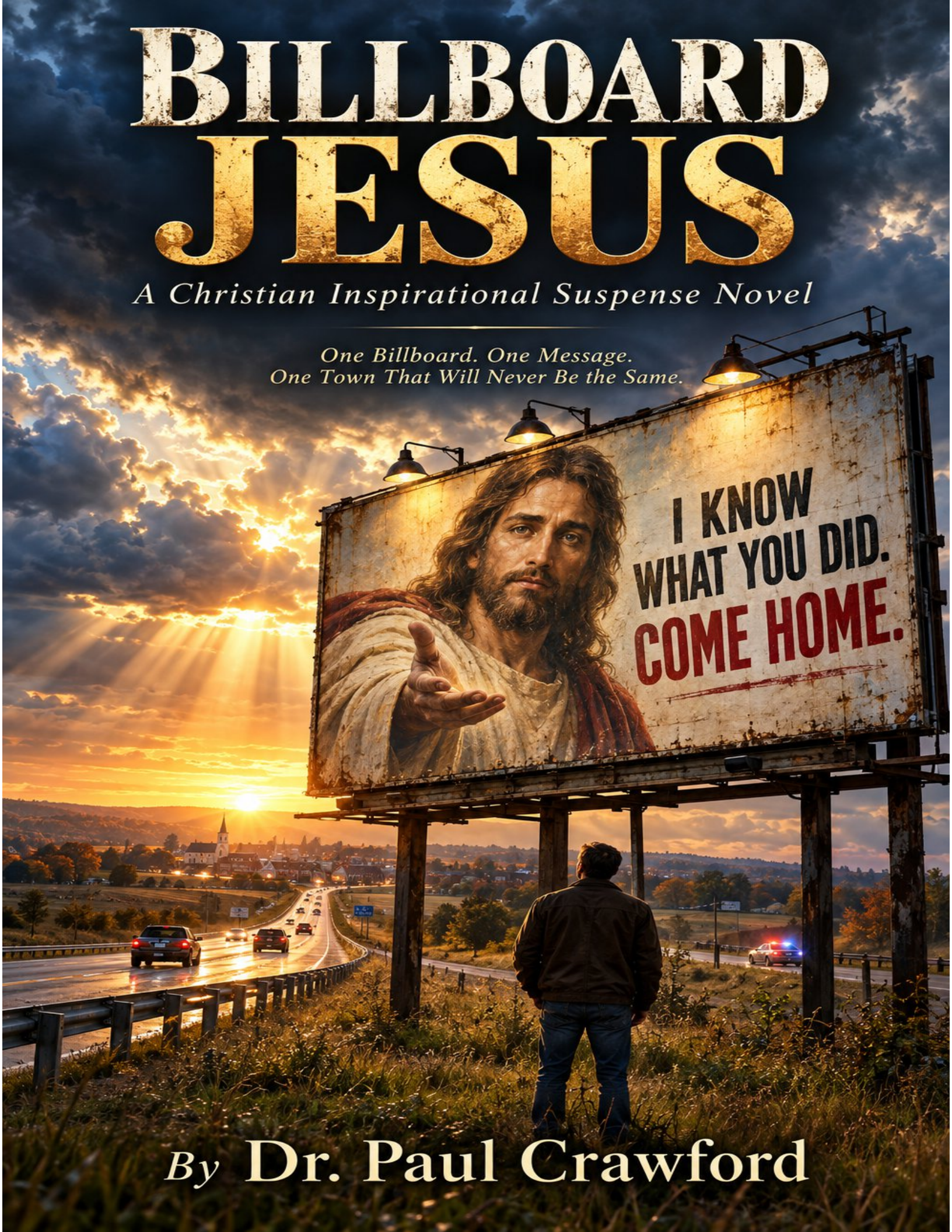
BILLBOARD JESUS

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

One Billboard. One Message.
One Town That Will Never Be the Same.



By **Dr. Paul Crawford**

BILLBOARD JESUS

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

“One Billboard. One Message. One Town That Will Never Be the Same.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue

The Painting That Was Never Finished

A forgotten portrait of Jesus, a letter from a deceased wife, and a promise made years ago set the stage for an extraordinary chain of events.

PART ONE: THE MESSAGE ON THE HIGHWAY

One man's act of faith becomes a message an entire town cannot ignore.

Chapter 1 — The Forgotten Billboard A rusting billboard along Interstate 71 catches the attention of retired sign painter Ezekiel Thornefield, a man who has spent fifteen years running from God.

Chapter 2 — Seven Words from Heaven After discovering an old letter from his deceased wife, Zeke purchases the billboard and paints a portrait of Jesus with a message that will shake Mercy Ridge: “I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.”

Chapter 3 — The Man Who Almost Crashed Police Chief Brantley Voss sees the billboard and is overcome by memories of a twenty-year-old crime he helped conceal.

Chapter 4 — The Woman Who Stopped Driving Grieving widow Delphine Ransom pulls off the highway after seeing the billboard. Seven words begin breaking through nine years of anger toward God.

Chapter 5 — Jesus Goes Viral Photographs of the billboard spread nationwide. As thousands react, Pastor Callan Whitlock questions whether the message is genuine evangelism or religious sensationalism.

PART TWO: SECRETS BENEATH THE SURFACE

The billboard begins exposing wounds, lies, and sins that have remained buried for decades.

Chapter 6 — The Girl with Another Name Waitress Tamsin Vale becomes terrified when strangers begin asking questions about her past. Zeke's unexpected kindness offers her a glimpse of Christian compassion.

Chapter 7 — The Man Who Wanted Jesus Gone Wealthy developer Sterling Blackmere offers Zeke a fortune to remove the billboard. When Zeke refuses, Sterling makes it clear that money is not his only means of persuasion.

Chapter 8 — A Pastor Without a Prayer Pastor Whitlock struggles with a dying congregation, a strained marriage, and his own spiritual emptiness as strangers begin arriving at his church searching for answers.

Chapter 9 — The Second Message Zeke changes the billboard's words to “WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL?” The new message unsettles the town, especially those protecting dangerous secrets.

Chapter 10 — The Body Beneath the Billboard A man is discovered dead near the highway. Inside his coat is a mysterious note: “THE BILLBOARD KNOWS EVERYTHING.” Chief Voss launches an investigation that threatens to uncover his own past.

PART THREE: WHEN DARKNESS FIGHTS THE LIGHT

As the truth begins emerging, powerful enemies become determined to silence the message.

Chapter 11 — The Photograph from Twenty Years Ago Investigative journalist Maribel Sloane discovers an old photograph connecting Chief Voss, Sterling Blackmere, and an innocent man imprisoned decades earlier.

Chapter 12 — The Prisoner Who Came Home Gideon Kestrel returns to Mercy Ridge after years of wrongful imprisonment. His arrival terrifies those responsible for destroying his life.

Chapter 13 — The Daughter Who Hated God Juniper Thornefield returns to confront her father about the billboard and the Christian faith she believes shattered their family.

Chapter 14 — Take Jesus Down Threatening letters arrive at Zeke's farmhouse. As the billboard receives national attention, someone warns him that refusing to remove it will cost him his life.

Chapter 15 — The Third Message Zeke paints another message: “YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM THE TRUTH.” As Tamsin prepares to reveal what she witnessed, Chief Voss realizes the investigation is closing in on him.

PART FOUR: THE TRUTH THAT SETS MEN FREE

Before a town can experience spiritual renewal, its darkest secrets must be brought into the light.

Chapter 16 — The Sin of Silence Juniper discovers evidence proving that Zeke witnessed part of the original conspiracy but remained silent for twenty years. Zeke must confront his own guilt before calling others to repentance.

Chapter 17 — Confessions in the Dark Chief Voss struggles with the choice between protecting his reputation and confessing his crimes. Meanwhile, Pastor Whitlock experiences a personal spiritual awakening that transforms his ministry.

Chapter 18 — The Night They Tried to Destroy Jesus During a violent thunderstorm, a crew arrives to dismantle the billboard. A confrontation turns disastrous when the structure catches fire and begins collapsing. Zeke risks his life to save a trapped worker.

Chapter 19 — The Man Who Finally Came Home As Zeke fights for his life in the hospital, the truth about the conspiracy is revealed. Juniper learns why her father painted Jesus beside the highway, and broken relationships begin to heal.

Chapter 20 — The Billboard That Could Not Be Silenced Six months later, Mercy Ridge is forever changed. Criminal secrets have been exposed, lives have been restored, and the gospel message has spread beyond the town. Zeke discovers a new billboard bearing the words of John 3:16.

Epilogue

The Message That Never Comes Down

Years after the first billboard changed Mercy Ridge, a weary traveler notices a simple roadside sign proclaiming the love of Jesus Christ. Unknown to the traveler, the message is part of a movement that began with one elderly man, one painting, and seven words.

The story closes with the reminder that the work of one faithful Christian can have an impact far beyond anything he ever imagined.

A Note from the Author

Why I Wrote Billboard Jesus

Dr. Paul Crawford shares the inspiration behind the novel and its central message: Jesus Christ still calls sinners to repentance, offers forgiveness to the broken, and transforms lives through the power of the gospel.

Scripture References

The Biblical Foundation of Billboard Jesus

A collection of key Bible passages concerning salvation, repentance, forgiveness, grace, spiritual restoration, and the responsibility of Christians to proclaim the gospel.

The Central Theme of the Novel

“You can tear down a billboard, but you cannot silence the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The twenty chapters follow four major developments: the billboard's creation, the awakening of buried secrets, the escalating danger surrounding Zeke, and the spiritual restoration of a community.

The story combines Christian suspense with an unmistakable message of salvation through Jesus Christ, culminating in a conclusion that emphasizes repentance, forgiveness, faith, and the life-changing power of the gospel.

BILLBOARD JESUS

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

PREFACE

When God Speaks Through the Ordinary

There are some messages in life that we simply cannot ignore.

We see thousands of advertisements throughout our lifetime. They appear along highways, on television screens, across the internet, and throughout our communities. They promise happiness, success, wealth, comfort, and everything else this world believes will bring satisfaction.

Most of those messages are forgotten almost as quickly as they are seen.

But occasionally, something captures our attention in a way we never expected.

A few simple words can awaken a memory we have tried to bury. A familiar Scripture can reach into the deepest parts of our hearts. A passing conversation can remind us of something we desperately need to hear.

And sometimes, what appears to be an ordinary moment becomes the beginning of an extraordinary change.

That is where the story of Billboard Jesus begins.

Along a lonely stretch of highway outside the fictional town of Mercy Ridge, Ohio, stands an old billboard that has long since outlived its usefulness. Its paint is fading. Its metal supports are rusting. Thousands of motorists pass beneath it without giving it a second thought.

To most people, it is nothing more than another forgotten structure along the highway.

But to one man, it becomes an opportunity.

Ezekiel Thornefield is not the kind of person the world would consider important.

He is not wealthy.

He is not famous.

He does not command the attention of thousands or possess the influence of powerful men.

He is simply an aging sign painter whose life has been filled with disappointment, sorrow, regret, and unanswered questions.

Once, he believed that God had a special purpose for his life.

Once, he dreamed of using his artistic abilities to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But dreams sometimes fade beneath the weight of suffering.

Faith can become clouded by grief.

And even those who once walked closely with God can find themselves wandering through years of spiritual darkness.

For fifteen years, Ezekiel has lived with the painful conviction that the best part of his life is behind him.

He believes his opportunities have passed.

He believes his mistakes have defined him.

And somewhere along the way, he has begun to wonder whether God has forgotten him altogether.

Yet the Lord has not forgotten Ezekiel Thornefield.

What begins with an old painting, a handwritten letter, and the memory of a promise will soon become something that changes an entire community.

Seven words painted beneath the face of Jesus Christ will challenge the consciences of ordinary people, disturb the security of powerful individuals, and bring long-hidden secrets into the light.

“I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.”

To some, those words will sound like an accusation.

To others, they will feel like a warning.

For some, they will awaken memories they have spent decades trying to escape.

But beneath the mystery and fear is an invitation far greater than any of them initially understands.

It is an invitation to stop running.

To confront the truth.

To acknowledge sin.

And to discover that forgiveness is possible through Jesus Christ.

The Bible declares in Proverbs 28:13:

> “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”

There is a tremendous difference between concealing sin and receiving forgiveness.

Human nature often drives us to hide our failures. We protect our reputations, defend our decisions, justify our behavior, and persuade ourselves that the past is safely buried.

But time does not erase guilt.

Distance does not remove responsibility.

And silence does not transform wrongdoing into righteousness.

The truth remains, even when no one speaks of it.

In Billboard Jesus, several individuals have built their lives upon secrets.

A respected police chief carries the burden of a decision that destroyed an innocent man's future.

A powerful businessman has gained wealth and influence while protecting a past he cannot afford to expose.

A frightened young woman is running from dangerous people and an identity she desperately wants to leave behind.

A grieving widow has allowed bitterness to separate her from the faith she once treasured.

Even a pastor, whose responsibility is to proclaim the Word of God, finds himself struggling with spiritual exhaustion and the painful realization that his ministry has become more about routine than devotion.

Each character faces a different struggle.

Each carries a different burden.

Yet all share something in common.

They need more than a change in circumstances. They need the transforming grace of God.

One of the great truths of Scripture is that God knows mankind completely.

Nothing is hidden from His sight.

He sees our public actions and our private thoughts. He knows our intentions, our weaknesses, our fears, and the secrets we would never willingly reveal to another human being.

Psalm 139:1–3 reminds us:

> “O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me.
>
> Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.
>
> Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.”

Such knowledge should produce reverence and humility.

It should remind us that no outward appearance can deceive the Lord.

But for those who are willing to repent and turn to Christ, God's knowledge of our sins does not make His offer of salvation less wonderful.

It makes His grace all the more remarkable.

He knows the very worst about us.

Yet He sent His Son into the world to save sinners.

Romans 5:8 declares:

> “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

That truth stands at the center of this novel.

The story is not ultimately about a painted billboard.

It is about the Savior whose image appears upon it.

It is not about the extraordinary power of a sign.

It is about the extraordinary power of the gospel.

And it is not about an elderly man's ability to change the world.

It is about what God can accomplish when an ordinary believer chooses to live faithfully and proclaim the truth.

Throughout history, the Lord has used individuals whom the world considered insignificant.

Moses doubted his ability to speak.

Gideon questioned his own strength.

David was a young shepherd.

Peter was a fisherman.

Paul had once persecuted the church.

Yet God used each of them according to His purposes.

The same principle remains true today.

A person does not need a large audience to be faithful.

A Christian does not need great wealth to make a difference.

And a believer does not need an impressive position to share the message of salvation.

Sometimes, a word of encouragement changes a life.

Sometimes, a simple act of kindness opens the door to the gospel.

Sometimes, an invitation to church reaches someone who has quietly been searching for hope.

And sometimes, as this fictional story imagines, a billboard along a highway becomes the beginning of something nobody could have predicted.

However, this novel also addresses a difficult truth.

Those who publicly proclaim righteousness must be willing to examine their own lives.

It is easy to identify the sins of others while excusing our own.

It is easy to speak about repentance while refusing to confess personal wrongdoing.

It is easy to proclaim forgiveness while harboring bitterness.

And it is possible to become so occupied with religious activity that we neglect the condition of our own hearts.

Ezekiel Thornefield will discover that the message he paints for others applies just as strongly to himself.

Before he can fully understand the words “Come Home,” he must face the painful truth that he, too, has been running.

His journey is not one of perfection.

It is one of repentance.

Not one of personal greatness.

But of humility.

Not one of escaping responsibility for the past.

But of confronting the past honestly while trusting in the mercy of God.

As the story unfolds, the people of Mercy Ridge will discover that truth can be uncomfortable, forgiveness can require humility, and genuine faith often demands courage.

Some will resist the message.

Some will mock it.

Some will attempt to silence it.

Others will find in it the hope they have desperately needed.

And a few will discover that the greatest prison is not made of iron bars, but of guilt, pride, hatred, and unconfessed sin.

Jesus declared in John 8:36:

> “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”

That freedom is far greater than relief from difficult circumstances.

It is the freedom that comes through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

As you enter the fictional world of Mercy Ridge, you will encounter mystery, hidden crimes, personal tragedy, betrayal, danger, and unexpected acts of courage.

You will meet people who appear respectable but are hiding darkness.

You will meet individuals who seem hopeless but are closer to spiritual restoration than they realize.

You will see how the consequences of one decision can extend across decades.

You will also witness how one act of faithfulness can influence people far beyond the person who performed it.

But above all, I hope you will see the central message woven throughout these pages:

No sinner is beyond the reach of God's saving grace, and no past is so dark that the light of the gospel cannot expose it.

This does not mean that every earthly consequence disappears when a person repents. Justice still matters. Truth must still be told. Those who have committed crimes must face responsibility for their actions.

Yet even in the presence of serious consequences, the mercy of God offers something this world cannot provide.

Forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

A new relationship with God.

And the promise of eternal life.

As this story begins, imagine yourself traveling along a quiet highway.

The sun is rising over the Ohio countryside.

Traffic moves steadily toward another busy day.

The radio is playing.

Your thoughts are occupied with the ordinary concerns of life.

Then, just beyond a bend in the highway, you notice something unusual.

An enormous portrait of Jesus Christ has appeared upon an old roadside billboard.

His expression is solemn yet compassionate.

One hand is extended toward the passing motorists.

And beneath His image are seven words written in letters large enough to be seen from the highway:

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

For a moment, everything else seems unimportant.

The traffic.

The appointments.

The responsibilities.

The distractions.

You find yourself thinking about the words.

What would they mean to you?

Would you become angry?

Would you feel uncomfortable?

Would you remember something from your past?

Would you continue driving and dismiss the message as another religious advertisement?

Or would you recognize within those words a reminder of the God who knows you completely and calls sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ?

That is the question waiting at the heart of Billboard Jesus.

And for the people of Mercy Ridge, answering that question will change everything.

For some, the billboard will become a symbol of hope.

For others, it will become a threat that must be eliminated.

And for one aging sign painter, it will become the greatest test of faith he has ever faced.

Because the moment Ezekiel Thornefield paints those seven words, the secrets of Mercy Ridge begin coming into the light.

And not everyone is willing to let the truth be known.

One billboard.

One message.

One town filled with secrets.

And a Savior whose invitation to sinners has never changed.

Welcome to Billboard Jesus.

May its pages remind you that while the messages of this world will eventually fade, the truth of God's Word endures forever.

And may you never forget that the greatest message the world has ever received was not written upon a billboard beside a highway.

It was proclaimed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” — Luke 19:10 (KJV)

Dr. Paul Crawford Author and Founder of Crawford Bible Commentary

Billboard Jesus — Prologue

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Prologue: The Painting That Was Never Finished

> "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." — Philippians 1:6 (KJV)

Mercy Ridge, Ohio Fifteen Years Earlier

The barn was colder than Hannah Thornefield remembered.

She stood in the doorway with a flashlight in one hand and the other pressed against the weathered frame. She waited for her breath to come back. The walk from the farmhouse was only sixty yards. Thirty years ago she had run it barefoot in the rain, laughing, with a pot of coffee for the young man who painted until midnight. Tonight it had taken her eleven minutes. She had stopped twice, once by the rail fence and once by the old maple. She held on to the bark until the world stopped tilting.

The doctors in Columbus had given her two months. That had been five weeks ago.

She did not tell Zeke she was going out. He was asleep at last, sprawled across their bed in his work clothes. One arm was flung over the empty place where she should have been. He had not slept a full night since the diagnosis. Neither had she. But tonight the pain medicine had given her a strange, thin clarity instead of drowsiness. Somewhere around two in the morning, she understood that if she did not do this now, she might never do it at all.

She found the switch on the wall and flipped it. The single bulb above the workbench flickered, buzzed, and caught. Its yellow light spilled across thirty years of a sign painter's life.

There were brushes standing bristle-up in coffee cans, dozens of them, sorted by width the way Zeke had always insisted. There were mahl sticks and lettering quills, rolls of pounce paper, and stencils for EAT and GAS and VACANCY. A half-painted sign for the Mercy Ridge Fall Festival leaned against the sawhorses. It had been there since August, when the word cancer first entered their house and took up all the air. The barn smelled the way it always had, of linseed oil, turpentine, cedar shavings, and old dust. It smelled like her husband.

Hannah walked to the far wall, where the lumber was stacked. Behind the lumber, under a canvas drop cloth gone stiff and gray with age, was the painting.

She had not looked at it in five years. She told herself she had stopped looking because it hurt to see it unfinished. That was only partly true. The rest of the truth was harder. The painting had stopped on the same night Zeke stopped looking her in the eye. She had never been brave enough to ask him why.

She set the flashlight on a crate and took hold of the drop cloth. Her arms trembled. She pulled once, and the canvas slid away in a soft rush of dust.

Jesus looked back at her.

He was not the pale, distant Christ of the Sunday-school pictures. Zeke had never been able to paint Him that way. "He was a carpenter," Zeke had said once, when he was twenty-six and full of fire. "He worked outside. He walked everywhere. He had calluses, Hannah. He had a sunburn." So the face on

the canvas was weathered and strong, with a brow lined by the sun. A faint scar ran across the bridge of the nose, the kind any working man might carry. The beard was dark and uneven. The hair fell loose to His shoulders.

But it was the eyes that had always undone her.

Zeke had spent most of a winter on those eyes. He painted them, scraped them, and painted them again. She remembered him sitting on an overturned bucket in front of the canvas for hours without lifting a brush. Once she had asked him what he was waiting for.

"I'm trying to figure out how He looks at people," Zeke had said. "I can make Him look kind. Anybody can paint kind. I can make Him look holy. But that's not it either."

"Then what is it?"

He had been quiet a long time. Then he said, "He looks at you like He already knows everything you ever did. And He's still glad you came."

When he finally finished the eyes, in the last week of February with sleet ticking against the barn windows, he had called her out to see. She had stood exactly where she stood now. She had started to cry and could not have told anyone why. The eyes were deep brown and steady. They held no accusation and no flattery. They were simply knowing, and under the knowing was a welcome so plain and unashamed that it made her want to confess things she had never done.

> "O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off." — Psalm 139:1–2 (KJV)

The face was finished. The shoulders and the rough brown robe were finished. Even the background was finished: a broad Ohio sky going gold at the edges, the way it looked over the interstate at sunrise.

But the hands were not.

In the painting, Christ's arms were open and held out toward whoever stood in front of Him. The pose was an invitation. It was the gesture a father makes when a child comes running across a yard. The arms were fully painted, down to the strong wrists. And then the paint simply stopped.

Where the hands should have been, there was only the pale, ghostly underdrawing of graphite on gesso. There were faint lines and the suggestion of fingers. In the center of each palm was a small, careful circle, the place where the nail wounds were meant to go.

Zeke had never painted them.

He had started on the left hand one autumn evening, five years ago. Hannah knew the date because it was the night of the bad wreck out on Route 71. Zeke had driven out to the old billboard by the interchange to look at a job, and he did not come home until nearly four in the morning. She had found him in the barn at dawn, sitting on the overturned bucket and staring at the canvas. There was a loaded brush in his hand, and the paint had dried hard on it. His face was gray. His boots were muddy to the ankle.

"Zeke? What happened?"

"Nothing." He had not looked at her. "Nothing happened. Go on back to bed."

He never picked up that brush again. Within a month, the painting was behind the lumber under the drop cloth. Zeke had changed in a hundred small ways she could not name. He still went to church, still said grace, and still bowed his head when Reverend Pruitt prayed. But something in him had pulled back from the edge of the light. He laughed less. He woke up some nights soaked in sweat. He stopped painting anything that was not paid for.

And there were things in that house that Zeke did not know she knew.

Hannah lowered herself slowly onto the old bucket. It was the same seat, and almost certainly the same bucket. She looked up into the face of Jesus.

"Well," she whispered. "Here we are."

She had been nineteen when she met Ezekiel Thornefield. He was twenty-two and hanging upside down from a scaffold.

It was the summer of the Mercy Ridge Bicentennial, and somebody on the town council had hired a skinny kid from Zanesville to paint a mural on the side of the hardware store. Hannah worked the counter at the pharmacy across the street. For three weeks she watched him through the front window between customers. He worked shirtless and sunburned. He sang hymns off-key and painted as if the wall owed him money. On the last day he climbed down, wiped his hands on his jeans, crossed the street, and bought a bottle of aspirin he plainly did not need.

"You've been watching me paint," he said.

"I've been watching you fall off things," she said. "You nearly went over twice on Tuesday."

He grinned. It was a crooked, unguarded grin, and it went straight through her. "Then you'd better come to supper with me Friday, so somebody can keep an eye on me."

They were married fourteen months later at Mercy Ridge Community Chapel. Old Reverend Pruitt officiated. He was not old then, of course. He had a full head of red hair and a voice that rattled the windows. Zeke cried through the vows. Hannah never let him forget it.

They bought the farmhouse on Ridgeline Road for almost nothing because the roof leaked and the barn was half-collapsed. Zeke fixed the barn first. "A man can sleep wet," he said, "but he can't paint wet." By the end of their first year he had built Thornefield Signs & Lettering into a business that kept them fed. He did gold-leaf windows for the bank, menu boards for the diners along the highway, and hand-lettered trucks for every farmer in three counties.

But it was the other work that lit him up.

He painted Bible verses on the sides of barns for nothing. He did the backdrop for every Christmas pageant at the chapel. He painted a twelve-foot Good Shepherd on the wall of the children's wing. When Hannah asked him why he did it free, he looked at her as though she had asked why he breathed.

"Because somebody might drive past and need it," he said. "You never know who's driving by, Hannah. You never know who's at the end of their rope."

It was on their first anniversary that he showed her the blank canvas.

It was enormous, six feet by four. He had stretched it himself and primed it with seven coats of gesso until it was smooth as eggshell. It stood on two sawhorses in the middle of the newly repaired barn like an altar.

"What's it for?" she asked.

"I'm going to paint Jesus."

She laughed, not unkindly. "You paint Jesus every Christmas."

"Not like this." He walked around the canvas slowly, the way he walked around a truck before he lettered it. "Everybody paints Him the same. Soft. Far away. Up in the clouds with the light coming down. Like He's a picture in a museum that you look at for a minute and then go get a sandwich." He shook his head. "I want to paint Him the way He'd look if He was standing out on the highway. Like He's right there. Like He's waiting on you."

"Who's it for, Zeke? Who's going to see it?"

He was quiet for a moment. Then he picked up the old Bible from the workbench, the one with the cracked leather cover that had been his grandmother's. He thumbed through it until he found the place.

"Listen to this," he said, and read aloud:

> "And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it." — Habakkuk 2:2 (KJV)

He closed the Bible and looked at her with an expression she would remember for the rest of her life.

"That he may run that readeth it," he said. "You know what that means? It means make it so big and so plain that a man running past can read it. A man in a hurry. A man who isn't even looking." He laid his hand flat against the empty canvas. "That's what I want to do, Hannah. Someday. I want to paint Him so big that a man doing seventy on the interstate can't help but see Him. A man running from his whole life. I want him to look up and see Jesus looking back."

"On a billboard?" she said.

"Maybe." He laughed at himself. "Someday. When we've got the money. When I'm good enough."

She had stepped close to him then and put both her hands over his on the canvas.

"Promise me," she said.

"Promise you what?"

"That you'll finish it. That you won't let it be one of those things you meant to do. Promise me that someday, somewhere, you'll put Him where the whole world can see Him."

He had looked down at her, twenty-four years old, paint under his fingernails, and said it without hesitating.

"I promise."

That had been nearly thirty years ago. In those years they had buried both of Hannah's parents and Zeke's father. They had lost two babies before they were born, and then Juniper came, red-faced and furious and perfect. They had paid off the farmhouse and patched the roof four times. They had raised their daughter in the third pew on the left side of the chapel. Zeke had painted the Jesus on the canvas a little at a time, in the margins of their life. He worked on winter evenings and slow Saturdays. He painted the face, then scraped it, then painted it again. A painting can take thirty years when the painter keeps waiting to be worthy of it.

And then it had stopped at the hands.

Hannah sat on the bucket and pulled her coat tighter. Her chest ached. Somewhere outside, a truck went by on Ridgeline Road. Its headlights swept briefly through the cracks in the barn boards and moved on.

She looked at the empty palms in the painting and the two small penciled circles where the scars should be.

She thought she understood something now that she had not understood five years ago. A man cannot paint forgiveness while he is hiding from it. Somehow Zeke had come to believe that his own hands were too dirty to paint the hands that had been pierced for him.

"Oh, Zeke," she breathed. "Honey, that's the whole point. That's why He has them."

> "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." — Isaiah 53:5 (KJV)

She took the envelope out of her coat pocket.

She had written the letter three times over the past week. She wrote it at the kitchen table in the afternoons while Zeke was in town picking up prescriptions, and she hid each draft in her recipe box behind the card for her mother's apple stack cake. The first draft was eleven pages long, and she had burned it in the woodstove. Some things were not hers to say. Some things would have to come from him, in his own time, to the people he owed them to. The second draft was so full of medical instructions and casserole schedules and reminders about the furnace filter that she had laughed out loud and burned that one too.

The third draft was one page. It was the right one.

She unfolded it now and read it again by the light of the bare bulb. Her handwriting was shakier than it used to be. The pen had skipped in two places.

> My dearest Zeke,

If you are reading this, then I have gone on ahead of you, and you have finally come back out to the barn. I know you. I know you'll stay away a long time. I know you're angry. You're allowed to be. Be angry at God if you need to. He's big enough to take it. He took a lot worse on a hill outside Jerusalem.

But don't stay away forever.

I have watched you carry something heavy for five years. I don't know all of it, and I'm not going to pretend I do. But I know it's the reason the hands are still empty. I know it's the reason you stopped painting Him. Honey, you can't wait until you're clean to finish this. Nobody's ever clean enough. That's why He came. Those scars aren't there because He was waiting on good men. They're there because He wasn't.

You made me a promise in this barn a long time ago. I'm not letting you out of it.

Zeke, if the world ever forgets who Jesus is, paint Him big enough that nobody can ignore Him.

And when you do — paint the hands. Paint them for you.

I'll be watching for you. Come home when you're ready. He'll be watching too.

All my love, always, Hannah

P.S. Take care of Juniper, even when she won't let you. Especially then.

Hannah folded the letter along its creases. She wrote ZEKE across the front of the envelope in block capitals, the way he had taught her to letter, with the downstrokes thick and the upstrokes thin.

Then she stood, slowly, and went around to the back of the painting.

Zeke had built the stretcher frame himself out of white oak. Along the bottom rail, behind the canvas, there was a gap about the width of two fingers between the wood and the tacked fabric. He had always tucked his sketches there and his color notes and a scrap of paper with the date he started. She slid the envelope into the gap until it disappeared, and she pressed the canvas flat against it with her palm.

It would be safe there. No one but Zeke would ever look behind this painting. And Zeke would not look until he was ready.

She came back around to the front and lowered herself to her knees on the dusty floor. She did it carefully, because her body no longer forgave her for anything. She folded her hands. She looked up into the painted eyes that already knew everything and were still glad she had come.

"Lord," she said, "I don't have a lot of time, so I'm going to be plain with You.

"I'm not afraid to die. I thought I would be, and I'm not. You've been too good to me for that. But I'm afraid for him. You know what he's carrying. You know better than I do. I've prayed for five years for him to put it down, and he hasn't. And now I won't be here to keep praying.

"So I'm asking You to keep after him. Don't let him go. When he runs, and he's going to run, You go after him. Like the shepherd after the one sheep. Like the father at the end of the road. Don't let him hide from You, Lord. He'll try. Don't let him.

"And Juniper." Her voice broke. She waited until she could speak again. "She's going to blame You. She's going to blame him. She's nineteen and she thinks she's grown and she's going to walk away from all of it. Bring her back. I don't care how long it takes. I don't care what it costs. Bring them both back to each other, and bring them both back to You."

She was crying now, quietly, the way she had learned to cry in the hospital so as not to frighten the nurses.

"And the other thing." Her eyes went, without meaning to, toward the house and the cedar chest at the foot of the bed in the spare room. Under the quilts in that chest was a shoebox she had kept hidden for five years, and in it were three things she had never shown anyone. "You know about that too. I couldn't make it right. I didn't know how. I'm sorry. But I've put it where it'll be found when it's time. You decide when it's time."

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

"Finish what You started in him," she whispered. "That's all. Finish it. In Jesus' name."

She stayed on her knees for a long time.

Zeke found her there at a quarter past five.

He had woken to an empty bed and a cold spot where she should have been. He had torn through the house calling her name, the bathroom, the kitchen, the front porch. Then he saw the light burning in the barn, and he ran across the frost-stiff yard in his sock feet without his coat.

She had fallen asleep sitting on the floor, slumped against the sawhorse with her head on her arm. The drop cloth lay in a heap beside her. Above her, uncovered for the first time in five years, the Jesus he had been painting for most of his life looked down at them both.

For a moment Zeke could not move.

Then he was on his knees beside her, gathering her up. She weighed almost nothing now. It terrified him every time.

"Hannah. Hannah, honey, what are you doing out here? You'll catch your death—"

He heard what he had said and stopped.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. It was the same smile he had seen through the pharmacy window more than thirty years ago.

"Well," she said. "I guess I'm going to catch it one way or another."

"That's not funny."

"It's a little funny."

He pressed his face into her hair and held her. She could feel him shaking.

"Why'd you uncover it?" he asked at last, his voice muffled.

She did not answer right away. She lifted one thin hand and pointed up at the painting, at the open arms and the empty, penciled palms.

"Because I wanted to see Him," she said. "And I wanted you to see Him too."

Zeke would not look up.

"Zeke." She took his chin in her fingers the way she did when Juniper was small and would not listen. She turned his face gently until he had to raise his eyes to the canvas. "Look at Him."

He looked. She felt the breath go out of him.

"You never finished the hands," she said softly.

"I know."

"Why?"

The silence went on so long that she thought he would not answer. Outside, the sky was going from black to iron gray. A rooster called somewhere across the road. In the rafters, a pair of barn swallows shifted and muttered in their sleep.

"Because I can't," Zeke said finally. His voice was rough and low. It was the voice of a man confessing something to a priest through a screen. "I tried, Hannah. I swear I tried. I'd pick up the brush and I'd go to paint the nail prints, and all I could see was—"

He stopped. His jaw clenched.

"All you could see was what?" she whispered.

But the door had already closed. She watched it happen. She had watched it happen a hundred times over five years, and she knew she would not live long enough to see it open.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "It's just a painting."

"It's not just a painting. And you know it."

She reached up and laid her palm flat against his chest, over his heart.

"You made me a promise in this barn," she said. "Do you remember?"

His eyes filled. "I remember."

"Say it again."

"Hannah—"

"Say it, Ezekiel."

He looked up at the face on the canvas, and then back down at his dying wife. He said it the way he had said it at twenty-four, though his voice cracked down the middle.

"I promise," he said. "Someday. Somewhere. I'll put Him where the whole world can see Him."

"And you'll finish the hands."

He hesitated.

"Zeke."

"And I'll finish the hands."

She smiled and closed her eyes and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Good," she murmured. "Now carry me back to the house. My feet are cold."

He carried her across the yard in the first gray light. He was crying openly now and did not care who saw. Behind them, the barn door stood open. The single bulb still burned over the workbench. The Jesus on the canvas went on holding out His unfinished hands to an empty room.

Zeke never noticed the small white corner of an envelope where it had slipped a quarter inch out from behind the bottom rail of the frame.

Hannah Thornefield died nineteen days later, on a Tuesday afternoon in early December. It was snowing. Zeke sat on one side of the bed and Juniper on the other. Hannah's Bible lay open on the quilt between them to the fourteenth chapter of John.

> "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." — John 14:1–2 (KJV)

Her last words were not to either of them. Her eyes were fixed on something past the foot of the bed, past the window and the falling snow. Her face changed, and the pain that had creased it for months smoothed away all at once. She smiled like a girl.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, look."

And then she was gone.

They buried her on Saturday in the cemetery behind Mercy Ridge Community Chapel, beside her parents, under a sky the color of wet slate. Half the town came. Reverend Pruitt preached. His red hair had gone white years ago, and his voice cracked twice. Silas Quenby stood at the back of the crowd with his hat in both hands. Silas had worked the highway crews with Zeke's father and had known Zeke since he was a boy. He did not sing the hymns. He watched Zeke the whole time with an expression no one else noticed.

Old Ottilie Mercerfield, who had taught Juniper in Sunday school, held the girl's hand through the entire service. At the graveside she leaned close and whispered, "Your mama's not in that box, sweetheart. Don't you ever believe she is."

Juniper pulled her hand away.

She was nineteen, home from her first semester at Ohio State. She had her mother's eyes and her father's jaw and a cold, bright fury that frightened everyone who saw it. She stood at the edge of the grave in a black wool coat and did not cry. She did not sing. When Reverend Pruitt read from Romans 8, she turned her head and stared at the bare trees until he was finished.

> "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." — Romans 8:28 (KJV)

"Good," she said afterward, in the parking lot, loud enough for people to hear. "She loved Him more than anyone in that building. She prayed every single day of her life. And He let her die screaming in a hospital bed. Tell me what's good about that, Daddy. Go on. Tell me."

Zeke had no answer. Two days later, Juniper packed her car and drove back to Columbus before the Christmas break was over. She did not come home for Christmas. She did not come home for Easter. The phone calls grew shorter and further apart, and then they stopped.

> "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" — Psalm 22:1 (KJV)

On the night after Juniper left, Zeke Thornefield went out to the barn with a can of turpentine and a box of kitchen matches.

The painting was still where Hannah had left it, uncovered, propped against the lumber. In the weeks of her dying he had not been able to bring himself to cover it again. He had not been able to look at it either. He had gone in and out of the barn for paint and tools with his eyes on the floor, like a man walking past a grave.

Now he stood in front of it with the turpentine in one hand and the matches in the other, and he made himself look.

"You took her," he said.

His voice echoed in the cold rafters.

"She gave You everything. Every day of her life. She never asked You for one thing for herself. Not once. And You took her. And now You've taken my girl too."

The painted eyes looked back at him. They were steady, knowing, and still glad he had come. That was the worst of it. He had painted them too well. He had spent a whole winter making sure those eyes would never look away from anyone. Now they would not look away from him.

"Don't you look at me like that," Zeke said. His voice was shaking. "Don't You look at me like You know."

He unscrewed the cap of the turpentine.

He stood there for a long time with the can tilted in his hand and the sharp smell of it filling the barn. He thought about how fast the old dry canvas would go up, how the gesso would blister and the face would curl and blacken. In five minutes, nearly thirty years would be gone.

He thought about Hannah on her knees on this floor.

He thought about her hand on his chest and her voice saying, Say it, Ezekiel.

He thought about the promise.

The can sagged. Then he threw it. It hit the far wall and burst, splashing turpentine across the stacked lumber and the concrete. He dropped the matches on the workbench and stood with his hands on his knees, breathing hard, like a man who had run a long way.

He could not burn it. He could not finish it. And he could not stand to look at it.

So he did the only thing left. He picked the old drop cloth up off the floor and threw it over the painting, the way you would cover a body. He dragged the canvas, frame and all, to the farthest, darkest corner of the barn. He shoved it behind the lumber and piled more on top: old sign blanks, broken sawhorses, rolls of rotten tarp. He piled things against it until there was no trace of it, until a stranger walking in would never have known it was there.

Then he took his grandmother's Bible off the workbench. He carried it into the house and put it in the bottom drawer of the dresser in the spare room, under a stack of Hannah's sweaters. He closed the drawer, and he did not open it again.

On Sunday morning he did not go to church.

On the Sunday after that, Reverend Pruitt drove out to the farm and knocked on the door for twenty minutes. Zeke sat in the kitchen with the lights off and waited for him to leave.

He stopped praying. He stopped painting anything but what paid the bills, and within two years he stopped that too. He sold the sign business to a company out of Cincinnati that printed vinyl banners on giant machines and did not need a man who could letter by hand. He let the farmhouse paint peel and the fence rails sag. He let the barn go dark.

And for fifteen years, behind the lumber in the farthest corner of that barn, under a gray drop cloth and a pile of forgotten things, Jesus stood with His arms open and His hands unfinished, waiting.

> "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? ... If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee." — Psalm 139:7, 11–12 (KJV)

Interstate 71 The Present Day

Three miles south of the Mercy Ridge exit, on a low rise above the northbound lanes, an old billboard stands against the sky.

It is forty-eight feet wide and fourteen feet high, built of steel I-beams and plywood panels on a pair of rusted columns sunk deep in Ohio clay. A catwalk runs along its base. Half the grating is gone, and the safety rail hangs loose at one end like a broken arm. Its floodlights burned out years ago.

For two decades the sign sold everything. It sold steak dinners and pickup trucks, personal injury lawyers and payday loans, and political candidates whose names nobody remembers. The faces on it changed every few months. The traffic beneath it never did.

Then the company that owned it went bankrupt. Nobody came to put up the next advertisement. The last one, for a hotel chain that has since gone out of business, has been peeling away in long gray strips for three years. What remains is mostly blank: weathered panel, bird droppings, and rust stains bleeding down from the bolts like tears.

Thirty thousand cars pass it every day. Nobody looks.

The drivers are in a hurry. Some are going to work and some are going home. Some are running from things they will never say out loud. Some are running from their whole lives. They do not look up. There is nothing up there to see.

Not yet.

Six miles away, on Ridgeline Road, a sixty-eight-year-old man sits alone at a kitchen table in a farmhouse that needs paint. He has a cup of coffee going cold in front of him and the television on with the sound turned down. He has not prayed in fifteen years. He has not set foot in the barn behind the house in almost as long.

He does not know that a letter has been waiting fifteen years for him to come and find it.

He does not know about the shoebox at the bottom of the cedar chest, or that his daughter is the one who will find it.

He does not know that the thing he saw on the highway twenty years ago, the thing he has never told a living soul, is not as buried as he thinks. He does not know that other men in Mercy Ridge have been carrying their own versions of that night all this time. He does not know that some of them would do almost anything to keep it buried.

He does not know any of that.

But tonight, for the first time in fifteen years, Ezekiel Thornefield cannot sleep. He does not know why.

He gets up from the table, opens the back door, and stands on the porch in the cold. He looks out across the dark yard at the barn.

And for no reason he can name, he finds himself remembering the sound of his wife's voice in that barn more than forty years ago, and the words of a promise he made when he was young and still believed he would someday be good enough to keep it.

Someday. Somewhere. I'll put Him where the whole world can see Him.

Zeke stands on the porch for a long time.

Then he goes back inside and closes the door.

But he leaves the porch light on.

> "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." — Luke 15:20 (KJV)

End of Prologue

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 1

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

PART ONE: THE MESSAGE ON THE HIGHWAY

One man's act of faith becomes a message an entire town cannot ignore.

Chapter 1: The Forgotten Billboard

> "And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?" — Genesis 3:9 (KJV)

Mercy Ridge, Ohio The Present Day

The porch light was still burning when the sun came up.

Ezekiel Thornefield noticed it at a quarter to seven, when he shuffled into the kitchen in his sock feet and saw the yellow bulb outside the back door going pale against the morning. He stood looking at it for a while with the coffee can in his hand. He could not remember the last time he had left it on all night. Hannah used to do that whenever Juniper was out late. So she can find her way home, she would say, as if the girl had not been walking up that same gravel drive since she was four years old.

Zeke reached over and flipped the switch. The light went out.

He had not slept. He had lain on his back on top of the covers from midnight until five, listening to the furnace kick on and off and the old house tick and settle around him. Every time he closed his eyes, his mind went somewhere he did not want it to go. So he kept them open and stared at the water stain on the ceiling that looked like the state of Kentucky, and he waited for the night to give up.

He measured out the coffee by habit, four scoops and a little extra, and filled the carafe at the sink. Through the window above the faucet he could see the whole backyard: the sagging clothesline, Hannah's rose beds gone to bramble, the rusted burn barrel, and beyond them, sixty yards off, the barn.

He did not look at the barn. He had gotten good at not looking at it. Fifteen years of practice will make a man good at almost anything.

The coffee maker gurgled and hissed. Zeke sat down at the kitchen table in the same chair he had sat in for forty-five years. Across from him was the other chair, Hannah's chair, pushed in neatly the way she had always left it. He had never moved it. He had never sat in it. Some mornings he talked to it without meaning to, and then he felt like a fool.

The television on the counter was on with the sound turned down. A weatherman in a bright blue suit was pointing at a map of Ohio covered in green and yellow blobs. Rain coming Thursday. Zeke did not turn up the volume. He kept the television on for the company of moving pictures, not for anything they had to say.

When the coffee was ready he poured a cup, black, and sat with both hands around it. Steam curled up past his face.

There had been a time when he would have bowed his head before that first cup. Not a long prayer. Just Thank You, Lord, for this day. Hannah used to tease him that he prayed over his coffee more faithfully than he prayed over his supper. He had told her that was because coffee was more of a miracle.

He did not bow his head now. He drank.

But the words came anyway. They always did. That was the trouble with a lifetime of Sunday school and Wednesday night Bible study and forty years of reading the Scriptures out loud to his wife after supper. You could close the Book and put it in a drawer under a stack of sweaters. You could stop going to church and stop answering the door when the preacher came. But the words stayed in you like nails in an old board. You could paint over them, but they were still there, and sooner or later the rust bled through.

This morning, for no reason he could name, the words that bled through were about Jonah.

> "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." — Jonah 1:3 (KJV)

Zeke set the cup down harder than he meant to. Coffee slopped over the rim onto the oilcloth.

"Not this morning," he said out loud to nobody.

He got up, wiped the spill with a dish towel, and went to get dressed.

He had an appointment at nine-thirty with the heart doctor in Columbus.

It was the third such appointment in a year. The first had come after he passed out in the feed store in March, right there in the aisle between the chicken wire and the fence posts. He woke up on the floor with Lyle Gaskins kneeling over him and a cashier on the phone with the ambulance. The second appointment was the follow-up. This one was supposed to be "routine," which Zeke had learned was a word doctors used when they did not want to tell you what they were really looking for.

He put on clean jeans and a flannel shirt and his good boots. He combed his hair, what was left of it. In the bathroom mirror a stranger looked back at him, a gaunt old man with a white stubble beard and

deep lines bracketing his mouth like parentheses around something nobody wanted to say. The eyes were the only part he still recognized. They were his father's eyes, gray as barn siding. Hannah used to say they were the kindest eyes in Clinton County.

They did not look kind anymore. They looked tired.

He took his keys off the hook by the door and went out to the truck.

It was a 1998 Ford F-150, green once, now mostly the color of a faded dollar bill. Years ago both doors had carried hand-lettered gold script that read Thornefield Signs & Lettering — Mercy Ridge, Ohio, with a telephone number underneath. When he sold the business, he had painted over the lettering himself with two coats of green enamel. But green enamel fades in the sun faster than gold leaf. Now, in certain light, especially early morning, the ghost of the old letters showed through the paint. THORNEFIELD SIGNS. Some days he could read every word.

He did not look at the door as he climbed in.

The usual way to Columbus was Route 3, the old two-lane road that wound north through farm country and little crossroads towns before it finally gave up and joined the interstate near Sunbury. It added twenty-five minutes to the drive. Zeke had taken it every time for twenty years.

He had never told anyone why. If anybody had asked, and nobody had, he would have said he liked the scenery. He would have said the interstate was full of truckers and teenagers driving ninety, and an old man had no business mixing it up with them. All of that was true.

It was not the reason.

This morning, two miles north of Mercy Ridge, he came around the bend at Harlan Creek and found the road blocked by a row of orange barrels and a sawhorse barricade with a flashing yellow light on top. A hand-lettered sign, poorly done, leaned against it: BRIDGE OUT — DETOUR. An arrow pointed west.

Zeke stopped the truck in the middle of the road and sat there with the engine idling.

The arrow pointed toward the Harlan Creek interchange. Toward Interstate 71.

He sat there long enough that a pickup came up behind him and honked. Zeke lifted a hand in apology and eased forward and turned onto the detour. He followed the orange signs for three miles over gravel and county blacktop until the road dipped under the overpass and swung up onto the northbound ramp. Then there was nothing to do but merge.

The interstate swallowed him. A tractor-trailer roared past on his left, close enough to rock the truck. Zeke tightened both hands on the wheel and held it at sixty in the right lane while the world blew by at eighty.

He knew what was coming. He had known it since he saw the detour sign. He could have turned around. He could have driven home and called the doctor's office and said his truck would not start. He was sixty-eight years old and a widower, and nobody would have argued with him.

But he did not turn around. Later he would wonder about that. He would wonder whether a man ever really decides to stop running, or whether he simply gets tired and the road decides for him.

The highway rose in a long gentle grade. The land fell away on the right into a broad hollow of cut cornfields and hedgerows. Then, at the top of the rise, there it was.

The billboard.

It stood on a low hill above the northbound lanes, the way it had always stood. Its two steel columns were rusted the color of dried blood. The catwalk along its base sagged like a broken jaw. Its great rectangular face, forty-eight feet across and fourteen feet high, was peeling away in long gray tatters that lifted and stirred in the wind. A few shreds of an old advertisement still clung to the upper corner. Zeke could make out part of a word, -OTEL, and half of a cartoon moon. The rest was blank, weather-streaked plywood, bleeding rust from every bolt.

Zeke's hands went cold on the wheel.

It was such an ordinary thing. A billboard. He had painted hundreds of them in his time, up on scaffolds in July heat with the sweat running into his eyes. He had painted billboards for tractor dealerships and Baptist revivals and a candidate for county sheriff who lost by forty votes. He knew billboards the way a farmer knows fence posts. A billboard was just wood and steel and paint. It could not hurt anybody.

But his heart had begun to pound in a way the doctors in Columbus would not have liked. There was a roaring in his ears that was not the traffic.

And for just a moment, the bright October morning went away.

It was night instead, and raining hard, and the floodlights on the billboard were blazing white through the downpour. There were headlights on the shoulder below it. There were two sets of them, three, he could never remember. There was a sound, the kind of sound you only hear once, and then a terrible silence. There were men's voices shouting and then not shouting. There was a hand gripping his arm, hard, and somebody very close to his ear saying Go home, Zeke. You hear me? You go on home. You were never here.

A horn blared.

Zeke jerked the wheel. The truck had drifted halfway onto the rumble strip, and the whole cab was shuddering and roaring. A minivan swerved past him on the left with a woman in the driver's seat mouthing something furious through the glass. He fought the truck back into the lane. His heart was slamming against his ribs.

When he looked up again, the billboard was in his mirror, already shrinking.

He did not look at it again. He drove the rest of the way to Columbus at fifty-five miles an hour with both hands on the wheel and the radio off, and he did not let himself think about anything at all.

> "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? ... If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." — Psalm 139:7, 9–10 (KJV)

The waiting room at the Franklin Heart Institute was full of old people, and Zeke supposed he was one of them.

There was a man with an oxygen tank on wheels and a woman knitting something purple. There was a young couple holding hands, which was worse, because one of them was the patient and they both knew it. A television in the corner was showing a cooking program. Somebody had hung a cross-stitch sampler on the wall beside the check-in window. It was the kind of thing a retired nurse makes and donates and nobody has the heart to take down. Zeke saw it the moment he sat down and could not stop seeing it.

> "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." — Psalm 90:12 (KJV)

He looked at the floor instead. He looked at the cooking program. He picked up a two-year-old copy of Field & Stream and read the same paragraph about walleye fishing four times.

They called his name at ten past ten.

Dr. Miriam Castellano was a small, brisk woman in her fifties with reading glasses pushed up into gray-streaked hair. She did not waste words, which Zeke appreciated. She put him on a table, listened to his chest, and frowned at a screen full of jagged green lines. Then she sent him down the hall for an echocardiogram, where a technician smeared cold jelly on his ribs and pushed a wand against him for twenty minutes without saying anything at all. After that he sat in a little room with a paper gown and his jeans folded on a chair for another half hour before Dr. Castellano came back in and shut the door behind her.

She sat down on a rolling stool and faced him. She took her glasses out of her hair and folded them in her lap.

Zeke had been married to a woman who died of cancer. He knew what it meant when a doctor sat down.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead."

"Your heart's not pumping the way it should, Mr. Thornefield. The muscle has weakened. It's what we call heart failure, and before you hear that word and panic, let me tell you what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean your heart is about to stop. It means it's tired. It's been working hard for a long time, and it's not keeping up the way it used to."

"How long?"

She did not pretend to misunderstand him. He liked her for that.

"That depends a great deal on you. With medication, if you take it, and some changes to how you eat and how you live, a lot of people your age with numbers like yours have good years. Five. Ten. Sometimes more." She paused. "Without those changes, fewer. And there's no promise either way. There never is."

Zeke nodded slowly. He looked down at his hands, spotted and rough, folded on the paper gown. Painter's hands. There was still a crescent of something blue under the nail of his right thumb. He had no idea what it was or how long it had been there.

"Do you have family nearby?" Dr. Castellano asked. "Someone who can help you with all this? Medications, appointments, getting you here if you can't drive?"

"I've got a daughter."

"Good. Does she live close?"

"Chicago."

"Do you see her often?"

Zeke did not answer.

The doctor waited. When nothing came, something in her face softened a little, though her voice stayed exactly as brisk as before.

"Mr. Thornefield, I'm going to say something that isn't strictly medical. You can ignore it. I've been doing this for twenty-six years. And the patients who do best with a diagnosis like yours aren't always the ones with the best numbers. They're the ones who have something to get up for in the morning. Something they still mean to do." She stood and tucked her glasses back into her hair. "If you've got something like that, I'd find it. If there's somebody you've been meaning to call, I'd call them."

She left him with a stack of prescriptions, a pamphlet titled Living Well With Heart Failure, and an appointment card for three months out.

Zeke sat alone in the little room for a long time after she had gone.

Something they still mean to do.

He thought about a barn, and about a promise. Then he got dressed and went out to the truck.

The detour was still in place on the way home. He had known it would be.

He came south on 71 in the early afternoon with the sun high and pale and the cornfields stretching out on both sides gold and brown. The billboard faced the northbound traffic, so on the way home he would see only its back, the gray skeleton of steel braces and the rough plywood. He told himself that was a mercy. He told himself he would drive past and not even turn his head.

Instead, a mile north of it, he found himself moving into the right lane. Half a mile north of it, he found himself taking his foot off the gas. And when he came to the top of the rise, where the old maintenance

turnout cut into the gravel below the hill, he put on his turn signal like a man who had planned to all along. He pulled off the highway and stopped.

He turned off the engine.

The silence came in all at once, the way it does when a truck engine dies. There was only the tick of the cooling motor and the hiss of cars going by on the interstate behind him. Somewhere out in the fields a crow called and another one answered.

Zeke sat with his hands in his lap and looked up through the windshield at the billboard.

From here, below it and behind it, he could see the whole structure. The great frame of welded I-beams was eaten through with rust. Cross-braces had come loose at one end and hung at angles. A ladder ran up the near column to the catwalk, its lowest ten feet cut away the way they always were, so kids could not climb it. At the foot of the hill, someone had pounded a metal stake into the ground. A laminated notice was zip-tied to it, gone yellow and wavy under its plastic.

Zeke got out of the truck.

The hill was steeper than it looked. Halfway up he had to stop and stand with his hands on his knees, breathing hard, his heart doing something complicated and unpleasant in his chest. He thought about Dr. Castellano and her pamphlet. He thought that it would be a fine joke if he dropped dead right here, on this hill, of all the hills in Ohio.

Then he climbed the rest of the way.

The notice on the stake read:

> NOTICE OF SALE — PROPERTY OF THE BANKRUPTCY ESTATE OF KESSLER OUTDOOR MEDIA, LLC Outdoor advertising structure, Interstate 71 Northbound, Mile Marker 52, together with remaining term of ground lease. Sealed bids accepted through the office of the Trustee. Structure sold AS IS.

There was a telephone number at the bottom and a case number in small print. Someone had written across the bottom corner in black marker, in a crude, hasty hand: Bids due Oct. 24.

Ten days.

Zeke read the notice twice. Then he turned and looked at the field on the other side of the fence line, east of the billboard, where the land ran flat toward the interchange. He had not noticed it from the highway. A large new sign stood planted there in the stubble. It was professionally printed in glossy navy and gold, with an architect's drawing of glass buildings and a parking lot full of happy little cars.

> COMING SOON BLACKMERE CROSSING Retail • Hospitality • Logistics A Blackmere Development Group Project

Zeke looked at that sign for a long time. Then he looked back up at the billboard.

He had not meant to walk up to the column. But he found himself standing at the foot of it with his hand flat against the cold, rough steel, and his head tipped back, looking up.

From directly beneath, the billboard seemed enormous. It blotted out half the sky. He could hear the wind moving across its face, a low, hollow thrumming, like someone blowing across the mouth of a bottle. A loose strip of the old advertisement had worked free and was flapping against the plywood with a sound like slow applause.

And Zeke Thornefield, who had not lifted a paintbrush in thirteen years, found himself doing what he had done his whole working life every time he stood beneath a blank surface. He measured it.

He could not help it. It happened by itself, the way a musician hears a song and cannot stop his fingers from finding the chords. Forty-eight feet by fourteen. Plywood face, probably three-quarter-inch exterior grade, needing at least a dozen panels replaced. The frame would need sanding, priming, and sealing before anything could hold. You would have to rig a swing stage off the catwalk, or rent a lift. He would want to lay out a grid first. With something that size, you lay out a grid, transfer the drawing square by square, and stand back on the highway every couple of hours to see it the way the drivers would see it. Big things lie to you up close.

What would you put on a surface like that? What would you paint so big that a man doing seventy miles an hour could not help but see it? A man in a hurry. A man running from his whole life.

The thought came out of nowhere, in his own voice, in a young man's voice. It was so clear that he actually turned his head as if someone had spoken behind him.

> "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it." — Habakkuk 2:2 (KJV)

Zeke took his hand off the steel as though it had burned him.

"No," he said.

The wind moved across the face of the billboard. The loose strip flapped and flapped.

"No," he said again, louder. "You don't get to do this. You hear me? You don't get to come around now. Not after fifteen years. You had your chance. You had her, and You took her, and You don't get to—"

His voice cracked and he stopped. He stood there shaking, an old man shouting at a rusted billboard on the side of the interstate. A semi went past below and the driver gave two short blasts on his air horn. It was probably a greeting. Probably the driver thought he was a farmer checking his fence.

Zeke turned his back on the billboard and started down the hill.

He was halfway to the truck when he saw the police cruiser.

It had pulled onto the turnout behind his pickup, lights off. It was a Mercy Ridge Police Department car, white with blue lettering. Zeke had painted the original version of that lettering himself, thirty years ago, when the department bought its first fleet of new Crown Victorias. They had changed the font since then. It was not as good.

A man was leaning against the cruiser's front fender with his arms folded, watching him come down.

He was a big man in his late fifties. He had a thick neck, close-cropped iron-gray hair, and a face sun-browned and creased from years of high school football games and summer parades and highway accidents. He wore a dark blue uniform with gold stars on the collar. His hat was on the seat of the car behind him.

Zeke slowed his steps. Then he made himself keep walking at the same pace. He came the rest of the way down the hill and stopped a few yards from the cruiser.

"Brantley," he said.

"Zeke." Chief Brantley Voss nodded once. His voice was pleasant, easy, the voice of a man everybody in Mercy Ridge trusted. "Been a while."

"Has it."

"Saw your truck pull off. Thought maybe you'd broke down." Voss's eyes went past him, up the hill, to the billboard. They stayed there for a second longer than they needed to. Then they came back. "You all right? You look a little gray around the gills."

"Just had my heart looked at," Zeke said. "Doctor says it's tired."

"Sorry to hear it." Voss sounded as though he meant it. He probably did. That was the thing about Brantley Voss. He had always been a decent man in most of the ways that showed. He had coached Little League for fifteen years. He had carried old Mrs. Abernathy out of her burning house on Locust Street in 2009 and got his picture in the Columbus Dispatch. He sat in the second pew at First Methodist every Sunday with his wife and sang the hymns in a good baritone.

"What're you doing up here, Zeke?"

"Looking."

"At what?"

Zeke turned and looked up at the billboard. Voss followed his eyes. Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"Not much to look at," Voss said finally.

"No. Not anymore."

The chief unfolded his arms and pushed himself off the fender. He came a few steps closer. When he spoke again his voice was lower, though there was no one for a mile in any direction to overhear.

"That ground belongs to the bankruptcy court now. And Sterling Blackmere's people have bought up everything from here to the interchange. They're touchy about folks wandering around out here. Surveyors, environmental people, that kind of thing. Wouldn't want anybody getting the wrong idea and calling it trespassing."

"Is that what it is? Trespassing?"

"I didn't say that." Voss smiled. It was a good smile, practiced, the smile from the campaign signs for the sheriff's race he had once considered running in. It did not reach his eyes. "I'm just saying. Some places, a man's better off not hanging around. Bad stretch of road. Always has been."

Zeke looked at him.

Brantley Voss looked back.

Something passed between them in that look. Neither of them could have put it into words, and neither of them would have tried. It was twenty years old. It had been there the last time they had stood this close together. It had been there at Hannah's funeral, when Voss came through the receiving line, shook Zeke's hand, said I'm so sorry for your loss, and could not meet his eyes. It was there now. It sat between them on the gravel like a third man.

"You sleep all right, Brantley?" Zeke asked quietly.

The chief's face did not change. But a muscle at the hinge of his jaw tightened and let go, tightened and let go.

"Like a baby," Voss said.

"That's good," Zeke said. "That's real good. I don't."

He walked past the chief to his truck, climbed in, and started the engine. In the side mirror he could see Brantley Voss still standing beside the cruiser. He was not watching the truck. He was looking up the hill, at the billboard, with his hand resting on his belt, and his face had gone very still.

Zeke pulled back onto the highway and drove south toward Mercy Ridge.

> "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." — Hebrews 4:13 (KJV)

The Crossroads Diner sat at the bottom of the Mercy Ridge exit ramp like it had been dropped there by a tornado and decided to stay. It was a long, low, stainless-steel railcar of a building with a red neon sign that said EAT in letters three feet high. Zeke had painted the original sign in 1987, before neon came back in fashion. Waverly Pike had replaced it in 2003 and apologized to him for a month.

He had not planned to stop. He had not been inside the Crossroads in over a year. But it was past two o'clock, he had not eaten since the day before, and Dr. Castellano's pamphlet was on the seat beside him with a picture on the cover of a smiling old couple eating salad. He decided that if he was going to start living well with heart failure, he might as well start with pie.

The bell over the door jingled when he came in. Every head at the counter turned to look at him, the way every head in every small-town diner in America turns, and then turned back.

The place had not changed. There was the long counter with chrome stools and red vinyl seats, the booths along the windows, and the pie case by the register with its slowly rotating shelves. The air smelled of bacon grease and burnt coffee and the lemon cleaner Waverly used on everything. On the wall behind the register, between a framed dollar bill and a calendar from the Clinton County Farm

Bureau, hung a small wooden plaque Zeke had lettered for Waverly as a gift twenty-five years ago. He remembered painting it at his workbench with Hannah reading over his shoulder.

> "O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him." — Psalm 34:8 (KJV)

It was still there. The gold leaf had held up well. It always did if you laid it right.

"Well, I'll be."

Waverly Pike came around the end of the counter wiping her hands on her apron. She was sixty-six years old and built like a fireplug. She had a cloud of improbably red hair and a voice that could stop a fistfight at fifty paces, and once had. She had run the Crossroads for thirty-one years. She had buried two husbands and outlived a triple bypass. She had sat with Hannah in the hospital every Tuesday afternoon for the last two months of her life.

"Ezekiel Thornefield," she said. "As I live and breathe. I was starting to think you'd died out there on that farm and nobody'd noticed."

"Not yet," Zeke said. "Working on it."

"Don't you joke about that." She swatted his arm with the dish towel and then, to his surprise and discomfort, pulled him into a quick, hard hug. She smelled like coffee and Jergens lotion. "Sit down. Silas is in his booth. Go on, he'll be glad to see you, though he won't say so."

Zeke looked where she pointed. In the last booth by the window, under the yellowed photograph of the 1974 Mercy Ridge High School state championship football team, sat a thin, stooped old man in a canvas barn coat. He was bent over a cup of coffee and a newspaper folded to the crossword. He did not look up, but Zeke saw his pencil stop moving.

Silas Quenby was seventy-three years old. He had worked for the Ohio Department of Transportation for thirty-eight years, most of them on the maintenance crews that patrolled I-71 between Cincinnati and Columbus. He had patched potholes, plowed snow, hauled deer carcasses off the shoulder, and mowed the medians. He had once pulled a family of five out of a submerged minivan in Caesar Creek during a flood. He had worked side by side with Zeke's father on the same highway crew for twelve years. When Zeke's father died, it was Silas who drove out to tell Zeke and his mother. He had been Zeke's oldest friend ever since, the kind of friend you do not have to talk to.

They had not talked in almost a year.

Zeke slid into the booth across from him. Silas filled in a word on the crossword. Then he set down his pencil, looked up, and studied Zeke over the tops of his bifocals for a long moment.

"You look terrible," Silas said.

"Thanks."

"I mean it. You look like something the cat dragged in and then thought better of."

"Heart doctor says it's failing."

Silas grunted. "Mine's been failing since 1991. Doctors don't know everything." He pushed the newspaper aside. "That why you're out? You been to Columbus?"

"Yeah."

"Which way'd you go?"

It was such an innocent question. But Silas asked it without looking at him, turning his coffee cup a quarter turn on the saucer. Zeke had the uncomfortable feeling that the old man already knew the answer.

"Bridge is out on Route 3," Zeke said. "Had to take the interstate."

"Huh." Silas turned the cup another quarter turn. "First time in a while, I'd guess."

Zeke did not answer.

A young woman came to the booth with a coffee pot and a menu. She was perhaps twenty-seven, slim and pale, with dark hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and no makeup at all. Her name tag said TAMSIN. She filled Zeke's cup without asking and set the menu down in front of him. She had a way of standing slightly turned, angled toward the door, so she could see the parking lot through the front window without seeming to look. Zeke noticed it because he had spent his whole life noticing angles and sightlines. He noticed, too, that when the bell over the door jingled behind her, her whole body went still. The coffee pot stopped in midair. Only when the customer turned out to be an old farmer in a seed cap did her shoulders come down again.

"Know what you want, hon?" she asked. Her voice was quiet and flat. It sounded like an accent that had been carefully sanded off.

"Piece of the apple, if you've got it," Zeke said. "And—" He thought of the pamphlet on the truck seat. "Ah, no ice cream."

"Living dangerous," she said. It might have been a joke. Her face did not change. She wrote it down and went away.

Silas watched her go. "New girl," he said. "Showed up in April. Waverly took her on without so much as a reference. Says the Lord told her to." He snorted. "Maybe He did. Works hard. Never misses a shift. Never talks about herself, either. Not a word. Rents that room over Haskell's hardware and doesn't own a car. Walks everywhere."

"Sounds like she's running from something."

"Most folks are." Silas looked across the table at him. "Some of them just run slower than others."

Zeke picked up his coffee and drank. It was terrible. It had always been terrible. Hannah used to say Waverly's coffee was the only proof she needed that the Lord had a sense of humor.

"Silas," he said, after a while. "That old billboard. Up on the rise, south of the exit. Mile Marker 52."

Silas's hands went still on the table.

"What about it?"

"There's a notice on it. Bankruptcy sale. Says they're taking bids."

"Kessler Outdoor went belly-up last spring," Silas said slowly. "Overextended. Bought too many signs right before everybody started looking at their phones instead of the road. The court's been selling off what's left. Most of it went to that outfit out of Indianapolis. But nobody's bid on that one."

"Why not?"

"Because it's falling down, for one. Cost more to fix than it'd ever make back. And because Sterling Blackmere wants it gone." Silas tipped his head toward the window, toward the interchange. "He's putting in his big shopping center and truck stop and Lord knows what all. He wants that hill. Wants the whole stretch clean. Word is he's going to buy that sign for scrap and pull it down soon as the court lets him."

"How much?"

Silas looked at him sharply. "How much what?"

"How much are they asking."

"Why on earth do you want to know that?"

Zeke did not have an answer. He looked down into his coffee.

Silas studied him for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice had changed. It had become quieter and more careful, the way a man steps when he is crossing a creek on stones he does not trust.

"Heard eighteen thousand," he said. "Structure and the rest of the ground lease. Lease has got about eleven years left on it. Ground's owned by an estate. Old family. Been tied up in probate since before you and me were gray." He paused. "You know who used to own that land, Zeke? Before Kessler ever leased it?"

Zeke looked up.

Silas held his eyes for a moment. Then the old man seemed to think better of whatever he had been about to say. He looked away, out the window, toward the interstate.

"Never mind," he said. "Old men talk too much."

"Silas."

"I said never mind." Silas picked up his pencil and pulled the crossword back toward him. But he did not write anything. He sat with the pencil hovering above the paper, and after a moment he said, without looking up, "Your daddy used to say something. Out on the crews. Used to say a man can outrun a lot of things in this life. Bill collectors. Bad weather. The law, sometimes, if he's lucky. But he can't outrun his own shadow at noon."

Zeke said nothing.

"Twenty years you wouldn't drive that road," Silas said. "Twenty years. And today you stop and climb that hill with your bad heart, and now you're sitting here asking me how much it costs." He finally raised his eyes. They were pale blue and watery with age and very, very sharp. "I'm not going to ask

you why, Zeke. I figure you'll tell me when you're ready. Or you won't. But I'll say this, and then I'll leave it be."

He set the pencil down.

"You remember that verse your mama used to have stuck on her refrigerator? The one from Proverbs?"

Zeke remembered. He had lettered it for her himself, on a scrap of pine board, when he was fifteen.

> "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." — Proverbs 28:13 (KJV)

"I'm not saying it's about you," Silas said. "I'm just saying I've been thinking about it lately. Thinking about it a lot." He picked up the pencil again. "Eat your pie."

Tamsin set the plate in front of him. Zeke looked up to thank her. For just a second he caught her eyes, dark and guarded and much older than her face. In them he saw something he recognized, the way you recognize your own handwriting on an envelope you do not remember mailing.

It was the look of someone who had not slept in a long time.

"Thank you, Tamsin," he said.

She blinked, as though it surprised her that he had read her name tag. As though it surprised her that anybody had. "Sure," she said, and turned away.

When Zeke left forty minutes later, he put a twenty-dollar bill under his saucer for a four-dollar slice of pie. He did not know why he did it. He only knew that it had been a long time since he had wanted to do anything for anybody, and the wanting felt strange. It felt like a limb waking up after you have slept on it wrong, painful and prickling and alive.

The house was dark when he got home.

He heated a can of soup and did not eat it. He laid out the new prescription bottles on the kitchen counter in a row and read the labels. He sat in his chair across from Hannah's empty chair. The television flickered silently on the counter, the evening news, and then a game show, and then something with police cars.

At ten o'clock he went to bed. At eleven he got up again.

He walked through the dark house in his sock feet the way he had walked through it the night before and many nights before that. He went past the closed door of Juniper's old room, which he had not opened in years. He went past the bathroom with its dripping faucet he kept meaning to fix. He stopped outside the door of the spare room.

He stood there a long time with his hand on the knob.

Inside, he knew, was the dresser. In the bottom drawer of the dresser, under a stack of Hannah's sweaters that still faintly smelled of her, was his grandmother's Bible. It had a cracked leather cover and onionskin pages thin as moth wings, and it had not been opened in fifteen years.

At the foot of the bed in that room was the cedar chest Hannah's father had built as a wedding present. Zeke had never opened that either. That had been Hannah's. Her quilts, her keepsakes, her things. He had always assumed that someday Juniper would come home and go through it. He had assumed a lot of things.

He turned the knob halfway. Then he let it go.

"Not tonight," he said.

He went back to the kitchen instead. He stood at the sink and looked out the window into the dark. There was no moon. The yard was black. And beyond it, sixty yards off, the barn was a deeper blackness against the sky. It was the shape of a thing more than the thing itself.

He thought about the billboard, forty-eight feet by fourteen, blank and peeling and waiting on its hill above the highway.

He thought about Brantley Voss with his hand on his belt and his face gone still.

He thought about Silas Quenby's sharp old eyes and the verse on his mother's refrigerator.

He thought about Dr. Castellano sitting down on her little stool. If you've got something like that, I'd find it.

And he thought, though he did not want to, about a young man in a barn on his first wedding anniversary, with his hand flat against a blank canvas, saying, I want to paint Him so big that a man doing seventy on the interstate can't help but see Him.

> "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah." — Psalm 32:3–4 (KJV)

Zeke opened the junk drawer beside the sink and took out the big yellow flashlight. He thumbed the switch. It still worked.

He put on his barn coat over his pajamas and his boots over his bare feet. He opened the back door and switched on the porch light. He did not know why he did that either. Then he stepped out into the cold.

The frost had already come down on the grass. It crunched under his boots as he crossed the yard. He walked past the clothesline, past the tangle of Hannah's roses, past the rusted burn barrel. Every step of the sixty yards felt longer than the one before it, as though the barn were backing away from him. Halfway there he stopped. His heart was doing its complicated thing again, and he stood in the dark with the flashlight beam pooled at his feet and waited for it to settle.

You don't have to do this, he told himself. You can go back inside. Nobody's making you.

But that was the trouble. Nobody was making him. Nobody had made him stop on the hill today, either, or climb it, or ask Silas how much. For fifteen years he had been running, and for fifteen years he had told himself he was being chased. Tonight, standing in the frozen dark between his house and his barn, he understood for the first time that he was not being chased at all.

He was being called.

There is a difference. A man being chased runs because he is afraid of being caught. A man being called runs because he is afraid of what will happen if he answers.

Zeke walked the rest of the way to the barn.

The big sliding door was stiff on its track. Rust had grown into the rollers, and he had to set the flashlight down and throw his whole weight against it before it gave. It groaned and shrieked and slid open two feet, then three. A breath of air came out of the dark interior, cold and close. It smelled of dust and mouse droppings and old hay. Underneath all that, faint but unmistakable after fifteen years, it smelled of linseed oil and turpentine.

Zeke stood in the doorway and breathed it in.

He found the light switch by feel, exactly where it had always been, on the post to the right of the door. His fingers knew it the way they knew the buttons on his shirt. He flipped it.

Nothing happened.

Then, high above the workbench, the single bulb flickered, buzzed, and caught.

Yellow light spilled across the barn.

It was all still there. The workbench with its vise and its scarred, paint-spattered top. The coffee cans of brushes standing bristle-up, sorted by width, gone stiff and gray with dust. The mahl sticks leaning in the corner. The half-painted Fall Festival sign still propped against the sawhorses, fifteen years out of date, the letters MERCY RIDGE FALL FEST finished and the date never painted in. Cobwebs hung from the rafters in long gray veils. A pair of barn swallows, or the great-great-grandchildren of the swallows he remembered, shifted and complained up in the dark.

And in the far corner, in the deepest shadow, was the pile.

Zeke had built it himself in a single night of grief and rage. Old sign blanks, broken sawhorses, rolls of rotten tarp, scraps of lumber, a cracked window sash, an old bicycle with no tires. Fifteen years of dust had settled over it, and mice had nested in it, and the whole thing had slumped and settled into a single gray mass that looked as though it had grown there.

He knew what was behind it.

He walked across the barn floor. His boots left prints in the dust. He set the flashlight on the workbench, pointed at the corner, and stood looking at the pile for a long moment.

Then he took hold of the first broken sawhorse and pulled it free.

It was slow work for an old man with a tired heart. He dragged out the bicycle. He hauled the rolls of tarp and they came apart in his hands in rotten shreds. He pulled the sign blanks one at a time and leaned them against the wall. Twice he had to stop and sit on the edge of the workbench with his hand on his chest, breathing hard and waiting for the dizziness to pass. Dust rose up around him in clouds and turned gold in the light of the bulb. He coughed until his eyes ran.

He did not stop.

It took him most of an hour. When he pulled away the last scrap of lumber, it was nearly one in the morning, and he was trembling all over, and his flannel pajama shirt was soaked with sweat under the barn coat.

There, leaning against the back wall where he had shoved it fifteen years ago, was a tall rectangular shape draped in a stiff gray drop cloth. It was six feet by four. It was exactly as he had left it.

Zeke stood in front of it.

He told himself he would just look. He told himself he did not have to do anything else. He told himself a great many things, standing there in the yellow light with his heart pounding and the dust settling slowly around him like snow.

Outside, very faintly, carried on the cold air from three miles away, he could hear the sound of the interstate. It was the endless rushing of the traffic, thousands of people in a hurry, going to work, going home, running from their pasts, searching for a reason to keep living. Not one of them was looking up.

> "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." — Revelation 3:20 (KJV)

Zeke reached out with a shaking hand and took hold of the corner of the drop cloth.

He pulled.

The canvas slid away in a soft rush of dust.

And for the first time in fifteen years, Jesus looked back at him.

End of Chapter 1

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 2

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 2: Seven Words from Heaven

> "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." — Isaiah 1:18 (KJV)

He had forgotten how good he was.

That was the first thing Zeke thought, standing in the yellow light of the barn at one o'clock in the morning with the drop cloth in a heap at his feet. It was not a proud thought. It was closer to grief. He looked at the face on the canvas and saw the work of a man he no longer knew: the patient layering of the skin tones, the sunburn across the cheekbones, the faint scar on the bridge of the nose, the way the light from the painted sky caught the edge of the beard. Somewhere along the way that man had died, and Zeke had been living in his house and wearing his clothes for fifteen years.

Then he made himself look at the eyes.

They had not changed. Of course they had not changed. They were oil paint on gesso, and oil paint does not change in fifteen years in a dry barn. But Zeke had changed, and so he saw them differently. When he painted them he had been a younger man, a churchgoing man, a man who had done some wrong in his life the way every man has, but nothing he could not carry. He had painted those eyes to look at other people.

Now they were looking at him.

He looks at you like He already knows everything you ever did. And He's still glad you came.

He had said that to Hannah forty-some years ago, in this barn, as easily as a man says the weather is turning. He had not known then what it would cost to stand in front of those eyes with everything he had done since.

Zeke's legs gave out. He did not fall so much as fold, slowly, down onto the overturned bucket that still sat in front of the canvas where Hannah had left it. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands hanging between them, and he looked up at the face of Christ, and for a long time he could not do anything at all.

The hands were still empty.

He had known they would be. Still, it was a blow to see them. The arms were open. The wrists were strong and finished. Then there was only graphite on white gesso, the ghost-lines of fingers, and the two small penciled circles in the palms where the nail wounds were supposed to go. They looked exactly as they had on the autumn night twenty years ago when he had come home from the highway with mud on his boots and a loaded brush in his hand and found that he could not make himself touch them.

"I know," Zeke said to the painting. His voice was hoarse from the dust. "I know."

That was when he saw the envelope.

It was only a corner. A small white triangle, no bigger than a postage stamp, sticking out from behind the bottom rail of the frame, gone faintly yellow with age. He would never have seen it if he had not been sitting so low, eye level with the bottom of the canvas. He stared at it without understanding. Then he leaned forward and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and drew it out.

It slid free easily, as though it had been waiting.

On the front, in block capitals, was a single word: ZEKE. The downstrokes were thick and the upstrokes were thin, the way he had taught her to letter on a winter evening at the kitchen table when Juniper was still in diapers. He would have known that hand anywhere in the world. He had seen it on grocery lists and birthday cards and the notes she used to tuck into his lunch pail. He had seen it on the last check she ever wrote, to the electric company, three days before she went into the hospital for the final time.

His hands began to shake so badly he almost dropped it.

He did not open it right away.

He sat on the bucket and held it in both hands, turning it over and over. The flap was tucked, not sealed. It was thin, a single page by the feel of it. He tried to imagine when she could have put it there. She had not been able to walk to the barn for the last month of her life. Before that, she had been at the hospital, or in bed, or too sick to stand. And then he remembered.

The night he found her asleep on this floor.

The cold spot in the bed. The light burning in the barn. Her small, wasted body slumped against the sawhorse, and the drop cloth pulled away, and her voice saying Look at Him.

She had not come out here to look at a painting. She had come out here to leave him something. And he had carried her back to the house and never once wondered why.

"Oh, Hannah," Zeke whispered. "Oh, honey."

He opened the envelope.

The paper was the lined kind she used for grocery lists, torn neatly from a pad. Her handwriting was shakier than he remembered. The pen had skipped in two places. He read it by the light of the single bulb, and when he got to the bottom, he read it again, and then a third time, because by then he could no longer see the words.

> You made me a promise in this barn a long time ago. I'm not letting you out of it.
>
> Zeke, if the world ever forgets who Jesus is, paint Him big enough that nobody can ignore Him.
>
> And when you do — paint the hands. Paint them for you.
>
> I'll be watching for you. Come home when you're ready. He'll be watching too.

The sound that came out of him did not sound human. It was something torn loose from the bottom of a well that had been capped for fifteen years. He slid off the bucket onto his knees on the dusty floor, exactly where she had knelt, though he did not know that. He pressed the letter against his chest with both hands, and he wept. He wept for his wife and for his daughter. He wept for the fifteen years and the twenty years and for the man who had painted those eyes. He wept the way he had not been able to weep at her bedside, or at her grave, or on any night since. He wept until his ribs ached and his heart stumbled and he had to put one hand flat on the floor to keep from going over.

Above him, the painted Christ held out His unfinished hands.

> "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." — Psalm 51:17 (KJV)

When the swallows began stirring in the rafters and gray light came seeping through the cracks in the barn boards, he was still there, sitting on the floor with his back against the sawhorse and the letter in his lap. He had not slept. He did not feel as though he would ever need to sleep again.

I have watched you carry something heavy for five years. I don't know all of it, and I'm not going to pretend I do. But I know it's the reason the hands are still empty.

She had known. Not everything. But enough. She had lived with it beside him for five years and never once forced it out of him. She had simply waited and prayed and, at the end, left the door open.

Come home when you're ready.

He was not ready. He knew that. There was a thing inside him, a thing with mud on its boots and rain in its hair, that he still could not bring himself to look at, not even here, not even now.

But for the first time in fifteen years, he wanted to be.

He did not sleep the second night either.

At eleven o'clock he stood outside the door of the spare room again with his hand on the knob. This time he turned it all the way.

The room smelled of cedar and dust and, faintly, impossibly, of her. Hannah's sewing machine sat under its cover on the table by the window. Her father's cedar chest crouched at the foot of the bed. Zeke did not look at the chest. He went to the dresser, knelt with a grunt on the braided rug, and pulled open the bottom drawer.

Her sweaters were still there. The blue cardigan she wore to church. The gray one with the moth hole in the elbow that she refused to throw away. He lifted them out one at a time and laid them on the bed, and the smell of her rose up from them so strongly that he had to stop and sit back on his heels and close his eyes.

Then he reached into the drawer and took out his grandmother's Bible.

It was heavier than he remembered. The leather of the cover had cracked further, and a corner of the spine had come loose. He held it in his lap for a while without opening it. Then he carried it to the kitchen, sat down at the table across from Hannah's empty chair, switched on the lamp, and opened it.

He did not know where to start, so he started where a man starts when he does not know where to start. He opened it to the middle and read the Psalms.

He read until two in the morning. He read Psalm 23, which he had known by heart since he was six, and found it had gone strange and new in his mouth, like a word you repeat until it stops sounding like a word. He read Psalm 38 and Psalm 42 and Psalm 130. Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD. He read slowly, moving his lips, the way his grandmother had read.

Then, near two o'clock, he turned to the New Testament, and the Bible fell open on its own in his hands to the eleventh chapter of Matthew.

It fell open there because something was tucked between the pages. It was a thin strip of paper, a homemade bookmark cut from the edge of a seed catalog, and on it, in pencil, in the same block capitals as the envelope, were two words.

FOR ZEKE.

And beneath the bookmark, on the onionskin page, someone had underlined a single verse in pencil, very lightly, so as not to tear the paper.

> "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." — Matthew 11:28–30 (KJV)

Zeke sat at the kitchen table and looked at that verse for a very long time.

All ye that labour and are heavy laden.

He was sixty-eight years old. He had a failing heart and an empty house and a daughter in Chicago who had not called him in eleven years. He had a thing inside him he had never told anyone. He was so tired that his bones ached with it. He had not slept a whole night through in longer than he could remember.

I will give you rest.

He closed the Bible. He did not put it back in the drawer. He left it on the kitchen table, under the lamp, where he would see it in the morning.

On the third night he prayed.

It was not much of a prayer. He did not kneel. He sat in the barn on the overturned bucket in front of the painting, with the Bible on his knee and Hannah's letter folded in his shirt pocket, and he talked out loud the way a man talks to someone he has not spoken to in a very long time and is not sure will answer.

"I don't know how to do this anymore," he said. "I used to. I used to be good at it. Hannah said I prayed over my coffee more than my supper." He laughed, and it came out wrong. "I've been mad at You for fifteen years. I guess You know that. I guess You know everything. That's sort of the problem."

The barn was quiet. The bulb buzzed overhead.

"There's a thing I can't tell You yet," Zeke said. His voice dropped. "You already know it. I know You do. But I can't say it out loud. Not yet. I'm not — I'm not ready for that. I'm sorry. I know that's not how this is supposed to work."

He looked up at the painted eyes.

"But she asked me to do something. And I promised her. Twice. And I'm running out of time to keep it." He swallowed hard. "So I'm asking. If You still want an old man who's run from You half his life, I'm here. I'll do it. I'll put You up there where they can see You. Just — show me how. Show me what to say."

He sat there a while longer. Nothing happened. There was no voice from heaven, no light, no sudden warmth. There was only the cold barn and the buzzing bulb and the faint, endless rush of the interstate three miles away.

But when he went back to the house and lay down on the bed, he slept. He slept for nine hours straight, without dreaming, for the first time in fifteen years.

> "And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left." — Isaiah 30:21 (KJV)

The trustee's office was in a glass building in downtown Cincinnati, but the trustee himself turned out to be a tired, friendly man named Harold Brisbane who answered his own phone.

"The Mile Marker 52 structure?" Brisbane said, when Zeke explained what he was calling about. Zeke could hear papers shuffling. "Sure, sure. That one's still open. Bids due on the twenty-fourth. Structure's sold as-is, along with the balance of the ground lease. Eleven years and four months remaining. The landowner's an estate, been in probate a long time, but the lease is valid and the rent's paid through next June. You're aware the structure is in poor condition?"

"I've seen it."

"And you're aware there's another interested party?"

Zeke was quiet for a second. "Blackmere?"

A pause on the other end. "I'm not at liberty to say, Mr. Thornefield. But I'll tell you there's been one bid, and it isn't a large one. Most people see that sign and figure it's worth what the steel will bring at the scrapyard." Another pause. Then, more carefully: "Can I ask what you plan to use it for? Purely curiosity. You don't have to answer."

Zeke looked across the kitchen at his grandmother's Bible lying open on the table.

"Advertising," he said.

He sat down that afternoon with the checkbook and a pencil and a pad of Hannah's grocery-list paper. He was not a rich man and never had been. The money from selling the sign business had gone mostly into Hannah's medical bills. What was left had sat in a savings account at the Farmers & Merchants Bank, earning almost nothing, for fifteen years. He had thought of it, when he thought of it at all, as burial money.

Thirty-one thousand, four hundred and twelve dollars.

He wrote it at the top of the page. Then he started subtracting. Plywood, primer, enamel. Rental on a boom lift. New floodlights and wiring. A welder for the cross-braces. Bolts, brackets, sealant, brushes. Insurance, if anybody would even insure such a thing. He worked it out the way he used to work out a bid for a job, carefully, item by item, and when he was done he looked at what was left and laughed out loud in the empty kitchen.

It was enough to bury him, if they used a pine box and skipped the flowers.

He bid eighteen thousand, seven hundred and fifty dollars. He drove the envelope to Cincinnati himself and handed it to Harold Brisbane's receptionist rather than trust it to the mail.

On the twenty-sixth of October, Brisbane called back.

"Congratulations, Mr. Thornefield," he said. "You are the proud owner of a billboard." He hesitated. "The other party was not pleased. I thought you should know. Their attorney asked a number of questions about you."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you paid by cashier's check," Brisbane said, "and that it cleared."

> "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." — Ecclesiastes 9:10 (KJV)

Silas Quenby found out on the twenty-seventh, because Zeke told him. He had not meant to. He had driven to the Crossroads for pie and found Silas in his booth, and before the coffee came, the words were out of his mouth.

Silas set down his pencil. He took off his bifocals, folded them, and laid them on the crossword. He looked at Zeke for a long time.

"You bought it," he said.

"I bought it."

"With what?"

"With my burial money."

Silas closed his eyes. "Lord, have mercy." He opened them again. "And what in the name of all that's holy are you going to do with a rusted-out billboard and a bad heart, Ezekiel?"

So Zeke told him. Not all of it. He did not tell him about the night on the highway. He did not tell him about the thing he had told God he could not say yet. But he told him about the barn and the painting and the envelope behind the frame. He took Hannah's letter out of his shirt pocket, unfolded it, and slid it across the table. Silas put his bifocals back on and read it twice. When he was done, he folded it carefully along its creases and slid it back, and he did not say anything for a while. He looked out the window at the interstate with his jaw working.

"She always was the best of the two of you," he said finally, roughly.

"I know it."

Silas sighed. It was a long sigh, the sigh of a man who has seen trouble coming down the road and knows he is going to step out in front of it anyway.

"You can't do it by yourself," he said. "You'll fall off that catwalk and break your fool neck, and then I'll have to explain to Hannah when I get there why I let you." He picked up his coffee cup. "My nephew runs the rental yard over in Wilmington. He'll let us have a boom lift for cost. And I've still got my welding rig in the garage. Haven't struck an arc since I retired, but it'll come back."

"Silas, I can't ask you—"

"You didn't ask. I offered. There's a difference." The old man drank his coffee and made a face. "Besides. Somebody ought to be there to see it."

Waverly Pike, who had been wiping the same three feet of counter for five minutes, came over with the coffee pot and said she would pray for them both. Then she said she would bring sandwiches. Then she said if either of them fell off that sign, she would personally make them sorry they had survived. Behind her, at the register, the young waitress named Tamsin was counting change into the drawer. She did not look up. But Zeke noticed she had stopped counting.

They worked for two weeks.

Every morning Silas pulled into the farmhouse drive at seven in his rattling Chevy with a thermos of coffee and a box of Waverly's biscuits, and they drove out to Mile Marker 52 together. The November mornings came up cold and gray, with frost on the windshield and the breath smoking out of them. Silas's nephew delivered the boom lift on a flatbed and showed them how to run it. Silas cut away the rotten cross-braces with a torch and welded new ones in. The blue-white arc hissed and spat, and the old man's face behind the welding mask was as calm as if he were doing a crossword. Zeke went over the frame with a wire brush and a can of rust converter, foot by foot, until his shoulders screamed. They pried off the last rotten shreds of the hotel advertisement and replaced eleven panels of plywood that had gone soft. They rewired the floodlights. Zeke primed the whole face of the billboard, all forty-eight feet of it, a clean flat white. Cars blew past below them on the interstate by the thousands, and nobody looked up. Nobody ever does, at a blank billboard.

Twice Zeke had to sit down on the catwalk with his back against the frame and his hand pressed to his chest until the world steadied. Both times Silas pretended not to notice. Both times, when Zeke got up again, Silas silently handed him a bottle of water and one of the white pills from Dr. Castellano's prescription.

The face of the billboard went up white. But the painting itself, Zeke did not do on the highway.

That was the old way, and he had decided on it the first night he sat down to plan the job. In the days before vinyl, before giant printers spat out pictures like newspapers, a sign painter did not paint a big bulletin in the open air with every passing car watching. He painted it in the shop, on separate panels, laid out flat. Then he trucked the panels out and bolted them up in one go. The face of the Mile Marker 52 board was built from twenty-one sheets of plywood, each four feet by eight. So Zeke and Silas numbered twenty-one new sheets, primed them, and carried them into the barn, where Zeke laid them out across the floor in a great grid. They filled the whole space from the workbench to the back wall, and he had to walk across them in his sock feet on boards laid over the top like stepping stones.

Then he climbed to the hayloft with a pencil and a yardstick, looked down at that enormous white field, and began to draw.

> "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house." — Matthew 5:14–15 (KJV)

He painted the face of Jesus from the face on the canvas.

He did it with a grid. Fine pencil lines divided the old painting into squares, and great chalk lines divided the new panels to match, so that every inch of the canvas became a foot of plywood. He worked square by square, matching color to color. It was slow, painstaking work, the kind of work his hands had not done in fifteen years. On the first day they shook so badly he could hardly hold a straight line. On the second day they shook less. By the fourth day, something in them had come back. It was not all of what he once had. But it was enough.

He painted the weathered brow and the dark, uneven beard. He painted the scar across the bridge of the nose. He painted the hair falling to the shoulders and the rough brown robe at the neck, and behind it all the broad gold-edged Ohio sunrise. And on the ninth day, he painted the eyes.

That took him all day and most of the night. Each eye was nearly four feet across. He painted them lying on his stomach on a plank laid over the panels, with a hand lamp clamped beside him. He painted until his elbows were raw and his back had locked up and Silas had to help him to his feet. When he was finished, he climbed the ladder to the hayloft at three o'clock in the morning, looked down, and had to hold on to the railing.

They were the same eyes. Knowing. Unflinching. Glad you came.

He painted a portrait, from the shoulders up. He did not paint the arms, and he did not paint the hands.

Silas noticed on the tenth day. He stood in the barn door with his hands in his coat pockets, looking at the twenty-one panels.

"No hands," he said.

"It's a portrait," Zeke said, without looking up. "Billboards are about the face. Anything more is clutter at seventy miles an hour."

"Mm-hm," said Silas.

He did not say anything else. But Zeke felt the old man's eyes on the back of his neck for a long time.

There was still the bottom of the board.

Zeke had left a band of white across the lower four feet of the panels, beneath the portrait, for the words. He had known from the beginning that there would have to be words. A picture alone was not enough. People would see a face and think it was an advertisement for a movie or a church supper or a lawyer. A picture asks a question. Words answer it.

But what words?

For three days he could not decide. He sat at the kitchen table with his grandmother's Bible and a pad of paper and wrote out verse after verse, and crossed them out one after another.

For God so loved the world. He loved that one more than any verse in the Book. But it was twenty-five words long, and nobody can read twenty-five words at seventy miles an hour.

That was the first rule of billboards, the one his first boss had beaten into him when he was nineteen: Seven words, Thornefield. Never more than seven. A driver gets three seconds. Seven words is all a man can take in, in three seconds, at seventy miles an hour. Any more than that and you're just painting for the birds.

Seven words.

He tried JESUS LOVES YOU. It was true, and it was three words. But he had seen it on a thousand bumper stickers, and so had everybody else. People's eyes slid right off it like water off wax. He tried COME UNTO ME. He tried THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH, then crossed it out so hard the pencil tore the paper, because that was not the face he had painted. That was not the look in those eyes.

On the third night, he went out to the barn, climbed to the hayloft, and sat looking down at the face on the floor.

He looks at you like He already knows everything you ever did. And He's still glad you came.

Zeke sat very still.

He thought about Hannah's letter. I'll be watching for you. Come home when you're ready.

He thought about the woman at the well in the fourth chapter of John. She had five husbands behind her and a sixth man who was not her husband. She went to draw water in the heat of the day so she would not have to face the other women. She met a stranger who told her every secret she had. She did not run from Him. She ran into town shouting about Him.

> "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" — John 4:29 (KJV)

He thought of the prodigal son on the long road home, rehearsing his speech, and the father who saw him a great way off and ran.

And he understood that the words had been in front of him all along. They were not written on any page. They were painted in those eyes. The first half was what Jesus knew. The second half was what Jesus wanted.

He climbed down from the hayloft, took a stick of chalk, and knelt at the edge of the white band. In letters two feet high, he laid out seven words.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

Beneath them, smaller, he wrote:

— JESUS

He sat back on his heels and looked at it.

It frightened him. That was the truth. The first four words frightened him so badly that his hands went cold. They sounded like a threat. They sounded like a voice on the phone in the middle of the night. He knew how they would read to a man with something on his conscience, driving alone at night. He knew it because he was such a man. Those four words were not written to the town first. They were written to him.

But the last two words were the whole gospel, and they would not let the first four stand alone.

Silas read the chalk lines the next morning, standing in the barn door with his coffee. He read them for a long time.

"Folks are going to read that the wrong way," he said finally. "Some of them, anyhow."

"I know it."

"Some of them are going to read it like a threat."

"Then they'll keep reading," Zeke said, "and get to the end of it."

Silas looked at him. Something moved in the old man's face, something Zeke could not read.

"And what if somebody reads it," Silas said quietly, "and thinks it's about him? Thinks somebody's found out?"

Zeke did not answer for a moment. He looked down at the words on the white plywood.

"Then I guess," he said, "he'll have to decide which half he believes."

He painted the letters that afternoon, in deep red, with a two-inch flat brush. His hand was as steady as it had been at thirty.

> "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God." — Jeremiah 3:22 (KJV)

They hung it on a Sunday night in the second week of November.

They waited until after midnight, when the traffic thinned to a trickle of long-haul trucks. Silas's nephew brought the panels out on the flatbed, twenty-one of them stacked and padded with moving blankets, and they worked by the light of the newly wired floodlights, which Zeke had aimed down at the catwalk so they would not shine on the face until the job was done. It was cold enough to see their breath and still enough to hear the hum of the tires on the interstate a quarter mile away. Silas ran the boom lift. Zeke rode the basket up with each panel and guided it into place, and bolted it to the frame with an impact driver whose whine carried for miles in the frozen air.

At two-thirty, a state trooper slowed on the northbound lanes. His spotlight swept across the hill and stopped on the lift. Zeke froze in the basket with a panel half bolted. Then the light moved on, and the cruiser accelerated, and was gone. To a passing trooper, at two in the morning, two old men on a billboard looked like any other sign crew. Nobody looks twice at a sign crew.

They put up the sky first, and then the robe and the shoulders. They put up the face, one panel at a time: the brow, the scar, the beard. At four-fifteen they put up the left eye. At four-forty, the right. Then they bolted up the white band at the bottom, with its seven red words, in three long panels.

At five-fifty, Zeke drove the last bolt.

He rode the basket down. He climbed out and stood for a moment with his hand on the frame of the lift, waiting for his legs to steady and his heart to slow. Then he walked to the junction box at the foot of the near column and swung the floodlights up off the catwalk and onto the face of the billboard.

He did not look up. Not yet. He wanted to see it the way they would see it.

They drove the trucks down the hill and a half mile south to the Harlan Creek overpass and pulled off onto the shoulder. They got out and stood at the railing in the dark, side by side, two old men in barn coats with their hands in their pockets, and they looked north up the long rise of the interstate toward Mile Marker 52.

The sky in the east had begun to go gray. Then it went pale gold.

And as the first light came across the stubbled cornfields and the hedgerows and the long gray ribbon of the highway, it found the billboard on its hill and touched the face of Jesus Christ. The broad sunburnt brow. The dark beard. The eyes, each four feet wide, looking down the interstate at every car that came up the rise, as though He had been standing on that hill all night waiting for each one of them in particular.

And beneath Him, blazing red in the floodlights and the sunrise:

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME. — JESUS

Neither of them said anything for a long time.

Then Silas Quenby, who had not cried at his own wife's funeral, took off his cap and held it against his chest. Zeke heard him whisper something that might have been Lord, have mercy, and might have been something else.

Zeke did not cry. He thought he would, but he did not. He stood at the railing with his hands in his pockets and Hannah's letter in his shirt over his heart, and he felt a stillness come down over him like snow. He had never felt anything like it in his life. It was not happiness exactly. It was something underneath happiness, something that happiness stands on.

Promise me that someday, somewhere, you'll put Him where the whole world can see Him.

"I kept it, Hannah," he whispered. "I kept it."

But a quiet voice in the back of his mind, a voice that sounded very much like hers, reminded him that he had promised two things in that barn. And the second one was still sitting on a canvas in the dark, with its arms held open and its hands unfinished.

Below the overpass, the first car of the morning came up the rise. It was a little silver sedan going about seventy-five. It reached the top of the hill.

Its brake lights came on.

Six miles to the south, in a split-level house on a cul-de-sac out past Harlan Creek, Chief Brantley Voss was standing at his kitchen counter in his uniform. He was finishing his first cup of coffee and listening to the radio.

He had a seven-thirty briefing at the station. He would take the interstate into town, the way he did every morning.

He rinsed out his cup, set it in the drainer, kissed his sleeping wife on the forehead, picked up his keys, and went out to his car.

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

End of Chapter 2

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 3

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 3: The Man Who Almost Crashed

> "But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out." — Numbers 32:23 (KJV)

Chief Brantley Voss had driven the same eleven miles to work every morning for twenty-three years, and he could have done it in his sleep.

Some mornings, he suspected, he did.

He backed the black Tahoe out of the driveway at six-fourteen. The radio was on low, tuned to the farm report out of Wilmington: corn futures, soybean futures, a cold front coming down from Michigan. The heater was on high. His coffee rode in the cupholder in the stainless steel travel mug his daughter had given him the Christmas she graduated from nursing school. It said WORLD'S OKAYEST DAD on the side. He had laughed when he opened it. He carried it every day.

He went down Cobblestone Court past the Hendersons' and the Adairs' and the empty house the bank had taken from the Pruett family last spring. He turned left on Harlan Creek Road. He passed the Methodist church with its marquee that said FALL HARVEST SUPPER SAT 5 PM — ALL WELCOME, which he would attend, because he attended everything. At the bottom of the hill he swung up the ramp onto Interstate 71 northbound, the way he did every morning, and settled into the left lane at seventy-four miles an hour.

He was thinking about the day. A seven-thirty briefing. A budget meeting with the township trustees at ten, where Earl Haskins would once again argue that the department did not need a fourth cruiser. Lunch at the Rotary. A parole board notification he had to sign and return to Columbus, some routine thing that had come in Friday's mail and that he had not opened yet. A call to his daughter, Kelsey, in Dayton, who was pregnant with their first grandchild and was due on Christmas Eve.

He was a man whose days were full. He liked them that way. A full day did not leave room for much else.

The highway climbed the long gentle grade south of town. The sky was paling in the east, the fields on either side gray with frost. A semi rolled along in the right lane ahead of him, WERNER on its trailer, and Voss eased up to pass it. He reached for his coffee.

He came over the top of the rise.

And Jesus Christ was looking at him.

Afterward, he could never say exactly what happened in the next four seconds. He tried to reconstruct it more than once, the way he had reconstructed a thousand accident scenes in his career, with diagrams and skid lengths and estimated speeds. But it would not hold still long enough to diagram.

He remembered the face. It was enormous, filling the sky above the highway, lit gold on one side by the sunrise and white on the other by floodlights. The eyes were looking straight down the northbound lanes. They were looking at him. Not at the road, not at the traffic, but at him, Brantley Voss, in the left lane of Interstate 71 at seventy-four miles an hour, with a coffee mug halfway to his mouth.

And he remembered the words. They were red. Blood red. Each letter was taller than a man.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID.

That was as far as he got.

The coffee mug went somewhere. Hot coffee went across his lap and the dashboard and the laptop mount. His hands jerked on the wheel. The Tahoe swerved right, across the dashed white line, into the lane where the Werner semi was rolling along at sixty-five. The truck's air horn went off like the end of the world. Voss saw the chrome grille fill his passenger window, so close he could read the Peterbilt badge. He wrenched the wheel left and the Tahoe slewed back across its own lane and onto the left shoulder, gravel roaring under the tires and the rumble strip hammering through the frame. The median grass was coming at him, and beyond it the southbound lanes and the oncoming headlights. He stood on the brake. The anti-lock pulsed and shuddered under his foot. The SUV fishtailed once, twice. Then it stopped, nose pointed half into the median, rocking on its springs, with the engine still running and the radio still talking about soybean futures.

The semi blew past, horn still blaring, and was gone over the next hill.

Voss sat with both hands locked on the wheel.

His heart was going so hard he could feel it in his teeth. There was coffee in his lap, scalding, and he did not feel it. There was a sound in the cab, a high, thin whistling, and it took him a long moment to understand that it was his own breath.

He did not look up. He would not look up.

He turned his head slowly and looked in the rearview mirror instead, and there it was, behind him now, on its hill above the northbound lanes. The face. The eyes. The red words. In the mirror they read backwards. But he did not need to read them. They were written on the inside of his skull now, and he knew he would see them every time he closed his eyes for the rest of his life.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME. — JESUS

"No," Brantley Voss said aloud, in the empty cab. His voice cracked like a boy's. "No. No, no, no."

> "For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me." — Psalm 38:4 (KJV)

It had been raining that night.

That was the first thing he always remembered, on the nights he could not stop himself from remembering. Not a soft rain. A hard, cold, driving October rain that came sideways across the interstate in sheets, so thick the wipers could not keep up. The kind of rain that turned the highway into a black mirror and made every set of headlights a smear.

He had been thirty-eight years old. A sergeant, three years on the Mercy Ridge force after twelve years with the Clinton County Sheriff. He had a wife and an eight-year-old daughter and a mortgage he could not quite afford. He had a reputation as a good, steady officer who did his job and did not make trouble. He wanted, more than he had ever let himself admit, to be chief someday.

The call came in at eleven fifty-two.

Vehicle versus pedestrian, I-71 northbound, Mile Marker 52. Possible fatality.

He was nine minutes away. He made it in five.

He could still see it. He would always see it. The billboard on its hill, lit up white by its floodlights in the rain. In those days it was advertising a steakhouse in Lebanon, with a picture of a sizzling T-bone the size of a pickup truck. Below it, on the shoulder, a tan Buick sedan with its hazard lights blinking and its right rear tire flat on the rim. A jack lay on its side in the gravel beside it. A spare tire had rolled into the ditch.

And beside the Buick, in the rain, a man lay on his back on the shoulder with his arms flung out and his eyes open.

His name, Voss learned later, was Wesley Arden. He was thirty-one years old. He worked the second shift at the feed mill in Sabina, and he had been driving home and had gotten a flat, and he had pulled over to change it in the rain. He had a wife and a little boy. There was a child's car seat in the back of the Buick, empty. There was a lunch pail on the passenger seat with a note in it in a woman's

handwriting. Voss would read that note later, under the dome light of his cruiser, and he would never forget it. Love you. Drive careful. Bring home milk.

Kneeling over Wesley Arden in the rain was another man, doing chest compressions.

He was young, mid-twenties, rangy and long-haired, in a soaked flannel shirt with no coat. His hands were black with blood to the wrists. He was counting compressions under his breath and crying at the same time. His beat-up red Ford pickup was parked on the shoulder thirty yards back with its door hanging open and its headlights on.

"He's gone, son," Voss said, crouching beside him. "Stop. He's gone."

The young man did not stop. "I saw it," he said. His teeth were chattering. "I saw it, I was coming up behind, I saw the whole thing. It was a car, a black car, it came up on the shoulder doing ninety, it didn't even slow down. It hit him and it went into the ditch up there—" He jerked his chin toward the dark beyond the billboard. "Up there, past the sign. I stopped. I stopped to help him. Why'd it— why didn't it even slow down?"

"What's your name, son?"

"Gideon." The young man finally stopped the compressions. He sat back on his heels in the gravel and the rain and looked at his bloody hands. "Gideon Kestrel."

Voss smelled the beer on him then. Not much. A couple of cans, maybe, at the end of a long day. But it was there.

He remembered noticing it. He remembered filing it away. He remembered, God help him, that some cold, careful part of his mind had already begun to think.

The black car was in the ditch a hundred yards north, past the billboard, nose-down in the culvert with its headlights still burning up into the rain.

It was a new BMW, a 7 Series, the kind of car nobody in Clinton County owned. Its front end was crumpled. Its windshield was starred on the passenger side. There was something on the hood that Voss did not let himself look at too closely.

Behind the wheel sat a boy.

That was how Voss thought of him, then and now. The boy. He had learned in the years since never to think the boy's name. Not in his own head, not alone in his car, not lying awake beside his wife at three in the morning. If he did not think the name, it was easier. It was a trick he had learned, the way you learn to step around a soft board on a porch.

The boy was nineteen. He was so drunk he could barely lift his head. He was sobbing. There was blood on his forehead from the steering wheel and vomit on his expensive shirt. When Voss opened the door, the smell of whiskey rolled out of the car in a wave. The boy looked up at him with wet, unfocused eyes and said, "Is he okay? Is the guy okay? I didn't see him. I swear to God I didn't see him. Is he okay?"

And Voss knew who he was. Everybody in Mercy Ridge would have known who he was. Everybody knew the family. The family owned half the county.

He stood there in the rain with his hand on the open door and his flashlight on the boy's face. He knew, very clearly, what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to call for a second unit and an ambulance. He was supposed to administer a field sobriety test, read the boy his rights, put him in cuffs, and put him in the back of the cruiser. He was supposed to secure the scene, photograph the BMW, and bag the paint transfer and the glass. He was supposed to take a statement from the eyewitness, Gideon Kestrel, who was still kneeling in the rain back by the Buick with a dead man's blood on his hands. He had done it a hundred times. He was good at it.

He did not do it.

Instead, he took out his cell phone, a flip phone, back then, and he made a call.

He did not remember deciding. That was the strange thing. He had gone over it ten thousand times in twenty years. He had looked for the moment when he chose, the fork in the road, the place where he could have gone one way and went the other instead. He could never find it. It was as though his hands had done it without him. As though some other man had stood in the rain that night and dialed that number while Brantley Voss watched from somewhere far away.

The boy's father answered on the second ring. He listened in silence while Voss told him. Then he said four words.

"Don't do anything. I'm coming."

He was there in fourteen minutes. He drove himself, in a dark green Range Rover, without lights or sirens, and he pulled onto the shoulder behind the BMW. Voss would remember for the rest of his life the sight of that man getting out of the Range Rover in his expensive raincoat. He did not run to his son. He did not even look at his son, at first. He walked up the shoulder in the rain, slowly, and looked at the BMW, and the ditch, and the billboard, and the tan Buick with its blinking hazards a hundred yards back. And then, last, he looked at Voss.

He looked at him the way a man looks at a tool, deciding whether it is the right one for the job.

They talked for perhaps four minutes, standing by the BMW in the rain, with their backs to the highway. Voss did not remember all of it. He remembered pieces. Old Chief Harlan's retiring in three years. The council will need someone they can trust. He remembered: Your daughter. Kelsey, isn't it. She'll want to go to college someday. He remembered: Who's the other one? The kid with the pickup?

And he remembered his own voice, very calm, very reasonable, saying: "He's been drinking. And he's got a dent in his front bumper."

Gideon Kestrel's red Ford did have a dent in its front bumper. It was an old dent from a deer on Route 22 the previous winter. Gideon had never gotten around to fixing it because he could not afford to. Voss had seen it, when he pulled in. He had noticed it the way he noticed the beer. He had filed it away.

That was all it took. A dent and two cans of beer.

> "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved." — John 3:20 (KJV)

The wrecker came at one-fifteen. It was not the county wrecker. It was a flatbed from a private towing company in Columbus that Voss had never heard of. Two men in dark coveralls loaded the BMW onto it and chained it down and drove it away into the rain, and nobody ever saw it again. The boy went with his father in the Range Rover. Voss never put either of them in a report.

He arrested Gideon Kestrel at one-forty for vehicular homicide and driving under the influence.

Gideon did not fight him. That was the part Voss could not stand to remember. The young man simply stood there in the rain with his bloody hands, staring, uncomprehending, as Voss read him his rights. He kept saying, "But I stopped. I stopped to help him. It was a black car. I told you. It was a black car." He was still saying it when Voss put him in the back of the cruiser. He was still saying it, Voss learned later, when they processed him at the county jail. He said it at his arraignment, and at his trial. He was still saying it, presumably, in the state penitentiary in Lucasville, eighteen years later.

It was a black car.

But by then there was no black car. There was a lab report on paint transfer from the victim's clothing. The paint samples had come out of an evidence bag that Sergeant Brantley Voss had personally sealed and signed and carried to the state lab. The flecks inside that bag were red, scraped from the front bumper of a 1989 Ford pickup. The bag had been switched at two in the morning on the hood of his cruiser, in the rain, while the floodlights of the billboard blazed white overhead.

There was a blood alcohol test showing that Gideon Kestrel had been over the limit. He had not been. Not by the test Voss gave him at the scene. But that test had been lost, and the one at the county jail two hours later read .09, and a defense attorney appointed by the court did not know enough to ask why.

There was a sworn statement from the arresting officer, Sergeant Voss, that he had found the suspect at the scene in an agitated and intoxicated state, with the victim's blood on his hands and a damaged front bumper. Every word of it was true. That was the genius of it. Every word was true.

And there was no other witness.

No other witness that anyone ever knew about.

But there had been one.

Voss sat in the Tahoe on the shoulder of I-71 with coffee soaking into his uniform trousers and the billboard in his rearview mirror, and he made himself remember the rest of it. He made himself remember the thing he had spent twenty years forgetting even harder than the boy's name.

When he had first pulled up that night, before he had seen the black car, before Gideon Kestrel told him anything, he had looked up at the billboard in the rain. He had seen someone on it.

A man was standing on the catwalk, forty feet up, in a yellow slicker, holding on to the safety rail with both hands. He was looking down at the shoulder. He had a flashlight hanging from his belt and a clipboard tucked under one arm. A sign painter's truck, an old green Ford with gold lettering on the door, was parked down in the maintenance turnout.

Voss had not thought about it at the time. He had been too busy. But later, after the father had come and gone, after the wrecker had taken the BMW, after he had switched the evidence bags on the hood of his cruiser in the rain, he had turned and looked up, and the man on the catwalk was gone. And the old green Ford was still in the turnout.

He had found Ezekiel Thornefield standing at the foot of the billboard in the dark, soaked to the skin, his face the color of ashes. He had seen it. Voss knew that the moment he looked at him. He had seen it all, from forty feet up, with a view of the whole shoulder and the ditch and the black car and the green Range Rover and everything that had happened between them.

Voss had taken him by the arm, hard, and put his mouth close to his ear.

"Go home, Zeke," he had said. "You hear me? You go on home. You were never here."

And Zeke Thornefield, a deacon at Mercy Ridge Community Chapel, a man who painted Bible verses on barns for free, had looked at him for a long, terrible moment. Then he had pulled his arm free, walked to his truck, and driven away.

He had never said a word. Not to the police, not to the newspapers, not to Gideon Kestrel's lawyer. Not in twenty years. Voss had waited for it in the beginning, every day, with his stomach in knots. Then he had waited for it every month. Then every year. And then, gradually, he had stopped waiting. He had decided that Zeke Thornefield was a man who knew how to keep his mouth shut. He had decided it was over.

Two weeks ago, Zeke Thornefield had been standing at the foot of that billboard with his hand on the steel.

You sleep all right, Brantley?

And now this.

Voss finally made himself turn around in his seat and look up through the back window at the face on the billboard, and at the words.

He knew whose hand had painted that face. He would have known it anywhere. Every barn in Clinton County had that hand on it somewhere. It was the hand that had lettered the doors of the police cruisers, thirty years ago, when Voss was a rookie. It was the same gold leaf, the same thick downstrokes and thin upstrokes. He knew.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID.

"You son of a gun," Brantley Voss whispered. "You son of a gun, Zeke. After twenty years."

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 4

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 4: The Woman Who Stopped Driving

> "And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty."
> — Ruth 1:20–21 (KJV)

Delphine Ransom had a rule about the radio. It stayed off.

Silence was easier to manage than music. Music had a way of getting under her guard. A song came on, any song, and it might be one Curtis used to whistle while he shaved, or one Hope used to sing in the back seat with her bare feet up on the console. Then Dell would have to pull over. She had learned that the hard way, more than once, in the first years. So the radio stayed off, and she drove in silence, and that was the way she liked it.

She liked most things that way now. Quiet. Orderly. Under control.

She was fifty-four years old. She lived alone in a white frame house on Sycamore Street with a porch swing nobody sat in and a piano nobody played. She kept the books for three businesses in Mercy Ridge: the feed store, the dentist, and the Crossroads Diner. She did her work at the kitchen table with a pencil and a ledger, because she did not trust computers. She went to bed at ten and got up at five-thirty. She paid her bills the day they came. She had not missed a day of work in nine years, and she had not set foot in a church in nine years either. If anyone had asked, she would have said those two facts were not related. Nobody asked anymore.

This morning she was driving to Columbus to see a surgeon about a shadow.

That was how the radiologist had put it, ten days ago, over the phone. A shadow on the mammogram, Mrs. Ransom. Probably nothing. But we'd like a closer look. The closer look was a biopsy, scheduled for nine-thirty at the breast center at Riverside. She had told no one. There was no one to tell. Her sister in Arizona would have cried on the phone and wanted to fly in. The ladies at the feed store would have brought casseroles. Pastor Whitlock would have called, because somebody would have told him, and he would have asked if he could pray with her. She would have had to say no, politely, the way she had said it to him nine years ago and every year since.

So she told no one. She took the day off for "a dentist appointment," which was the kind of lie that made her laugh grimly to herself, since she did the dentist's books. She put on her navy slacks and her good gray coat, and at eight-ten she backed her Buick out of the drive and headed for the interstate.

It was a cold, bright morning in the second week of November. The trees along Sycamore Street were bare. The sky was the hard blue of a china plate. She turned onto Harlan Creek Road and went down the hill past the Methodist church with its marquee about a harvest supper. She went up the ramp onto

I-71 northbound and settled into the right lane at sixty-eight miles an hour, the way she always did, with both hands on the wheel at ten and two.

She was thinking about the biopsy. She was thinking about the needle, and about the word shadow, and about the way the radiologist had said probably. She was thinking that if it was cancer, she would handle it the way she had handled everything else. Alone. Efficiently. Without fuss and without God.

She noticed that the traffic ahead of her was slowing. Brake lights flickered all the way up the long grade south of town. Was it an accident? She leaned forward and squinted. No flashing lights. The cars were simply slowing, one after another, as they came over the top of the rise, the way they would slow for a deer, or a wreck on the other side, or something strange in the sky.

Dell came over the top of the rise.

The face was the first thing.

She did not understand it at first. Her mind would not put it together. It was a face, enormous, filling the old billboard that had stood blank and peeling on that hill for as long as she could remember. A man's face, sun-browned, bearded, with long dark hair falling to his shoulders. A sunrise behind him, gold and rose. And eyes.

Then she understood who it was.

Her hands tightened on the wheel.

Well, she thought. Isn't that just fine.

She felt something cold and familiar rise up in her chest. It was the anger. It was always there, banked like a coal fire under ash, and it did not take much to stir it. A hymn drifting out of an open church door. A sympathy card with a lily on it and a verse about God's plan. A woman in the grocery store telling her, with shining eyes, that the Lord never gives us more than we can handle.

And now this. A forty-foot Jesus on the side of the interstate, looking down at her like He had a right to.

Then she read the words.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID.

Something went through her like a current.

For a moment she could not breathe. Her foot came off the gas by itself. The Buick slowed, and a pickup behind her honked and swung around her on the left. She did not hear it.

I know what you did.

Her first feeling was fury, white and clean. What I did? she thought. What I did? What about what You did? She wanted to roll down the window and scream it at the billboard. You took my husband. You took my baby girl. You let a sixteen-year-old child die alone in a ditch on Old Quarry Road at one o'clock in the morning. And You want to talk to me about what I did?

But even as she thought it, she knew. That was the terrible thing. Down under the fury, in the place she never let herself go, she knew exactly what she had done.

Her eyes went to the second line.

COME HOME.

And Delphine Ransom, who had not cried in front of another human being in nine years, felt something inside her break.

It did not break loudly. It broke the way ice breaks on a pond in March. There is a long silence, and then a small sharp crack, and then the whole surface begins to shift. She heard a sound come out of her own throat, high and thin, like an animal caught in a fence. Her vision blurred. The billboard swam. The lane lines swam. She could not see the road.

She did the only thing she could think of. She put on her turn signal like a good driver. She took the Mercy Ridge exit, three miles up, with tears running down her face so fast she could barely see the ramp. At the bottom of the ramp she turned right, into the first parking lot she came to. She pulled into a space at the far end, by the dumpster, and put the car in park.

Then she put her forehead down on the steering wheel and wept.

> "How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?" — Psalm 13:1 (KJV)

Curtis had gone first.

That was twelve years ago. He was forty-two years old, a big, quiet, gentle man who managed the grain elevator in Sabina and sang bass in the chapel choir. He could not carry a tune in a bucket, everyone said, but he sang so loud and so happily that nobody had the heart to tell him. On a Tuesday afternoon in October, during harvest, he climbed into a grain bin to break up a crust of corn that had caked against the wall. The crust gave way. He went under in eleven seconds. They told her later it was eleven seconds. As though that were a comfort.

Dell had not stopped believing then. She had wanted to. There had been nights, many nights, when she lay in the bed that was too big and shouted at the ceiling until her throat was raw. But in the morning she got up. She got Hope off to school. She went to church on Sunday and played the piano for the morning service the way she had for twenty years, because that was her job and she did not quit jobs. She sat in the third pew afterward with her daughter's head on her shoulder. She told herself that God had a reason, even if she could not see it. She told herself that she still had Hope.

Hope was thirteen when her father died. She took it hard, harder than anyone knew. She had been a bright, funny, sweet-tempered little girl who sang in the children's choir and cried at commercials about puppies. In the three years after Curtis died, she became someone else. She cut her hair short and dyed it black. She stopped going to youth group. She started running with older kids from Wilmington who drove too fast and smelled of things Dell did not want to name. She came home late, and then later, and then sometimes not at all.

Dell did what she knew how to do. She made rules. She set curfews. She took away the car keys and the phone. She prayed, too, in those days, the anxious, bargaining prayers of a frightened mother. Lord, just keep her safe. Lord, just bring her back to me. Lord, I'll do anything.

And then one night in April, nine years ago, they had the fight.

It was a Friday. Hope was sixteen. She came downstairs at ten-thirty at night in a short black dress and too much eyeliner, with her car keys in her hand. Dell had confiscated those keys a week before, and Hope had found where she hid them. There was going to be a party out at the old quarry, Hope said. Everybody was going. She was going too, and Dell couldn't stop her.

Dell stood in front of the door.

She did not remember everything they said. She remembered the shouting. She remembered Hope's face, white and furious under the eyeliner, and she remembered that it looked so much like Curtis's that it frightened her. She remembered Hope saying I hate this house. I hate this town. I hate that stupid church and I hate your stupid God, and I hate you.

And she remembered, with perfect, merciless clarity, what she said back.

Then go. Go on. But if you walk out that door tonight, Hope Elizabeth, don't you bother coming home.

Hope looked at her for a long moment. Then she walked out the door.

> "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee." — Isaiah 49:15 (KJV)

The phone rang at 12:58 that morning.

Dell had been lying awake in the dark, still too angry to sleep. She looked at the screen on her nightstand and saw her daughter's name. She remembered the little photograph that came up with it, Hope at eleven in a Mercy Ridge Little League cap, grinning, with a gap in her teeth.

She did not pick up.

She lay in the dark and watched it ring. Four times. Five. Six. She was still angry. She wanted Hope to sweat. She wanted her to understand that you could not say those things to your mother and walk out the door and then call at one in the morning, expecting everything to be fine. She would call her back in the morning, she told herself. Let her stew for one night. It would do her good.

The phone stopped ringing. A moment later, the little voicemail light began to blink.

She did not listen to it. She turned the phone face down on the nightstand and rolled over and, eventually, she slept.

At 3:40 in the morning, a deputy sheriff knocked on her front door.

Hope's car had left Old Quarry Road on a curve about a mile from the highway. It went down an embankment into a creek bed. There were no other vehicles, the deputy said. No witnesses. No skid marks. Her blood alcohol was zero. She had not been drinking. They did not know why she had left the

party alone, or why she was driving so fast, or why she had gone off the road on a curve she had driven a hundred times. They estimated the time of the crash at a little after one o'clock.

A little after one o'clock.

Dell had listened to the voicemail at 4:15 that morning, sitting on the kitchen floor in her nightgown with the deputy standing awkwardly in the doorway. She had listened to it perhaps ten thousand times since. She knew it the way she knew her own heartbeat. It was eleven seconds long. That was the same length of time it had taken Curtis to drown in the corn. She had noticed that, later. She did not know what it meant. She had stopped believing that things meant anything.

Mama? It's me. Hope's voice was small and shaking, and in the background there was wind, or road noise. Mama, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Something happened and I'm scared, and I just ... I want to come home. Can I come home? Please pick up. Mama, please, I'm coming home.

That was all.

She never knew what had happened. She never knew what had frightened her daughter so badly that she left a party alone in the middle of the night, sober, driving too fast on a dark road, calling her mother and begging to come home. The sheriff's investigation found nothing. The kids at the party said Hope was there, and then she was not. Nobody saw her leave. Nobody knew anything. The file was closed in six weeks: single-vehicle accident, excessive speed, driver inexperience.

And Delphine Ransom closed her piano, and closed her Bible, and closed the door of her daughter's room. She sat in the third pew of Mercy Ridge Community Chapel on the Sunday after the funeral while the congregation sang "It Is Well with My Soul." She did not sing. When the service was over, she stood up and walked out the door, and she never went back.

She had told everyone it was God she could not forgive.

That was true. But it was not the whole truth. The whole truth was that she could not forgive the woman who had stood in front of a door and said don't you bother coming home. That woman had then lain in the dark and watched her daughter's name light up the phone, six rings, and turned it face down and gone to sleep.

It was easier to be angry at God. God could take it. God was big enough to take it.

She was not sure she was.

> "Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." — John 11:32 (KJV)

Somebody was knocking on her window.

Dell lifted her head from the steering wheel. Her face was wet and hot and swollen, and she could not see clearly. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. A woman was standing beside the car in a

white apron and a down vest, holding a paper cup of coffee in each hand. She was short and solid, with a cloud of improbably red hair.

Waverly Pike.

Dell looked around and realized for the first time where she was. The far end of the Crossroads Diner parking lot, by the dumpster. She did the Crossroads books every month. She had sat in that booth by the register with Waverly and a pot of terrible coffee going over receipts a hundred times. Of all the parking lots in the state of Ohio, she had to pull into this one.

She rolled the window down two inches.

"I'm fine," she said. Her voice came out in pieces.

"I know you are, honey." Waverly passed one of the cups through the gap in the window. "Drink that anyway. It's terrible. It'll take your mind off things."

Dell took it, because it was easier than arguing. It was hot and bitter and it scalded her tongue. Waverly did not go away. She stood there in the cold with her own cup, looking off toward the interstate, and said nothing at all. After a minute Dell understood that she was not going to say anything. She was not going to ask what was wrong. She was not going to quote a Bible verse or tell Dell that God had a plan. She was just going to stand there.

It was the kindest thing anyone had done for her in a very long time.

"You saw it," Waverly said at last. It was not a question.

Dell nodded. She could not speak.

"Half my breakfast crowd's seen it. Lyle Gaskins came in at seven white as a sheet and ordered a short stack and didn't eat a bite. Two truckers came in arguing about whether it's legal." Waverly took a sip of her coffee. "A girl from the college came in crying. Didn't order a thing. Just sat in the booth by the window and cried for twenty minutes, and then she got up and left. I don't know her name."

Dell looked down at the cup in her hands. "Who put it up?"

"I've got an idea," said Waverly. "But it's not mine to tell." She was quiet for a moment. "I'll tell you this, though. I've known the man I think put it up for forty years. And he's been as mad at God as you are, Dell Ransom. Maybe madder. For fifteen years."

Dell looked up at her.

"Don't know what changed," Waverly said. "But something did."

She reached through the gap in the window and laid her rough, warm hand over Dell's on the steering wheel. She left it there for a moment. Then she took it back, and patted the roof of the Buick twice, the way you pat a horse. She walked back across the lot to the diner, where a slim, dark-haired young waitress was standing in the doorway watching them. When Waverly reached her, the girl ducked her head and went back inside.

Dell sat alone in the car.

She looked at the clock on the dashboard. 9:22. She would be late for the biopsy. She found that she did not care very much.

She turned her head and looked south, toward the interstate. From here, at the bottom of the exit ramp, she could not see the billboard. The overpass and the trees were in the way. But she knew it was there. She could feel it there, three miles back, on its hill, the way you feel someone watching you across a crowded room.

I know what you did.

Come home.

"I can't," she whispered. "I don't know how. I don't even know where that is anymore."

Nobody answered. But for the first time in nine years, she found that she had said it to someone.

> "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." — Psalm 34:18 (KJV)

She went to the biopsy. She was forty minutes late, and the receptionist was cross with her, and she apologized and sat in the waiting room in a paper gown and did not think about the shadow at all. The doctor was young and kind and had cold hands. It was over in twenty minutes. Results in five to seven business days, he said. Try not to worry.

On her way out, she took a wrong turn looking for the parking garage and found herself in a quiet carpeted hallway on the ground floor. Halfway down it stood a pair of wooden doors propped open with a rubber wedge. A small brass sign beside them read CHAPEL — ALL ARE WELCOME.

She would have walked past. She had walked past a great many doors like it in nine years. But someone inside was praying out loud, and she knew the voice.

She stopped in the doorway.

The chapel was small and dim, with six short pews and a stained-glass window lit from behind by an electric bulb. In the front pew, a tiny white-haired woman in a purple wool coat sat with her head bowed and her hands folded over the handle of a cane. It was Ottilie Mercerfield. She was seventy-nine years old. She had taught the second-grade Sunday school class at Mercy Ridge Community Chapel for forty-one years, and she had taught Hope. She had taught Juniper Thornefield and half the children in town. She was praying the way she always had, plainly and out loud, as though the Lord were sitting in the pew beside her and might be a little hard of hearing.

"...and Lord, I don't know who put that picture of You up on the highway, but I thank You for it. My eyes aren't what they were and I had to have Harold's boy drive me past it twice, but I saw it. I saw You. And Lord, I know there's people in this town who saw it this morning and it cut them to the heart. You know who they are. I don't. So I'm asking You to go after every one of them. Every single one. Don't You let a one of them get away."

Dell stood frozen in the doorway.

Ottilie lifted her head, as though she had felt someone there, and turned around in the pew. Her eyes were cloudy with cataracts. But she squinted, and then her whole wrinkled face opened up like a flower.

"Why, Delphine Ransom," she said. "Come here, child."

Dell did not move. "Miss Ottilie. I — I was just looking for the parking garage."

"Weren't we all," said Ottilie. "Weren't we all." She did not ask why Dell was at a hospital in a gray coat with her eyes swollen. She patted the pew beside her. When Dell did not come, she simply nodded, as if that were an answer too. "I'm here for my eyes. They want to cut on them Thursday. I came down to talk to the Lord about it first." She smiled. "You saw it, didn't you? On the highway."

"Yes, ma'am."

"So did I. And I'll tell you what I've decided, Delphine. I've decided I'm going to go out there tomorrow morning and pray under it. And the morning after that. Every morning the Lord gives me, as long as it's up there." She turned back toward the window. "Somebody ought to. Somebody ought to stand there and pray for all those cars."

Dell backed out of the doorway without a word. But she heard, as she went down the hall, the old woman's voice start up again behind her, and she heard her own name in it.

She drove home the long way, on Route 3, though the bridge was out at Harlan Creek and she had to take the detour on gravel roads. She told herself it was because she did not want to fight the interstate traffic. She knew it was because she did not want to see that face again. She was not sure what would happen if she did.

She got home at three. She did not go back to work. She sat at her kitchen table with the ledger for the feed store open in front of her and a pencil in her hand, and she did not write a single figure. The house was very quiet. The clock over the stove ticked. Down the hall, past the bathroom, the door of Hope's room stood closed, as it had been closed for nine years.

At four-thirty she got up and went into the front room and stood in front of the piano.

It was an old Baldwin upright that her mother had bought her when she was seven. It had followed her from her mother's house to the first apartment she shared with Curtis, and then to this house, where it had stood against the front wall for twenty-six years. Hope had learned to play "Jesus Loves Me" on it with one finger, sitting on Dell's lap. Curtis had sung along to it on Saturday nights, loud and off-key and happy. The lid had been closed for nine years. There was a lace runner on top of it and a row of framed photographs, and dust in the carving of the music stand.

She lifted the lid.

The keys were yellowed. She touched middle C with one finger. The note came out flat and sour. The piano had not been tuned in nine years either. It hung in the empty room and died away.

She closed the lid again.

But she did not put the lace runner back on top of it.

The phone rang at 9:14 that night.

Dell was sitting on the couch in her bathrobe with the television on and the sound off, not watching it. The phone was on the end table beside her. It was the same kind of phone she had had nine years ago, though not the same one. She had never been able to get rid of the old one. It was in a drawer in her nightstand, with its battery long dead, and its voicemail saved to a backup her nephew had made for her on a computer she never turned on.

The screen showed a number she did not recognize. A Cincinnati area code.

She almost did not answer. She did not answer numbers she did not know. But something, she would never be able to say what, made her pick it up.

"Hello?"

There was silence on the line. Then the sound of someone breathing, quick and shallow. Then a woman's voice. It was young, and low, and nervous, as though she had been sitting with the phone in her hand for a long time working up her courage.

"Is this Mrs. Ransom? Delphine Ransom?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"You don't know me." The voice wavered. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be calling. I almost didn't. I've almost called you a hundred times. But I drove past that billboard this morning, on 71, and I —" She stopped. Dell heard her swallow. "I had to pull over. I couldn't drive. I sat on the shoulder for an hour. And I knew I had to call you. I knew I couldn't keep it anymore."

Dell's hand had gone cold on the phone. "Keep what?"

"Mrs. Ransom, I knew Hope." The voice broke on the name. "I was there. At the quarry. The night she died."

The room seemed to tilt. Dell put her free hand flat on the couch cushion to steady herself.

"What did you say?"

"I was there. I was with her. Before she left." The young woman was crying now, quietly. "Everybody told the deputies they didn't see anything. That she was there and then she wasn't. That's not true. That's not what happened. Something happened that night, Mrs. Ransom. Something bad. And Hope saw it. That's why she ran. She wasn't being reckless. She was scared. She was trying to get away. She was trying to get home to you."

Dell could not speak.

"I've never told anybody," the girl said. "Not in nine years. I was too scared. I'm still scared. There are people —" She stopped again. "I can't say any more on the phone. I'm sorry. I'll call you again. I promise. I just ... I needed you to know. She wasn't running away from you that night. She was running home."

"Wait," Dell said. "Wait, please, what's your name? Please —"

But the line was already dead.

She sat on the couch with the phone in her lap for a long time. The television flickered silently. The clock ticked over the stove. Down the hall, Hope's door stood closed.

She was running home.

After a while, Dell got up. She walked down the hall in her bare feet and stood in front of her daughter's door with her hand on the knob, the way she had stood a thousand times in nine years and never turned it.

She turned it.

The room was exactly as Hope had left it. The black curtains. The posters of bands Dell had never heard of. The unmade bed. And on the wall above the bed, half hidden behind a concert poster, was a thing Dell had forgotten was there. It was a small framed cross-stitch Hope had made at vacation Bible school the summer she was nine, in crooked pink and purple thread. Dell crossed the room and lifted the edge of the poster and looked at it.

> "He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds." — Psalm 147:3 (KJV)

Delphine Ransom sat down on the edge of her daughter's unmade bed. She held the little frame in both hands, and for the second time that day, she wept.

But it was not the same weeping. That morning's tears had come up out of a locked room. These came from somewhere else, somewhere she had not been in nine years, a place where a door had just come open a crack. Through that crack, very faint and very far away, she thought she could see a light left on.

Mama, I'm coming home.

"I know, baby," Dell whispered into the dark. "I know. Me too. I'm trying."

> "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." — Revelation 21:4 (KJV)

End of Chapter 4

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 5

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 5: Jesus Goes Viral

> "And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast: the same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus." — John 12:20–21 (KJV)

The whiteboard in Pastor Callan Whitlock's office had not been erased in twelve years.

It hung on the wall beside his desk, facing him, where he could not avoid it. Down the left side, in faded blue marker, someone had written the years. Down the right side were the numbers. The first entries were in the cramped hand of old Reverend Pruitt, his predecessor. The rest were in Callan's own neat, slanted printing.

Average Sunday attendance.

When Callan came to Mercy Ridge Community Chapel twelve years ago, fresh from a youth pastorate in Indianapolis, the number at the top of his column was 412. He had stood in front of this whiteboard on his first morning, with his diploma from seminary still in a box on the floor, and felt something like awe. Four hundred and twelve souls. He had made himself a promise that morning. He would never let that number go down.

Last Sunday's number, written in at the bottom of the column on Monday morning, was 58.

He sat at his desk at seven o'clock on a gray Monday morning in November and looked at it. He had come in early to work on Sunday's sermon. In front of him was a legal pad with a title at the top of the first page, Faithfulness in the Small Things, and nothing underneath it. Beside the legal pad lay his Bible. It was closed. He realized he could not remember the last time he had opened it for any reason except to find a sermon text.

He was forty-nine years old. He had preached perhaps eighteen hundred sermons in his life. He was good at it. Everyone said so. He was clear and warm and well prepared. He told stories about his golden retriever and quoted C. S. Lewis and never went over twenty-five minutes. He did not shout. He did not threaten. He did not pass the plate twice. He had built his whole ministry, quite deliberately, on being the kind of preacher his father had never been.

And the number on the whiteboard had gone from 412 to 58.

His phone buzzed on the desk.

It was a text from Elowen. His wife taught fourth grade at Mercy Ridge Elementary. She was usually in her classroom by seven, getting ready for the day, and almost never texted him in the morning. The message had no words. It was just a photograph, taken through a car windshield. It showed the face of Jesus, enormous, on a billboard above the interstate, and red words beneath it.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

A second text came in a moment later.

Have you SEEN this?? On 71 south of town. Every car on the highway is stopping. Cal, I'm sitting on the shoulder crying and I don't even know why.

Callan looked at the photograph for a long time.

Then he typed back: Saw it. Kind of over the top, isn't it?

He watched the three little dots appear and disappear several times. She did not answer.

> "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." — Revelation 2:4 (KJV)

By noon, the whole country had seen it.

Callan watched it happen on his computer screen with a kind of horrified fascination. It was like watching a grass fire on a windy day.

At eight-fifteen, the first photograph appeared on a local Facebook group called Mercy Ridge Community News. It was a blurry phone picture taken from a moving car. Anybody know who put this up?? Gave me chills. By nine it had six hundred comments. Some of them said Amen and Praise God and Thank you Jesus. Some said it was creepy. Some said it was a scam, or a stunt for a horror movie, or an ad for a church that would turn out to want your money. One said it was the most beautiful painting he had ever seen. Another said whoever put it up should be arrested for harassment.

By ten, the photograph had jumped to Twitter and Instagram and TikTok. Somebody had given it a hashtag: #BillboardJesus. By eleven it was the number four trending topic in the United States.

At eleven-thirty, a nineteen-year-old college student named Verity Ashcombe posted a ninety-second video from the front seat of her car.

Callan watched it at his desk with the door closed. He watched it three times.

She was a slight, pale girl with a messy blond ponytail and a Wilmington College sweatshirt. She held her phone at arm's length. Her eyes were red and swollen, and behind her, through the back window of the car, Callan could see the billboard on its hill.

"Okay. Um. I don't usually do this," she said. Her voice shook. "I don't even really post. But I have to tell somebody, and I can't tell my parents yet, so I'm telling everybody, I guess." She laughed, and it turned into a sob, and she wiped her nose on her sleeve. "So. For the last year I've been lying to my mom and dad. I dropped out of school last fall. They don't know. They've been sending me money every month for tuition, and I've been ... I've been spending it. On stuff. Bad stuff. I'm not going to say. And this morning I packed everything I own in this car. I was going to just drive. Just leave. Go to Florida or somewhere and never come back and never have to tell them. I was going to disappear."

She turned the phone around. The camera swung across the dashboard and out the window, up the hill, to the face on the billboard and the red words.

"And then I came over that hill," she said, off camera. Her voice cracked completely. "And that was there. And it said that. I know what you did. And I just ... I lost it. Because He does. He does know. And He still said come home."

The camera swung back to her face.

"So I'm not going to Florida," Verity Ashcombe said. "I'm turning around. I'm going home. I'm going to tell my parents everything. I'm really scared. But I'm going home." She looked straight into the phone. "And if you're out there and you're running from something, I don't know. Maybe you should go home too."

The video ended.

By two o'clock in the afternoon, it had been viewed four million times. By midnight, nine million. People were stitching it and reacting to it, and crying in their own cars, and posting their own videos from their own shoulders of their own highways. I know what you did. Come home. Every one of them said it like it had been written for them alone.

Callan closed the laptop.

He sat back in his chair and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. He felt something he did not want to name. It was not joy, though it should have been. It was something closer to unease. Worse than unease, if he was honest. It was something that had a little resentment in it, and a little envy, and underneath both of those, something very old and very cold that went all the way back to his childhood.

He knew this. He knew exactly what this was. He had grown up in it.

His father had been an evangelist.

Not a pastor. An evangelist. The Reverend Doyle Whitlock had preached tent revivals across six states for thirty years, from the hollers of eastern Kentucky to the cornfields of Iowa. He drove an old Cadillac with a trailer full of folding chairs and a canvas tent that smelled of mildew and sawdust. Callan had grown up in the back seat of that Cadillac. He had spent every summer of his childhood under that tent, handing out paper fans with a picture of a weeping Jesus on one side and a funeral home ad on the other.

His father was a magnificent preacher. Callan could admit that now. Doyle Whitlock could make a tent full of farmers weep in ten minutes and run to the altar in twenty. He did it with fear. He preached hell like a man who had been there and come back with a sunburn. He would lean over the pulpit and lower his voice almost to a whisper, and he would say: God knows what you did. He saw you. He was there. And grown men would break down sobbing in the folding chairs.

Then, while they were still sobbing, he passed the offering plate. Twice.

Callan was fourteen the night he understood. He was counting the offering in the back of the Cadillac by flashlight, as he did every night, and he found the second ledger. It was the real one, the one with the real numbers, and the real places the money went. It went to the motels and the bourbon. It went to the woman in Tulsa. It went to everything but the orphanage in Haiti that his father talked about, with tears in his eyes, every single night.

Callan never told anyone. He finished high school. He went to seminary on a scholarship and swore to himself that if God ever let him preach, he would never manipulate a single soul. He would never use fear. He would never use spectacle. He would never say God knows what you did to make a man reach for his wallet. He would preach the gospel quietly, reasonably, truthfully, and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

And he had kept that promise for twenty-five years.

And now there was a forty-foot Jesus on Interstate 71, saying I KNOW WHAT YOU DID in letters as tall as a man.

> "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away." — 2 Timothy 3:5 (KJV)

The phone call from Channel 4 in Columbus came at three.

A young reporter named Amber something wanted a comment from "a local faith leader" for the six o'clock news. Callan should have said no. He knew he should have said no. But the reporter was polite, and he was flattered, if he was honest, and he had been thinking about it all day. So he stood in front of the chapel at four-thirty in his good blue sweater with the white steeple behind him and the camera's light in his eyes. He said what he thought.

"I'm sure whoever put it up meant well," he said. "And I'm grateful that people are thinking about Jesus. But I'd gently caution people against confusing spectacle with faith. The gospel isn't a threat. It's not I know what you did. Jesus didn't come to frighten people into His kingdom. Honestly, I think messages like this can do as much harm as good. They can make people think of God as some kind of cosmic surveillance camera. That's not the God I know."

It was a good answer. Measured. Reasonable. He had been proud of it.

By the next morning, it was on the national news. Channel 4 had cut it down to eleven seconds: I'd caution people against confusing spectacle with faith. Honestly, I think messages like this can do as much harm as good. A website in Atlanta ran it under the headline LOCAL PASTOR SLAMS 'BILLBOARD JESUS.' By Tuesday afternoon, Callan had received three hundred and forty emails. Some of them agreed with him. Most of them did not. Some of them used words he did not know Christians knew.

One of them, from a woman in Arkansas, said only: Pastor, my son saw that billboard on his way to a meth house and turned around and went to rehab instead. Whose side are you on?

He did not answer it. He read it eleven times.

On Wednesday, it got worse.

On Wednesday, the Reverend Blaine Harker discovered Billboard Jesus.

Blaine Harker had a television program called Victory Hour that went out on two hundred stations and a satellite channel. He had a megachurch in Houston and a private jet and teeth so white they looked like porcelain. He also had an instinct for money that Doyle Whitlock would have admired. On Wednesday evening, on Victory Hour, he stood in front of a giant screen showing the billboard. He announced, with tears in his eyes, that the Lord had laid it on his heart to come to Mercy Ridge, Ohio, and hold a Billboard Jesus Revival. He would hold it right there beside the highway, under that blessed face, the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Then he held up a T-shirt. It was black, with the billboard's face printed across the chest and the red words beneath it. I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

"For a seed gift of just twenty-nine ninety-nine," said Blaine Harker, "we'll send you this shirt as a reminder to wear your faith boldly. Call now. The operators are standing by."

Callan sat on the couch in the living room and watched it with the remote control in his hand. He felt sick to his stomach. He also felt something worse, something he would be ashamed of later. He felt vindicated.

There, he thought. There it is. I told you. I told all of you.

"You told them what, exactly?" said Elowen.

She was standing in the doorway of the living room in her robe, with her arms folded. He had not heard her come downstairs. He had not realized he had said it out loud.

"That it would come to this. Hucksters. T-shirts. It's my father all over again. You know it is."

Elowen did not answer right away. She came into the room and sat down in the armchair across from him, with the television flickering blue on her face. She was forty-six years old, small and dark-haired, with reading glasses she was always losing on top of her head. They had been married twenty-two years. For most of those years she had been his best friend. For the last few, he was no longer sure what she was. They were polite. They were careful. They lived in the same house and slept in the same bed and talked about the gutters and the electric bill. Somewhere along the way, they had stopped talking about anything that mattered.

"I drove past it again today," she said. "On the way home from school. I pulled over and got out and stood on the shoulder for twenty minutes."

"Elowen—"

"There was an old woman there. In a lawn chair, with a thermos of coffee and a blanket on her knees. Praying. Out loud. People kept stopping, Cal. Truckers. Moms with car seats. A man in a business suit. They'd stop and get out and look up at it, and some of them would cry. And she'd pray for them. She didn't ask them for anything. She didn't sell them a T-shirt. She just prayed for them, by name, if they told her their names."

Callan said nothing.

"I know about your father," Elowen said quietly. "I know better than anyone. I was there when you found out he'd died, and you didn't cry, and I knew why. But that billboard isn't your father, Cal. And Blaine Harker isn't the man who painted it." She leaned forward. "Did you ever think the reason you hate it so much is that it's doing something you haven't been able to do in a long time?"

The words landed somewhere deep. He felt them go in.

"That's not fair," he said.

"No," she said. "It's not." She stood up. She looked very tired. "When's the last time you prayed for somebody, Callan? Not in a service. Not from the pulpit. Not because it was on the schedule. Just ... prayed for somebody. Because you couldn't stand not to."

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

She waited. Then she nodded, the way you nod when you have gotten the answer you expected, and went back upstairs.

> "I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out." — Luke 19:40 (KJV)

On Thursday, the strangers started coming.

The first one arrived at ten in the morning. Callan was in his office, answering emails he did not want to answer, when he heard the front door of the chapel open and close. He found a man standing in the middle of the empty sanctuary with his cap in his hands. He was a big man in his fifties, in a flannel jacket with a trucking company's logo on the breast. He had a gray beard and a face like a clenched fist.

"You the preacher?"

"I'm Pastor Whitlock. Can I help you?"

The man took out his phone and held it up. On the screen was the billboard.

"I drive for Werner," he said. "Cincinnati to Cleveland and back, three times a week. I seen this Monday morning. Near about ran a cop off the road, I was so busy staring at it. Been seeing it every day since." He swallowed. "I ain't been in a church since my mama's funeral. I done some things. Bad things. I left my wife and my boy in Dayton eleven years ago and never looked back. Never sent a dime." His voice was rough. "And I seen that sign, and it said come home, and I ain't slept since. So I got off at your exit. And here I am. And I don't know what to do. I figure you do. I figure that's your job."

He looked at Callan with naked, desperate hope.

Callan stood in the aisle of his own church and felt the floor tilt under him.

He knew what he was supposed to say. He had taken classes on it in seminary. He had taught a six-week course on it to the deacons. The Romans Road. The Four Spiritual Laws. Acknowledge, Believe, Confess. He knew the verses. He could have recited them in his sleep.

He could not find any of them.

"Well," he heard himself say. "We'd love to have you join us on Sunday. Service is at ten-thirty. And let me get you one of our visitor packets." He went to the rack by the door and took out a glossy folder with a picture of the steeple on it. Inside were a welcome letter and a brochure called Ministries at Mercy Ridge Community Chapel and a pledge card. "There's information in there about our small groups. We have a men's breakfast on the second Saturday of the month."

The trucker took the folder. He looked down at it. He looked back up at Callan. Something in his face closed, slowly, like a door swinging shut in the wind.

"I didn't come for a brochure, Preacher," he said.

He set the folder down carefully on the end of the last pew and walked out.

Callan stood in the empty sanctuary for a long time after the door closed.

Finally he walked to the back pew and picked up the folder. It had been bent nearly in half in the man's big hands. When Callan opened it, the pledge card slid out and fell face down on the carpet.

He bent and picked it up. On the back, in pencil, in heavy, careful capitals, the kind a man prints when he does not write very often, someone had written:

RAY DOOLIN. PLEASE PRAY FOR ME. I DON'T KNOW HOW.

There was a phone number underneath, with a Dayton area code.

Callan sat down in the last pew with the card in his hands.

He would pray for Ray Doolin. Of course he would. It was his job. He bowed his head, right there, and closed his eyes, and opened his mouth to begin the way he had begun ten thousand prayers. Heavenly Father, we lift up to You...

He stopped.

The words were there. They were always there, smooth and worn as river stones. We lift up. We just ask. Be with him. Guide him. In Your name. He could have strung them together in his sleep. He had, many times. But sitting in the back pew of his own empty church with that pencil-printed card in his hands, he heard them for what they were. They were the sound of a man reading a script to an empty room.

I don't know how.

Neither, Callan realized, did he. Not anymore. Somewhere in twelve years of budgets and building committees, attendance numbers and sermon series, he had stopped talking to God and started talking about Him. He had become a very good spokesman for Someone he no longer actually spoke to.

He sat in the pew a long time with his head bowed and his eyes closed. No words came. In the end, he did the only honest thing he could think of. He held the card against his chest, the way a man holds a letter from someone he has lost, and he sat there in silence.

It was the first real prayer he had prayed in years. He did not know that yet.

That afternoon, four more people came. A woman with a printed photograph of the billboard folded in her purse asked whether God could forgive her for something she would not name. A young couple wanted to know if he would baptize them. A man in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank just wanted to sit in a pew for a while. On Friday there were seven. One of them was a teenage boy who would not give his name and would not say why he had come. He sat in the back row for an hour with his face in his hands, then left before Callan could reach him.

Callan gave each of them a visitor packet. He did not know what else to do.

> "But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." — Matthew 9:36 (KJV)

On Saturday morning, before dawn, he drove out to see it for himself.

He realized on the way that he had never actually looked at it. He had seen the photographs. He had seen the video. He had denounced it on the six o'clock news. But in five days he had not once driven past it. He had told himself he was too busy. He knew now that he had been avoiding it.

He came up the long grade on the northbound side in the gray light and pulled onto the shoulder below the hill behind a line of other cars. There were eleven of them. People were standing on the shoulder in the cold in ones and twos, looking up. Halfway up the hill, on a flattened patch of frosty grass, sat a tiny old woman in a purple wool coat in a folding lawn chair. She had a plaid blanket over her knees and a thermos at her feet.

Ottilie Mercerfield. She had been a member of his church for sixty years.

He climbed the hill. She heard him coming and turned. Her cloudy old eyes squinted up at him, and then her face lit up.

"Why, Pastor," she said. "I wondered when you'd get out here."

"Miss Ottilie. It's twenty-eight degrees. You'll catch your death."

"Then I'll catch it here," she said serenely, "as well as anywhere." She patted the frosty grass beside her chair, as though offering him a seat. "You said some things on the television."

"I did."

"I heard them." She did not sound angry. "I don't suppose you'd looked at it, when you said them."

He did not answer.

"Look at it now," she said.

He looked.

The sun was just coming up behind him, low and gold across the fields, and it lit the billboard from the side. The face was enormous. It was not the face from the photographs. It was nothing like the Jesus on Blaine Harker's T-shirt. It was weathered and sun-browned and real, the face of a working man, with a faint scar across the bridge of the nose. And the eyes.

He had braced himself for accusation. For that leaning-over-the-pulpit look, that God knows what you did, that look he had seen in his father's face a thousand times under the tent.

It was not there.

There was knowing in those eyes. Terrible, total knowing. But there was no threat in it. There was something else. It was something he had not felt looking at a picture of Christ, or listening to a sermon about Him, or preaching one, in a very long time. It was the look of someone who had been waiting at the end of a long road. Waiting, and watching, and glad.

"I know that hand," Ottilie said beside him softly. "So do you, Pastor, if you think about it. Go look at the wall in your children's wing."

He turned to her, startled.

The children's wing. The twelve-foot Good Shepherd on the end wall, painted thirty-some years ago by a deacon whose name was on a small brass plate at the bottom corner. Callan walked past it every Sunday. The children sat under it on carpet squares for story time. A shepherd with a lamb across his shoulders and a weathered, sunburnt face. And those eyes.

E. THORNEFIELD.

"He hasn't been inside a church in fifteen years," Ottilie said. "Not since Hannah passed. He was mad at God, and God let him be mad. But it looks like God went after him anyway." She smiled up at the billboard. "He does that."

> "Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." — Philippians 1:18 (KJV)

On Sunday morning, he arrived at the chapel at nine.

He had his sermon in a manila folder under his arm. It was not Faithfulness in the Small Things. He had thrown that away on Tuesday. The new one was called Discernment in an Age of Spectacle, and he had spent all week on it. It was careful and wise and full of quotations, and it explained, gently, why Christians should be wary of emotional manipulation in all its forms. It was one of the best sermons he had ever written.

He pulled into the parking lot and stopped.

The lot was full.

There were cars he did not recognize, dozens of them, parked along the curb and on the grass and in the bank's lot across the street. There were license plates from Kentucky and Indiana and Michigan and West Virginia. There was a Werner semi-tractor, without its trailer, parked across four spaces at the back. People were standing on the front steps in their coats, waiting for the doors to open. They were not his people. He did not know a single one.

Inside, Hollis Fenwick, his worship leader, met him in the hallway. He was thirty-one, gifted, likable, and lately always late. This morning his face was gray and sweating, and his hands shook as he flipped through the music. His breath smelled strongly of peppermint. Callan noticed it the way he had been noticing it for months, and said nothing, the way he had been saying nothing for months.

"Pastor, have you seen it out there?" Hollis said. His eyes were wide. "Ushers counted a hundred and sixty already. They're putting folding chairs in the aisles. What are we going to do?"

At ten-thirty, Callan walked out to the pulpit.

The sanctuary was full. Every pew. Folding chairs in the aisles and along the back wall. People standing in the vestibule. The trucker from Werner sat in the third row, still in his flannel jacket, with the glossy visitor folder rolled up in his fist. Callan saw Verity Ashcombe, the girl from the video, between a gray-haired man and woman who had to be her parents. All three of them had been crying.

He saw young couples, and old men in feed caps, and teenagers with piercings. He saw a woman in a nurse's uniform who had obviously just come off a night shift. Near the front, in the place she had sat for sixty years, he saw Ottilie Mercerfield, smiling at him. In the back row, beside the door, he saw Elowen. She was not in her usual seat. She was watching him with an expression he could not read.

And every one of them, every single face in that room, was turned toward him with the same look the trucker had worn on Thursday. A naked, desperate, terrible hope.

Sir, we would see Jesus.

Callan Whitlock set his manila folder on the pulpit and opened it. He looked down at the first line of Discernment in an Age of Spectacle.

He looked up at the faces.

He looked back down.

He closed the folder.

The room was so quiet he could hear the furnace ticking in the basement. He gripped both edges of the pulpit. His mouth had gone completely dry. He had preached eighteen hundred sermons. He had never in his life stood in front of a congregation with nothing to say.

"I had a sermon prepared," he said. His voice sounded strange to him, thin and far away. "It's a good sermon. I worked hard on it." He swallowed. "But I don't think it's the one you came for."

He looked out at them, all those faces, waiting.

And Pastor Callan Whitlock understood, with a clarity that took his breath away, that he did not know how to begin.

> "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." — Romans 1:16 (KJV)

End of Chapter 5

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 6

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

PART TWO: SECRETS BENEATH THE SURFACE

The billboard begins exposing wounds, lies, and sins that have remained buried for decades.

Chapter 6: The Girl with Another Name

> "And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress ... And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me." — Genesis 16:8, 13 (KJV)

Every morning, before she did anything else, Tamsin Vale checked the street.

She did it at four-forty-five, before the alarm went off, because she always woke before the alarm. She slid out from under the thin quilt and crossed the cold floor of the room above Haskell's Hardware in her socks. She did not turn on the light. She stood to one side of the window, the way she had seen people do in movies, and moved the curtain one inch with one finger, and looked down at Main Street.

It was empty. A single streetlight. The bank clock across the way blinking 4:46 and 31°. Haskell's delivery truck parked at the curb where it always was. No cars with their engines running. No men sitting in cars. Nothing.

She let the curtain fall.

Then she knelt beside the bed, in the corner where the floor was oldest, and pried up the loose board with a butter knife she kept for that purpose. Underneath, in the dusty space between the joists, sat a red Folgers coffee can with a plastic lid. She took the lid off and looked inside, the way some people look in on a sleeping child.

Everything was there. A roll of cash, twenty-three hundred dollars in twenties and fifties, which was everything she had. A small black flash drive, no bigger than her thumb. A driver's license from the state of Ohio, with her picture on it and a name that was not Tamsin Vale.

She had not said that name out loud in seven months. Some nights she lay awake and said it silently, to herself, just to make sure she still remembered it.

She put the lid back on the can and the can back in the hole and the board back over the hole. She slid the dresser two inches to the left so that its leg sat on the edge of the board. Then she took the chair out from under the doorknob, where she wedged it every night before she went to bed, and got dressed for work.

She was twenty-seven years old. She had not slept through a night since April.

> "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee." — Psalm 56:3 (KJV)

The Crossroads Diner had gone crazy.

That was Waverly's word for it, and Tamsin could not think of a better one. A week ago it had been a sleepy truck-stop diner at the bottom of an exit ramp in a town nobody had heard of. The breakfast crowd was farmers and truckers and old men who came for the coffee refills and stayed to argue about the Bengals. On a good morning, Tamsin might serve forty people before the lunch rush.

This morning she served forty before seven o'clock.

They came off the interstate in a steady stream from the moment Waverly unlocked the door. They had seen the billboard. Most of them had seen it on their phones before they ever saw it on the hill. Some of them had driven hundreds of miles just to see it with their own eyes. They came from Kentucky and Indiana and Pennsylvania and Tennessee. There were church vans with the names of Baptist churches on the side. There were bikers in leather vests with Christian patches. There were young couples with

babies, and old couples with walkers. A man came all the way from Maine and said he had been praying for his son for twenty years and wanted to stand under that face and pray one more time.

They all wanted coffee. They all wanted pie. And all of them, every one, wanted to talk about it.

"Did you see it go up? Do you know who painted it? Do you think it's a miracle? Is it true a girl was going to kill herself and saw it and turned around? Is it true a cop almost crashed? Is it true about the trucker?"

Tamsin smiled and poured coffee and said she didn't know. She had become very good at saying she didn't know.

Waverly was in heaven. She moved through the crowd like a tugboat through a harbor, refilling cups, slapping backs, hugging strangers, and telling every single person who would listen that Jesus loved them and the pie was homemade. She had hired two high school girls for the weekend and was talking about hiring a third. She had put a hand-lettered sign in the window that said WELCOME PILGRIMS — BILLBOARD 3 MILES SOUTH — GOD BLESS.

"Isn't it wonderful, honey?" she said to Tamsin, in the middle of the rush, with a tray of dirty cups balanced on her hip. "Isn't it just the most wonderful thing?"

Tamsin said it was.

She did not say what she was really thinking, which was: There are too many people. There were too many strangers. Too many faces she did not know, sitting in her section, looking at her. Too many phones held up in the air, taking pictures of the pie case and the neon EAT sign and the little gold-lettered plaque behind the register.

Too many cameras.

The television trucks had started coming on Tuesday.

First Channel 4 from Columbus, then Channel 9 from Cincinnati, then a van from a station in Louisville. They parked in the gravel lot with their satellite dishes pointed at the sky. Reporters in nice coats did their segments standing in front of the diner, with the EAT sign glowing behind them. Then they came inside to get coffee and local color.

Tamsin learned to see them coming. She learned to be in the kitchen, or the back storeroom, or bent over a booth with her face turned away, whenever a camera was pointed into the room. She had cut her hair and dyed it dark in a motel bathroom in Kentucky seven months ago, and she wore no makeup, and she was thinner than she had been. Still, she did not take chances.

On Wednesday afternoon, a crew from a national cable network came in. It was not a local station. It was one of the big ones, the kind that was on in every airport and every hotel lobby in America. The reporter was a tall, handsome man with silver hair whom Tamsin had seen on television her whole life. He sat at the counter and ordered a slice of apple pie and interviewed Waverly while his cameraman filmed over his shoulder. Waverly told him about the billboard and about Jesus and about her pie. The reporter laughed in all the right places.

Tamsin stayed in the kitchen the whole time.

At least, she thought she did.

That night, alone in her room above Haskell's, she turned on the little television on her dresser. The national news came on at six-thirty, and there it was. THE BILLBOARD THAT STOPPED A NATION, said the graphic. There was the face. There was the hill. There was the silver-haired reporter at the counter of the Crossroads Diner with a fork in his hand. There was Waverly, beaming, saying, "Honey, the Lord can use anything. Even a rusty old billboard. Even an old woman who makes pie."

And there, over Waverly's shoulder, for perhaps three seconds, was the swinging door to the kitchen. It was standing open. Someone had pushed it open with her hip, carrying a bus tub of dishes. She had stopped in the doorway, startled, and looked straight at the camera.

Then the door swung shut and she was gone.

Three seconds. Maybe less. A thin, dark-haired waitress in a white apron, in the background of a story about a billboard, on the national news, in front of eleven million people.

Tamsin sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the screen. She did not move for a long time. Her hands were shaking so badly that she had to press them between her knees.

Three seconds, she told herself. Nobody will notice. Nobody watches the background. Nobody's looking for you on a cable news story about Jesus.

But she knew that was not true. She knew that somebody was always looking. Somebody had been looking for seven months. And somebody, somewhere, had software that could find a face in a crowd faster than she could blink.

She thought about the billboard. She had only seen it once, from the passenger seat of Waverly's Oldsmobile on Monday afternoon. Waverly had insisted on driving her out to see it on their break. She had pulled onto the shoulder and turned off the engine and said, "Look at that, honey. Just look at that." And Tamsin had looked, and read the words, and felt all the blood go out of her face.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID.

Waverly thought it was about sin. About God. About coming home.

Tamsin had read it like a warning.

He came in every day now. The old man.

She had noticed him the first time, back in October, before any of this. He was a gaunt, tired-looking old man in a barn coat, with gray eyes and white stubble. He sat across from old Silas Quenby in the back booth and ordered apple pie without ice cream. When he left, he put a twenty-dollar bill under his saucer for a four-dollar slice of pie. Tamsin had stood there holding the twenty and thought it must be a mistake. When she looked up, he was already gone.

The second time she saw him, he did it again.

Now he came every day. Usually he came in the middle of the afternoon, between the lunch rush and the supper rush, when the diner was quietest. He sat at the end of the counter, nearest the kitchen door, on the stool nobody else wanted because it wobbled. He ordered coffee and pie. He did not read a newspaper or look at his phone. He just sat there and ate his pie slowly. Sometimes he talked to Waverly in a low voice. Sometimes he talked to nobody at all.

And always, when he left, there was a twenty under the saucer.

Waverly told her his name was Zeke Thornefield. He was a sign painter, retired, a widower, and an old friend. That was all Waverly would say. But on Thursday Tamsin saw them in the corner by the pie case with their heads together. Waverly had tears in her eyes, and she hugged him. As he turned away, Tamsin saw that there was paint under his fingernails. Blue and gold and a deep, dark red.

The same red as the letters on the billboard.

She did not say anything. She did not ask. She did not ask people things. That was the first rule. If you did not ask questions, people did not ask you questions back.

But the old man did not ask her questions either. That was what she could not understand.

Everyone asked questions. Customers asked where she was from, and why she had come to Mercy Ridge, and whether she had a boyfriend, and what her last name was. Even Waverly, who was kinder to her than anyone had been in years, sometimes asked. She asked gently, with her head tilted, as though she were trying to coax a stray cat out from under a porch.

Zeke Thornefield never asked her anything. He said good afternoon, Tamsin, and thank you, Tamsin, and once, you look tired, Tamsin. You ought to sit down a minute. He used her name every time. Not the way men in diners sometimes did, reading it off her name tag like a joke or a come-on. He said it carefully, almost formally, the way you would say the name of someone you respected.

It was not her name. But nobody had ever said it like that before.

On Friday, after he left, she found something under the saucer besides the twenty.

It was a paper napkin, folded in quarters. When she unfolded it, there was a drawing on it in ballpoint pen. It was small, no bigger than the palm of her hand, and very, very fine. It was a sparrow, perched on a bare twig, with its feathers fluffed against the cold. Every feather had been drawn. Its tiny black eye seemed to shine. Underneath it, in small, perfect capital letters, he had written:

> "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." — Matthew 10:29–31 (KJV)

Tamsin stood behind the counter with the napkin in her hand and could not breathe.

Fear ye not.

She folded it back up very carefully and put it in the pocket of her apron. That night she put it in the coffee can, under the floorboard, with the cash and the flash drive and the license with her real name on it.

She did not know why.

The man in the gray quarter-zip came in on Saturday.

He came at ten-fifteen, during the slow stretch between breakfast and lunch, and he sat in her section. He was perhaps forty. He was fit and tan and clean-shaven, with expensive boots and a watch that cost more than her car would have, if she had had a car. He did not look like a pilgrim. He did not look at the billboard photographs taped up by the register, or at the gold-lettered plaque, or at anything. He looked at her.

"Coffee," he said. "Black. And whatever's good."

"The apple's good."

"Then the apple." He smiled at her. It was a pleasant, easy smile. His eyes were not smiling at all. They moved over her face slowly, feature by feature, the way you would check a photograph against a face at an airport.

She brought him coffee and pie. Her hand was steady when she set them down. She had practiced that.

"You from around here?" he said.

"Close enough."

"Funny. You look familiar. I'm in Cincinnati a lot for work. You ever live in Cincinnati?"

"No, sir."

"Huh." He took a bite of the pie. He chewed slowly, watching her. "I'd have sworn. You've got one of those faces." He set down the fork. "You ever work for a man named Warren Hale? Big developer. Had a place on the river, down in Indian Hill. Real estate, hotels, that kind of thing."

The room went very far away. Tamsin could hear her own heartbeat. She could hear the clock over the pie case, and the grill hissing in the kitchen, and Waverly laughing with somebody at the register. All of it sounded as though it were coming from the bottom of a well.

"No, sir," she said. "I don't know that name."

"Disappeared last spring. Just walked out of his house one night and never came back. Terrible thing. His family's real worried." The man in the gray quarter-zip took a business card out of his pocket and laid it on the counter beside his plate. MERIDIAN RISK CONSULTANTS, it said. Cincinnati — Columbus — Chicago. There was a phone number. On the back, in blue ink, someone had written D. Pell. "They've hired us to look into it. Anybody who knew him, anybody who worked for him, might be able to help. If you happen to remember anything, you give me a call. Any time. Day or night."

He finished his pie. He left a five on a nine-dollar check. He smiled at her once more on his way out the door. Through the front window she watched him walk to a dark gray sedan at the far end of the lot. He sat in it with the engine running for a long time. He did not take out his phone. He did not do anything. He just sat there.

Tamsin went into the storeroom, shut the door, and was sick in the mop sink.

> "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." — Psalm 46:1 (KJV)

She worked the rest of her shift. She did not know how. Waverly asked her twice if she was all right, and she said she had a stomach bug. At four o'clock she walked home the long way, through the alley behind the bank and the feed store, checking every car she passed.

The gray sedan was parked across the street from Haskell's Hardware.

It was not the same space it had been in at the diner, but it was the same car. She was sure of it. There was a man behind the wheel. In the dusk she could not see his face.

She went up the back stairs to her room with her key in her fist. She stopped on the landing with her hand on the doorknob, listening. Nothing. She unlocked the door and pushed it open and stood in the doorway without going in.

The room looked the same. The bed. The dresser. The little television. The chair she had left beside the door.

But the dresser was not two inches to the left. It was flush against the wall, where it had been before she moved it. Its leg was no longer on the loose board.

Tamsin crossed the room in three steps. She dropped to her knees and shoved the dresser aside and pried up the board with her fingernails. She did not even look for the butter knife.

The coffee can was there. She ripped off the lid.

Everything was there. The cash. The license. The flash drive. The napkin with the sparrow.

She knelt on the floor, shaking, with the can clutched against her chest. Someone had been in her room. Someone had moved the dresser. Whether they had found the board, whether they had looked in the can, whether they had been interrupted, she did not know. She would never know. But someone had been here.

They had found her.

> "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" — Psalm 139:7 (KJV)

She left at two in the morning.

She did not have much to take. Everything she owned fit in a single backpack. She had learned that, too, seven months ago. Three changes of clothes. A toothbrush. The coffee can, wrapped in a sweatshirt at the bottom of the bag. She left her apron and her name tag on the bed. She left a note for Waverly on the dresser. It said only I'm sorry. Thank you for everything. Please don't look for me. She wrote it four times before she got it short enough that she would not cry.

She went down the back stairs and out through the alley, the long way, away from Main Street. She walked a mile and a half through the dark to the interstate in a cold, thin rain that soaked through her jacket in ten minutes. She stood at the bottom of the northbound on-ramp at the Mercy Ridge exit with her thumb out. She had never hitchhiked in her life. She knew how dangerous it was. She did not care anymore.

Cars went by. Not many, at two-thirty in the morning. A semi. A pickup. A minivan that slowed and then sped up again. Nobody stopped.

She had been standing there almost half an hour, shivering so hard her teeth clattered, when a set of headlights came down the road from the direction of town. They were moving slowly. It was an old green pickup truck. It went past her, and its brake lights came on, and it stopped on the shoulder fifty yards up the ramp.

For a moment, she did not move. Every instinct she had told her to run.

Then the driver's door opened and an old man climbed out into the rain in a barn coat. He stood there by the truck without coming any closer, as though he understood exactly what she was afraid of.

"Tamsin?" called Zeke Thornefield. "That you?"

She did not answer.

"It's two-thirty in the morning, honey," he said. "And it's thirty-four degrees. And you're soaked through." He waited. "I was out at the sign. I go out some nights to check the lights. Can't sleep." He paused. "I'm not going to ask you where you're going. Or why. That's your business. But I'll take you there, wherever it is, if you want. Columbus, Cincinnati, the Greyhound station, the moon. And I won't ask you one question the whole way. You've got my word on that."

The rain came down between them. A truck went by on the interstate above, its tires hissing.

Tamsin thought of the gray sedan. She thought of the man named Pell, and his eyes moving over her face. She thought of the sparrow on the napkin, and fear ye not, and the twenty-dollar bills under the saucer. She thought of the way this old man said her name. Her name that was not her name.

She picked up her backpack and walked up the ramp to the truck.

He kept his word. He did not ask her anything.

He turned the heater up all the way and handed her an old wool blanket from behind the seat, and he pulled back onto the ramp and up onto the interstate, northbound. He did not turn on the radio. He drove with both hands on the wheel, slowly, in the right lane. The wipers thumped back and forth. Tamsin sat against the passenger door with the blanket around her shoulders and the backpack in her lap and watched the dark go by.

Then the road began to climb. She knew where they were before they reached the top.

The billboard rose up out of the rain on its hill. It was lit white by the floodlights against the black sky, with the rain slanting silver through the beams. The face. The eyes. The red words.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

Tamsin heard herself make a sound. She pressed her hand over her mouth.

Zeke did not say anything. But he took his foot off the gas, and the truck slowed, and they went by it at thirty miles an hour. She turned in her seat and watched it go past, and watched it in the side mirror until the road dropped away and it was gone.

"You painted it," she said. It was not a question. "Didn't you."

"Yes, ma'am. I did."

"Why?"

He was quiet for a long time. The wipers thumped.

"Because I made a promise to my wife," he said at last. "And because I've been running from God for twenty years. And I got tired." He glanced at her, and then back at the road. "And because I figured there might be somebody else out there on this highway who was running too. Somebody who needed to know they could stop."

Tamsin looked down at her hands.

"Is it true?" she said. Her voice came out small. "What it says. Does He really know?"

"He knows."

"Then He knows what I did. He knows what I saw. He knows I ran." She was crying now. She had not cried in front of anyone in seven months. "He knows I'm a liar. I lie to everybody, every day. My name isn't even my name. Nothing about me is real. Why would He want me to come home? Home to what?"

Zeke Thornefield was silent for a long time.

"I don't know what you did, Tamsin," he said finally. "And I'm not going to ask. I gave you my word." He kept his eyes on the road. "But I'll tell you something I've learned. It took me sixty-eight years and it near about killed me. Whatever it is you've done, whatever it is you saw, whatever it is you're carrying, it isn't bigger than Him. It can't be. Nothing is." He paused. "He knew your real name before your mama ever said it. He knows it right now. And He hasn't forgotten it, even if you're trying to."

> "But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." — Isaiah 43:1 (KJV)

Tamsin put her face in the blanket and wept.

Zeke drove on. He did not say anything else. He just drove, slowly, through the rain. After a while he reached across the seat without looking and laid his hand on top of her backpack, very lightly, the way you would lay a hand on the shoulder of someone at a funeral. He left it there.

When she could talk again, the green sign for the next exit was coming up out of the dark. Jeffersonville, 1 mile.

"Mr. Thornefield," she said.

"Zeke."

"Zeke." She wiped her face with the blanket. "Could you turn around? Could you take me back?"

He looked at her.

"Not to my room," she said quickly. "I can't go back there. Somebody's been in my room. But ... could you take me to Waverly's?"

Zeke Thornefield put on his turn signal.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I surely can."

Waverly Pike opened her front door at four in the morning in a pink chenille bathrobe and curlers. She took one look at the soaking-wet girl on her porch and the old man standing behind her. She did not say a single word. She just opened her arms.

Tamsin walked into them.

Over her head, Waverly's eyes met Zeke's. Zeke took a pencil stub out of his coat pocket and a scrap of paper out of the other. He wrote something on the paper and handed it to Waverly. It was his phone number, in neat block capitals.

"Anybody bothers her," he said quietly, "anybody at all, you call me. I'm an old man with a bad heart. But I've got a truck, and I know every back road in three counties."

Then he touched the brim of his cap and went back out into the rain.

> "The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe." — Proverbs 18:10 (KJV)

Waverly did not ask questions either. Tamsin would remember that for the rest of her life.

She put the girl in a hot shower and gave her a flannel nightgown that came down past her ankles. She sat her at the kitchen table under the light and made cocoa from scratch in a dented saucepan, with real milk and too much sugar, the way her own mother used to make it. She set the mug down in front of Tamsin and sat across from her with her own, and for a long time the only sound was the refrigerator humming and the rain on the window over the sink.

"I ran once," Waverly said at last.

Tamsin looked up.

"Forty-one years ago. I was twenty-five. I had a husband who drank and a baby who was eight months old, and one night he put me through a door." Waverly turned her mug slowly on the oilcloth. "I took my girl and forty dollars and the clothes I had on, and I got on a Greyhound bus in Huntington, West Virginia. I rode it till the forty dollars ran out. It ran out here. I didn't know a soul. I slept in the bus station two nights. On the third night a little old lady from the chapel found me there and took me

home. She never asked me one single question. She just fed me and let me sleep." She smiled faintly. "Her name was Hattie Pruitt. The preacher's mother."

The rain ticked on the window.

"I'm not going to ask you what you're running from, honey," Waverly said. "When you're ready, you'll tell me, or you won't. But I want you to know something. You're not the first girl who ever came to this town with nothing but a bag and a made-up name. And the Lord didn't turn the first one away either."

> "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? ... He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength." — Isaiah 40:28–29 (KJV)

Tamsin slept that night in Waverly's spare room under a quilt that smelled of cedar. She slept until noon. It was the first time since April that she had slept through the night.

Three miles away, on Main Street, a dark gray sedan sat at the curb across from Haskell's Hardware with its engine running and its lights off.

The man in the gray quarter-zip had been sitting there since midnight. At four-twenty, he took out his phone and dialed.

"She's gone," he said. "Room's empty. Apron's on the bed. She left a note for the old woman at the diner."

He listened.

"No. I went back in at three. The board was up. Whatever she had under there, she took it with her." He listened again. "No, sir. But she can't have gone far. She doesn't have a car. And it's a small town."

He was quiet for a moment, listening to the voice on the other end.

"Yes, sir," said the man named Pell. "I understand. I'll find her. And I'll find whatever she's carrying."

He hung up. He sat for a while in the dark, watching the empty street. Then he put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. He drove slowly south, toward the interstate. Toward the billboard. Toward the only part of town where anything was still lit.

End of Chapter 6

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 7

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 7: The Man Who Wanted Jesus Gone

> "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." — Matthew 6:24 (KJV)

From the fourth floor of the old Farmers Exchange Building, Sterling Blackmere could see most of what he owned.

He stood at the tall arched window of his corner office with a cup of black coffee in his hand and looked out over Mercy Ridge the way another man might look over a garden. There was the Main Street block, eleven storefronts, nine of them his. There was the Blackmere Inn at the east end of town, with its white columns and its restaurant that had been written up in Ohio Magazine. There were the Blackmere Freight terminal and its forty-two trucks, the business his father had started with one secondhand Mack in 1961. There was the shopping plaza on Route 3, and the medical office building, and the new apartments going up on the old Kessler farm.

And there, to the south, beyond the water tower and the grain elevator, was the interchange. Three hundred and eighty acres of flat, empty farmland lay on either side of Interstate 71, waiting.

Blackmere Crossing. A hundred and forty million dollars. A truck plaza, two hotels, a distribution center, a shopping center with a Target and a Costco, and four restaurants. Eleven hundred jobs. It would be the largest development in the history of Clinton County. He had spent six years putting it together. He had bought the land parcel by parcel, some of it from widows who did not know what it was worth. He had courted the investors in Indianapolis and Chicago. He had sat through forty-one meetings with the Ohio Department of Transportation about the interchange. The ground was supposed to be broken in March.

And on the hill above it, three hundred yards from his property line, a forty-foot Jesus was staring back at him.

He did not look at it. He could not see it from here, not really. It was only a small pale rectangle on a far hill. But he knew it was there. He had known it every minute of every day for eleven days.

Sterling Blackmere was sixty-two years old. He was tall and lean, silver-haired, with a tennis player's build and a face the society pages called distinguished. He wore a navy suit from a tailor in Chicago and a white shirt with no tie. He did not raise his voice. He had never needed to. He had learned from his father that a man who owns enough does not have to shout. He only has to wait.

Behind him, on the credenza beneath the window, stood a row of silver-framed photographs. There was his late wife, Diane, on the deck of a sailboat. There was Cecily at her graduation from Northwestern. There was his father, cutting the ribbon on the first Blackmere Freight terminal. There was Sterling himself, shaking hands with two governors and a United States senator.

At the end of the row, one frame lay face down.

It had lain face down for nineteen years. The cleaning woman knew not to touch it. Cecily had stopped asking about it a long time ago.

> "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" — Matthew 16:26 (KJV)

"We can't attack it," said Cecily. "That's the first thing. Whatever we do, we can't be seen attacking it."

His daughter sat across the conference table from him with her laptop open and her reading glasses pushed up into her dark hair. She was thirty-two. She ran her own public relations firm in Columbus, with clients in three states. She was the smartest person Sterling had ever known, including himself. He had asked her to drive down this morning because he did not trust anyone else with this.

"I'm not attacking anything," Sterling said. "I'm protecting a hundred-and-forty-million-dollar investment."

"From Jesus."

"From an old man with a paintbrush."

Cecily looked at him over her laptop for a moment. Then she turned the screen around so he could see it.

"Here's what you're up against, Dad," she said. "Forty-one million views on the girl's video. The college student. Eleven million on the national news story. The hashtag has been trending for nine days. There are people driving here from Maine. A church in Texas is chartering buses. That TV preacher in Houston is selling T-shirts and promising a revival on the shoulder of the interstate the Saturday after Thanksgiving. That's ten thousand people, minimum, standing on your property line." She tapped the table. "If Blackmere Development Group is seen trying to take that billboard down, you will be the man who tried to take down Jesus. On every screen in America. Your investors in Indianapolis will read about it over breakfast. Nobody wins a fight with Jesus. Not in Ohio."

Sterling said nothing. He turned his coffee cup slowly on its saucer.

"The ODOT angle's dead too," Cecily went on. "I talked to their district office yesterday. The structure is legal. The permit's grandfathered. Non-commercial speech is protected. The traffic issue is real, people stopping on the shoulder, but they're handling it with signs and extra patrols. They are not going to make him take it down. And the township won't touch it. Half the trustees go to church with the people who are praying out there every morning."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Patience." She closed the laptop. "This is a news cycle. It's a big one, but it's a cycle. By spring it'll be over. Nobody will remember. You break ground in March, the way you planned, and you do it quietly. If the old man's billboard is still there, you plant a row of trees along the property line, and in five years nobody will be able to see it from the Costco parking lot."

It was good advice. Sterling knew it was good advice. It was exactly what he would have told anyone else.

"That's very sensible," he said.

Cecily studied him. Her mother's eyes. Diane had always been able to see through him, too.

"But you're not going to do it," she said slowly. "Are you?"

He did not answer.

"Dad, why does this bother you so much?" She leaned forward. "I've watched you lose deals worth ten times what this sign could ever cost you, and you never even blinked. You've had protesters. You've had lawsuits. You had that whole thing with the EPA. You never lost a night's sleep. But this ..." She shook her head. "You look like you haven't slept in a week. And every time somebody says the words on that billboard, you look like somebody walked over your grave."

Sterling stood up. He walked to the window and stood with his back to her.

"It's bad for business," he said. "That's all."

Behind him, he heard his daughter close her laptop and gather her things. At the door she paused.

"I watched the video again last night," she said quietly. "The girl. Verity. Where she says she's going home." Cecily's voice wavered just slightly. "I watched it four times. I don't even know why."

Then she was gone.

Sterling stood alone at the window looking south. After a while he took out his phone and dialed a number.

"Dashiell," he said. "Bring the car around. We're going to see Mr. Thornefield."

Zeke Thornefield was in the barn when he heard the car.

He was sitting on the overturned bucket in front of the canvas with a brush in his hand, as he had sat every afternoon for a week. He had not painted anything. He had only sat and looked at the empty hands. Twice he had dipped the brush. Twice he had lifted it toward the penciled circle in the left palm. Twice his hand had stopped an inch from the canvas, shaking, and would not go any further.

Paint them for you.

He was still sitting there when the sound of tires on gravel came up the long drive from Ridgeline Road. It was not Silas's rattling Chevy. It was something heavy and quiet and expensive.

He set the brush down in the can of turpentine and went to the barn door.

A dark green Range Rover was rolling slowly up the drive. It stopped in front of the house, beside his old pickup, and sat there for a moment with its engine running. Then the driver's door opened. A man got out who looked about forty, broad-shouldered, with a close military haircut and a black fleece jacket. He did not look at the house. He looked at everything else. He looked at the road and the fields, the barn and the pickup, and the windows of the house. He looked at Zeke last, standing in the barn door, and held his eyes for a moment without any expression at all. Then he went around and opened the rear door.

Sterling Blackmere stepped out into the November afternoon in a camel-hair overcoat.

Zeke stood very still in the barn door.

He knew the car before he knew the man. Twenty years. A different car, surely. Range Rovers did not last twenty years, and Sterling Blackmere would not have driven one that did. But it was the same color. The same dark, deep green. He had seen it from forty feet up, through the rain, pulled onto the shoulder behind a black BMW in a ditch. He had watched a man in an expensive raincoat climb out of it and walk slowly up the shoulder without looking at his son.

He had never let himself think about that car. Now here it was, in his own driveway.

He made himself walk across the yard.

"Ezekiel," said Sterling Blackmere. He held out his hand. "It's been a long time."

Zeke looked at the hand. He did not take it.

Sterling let it drop without any sign of embarrassment. He smiled. "May I come in?"

"We can talk out here."

"Of course." Sterling looked around at the sagging porch and the peeling paint and the barn. His eyes rested on the barn for a moment. "Your father lettered my father's first truck, did you know that? Nineteen sixty-one. Blackmere Hauling, Mercy Ridge, Ohio. Gold leaf, on a green Mack. My father kept a photograph of it on his desk until the day he died." He turned back to Zeke. "And you lettered all forty of my trucks in the eighties. Every one of them. Best work in the state. People still talk about it."

"That was a long time ago."

"So it was." Sterling put his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. "I'll come to the point, Ezekiel. I know you're not a man who likes to waste time. And neither am I."

He made it sound so reasonable. That was the thing Zeke would remember afterward. Sterling Blackmere did not threaten, and he did not bluster. He laid it all out on the front walk of the farmhouse like a man explaining the terms of a loan.

The billboard was a traffic hazard. The highway patrol had logged forty-one incidents of vehicles stopping on the shoulder in eleven days. There had been two minor collisions, and a near miss involving the chief of police himself. Someone was going to get killed out there, sooner or later. Sterling said he didn't think Zeke wanted that on his conscience.

It was also bad for the town. Mercy Ridge was trying to grow. Blackmere Crossing would bring eleven hundred jobs to a county that had been bleeding them for thirty years. But investors were cautious people. They did not like controversy. They did not like circuses. They did not like news vans and TV preachers and ten thousand people camped beside an interchange.

And besides, Sterling said, there was a principle at stake. He was a churchgoing man himself. He was on the vestry at St. Andrew's in Wilmington. But he believed faith was a private matter, between a man and his God. It was not something to be shouted at strangers from a billboard. Plenty of people found

the message offensive. Plenty of people did not share Zeke's beliefs. Was it right for one man to force his religion on thirty thousand drivers a day?

Zeke listened to all of it without saying a word.

"So here's what I'd like to propose," said Sterling. "I'll buy it from you. The structure and the remainder of the lease. You paid eighteen thousand seven hundred and fifty, I believe." He smiled slightly. "I'll pay you two hundred and fifty thousand."

Zeke said nothing.

"Cash. This week. You take the painting down, carefully. You keep it, of course. It's yours. Hang it in a church somewhere, if you like. I'll even pay to have it moved. And then you never have to think about any of this again."

Zeke still said nothing.

Sterling's smile did not change. "Five hundred thousand," he said.

Somewhere out in the field a crow called. The man in the black fleece stood beside the Range Rover with his hands folded in front of him, looking at the barn.

"I've done a little reading about you, Ezekiel," Sterling said. His voice was gentler now, almost kind. "I know about your heart. I know you've got a doctor in Columbus and a pile of prescriptions. I know you spent your savings on that sign. I know this house needs a roof and that truck needs an engine. And I know you've got a daughter in Chicago who hasn't been home in fifteen years." He paused. "Five hundred thousand dollars would fix a great many things. A roof. A truck. The best cardiologist in the state. A plane ticket to Chicago." He let it hang there. "Maybe even a reason for her to pick up the phone."

Something moved in Zeke's chest. For a moment, just a moment, he saw it. Juniper's face, the way it had looked at nineteen, white and furious at the edge of her mother's grave. And the phone ringing. And her voice on the other end.

Then it was gone.

"It isn't for sale," Zeke said.

Sterling tilted his head, as though he had not heard correctly.

"It isn't for sale," Zeke said again. "Not for five hundred thousand. Not for five million. It isn't mine to sell, Sterling. I just painted it."

"Then whose is it?"

Zeke looked at him for a long moment.

"I think you know," he said.

> "But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money." — Acts 8:20 (KJV)

The smile went out of Sterling Blackmere's face. It did not go all at once. It went slowly, the way the light goes out of a room when someone turns a dimmer switch. What was underneath it was not angry. It was something colder than angry. It was the face of a man doing arithmetic.

"Everything is for sale, Ezekiel," he said quietly. "Every man has a price. You of all people know that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you've been quiet about a great many things, for a great many years. And you never asked anybody for a dime." Sterling took a step closer. He lowered his voice, though there was no one within half a mile to hear. "I've always respected that about you. I thought you were a man who understood that some things are better left where they are. I'd hate to think I was wrong."

Zeke's mouth had gone dry.

"Let me tell you what's going to happen," Sterling said, in the same reasonable voice. "The land under your billboard belongs to the Harlow estate. It's been in probate for twenty-two years because old Mrs. Harlow died without a will and her heirs are scattered from here to Arizona. Last Tuesday, my attorneys purchased the interests of four of those heirs. By the end of the month we'll have the rest. And when we do, Ezekiel, I'm going to own the ground your sign is standing on. My attorneys tell me there are several defects in that ground lease. They'll take some time to litigate. And a man in your condition, with your heart, might not enjoy spending the next two years in a courtroom in Wilmington."

He let that settle.

"And that's the gentle way," he said. "That's the way I'd prefer."

He glanced, very briefly, toward the barn. The man in the black fleece glanced at it too.

"These old barns," Sterling said. "Full of turpentine and dry wood. I read somewhere that the number one cause of rural fires in Ohio is old wiring in outbuildings. Isn't that something? You should have someone look at yours." He buttoned his overcoat. "And stress is very bad for the heart. I've heard that, too."

He reached inside the coat and took out a long envelope. He did not hand it to Zeke. He laid it on the porch rail, the way a man lays a tip on a table.

"That's a cashier's check for five hundred thousand dollars," he said. "Made out to you. It's good until Thanksgiving. Think about your daughter, Ezekiel. Think about your heart. And think about all those people out there who'd be better off if a few old things stayed buried."

He turned and walked back to the Range Rover. The man in the black fleece opened the door for him. Sterling got in without looking back. The driver got in, and the big car turned slowly in the yard and went back down the drive and out onto Ridgeline Road. It went south, toward the interstate, and was gone.

Zeke stood alone in the yard for a long time.

His hands were shaking. His heart was doing its complicated thing. He made himself breathe slowly, in and out, the way Dr. Castellano had shown him. Then he walked to the porch rail and looked at the envelope lying there.

Five hundred thousand dollars.

A roof. A truck. The best doctor in the state. A plane ticket to Chicago. Maybe even a reason for her to pick up the phone.

He picked up the envelope. He did not open it. He carried it across the yard to the rusted burn barrel beside Hannah's roses. He took a kitchen match out of his shirt pocket, struck it on the rim of the barrel, and held the flame to the corner of the envelope. He watched it catch and curl and blacken. He dropped it into the barrel and stood there until it was ash.

Then he went back into the barn, sat down on the bucket in front of the painting, and put his face in his hands.

"I'm scared, Lord," he said, after a long time. It came out in a whisper. "I'm not going to pretend I'm not. I'm an old man and my heart's no good, and that man has more money than God." He stopped. He almost laughed. "Well. Not more than You. But more than anybody I know."

The barn was quiet. The bulb buzzed overhead.

"He knows I was there," Zeke said. "That night. He's always known. And he knows I never said anything. He's counting on me never saying anything. That's what that check was for. It wasn't for the sign. It was for me." He lifted his head and looked up at the painted eyes. "Twenty years I let him count on me. Twenty years I kept his secret for him and called it minding my own business."

The eyes looked back at him, steady and knowing and glad he had come.

"I'm not ready yet," Zeke whispered. "You know I'm not. But I'm not taking his money. I can give You that much. That's a start, isn't it?"

Nobody answered. But for the first time all day, his hands stopped shaking.

> "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." — 1 Timothy 6:10 (KJV)

Dashiell Crowe did not like this job.

He had not liked it from the beginning, and he liked it less with every mile of the drive back to town. Mr. Blackmere sat in the back seat and said nothing. He looked out the window at the passing fields with his face perfectly composed. Crowe had worked for him for three years. He had been a military policeman for twelve years before that, two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. He had learned to read men's faces the way a farmer reads the sky. He did not like the weather in this one.

His company was called Crowe Security Solutions, LLC. It had two employees: himself and his ex-wife's brother, who worked nights. Most of the work was easy. Driving Mr. Blackmere. Checking out

contractors. Running background on job applicants. Sitting in a car outside the Blackmere Freight terminal at night after the copper thefts. It paid well. Very well. He had a ten-year-old daughter named Lily who lived with her mother in Dayton, and he paid her private school tuition with Sterling Blackmere's money and did not ask questions. That was the arrangement.

At the bottom of Ridgeline Road, Mr. Blackmere spoke.

"He's not going to take the money."

"No, sir. I don't think he is."

"Then I want him uncomfortable," said Sterling Blackmere. "Starting tonight. Nothing that leaves a mark. Nothing anyone could trace. Not yet." He was still looking out the window. "I want him to understand that I'm serious. I want him to lie awake at night. I want him to feel it every time he walks out his front door. You know how to do that, Dashiell. That's what I pay you for."

Crowe kept his eyes on the road. "Yes, sir."

"And that business with the girl. The waitress. Has Pell found her?"

"Not yet, sir. He thinks she's still in town."

"Tell him to stop thinking and start finding." Sterling Blackmere turned his head at last and met Crowe's eyes in the rearview mirror. "I don't pay either of you to think."

> "Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb." — Psalm 37:1–2 (KJV)

He went out at one-thirty in the morning.

He drove his own truck, not the Range Rover, with the headlights off for the last quarter mile up Ridgeline Road. He parked in a field access on the far side of a hedgerow and walked the rest of the way. The old man's farmhouse was dark. One light was burning in the back, over the porch. The barn was a black shape against the stars.

He did what he had been paid to do. He did it quickly and professionally, the way he did everything. He let the air out of all four tires of the old green pickup. He did not slash them. Slashing was traceable, and slashing was a crime that would bring a deputy. Letting the air out was just a message. Then he took a folded index card from his jacket pocket. He had printed it at the office on a laser printer that a thousand other businesses also used. He tucked it under the pickup's windshield wiper.

STRESS IS BAD FOR THE HEART.

Then he got back in his truck and drove to Mile Marker 52.

The billboard blazed white on its hill above the empty highway. Crowe parked in the maintenance turnout and climbed the hill in the dark with a pair of bolt cutters. The power ran up to the floodlights

through a conduit from a junction box at the base of the near column. The junction box had a padlock. The padlock was new. Crowe cut it in one bite. He opened the box, found the main feed, and snipped it.

The floodlights went out.

The face of Jesus vanished into the dark as though a hand had passed over it.

Crowe stood at the foot of the billboard in the sudden blackness, breathing hard. He was surprised at how hard he was breathing. He had done much worse things than this, in much worse places, for much worse reasons. He had kicked in doors in Fallujah. He had held men at gunpoint while they wept. He had not lost a minute of sleep over any of it.

But he found, standing there in the dark, that he did not want to look up.

He did not know why. There was nothing to see. The floodlights were out. The face was gone. There was only a black rectangle against a black sky.

He did not look up anyway. He walked back down the hill with the bolt cutters in his hand and his eyes on the ground, the whole way.

Zeke found the tires in the morning, and the card under the wiper. He read it standing in the frost in his slippers. Then he folded it carefully and put it in his shirt pocket, behind Hannah's letter. He went back inside and called Silas.

Silas came with his compressor and filled the tires without a word. Then they drove out to the billboard together. Waverly had called at six-thirty to say it had gone dark in the night, and the whole town was talking about it.

The lineman from the electric co-op was already there when they arrived, splicing the main feed. He was a big, slow, cheerful man named Bud Tackett who had been in Zeke's Sunday school class forty years ago. He shook his head over the cut padlock.

"Somebody knew what they were doing," he said. "Clean cut. Didn't touch anything else. Didn't even scratch the box." He looked at Zeke from under his hard hat. "You got enemies, Zeke?"

"Seems like," said Zeke.

Bud Tackett looked up at the billboard. In the gray morning light, without its floodlights, the painted face looked quieter somehow. Patient. Waiting.

"Well," Bud said, "they'll have to cut it a lot more times than once." He went back to his splice. "I'm on call every night this month. You tell whoever it is, they cut it, I'll fix it. Every time. On the co-op's dime."

At the top of the hill, in her lawn chair, wrapped in two blankets, with her thermos at her feet, sat Ottilie Mercerfield. She had been there since five. She had been sitting in the dark under the dead floodlights for an hour and a half, praying, before anyone else arrived. She had not been afraid, she told Zeke later. Not even a little.

"I couldn't see His face," she said. "But I knew it was there. I didn't need the lights, Ezekiel. I've been looking at that face a long time."

That night, at dusk, the floodlights came on again, right on time. The face of Jesus blazed out over the interstate as though nothing had happened.

> "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." — John 1:5 (KJV)

At eleven-forty that night, Dashiell Crowe drove south on Interstate 71 on his way home from Mr. Blackmere's house. He had just been told, in a very quiet voice, that the old man had not been made uncomfortable enough. He had been told what to do next.

He came up the long grade toward Mile Marker 52 with his jaw set and his hands tight on the wheel. He was not going to look. He had decided that. He was going to drive past it the way you drive past a wreck, with his eyes straight ahead.

The floodlights were burning.

He saw them from a mile away, a white glow above the dark fields. And as he came over the rise, his eyes went up anyway. He could not stop them.

The face was there. Of course it was there. The eyes were looking down the northbound lanes. They were not looking at his lanes. He was southbound, on the far side of the median, and the face was turned the other way. He could only see it at an angle, over his left shoulder, for a few seconds as he passed. But he saw it.

And he saw, at the foot of the hill, in the glow of the floodlights, a tiny figure in a lawn chair with a blanket around her shoulders. An old woman. Alone. At midnight. In the cold.

Her head was bowed.

Dashiell Crowe drove past at seventy miles an hour and did not slow down. He drove on into the dark toward Cincinnati, and he did not look in his mirror.

But a mile later he found that he had pulled onto the shoulder. He did not remember deciding to. He sat there with the engine running and his hands on the wheel and the blinkers ticking, in the dark, for a long time.

He thought about his daughter, Lily, and the way she prayed before bed. She got down on her knees beside it with her hands folded, because her mother had taught her that. She always ended the same way. And God bless Daddy. And keep him safe. And help him be good.

He sat there until the blinkers had ticked a thousand times.

Then he put the truck in gear and drove on. He had a job to do. He would do it.

But he did not sleep that night either.

> "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 (KJV)

End of Chapter 7

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 8

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 8: A Pastor Without a Prayer

> "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" — Ezekiel 34:2 (KJV)

The silence went on for eleven seconds.

Callan would learn that later. A teenager in the balcony had been filming the service on his phone, and that night the video went up online with the title Pastor FREEZES at Billboard Jesus Church. It got four hundred thousand views. Callan watched it once, alone in his office at midnight, and then never again. Eleven seconds. It had felt like an hour.

He stood at the pulpit with both hands gripping the edges and his sermon folder closed in front of him. Two hundred faces looked up at him. Not one of them looked away. The furnace ticked. Someone's baby fussed in the back and was hushed. Somewhere outside on Main Street a truck downshifted.

And then, because he could not think of anything else to do, Callan opened his Bible.

He did not choose the passage. Afterward he could not have said why his fingers went where they went. He turned the thin pages until he came to the fifteenth chapter of Luke, and he began to read. He did not explain it. He did not introduce it. He just read it out loud, in a voice that did not sound like his own.

A certain man had two sons.

He read about the younger son who took his inheritance and went into a far country and wasted it all. He read about the famine, and the pigs, and the husks the swine did eat, and how no man gave unto him. He read about the moment the boy came to himself and said, I will arise and go to my father.

And then he came to the verse.

> "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." — Luke 15:20 (KJV)

His voice broke on ran.

He had read that verse a hundred times. He had preached on it at least a dozen. He had a sermon in his files called The Running Father with three points and a poem. He had never once had trouble getting through it.

He stood there now and could not go on. He looked down at the page and the words swam. He heard a sound from the third row. It was Ray Doolin, the trucker, with his big hand over his face and his shoulders shaking. He heard another sound from the middle of the room, and another from the back. All over the sanctuary, people were weeping.

Callan closed the Bible.

"That's all I have," he said. His voice was barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry. That's all I have this morning."

He stepped back from the pulpit.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Ray Doolin stood up in the third row, walked down the center aisle, and knelt on the carpet in front of the communion table with his face in his hands. Verity Ashcombe followed him. Then her mother and father. Then a biker in a leather vest. Then a young woman holding a baby. Then a gray-haired man in a feed cap, and a teenage boy, and the nurse who had just come off her night shift. They came down the aisle in ones and twos until the whole front of the church was full of people on their knees.

Callan stood at the side of the platform and watched.

He did not know what to do. He should go to them. He knew he should go to them. He should kneel beside them and put his hand on their shoulders and pray. That was his job. That was what a pastor was for.

He could not move.

It was Ottilie Mercerfield who went first. She got up out of her pew with her cane and made her slow way down the aisle and lowered herself, with great difficulty, onto her old knees beside Ray Doolin. She put her small spotted hand on his back and began to pray out loud. Then Elowen came down from the back row and knelt beside the young woman with the baby. Then Waverly Pike, who had closed the diner for an hour for the first time in thirty-one years, knelt beside Verity Ashcombe and put her arms around her.

Callan Whitlock stood at the side of his own platform, in his own church, and watched three old women and his wife do his job.

He had never felt so far away from God in his life.

Afterward, they lined up to shake his hand.

He stood at the front door of the chapel in the cold, the way he had stood every Sunday for twelve years. They came out past him one by one, and every one of them wanted to touch him. A woman from Kentucky pressed both his hands between hers and said, "God bless you, Pastor. God bless you." A big

man in a Carhartt jacket hugged him so hard his ribs creaked. A teenage girl with blue hair and a ring in her nose said, "That was the realest church I've ever been to," and burst into tears and ran down the steps.

"That was the most powerful sermon I ever heard in my life," said a gray-haired man in a VFW cap. He was gripping Callan's hand and would not let go. "Most powerful sermon in my life. And you didn't hardly say a word."

Callan smiled and nodded and said thank you. He said it forty times. He said it a hundred.

The last one out was a tiny Black woman of perhaps eighty, in a church hat with a purple feather and white gloves. She had driven up from Cincinnati, she said, with her grandson. She took Callan's hand in her small gloved one and looked up into his face for a long moment with her head tilted, the way a doctor looks at a patient.

"You know why it was so good, baby?" she said.

"No, ma'am."

"Because you didn't get in the way." She patted his hand. "Most preachers can't help it. They get up there and they talk and they talk, and they stand right in front of Him the whole time, so nobody can see. This morning you got out of the way. You just read it and stepped back." She smiled. "Don't you worry. It's a hard thing to learn. Took my own pastor forty years."

She went down the steps on her grandson's arm.

Callan stood in the doorway with the cold wind blowing in. He knew she had meant it as a kindness. He knew she had meant it as praise. It went through him like a knife anyway.

You didn't get in the way.

Because he had nothing to give them. Because there was nothing left inside him to put in the way.

"Thirty-eight thousand dollars," said Merle Pettibone. "That's the deficit. Through October."

The deacon board met on Monday evenings in the fellowship hall, around a folding table with a plastic cloth. There were five of them now. There had been twelve when Callan came. Merle was seventy-four, a retired insurance man who had been treasurer for twenty-six years and had never once smiled while reporting a number. He pushed a spreadsheet across the table to Callan with one finger, the way you push away a plate you do not intend to finish.

"But yesterday," said Dottie Kimble. "Yesterday there were two hundred people."

"Two hundred people," Merle agreed. "And the offering was four hundred and eleven dollars. Most of it in ones." He turned a page. "Also a wedding ring. Gold. Somebody put it in the plate. No name."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"Well, we can't sell it," said Dottie.

"I didn't say we could sell it, Dottie. I'm saying it's not money."

Callan looked down at the spreadsheet. The numbers did not surprise him. He had known them for months. Heating oil for a building designed for five hundred. A roof that leaked over the choir loft. His own salary, which he had cut twice already. Insurance. The organ, which needed eleven thousand dollars of work and had needed it for four years.

"There's more," Merle said. "The Fosters called me Saturday. They're transferring their membership to First Methodist. And the Delaneys. And Bob and Joyce Hatcher."

"Why?" Callan said, though he knew.

Merle looked at him over his reading glasses. "Bob says it isn't their church anymore. Says he came to worship yesterday and couldn't find a parking place. Had to sit in a folding chair behind a man with a tattoo of a snake on his neck. Says there were bikers smoking on the front steps. Somebody's child spilled grape juice on the carpet in the vestibule." He paused. "And he says the pastor didn't even preach."

The words hung in the air.

"I'll call him," Callan said.

"You can call him. He's not coming back." Merle took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "There's one more thing. We got a letter from the district office on Friday. They're putting us on review." He slid an envelope across the table. "If attendance and giving don't stabilize by June, they want to talk about merging us with Wilmington First. Or closing."

Closing. After a hundred and forty years.

"And then there's this." Merle slid one last sheet of paper across the table. It was an email, printed out. "Came to the church account this morning. From Houston."

Callan read it.

It was from the Ministry Partnerships Office of Victory Hour International. It was warm and gracious and full of exclamation points. The Reverend Blaine Harker was so blessed to learn of the revival happening at Mercy Ridge Community Chapel! He would count it an honor to partner with Pastor Whitlock and his precious congregation for the upcoming Billboard Jesus Revival. As a token of that partnership, Victory Hour International would be delighted to make a Kingdom Investment of fifty thousand dollars. In return, the chapel would serve as the "local host church." Its parking lot would be available for staging, and Pastor Whitlock would appear on stage with Reverend Harker for the opening prayer. They looked forward to hearing from him soon! God bless!

Callan set it down.

"Fifty thousand dollars," said Merle Pettibone. "That would cover the deficit. And the roof."

"He's selling T-shirts, Merle. With the billboard on them. Twenty-nine ninety-nine."

"I know what he's selling." The old man's voice was flat. "I'm the treasurer. I'm telling you what the numbers say. The numbers say we close in June. Or we take the man's money." He put his glasses back on. "You're the pastor. You tell us which one God wants."

Four faces turned toward Callan.

He opened his mouth. He did not know. That was the truth of it. He did not know which one God wanted. He did not know how he would find out. He could not remember the last time he had asked God anything and waited long enough for an answer.

"Let me pray about it," he said.

It was what pastors said. Merle Pettibone looked at him for a long moment, as though he could see straight through the words to the empty place behind them. Then he nodded and closed his folder.

> "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." — Matthew 23:27 (KJV)

He found Hollis on Tuesday.

He had come back to the church after dark to get a book he had left in his office. He heard a sound from the choir room as he passed. It was a soft, rhythmic thumping, like someone tapping a foot. The door was half open. The light was off.

Callan pushed it open and turned on the light.

Hollis Fenwick was sitting on the floor with his back against the piano, his legs stretched out in front of him and his head lolling against the keyboard cover. His eyes were half open. His skin was gray and slick with sweat. One heel was tapping against the floor, over and over, as though it belonged to someone else. On the carpet beside him lay an orange prescription bottle with its cap off. Two small round pills had spilled out next to it.

"Hollis."

The young man's eyes came open slowly. It took him a moment to focus. When he did, his face crumpled.

"Pastor. Oh, man. Oh, no."

Callan crouched down beside him. He picked up the bottle and read the label. Oxycodone HCl 10mg. The name on the label was not Hollis Fenwick. It was a woman's name, an address in Wilmington, a date from two years ago.

"It's my back," Hollis said. The words came out slurred and too fast. "I hurt my back. Moving the sound equipment. Last spring. It's just till it gets better. I swear, Pastor, it's just my back."

Callan looked at him.

He knew what he was supposed to do. He had taken a course in seminary on pastoral care in crisis. He had a list of rehab centers in his desk drawer. He had a phone number for a counselor in Dayton. He knew that the young man on the floor in front of him was not hurting his back. He was dying, slowly, in a choir room, and had probably been dying for a long time. Callan had smelled the peppermint on his

breath every Sunday for months and seen his hands shake. He had said nothing because saying something would have been hard and messy and would have taken time.

Hollis was looking up at him with the same look all those strangers had worn on Sunday. A naked, terrible hope.

Help me.

And Callan said: "Why don't you take a few weeks off, Hollis? Get some rest. Get your back looked at."

Hollis stared at him. Something in his face changed.

"Are you firing me?"

"No. No. Just take some time. We'll get somebody to fill in on Sundays."

The young man kept looking at him. Then, slowly, the hope went out of his eyes. It went the way it had gone out of Ray Doolin's eyes in the empty sanctuary on Thursday, when Callan handed him a brochure.

"You know," Hollis said quietly. "Don't you. You've known for a while."

Callan opened his mouth to say I don't know anything, Hollis.

He could not say it. He could not make the lie come out. He closed his mouth again.

Hollis nodded slowly. He took the bottle out of Callan's hand, screwed the cap back on, and put it in his pocket. He got to his feet, unsteadily, holding on to the piano. He did not look at Callan again. He walked out of the choir room and down the dark hallway, and Callan heard the side door open and close.

Callan sat alone on the floor of the choir room, under the fluorescent light, for a long time.

> "The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost." — Ezekiel 34:4 (KJV)

When he got home that night, Elowen's overnight bag was sitting by the front door.

She was in the kitchen, in her coat, writing a note on the pad by the phone. She looked up when he came in. She did not look angry. She looked tired, and sad, and very calm.

"I was going to leave you a note," she said. "I didn't want to just be gone."

"Elowen. What are you doing?"

"I'm going to Ruthie's for a few days." Her sister lived in Springfield, an hour north. "I'm not leaving you, Cal. I want you to hear me say that. I'm not leaving. I just need to be somewhere quiet for a little while. I need to hear myself think."

He set his keys down on the counter very carefully. "Is this about Sunday?"

"It's about Sunday. And last Sunday. And five years of Sundays." She put down the pen. "Do you know where I've been going every morning, before school? For the last week?"

He shook his head.

"Out to the billboard. To sit with Ottilie Mercerfield and pray." She almost smiled. "Me. In a lawn chair. At six in the morning. On the side of the interstate. With a seventy-nine-year-old woman who can barely see." Her voice softened. "You know what I pray for, Cal? Every morning?"

He waited.

"I pray for my husband. For the man I married. The one who used to cry when he prayed. Do you remember him? We'd be sitting in that terrible little apartment in Indianapolis, and you'd pray for some kid in your youth group. And you'd get so caught up in it that you'd forget I was there, and you'd start to cry. Just talking to God like He was sitting at the kitchen table." She shook her head slowly. "I fell in love with that man. I haven't seen him in a long time."

"I'm still here," Callan said. His voice cracked.

"Are you?" She looked at him with infinite gentleness. "Then where did you go, sweetheart? Because I've been looking."

He could not answer.

She came around the counter, put her hand on his cheek, and kissed him on the forehead the way you kiss a child with a fever. Then she picked up her bag.

"I'll be back Saturday," she said at the door. "I'll keep praying for you. I won't stop." She paused. "Maybe you could try praying for you too."

Then she was gone.

He stood in the kitchen and listened to her car go down the street. The refrigerator hummed. The clock on the stove said 10:14. On the pad by the phone, in her round, careful handwriting, was the note she had not finished.

Cal, I love you. I'm not giving up on you. But I

That was all.

He tore the page off the pad, folded it, and put it in his wallet behind his driver's license.

Then he went upstairs to the bedroom and knelt down beside the bed. He had not knelt to pray in his own house in he did not know how long. His knees cracked. The carpet smelled of Elowen's lavender sachets. He folded his hands on the quilt her grandmother had made, the way he had folded them as a boy beside a motel bed in Tulsa or Paducah or Terre Haute. He used to kneel there while his father counted the offering at the table by the window.

"God," he said.

He waited.

"God, I ..."

The house was silent. The furnace clicked on downstairs. Out on the street, a dog barked twice and stopped.

He knelt there for twenty minutes, and those were the only two words that came.

> "My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God?" — Psalm 42:3 (KJV)

Ray Doolin called on Wednesday afternoon.

Callan almost did not recognize the voice. It was hoarse and flat and sounded as though it were coming from very far away. There was road noise behind it, the hum of a diesel engine and the hiss of tires.

"Preacher? It's Ray. Ray Doolin. From Sunday."

"Ray. Of course. How are you?"

There was a long pause. "I went to Dayton. Yesterday. Like you said. Like that sign said. I went home." Another pause. "I found the house. My wife's name ain't Doolin no more. She got married again. Nice fella, I guess. Drives for UPS. My boy's seventeen now. He answered the door."

Callan waited.

"He knew who I was. Took him about two seconds. And he looked at me ..." Ray's voice cracked. "Preacher, he looked at me like I was something he'd stepped in. And then he shut the door. Didn't say nothing. Just shut it. I stood on that porch twenty minutes. Nobody come back."

Callan closed his eyes.

"You said pray," said Ray Doolin. "On that card. I wrote it down. Please pray for me, I don't know how. And you did, I guess. I prayed too, all the way to Dayton. First time in my life. And I went home like the sign said. And he shut the door in my face." The diesel engine roared and fell away. "So I'm calling to ask you, Preacher. What do I do now? Because I ain't got nobody else to ask."

Callan sat at his desk with the phone against his ear. He looked at the whiteboard on the wall, with its column of numbers. He looked at the closed Bible beside his elbow.

He knew what pastors said to men like Ray Doolin. Give it time. God's timing isn't our timing. Keep praying. Keep knocking. All of it was true. All of it was in the Book. He had said it a hundred times to a hundred people.

He could not make himself say it to this man.

"I don't know, Ray," he said finally. "I'm sorry. I don't know."

There was a long silence on the line, full of road noise.

"Well," said Ray Doolin at last, quietly. "Least you're honest."

And he hung up.

On Wednesday evening, there was music in the sanctuary.

He heard it from his office at seven o'clock. There was no choir practice. Hollis had not come in. There was no one in the building but him. But someone was playing the old Steinway grand at the front of the sanctuary. They were playing slowly, haltingly, stopping and starting again, the way someone plays when their fingers have forgotten something their heart still remembers.

He knew the hymn before he reached the door.

When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll...

He stood at the back of the sanctuary in the shadows. A woman in a gray coat sat at the piano with her back to him, under the single light that was left on over the platform. She played two lines, stopped, sat with her hands in her lap, and started again. She stumbled on the same chord three times. The fourth time she got it.

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

She stopped. Her shoulders were shaking.

Callan walked slowly down the aisle. She heard him coming and turned. It was Delphine Ransom.

He had not seen her inside this building in nine years. He had called on her four times after Hope's funeral. She had sent him away three times, politely, at the door. The fourth time she had not answered the door at all. For twenty years before that, she had played this piano every Sunday morning. She had played it at his installation service. She had played it at Curtis's funeral, with her face like stone, because she said Curtis would have wanted her to.

"Pastor," she said. She wiped her eyes quickly. "I'm sorry. The side door was unlocked. I didn't think anyone was here."

"It's all right. It's your piano. It always was."

She looked down at the keys. "Mine's out of tune," she said. "Nine years. I opened it on Monday and it sounded like a dying cat." She almost laughed. "I wanted to hear it right. Just once. That's all."

He sat down in the front pew. For a while neither of them said anything.

"Something happened," Dell said finally. She did not look at him. "I can't tell you what. Not yet. Somebody called me. About Hope. About the night she died." Her hands tightened in her lap. "I've been thinking about it for three days. And I've been thinking about that billboard. And I've been thinking ..." She stopped. Then she turned on the piano bench and looked straight at him. "Pastor, can I ask you something? And will you tell me the truth?"

"I'll try."

"Do you believe it? What you preach. Do you really believe God hears us? That He answers? That He knows what we did and still wants us to come home?" Her voice was very quiet. "Not what you're supposed to say. What you really believe. Right now. Tonight."

Callan Whitlock looked at the woman on the piano bench. He thought about the answer he was supposed to give. He had given it a thousand times. It was ready in his mouth, smooth and warm and true. Of course I believe it, Dell. God loves you. He has never stopped loving you.

He thought about Hollis on the floor of the choir room. He thought about Elowen's unfinished note. He thought about eleven seconds of silence in a full sanctuary.

"I don't know," he said.

The words came out of him like a stone. He heard them fall into the empty room.

"I used to," he said. "I want to. But I don't know anymore, Dell. I'm sorry. That's the truth."

She looked at him for a long time. He braced himself for anger, or contempt, or the polite closed face she had given him at her door nine years ago.

Instead, slowly, her face softened.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For not lying to me. Everybody lies to me about God. They've been lying to me for nine years. They say everything happens for a reason, and He never gives us more than we can handle, and she's in a better place. I hate them for it." She closed the lid of the piano gently. "You're the first person who's told me the truth."

She stood up and buttoned her coat. At the end of the pew she stopped and looked down at him.

"I don't know either, Pastor," she said. "Not yet. But I think I'd like to find out. Maybe we could find out together."

She went up the aisle and out the side door. He heard her car start in the lot and pull away.

He sat alone in the front pew, under the one light, for a long time.

> "Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious?" — Psalm 77:7–9 (KJV)

He drove out to Ridgeline Road at ten o'clock that night.

He did not plan it. He got in his car to go home to the empty house. At the end of Main Street, instead of turning left toward his own neighborhood, he turned right. He drove four miles out of town into the dark farm country, past fields of cut corn silver under the moon. He turned into a long gravel drive

beside a mailbox with THORNEFIELD painted on it in faded gold script. It was the most beautiful lettering on any mailbox he had ever seen.

The farmhouse was dark except for the kitchen window and the porch light. Out behind the house, a light was burning in the barn.

He sat in the car with the engine running for five minutes. He almost left. Twice he put his hand on the gearshift.

Then he turned off the engine, got out, walked up the steps, and knocked.

He waited a long time. He heard slow footsteps inside, and a chain, and a bolt. The door opened. A gaunt old man stood there in a flannel shirt with paint on his hands. His gray eyes looked out at Callan from under white eyebrows, with no surprise in them at all.

"Pastor Whitlock," said Zeke Thornefield. "I wondered when you'd come."

Callan stood on the porch with his hands in his coat pockets. He had rehearsed what he would say all the way out from town. He had a speech. It was about the billboard, and the crowds, and the traffic, and Blaine Harker, and the need for discernment. It was reasonable and pastoral and measured.

He opened his mouth, and none of it came out.

"I need to know how you did it," he said instead.

Zeke tilted his head. "Did what?"

"Found Him again." Callan's voice cracked. "You walked away. Fifteen years. Everybody in town knows. And now you've got the whole country looking at His face. People are coming to my church on their knees. People I couldn't reach in twelve years of trying. And I stood up there on Sunday in front of two hundred people with nothing to say. Nothing." He was shaking. "I've lost Him, Mr. Thornefield. Somewhere along the way, I lost Him, and I don't know where. And you found Him. So I need to know how."

The old man looked at him for a long moment.

Then he stepped back and opened the door wider.

"I didn't find Him, Pastor," he said gently. "I just quit running long enough for Him to catch up." He nodded toward the kitchen, where a light was burning. "Come on in. The coffee's terrible, but it's hot. And I've got something out in the barn you ought to see."

Callan Whitlock stepped across the threshold.

> "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." — Lamentations 3:22–23 (KJV)

End of Chapter 8

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 9

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 9: The Second Message

> "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" — Mark 8:36–37 (KJV)

Pastor Callan Whitlock stood in the barn at eleven o'clock at night and looked at the empty hands of Christ.

Zeke had pulled the drop cloth away without a word and stepped back, and now the two men stood side by side in the yellow light of the single bulb. Neither of them said anything for a long time. The painting leaned against the back wall where Zeke had moved it, six feet tall, the open arms reaching out toward them. Above the arms was the face. It was the same face that hung on the hill above the interstate, but smaller and closer, and somehow more terrible for being close.

"It's the same," Callan said at last. His voice was hushed, the way people speak in a hospital room. "The one on the billboard. You copied it from this."

"Square by square."

"How long did this take you?"

"Thirty years," said Zeke. "Give or take."

Callan looked at the hands. The penciled outlines on the bare gesso. The two small circles in the palms.

"You never finished them."

"No."

"Why not?"

Zeke did not answer right away. He went to the workbench and poured two cups of coffee from a thermos and handed one to Callan. Then he sat down heavily on the overturned bucket.

"Because there's something I haven't told," he said. "To anybody. Not to God, not out loud. Not even to my wife, and she's been dead fifteen years." He looked down into his cup. "I keep thinking I'll be ready. I sit out here every night with a brush in my hand. And every night I get about an inch from the canvas, and I can't." He shook his head slowly. "A man can't paint the nail prints, Pastor, with his own hands that dirty. Not while he's still hiding what they did."

Callan sat down on an upturned crate across from him.

"I'm not going to ask you what it is," he said.

"I know. That's why I showed you."

They sat for a while without talking. Outside, the wind moved through the bare trees along the fence line.

"Blaine Harker offered my church fifty thousand dollars," Callan said finally. He did not know why he said it. "To stand on his stage. Fifty thousand. We're thirty-eight thousand in the hole. The district wants to close us by June."

Zeke grunted. "Sterling Blackmere offered me five hundred thousand to take it down. Left a check on my porch rail."

Callan stared at him. "What did you do?"

"Burned it." Zeke nodded toward the yard. "In the barrel."

Callan laughed. It was the first time he had laughed in weeks, and it surprised him. It came out cracked and rusty, but it was real. "Everybody's got a price, apparently," he said. "Fifty thousand for a preacher. Five hundred for a sign painter. I guess we know what we're worth."

Zeke did not laugh. He was looking at the painting with a strange expression.

"Say that again," he said.

"What?"

"Everybody's got a price." Zeke set his cup down. He stood up slowly, his knees cracking, and went to the canvas and stood in front of it with his hands at his sides. "Sterling said that to me. Standing in my yard. Every man has a price, Ezekiel." He was quiet for a moment. "And I keep thinking about Hollis Fenwick, and that Doolin fellow, and the chief, and that girl at the diner. All of them paying and paying, every day, for something they won't put down. And none of them knows what it's costing."

He turned around.

"It's been seven days," he said. "The Lord made the whole world in seven. It's time for a new one."

> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it." — Matthew 13:45–46 (KJV)

He broke his own rule.

He knew it the moment he chalked it out on the three white panels laid across the barn floor. He counted the words twice, the way his first boss had taught him. Eight. One too many. Seven words, Thornefield. Never more than seven.

He stood looking down at it for a long time with the chalk in his hand. He tried to find a word to cut. He could not. Every word was carrying weight. Take one out and the whole thing fell down.

"Some questions need the extra word," he said out loud, to nobody. Then he picked up his two-inch flat brush and the can of deep red enamel and knelt down on the plywood.

They hung the new panels at two in the morning on Monday. This time there were more of them. Silas ran the lift, as before. Bud Tackett parked his co-op bucket truck on the shoulder with its amber lights flashing, so that anybody coming up the grade would think it was a utility crew. Two of Bud's linemen, big quiet men who went to the Church of Christ in Sabina, stood at the foot of the hill with flashlights and thermoses. They did not say much. But they did not leave until the last bolt was in.

Ottilie Mercerfield arrived at five-fifteen, as she did every morning, driven by her neighbor's grandson in his pickup. She settled into her lawn chair at the top of the hill with her blanket and her thermos. Only then did she look up and squint through her cataracts at the bottom of the board, where the red letters had changed.

She read them slowly, moving her lips. Then she bowed her head.

"Oh, Lord," she whispered. "Oh, Lord, they're going to feel this one."

WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL? — JESUS

> "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: (For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever:)" — Psalm 49:7–8 (KJV)

By noon on Monday, the Crossroads Diner was a battlefield.

Not a violent one. Nobody threw anything, though Waverly said afterward that it had been a near thing with the coffee. But the whole room was arguing. Every booth and every stool, farmers and truckers and pilgrims and reporters, all of them talking at once about eight red words on a hill.

"It's a threat, is what it is," said a heavyset man in a Bengals jacket at the counter, loud enough for the whole room to hear. "First week it's I know what you did. Now it's what would you give. Next week what? Pay up or burn? Who does this guy think he is? This is extortion with a Bible verse on it."

"It is a Bible verse," said Waverly, refilling his cup harder than necessary. "Mark eight. Look it up, Gary."

"I don't care if it's the Gettysburg Address. Some old man's sitting out there deciding what the whole town needs to feel guilty about this week. Who made him God?"

"Nobody," said a quiet voice from the corner booth.

It was a young woman with a baby on her lap. She was perhaps twenty-two, thin, with dark circles under her eyes. Everyone turned to look at her. She flushed but did not look away.

"Nobody made him God," she said. "He's not saying he is. He's just asking. That's all it is. A question." She shifted the baby to her other knee. "I been using for three years. Meth. I got clean in October because of my daughter. Every morning I drive past that sign on my way to the clinic in Wilmington. Last week it said come home, and I cried in the parking lot. This morning it asked me what I'd give." Her voice shook. "And I knew the answer. I already gave it. I gave the drugs. For her." She looked

down at the baby. "I didn't even know that's what I was doing until I read it. So, no. It's not a threat. Not to me."

The room was quiet.

The man in the Bengals jacket looked down at his coffee. After a while he put a five on the counter and left without finishing it.

In the back booth, under the yellowed photograph of the 1974 state champions, Silas Quenby looked across the table at Zeke.

"Gary Pruett," Silas said quietly. "Owes the bank on two tractors and a combine. Lost his house in the spring. Been gambling at the casino in Lawrenceburg since his wife left. Everybody knows it but him." He took a sip of coffee. "Funny how a question sounds like a threat when you already know your answer and don't like it."

Zeke said nothing. He was watching the young woman with the baby. She had her face pressed into the child's hair, and her shoulders were shaking.

"Eight words," Silas said. "You broke your own rule."

"I know it."

"Your daddy'd have had something to say about that."

"I know it." Zeke looked out the window toward the interstate. "Some questions need the extra word."

Chief Brantley Voss saw it at six-twenty-two.

He had changed his route to work after that first morning. For a week he had taken Route 3 into town, detour and all, rather than drive past it. But the bridge at Harlan Creek had reopened on Friday. That morning he found himself, without quite deciding to, back on the interstate in the left lane with his coffee in the cupholder. He came up the long grade the way he had come up it ten thousand times.

He knew it would be there. He had braced himself for it. He kept both hands on the wheel at ten and two and his eyes on the road.

He saw the words change before he understood them. Red on white. A different shape. Longer.

He read them.

He did not swerve this time. He did not spill his coffee. He drove past at seventy-four miles an hour, steady, his face composed. A mile later he pulled off at the Mercy Ridge exit and into the empty lot of the closed-down Shell station at the bottom of the ramp. He parked behind the boarded-up building where no one could see him from the road, and sat there.

What would you give to save your soul?

He took his wallet out of his back pocket and opened it. Behind his driver's license, where some men keep a photograph of their wife, he had a small square printout. It was grainy and gray, with a white crescent in the middle that looked like nothing at all unless you knew what you were looking at. Kelsey

had mailed it to him in September. On the back, in her handwriting: Hi Grandpa! See you Christmas Eve! ♥

He looked at it for a long time.

He knew what he would give. That was the terrible thing. He had sat in the basement every night for a week with Gideon Kestrel's letter in one hand and that photograph from the envelope in the other. He had worked it out. He had made himself do the arithmetic, the way he had once made himself do the arithmetic on a twenty-year sentence.

He would give his badge. His pension, probably. His name on the Citizen of the Year plaque. Janelle's face across the supper table, the way she looked at him now. His place in the second pew at First Methodist. Kelsey's respect. The chance to hold his granddaughter on Christmas Eve without his daughter knowing what he was.

He would give all of it. If he told the truth, every bit of it would be gone.

And the other side of the scale was twenty years of a man's life. A man who had stopped to help a stranger in the rain. Wesley Arden's wife and his little boy, who had never known who really killed him. And whatever was left of his own soul.

He sat behind the boarded-up Shell station until he was late for his own briefing. Then he put the wallet away and drove to the station.

Rafe Dunning was waiting for him in the hallway outside his office. The young deputy had a cardboard file box in his arms and an uncertain look on his freckled face.

"Morning, Chief. You got a minute?"

"What is it, Rafe?"

"Nothing big. It's just ..." Rafe shifted the box. "You know Marge has had me digitizing the old case files? The ones in the basement, pre-2010? I've been doing a box a day."

"I know."

"Well, I got to the vehicular homicides yesterday. And there's one, that Arden case, twenty years ago, out on 71? The one where the Kestrel guy went to prison." He hesitated. "It's funny. The file's all there. Report, statements, lab results. But the scene photos are missing. The whole envelope. The log says forty-one photographs taken at the scene, signed in by you. But there's nothing in there. Just an empty envelope with your initials on the flap."

The hallway was very quiet.

"Probably misfiled," said Chief Voss. "Twenty years. Things get lost."

"Yes, sir. That's what I figured. I just thought you'd want to know, since you were the arresting officer." Rafe smiled a little. "And with the guy getting out next month and all. In case anybody asks."

"Who'd ask?"

Rafe blinked. "I don't know, sir. Reporters, maybe. There's a lot of them in town."

Voss looked at the young man for a long moment. At his open, honest face. At the box in his arms.

"Leave it on my desk," he said. "I'll take a look."

He went into his office and closed the door. He sat down behind his desk and looked at the box for a long time without opening it.

He knew exactly where those forty-one photographs were. He had burned them in his father's woodstove twenty years ago, one at a time, at three o'clock in the morning.

> "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold." — Proverbs 22:1 (KJV)

Hollis Fenwick saw it on his way to Wilmington.

He had a man to meet in the parking lot behind the Dollar General at seven. He had run out on Saturday. By Monday morning he was sick, sweating and shaking and nauseous, with an ache in his bones like the flu times ten. He had sixty dollars in his pocket and his guitar in the back seat of his Corolla. If the man wanted more than sixty, the guitar was going to be part of the deal. It was a Martin. His grandfather had given it to him when he was fourteen. He had led worship with it for eleven years. He had already decided.

He came over the rise in the right lane and the face was there, as it always was. He had driven past it every day for a week and made himself not look.

He looked.

What would you give to save your soul?

He laughed. It was not a good laugh. It came out of him high and cracked and frightening, and he could not stop it. What would I give? He had already given it. He had given his job, practically. Pastor Whitlock had seen him on the floor of the choir room. He had given his savings, his apartment deposit, and his girlfriend, Abby, who had left in August. He had given his voice, which had once been the best tenor in three counties and was now ragged and thin. He had given his mother's trust and his grandmother's wedding ring, which he had pawned in Dayton in July and told everyone was lost. He was on his way right now to give his grandfather's guitar.

What would you give?

Everything. He would give everything. He already had.

But not to save his soul.

He pulled onto the shoulder half a mile past the billboard, opened the car door, and threw up into the frozen grass. Then he sat on the edge of the seat with his feet in the gravel and his head in his hands, shaking.

When he could move again, he reached into his jacket pocket and took out the orange prescription bottle. There were two pills left in it. He had been saving them for the drive home.

He looked at them for a long time.

Then he threw the bottle as hard as he could, out into the field. He watched it bounce once on the frozen ground and roll into a furrow and disappear.

He sat there for ten minutes. Fifteen. The shaking got worse.

Then he got out of the car and walked out into the field in his sneakers. He got down on his hands and knees in the frozen dirt and started looking for it. He crawled from furrow to furrow, with his hands bleeding from the stubble and the tears freezing on his face, searching for the bottle he had just thrown away.

He did not find it. He searched for forty minutes, and he did not find it.

When he finally gave up and got back in the car, he did not drive to Wilmington. He sat behind the wheel with his bleeding hands in his lap and his grandfather's guitar in the back seat. He did not know where to go.

> "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" — Romans 7:24 (KJV)

Six hundred miles away, in a glass tower on Wacker Drive in Chicago, Juniper Thornefield saw it on a television in a conference room.

She was thirty-four years old, a senior associate at a law firm with ninety-one partners, and she had been in the conference room since seven that morning. She was preparing for a deposition in a securities case that would bill eleven hundred hours before it was over. The television on the wall was tuned to a cable news channel with the sound off, as it always was. Nobody watched it. It was just there, the way a clock is there.

She glanced up at it at eleven-fifteen to rest her eyes.

BILLBOARD JESUS: SECOND MESSAGE STUNS OHIO TOWN, said the banner along the bottom of the screen. Above it, a camera on a helicopter was circling slowly over a stretch of interstate highway. There was a hill, and on the hill a billboard, and on the billboard a face.

Juniper put down her pen.

She knew that face.

She had grown up with that face. It had leaned against the back wall of her father's barn for her entire childhood under a canvas drop cloth. Twice a year, maybe, he would pull back the cloth and work on it a little. She would sit on a sawhorse and watch him. She had been afraid of it when she was very small, the way the eyes followed you around the barn. Later she had loved it. Later still, after her mother died, she had hated it more than anything in the world.

She knew the scar on the bridge of the nose. She knew the sunburn across the cheekbones and the way the beard was darker on the left side. She knew those eyes.

E. Thornefield.

"Juniper? You okay?" One of the paralegals was looking at her across the table. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"I'm fine," Juniper said. "Excuse me a minute."

She went out into the hallway and down to the women's restroom and locked herself in the last stall. She took out her phone. She typed her father's landline number from memory. She had not dialed it in eleven years, and her fingers still knew it.

She sat there with her thumb over the call button for a long time.

Then she put the phone back in her pocket, washed her face, and went back to the conference room. She picked up her pen. She did not look at the television again.

But for the rest of the day, every time she closed her eyes, she saw eight red words on a white panel. They were lettered in a hand she would have known anywhere. The downstrokes were thick and the upstrokes thin, the way her father had taught her mother at the kitchen table when Juniper was still in diapers.

Tamsin read it from the passenger seat of Waverly's Oldsmobile on the way to the diner, at five-forty in the morning.

She had been staying at Waverly's for a week. She had not gone back to her room above Haskell's. Waverly had driven over herself, in broad daylight, and packed up the few things that were left, and paid the rent through December. She told Mr. Haskell that her girl had gone to visit family in Kentucky. Tamsin had not gone outside except to work, and she rode to work and back with Waverly every day. She sat in the kitchen during her breaks. The gray sedan had not come back to the diner. But twice she had seen it on the road behind them, three or four cars back, and once parked across from Waverly's church on Sunday.

She read the new words on the billboard. She did not say anything.

Waverly did not say anything either. But she reached over and squeezed Tamsin's hand.

That night, after the supper shift, they sat at Waverly's kitchen table. Tamsin had the coffee can in her lap. She had not let it out of her sight in a week. She took off the lid and took out the flash drive and turned it over in her fingers.

"Waverly," she said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Course you can, honey."

"If you knew something. Something about some people. Powerful people. Something that could put them in prison. And you had proof." She did not look up. "But if you told, they'd find you. And they'd ... I don't know what they'd do. And the police here, I don't know if I can trust them. I don't know who I can trust. What would you do?"

Waverly was quiet for a long time. She turned her coffee mug slowly on the oilcloth.

"I'd ask myself what I was willing to give," she said finally. "Same as that sign says." She looked at Tamsin across the table. "And then I'd ask myself what it was already costing me to keep quiet. Because, honey, it's costing you. I can see it. It's costing you every night you don't sleep."

> "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." — John 8:32 (KJV)

Waverly's grandson had left an old laptop in the spare room when he went off to Ohio State. At eleven o'clock that night, after Waverly had gone to bed, Tamsin sat on the edge of the spare bed with the laptop on her knees. She plugged in the flash drive with shaking hands.

There was only one file on it. A video. The file name was a date in April, and a time: 11:47 PM.

She had watched it once, seven months ago, in a motel room in Kentucky. She had not been able to watch it since.

She sat looking at the little icon for a long time. Her finger hovered over the trackpad.

She closed the laptop.

Not yet, she told herself. Not yet.

But she did not put the flash drive back in the coffee can. She put it on a chain around her neck, under her shirt, against her skin. It was the first time in seven months she had kept it that close.

Sterling Blackmere did not see it on the billboard. He saw it on his phone, in the back of the Range Rover, at eight-fifteen, in a text from his daughter. It was a photograph and nothing else.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he called his attorneys in Cincinnati and told them that he did not care what it cost. He wanted the remaining Harlow heirs bought out by the end of the week, not the end of the month. He called a man in Columbus who owned a demolition company. Then he called Dashiell Crowe.

"Next week," he said. "Something he'll feel. Do you understand me?"

There was a pause on the line. Just a moment too long.

"Yes, sir," said Dashiell Crowe.

Cecily Blackmere was standing in her father's empty office at that moment. She had driven down from Columbus to see him and found him gone. She stood at the arched window looking south toward the interchange and the far pale rectangle on the hill. Then she turned around and looked at the credenza. At the row of silver frames. At the one at the end, lying face down.

She had not touched it since she was thirteen years old. Her father had shouted at her that day, the only time in her life he ever had.

She picked it up and turned it over.

It was her brother. Preston, at eighteen, in his senior photograph. He was grinning, golden-haired and sunburned, in a white polo shirt. He had their mother's smile. Cecily had been twelve when he went away to the treatment center in Arizona, the autumn after he graduated. Nobody would tell her why. He had died there eleven months later. An overdose, they said. Her father never spoke his name again. Not once in nineteen years. She had stopped saying it herself, after a while, because of the look on her father's face when she did.

She stood in the empty office holding her brother's photograph. On her phone, in her other hand, was the picture of the billboard she had just sent her father.

What would you give to save your soul?

She did not know why the two things felt connected. She only knew that they did. And she knew, with a cold certainty that started in her stomach and spread outward, that her father's fear of an old man's billboard had something to do with the brother whose name nobody said.

She set the frame back on the credenza.

Face up.

> "For ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold ... But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." — 1 Peter 1:18–19 (KJV)

It was two-thirty on Saturday morning when Dashiell Crowe drove out to Mile Marker 52 to do what he had been told to do.

He had a five-gallon can of gasoline in the bed of his truck. He had a road flare and a pair of gloves. His instructions were simple, and they did not include the billboard. They were for the old man's barn, on Ridgeline Road, four miles away. Something he'll feel. The billboard was just on the way. He told himself he was only driving past it to make sure the road was clear. He told himself a lot of things.

He came up the long grade on the northbound side with his headlights on low. At the top of the rise he saw that someone was already there.

There was a car parked on the shoulder below the hill. It was a silver sedan, older, with its hazard lights blinking. Its driver's door stood open and the dome light was on. And at the top of the hill, in the white blaze of the floodlights, a man was on his knees.

Crowe slowed. He pulled onto the shoulder two hundred yards back and turned off his lights and sat watching.

The man was perhaps sixty. He was heavyset, in a long dark overcoat, bareheaded, with thin gray hair that lifted in the wind. He was kneeling in the frozen grass directly beneath the face of Christ, with his head thrown back and his arms open. His mouth was moving. Crowe rolled down his window. The night was so still that he could hear the man's voice carrying down the hill, ragged and broken.

"...I'll tell them. I swear to You I'll tell them. All of it. I should have told them twenty years ago. I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry. Forgive me. Please. Forgive me. I'll tell them everything ..."

Crowe sat with his hands on the wheel.

He had a can of gasoline in the bed of his truck. He had a job to do four miles away. He had a ten-year-old daughter in Dayton whose tuition was due on the first.

He sat there and watched a stranger weep on his knees under a painted face at two-thirty in the morning, begging God to forgive him. Dashiell Crowe found that he could not move.

What would you give to save your soul?

He sat there for twenty minutes. The man did not stop praying.

At two-fifty-one, Crowe started his truck. He did not drive to Ridgeline Road. He turned around in the median and drove south, back toward Cincinnati, with the can of gasoline still sloshing, full, in the truck bed. He did not know what he would tell Mr. Blackmere in the morning. He did not care.

But he would remember, later, when the police asked him, that as he turned around in the median he had looked back once. The man was still kneeling at the top of the hill in the floodlights.

And a second set of headlights was coming slowly up the long grade from the south.

> "But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee." — Luke 12:20 (KJV)

End of Chapter 9

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 10

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 10: The Body Beneath the Billboard

> "And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground." — Genesis 4:10 (KJV)

Ottilie Mercerfield found him at five-nineteen in the morning.

Her neighbor's grandson, a sleepy seventeen-year-old named Tyler Briscoe, had driven her out from town in his pickup the way he did every morning. He grumbled about the hour. He would not have missed it for the world. He pulled onto the shoulder below the hill in the dark, and his headlights swept across a silver sedan parked fifty yards ahead with its hazard lights blinking and its driver's door standing open.

"Somebody broke down," Tyler said.

Ottilie peered through the windshield with her cloudy eyes. "Then go and see if they need help, Tyler. Don't just sit there."

He went. She watched him walk up the shoulder in the glow of his own headlights, a lanky boy in a Carhartt jacket with his hands in his pockets. She watched him reach the silver car and look inside it and then look around. She watched him stop.

He stood very still for a moment, looking down at something in the ditch beside the car. Then he turned around and came back to the truck at a dead run. When he yanked open the door, his face in the dome light was the color of skim milk.

"Miss Ottilie. Miss Ottilie, there's a man. In the ditch. He's not moving. I think he's ... I think he's dead."

Ottilie Mercerfield was seventy-nine years old. She had buried a husband, two brothers, a son, and most of the people she had grown up with. She had sat with the dying in hospital rooms and nursing homes and farmhouse bedrooms for sixty years. She did not scream. She did not faint.

She reached into her handbag, took out the old flip phone her daughter in Columbus had made her carry, and handed it to the boy.

"Call 911, Tyler," she said. "Tell them where we are. Then help me out of this truck."

"Miss Ottilie, you shouldn't—"

"Somebody ought to be with him," she said. "Nobody ought to be alone like that. Help me down."

He helped her down. She made her slow way up the shoulder on her cane in the dark, with Tyler holding her elbow and the 911 operator talking in his other ear. When she reached the ditch, she lowered herself onto her old knees in the frozen grass beside the man who lay there. He was on his back with his arms flung out and his eyes open to the sky. Above them both, on its hill, in the white blaze of the floodlights, the face of Christ looked down the empty northbound lanes.

Ottilie took the dead man's cold hand in both of hers.

"Lord," she said, "I don't know who this is. But You do. Receive him."

And she stayed there, kneeling, holding his hand, until the sirens came.

Tyler Briscoe stood on the shoulder behind her with the phone pressed to his ear and tears running down his face. He was too scared to come any closer and too ashamed to go back to the truck. Years later, when he was a youth pastor in Kentucky with children of his own, he would tell this story to every group of teenagers he ever taught. He would tell them about the cold and the dark, and the dead man, and the face on the hill. Mostly he would tell them about a tiny old woman on her knees in a frozen ditch, holding a stranger's hand so that he would not be alone.

That's what it looks like, he would tell them. That's what Jesus looks like. I saw it.

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." — Psalm 116:15 (KJV)

Chief Brantley Voss got the call at five-thirty-one. He was there at five-forty-four.

Rafe Dunning was already on scene, his cruiser parked across the shoulder with its light bar strobing blue and red over the frozen fields. Two county deputies were stringing yellow tape from the guardrail to a fence post. An ambulance sat idling with its back doors open and two paramedics standing beside it with their hands in their pockets. They were in no hurry. There was nothing for them to do.

Voss got out of the Tahoe and walked up the shoulder.

He did not need anyone to tell him where the body was. He knew before he saw it. He knew from the angle of the cruiser and the line of the tape, and from where the paramedics were standing. He knew it the way you know a song from the first two notes.

The man was lying in the ditch beside the shoulder, on his back, with his arms flung out. He was forty yards south of the billboard's near column. He lay on the same stretch of gravel and frozen grass where, twenty years ago almost to the month, Wesley Arden had lain in the rain with his eyes open.

Not near it. Not close to it. The same place.

Voss stopped walking.

For a moment the floodlights and the strobes and the frozen fields went away. It was raining, and there was a tan Buick with its hazards blinking, and a young man with long hair kneeling in the gravel doing chest compressions with bloody hands. And somewhere above him, forty feet up, a man in a yellow slicker was standing on the catwalk.

"Chief?"

Rafe was at his elbow. Voss blinked, and it was November again, and cold, and nearly dawn.

"Chief, you okay?"

"Fine." His voice came out rough. He cleared his throat. "What do we have?"

Rafe flipped open his notebook. His hands were shaking slightly, Voss noticed. The boy had worked a dozen fatal accidents in fourteen months, but never a body like this. Never one that had just been lying there in the dark under that face.

"White male, sixty to sixty-five. No obvious trauma that I can see, but I didn't move him. Paramedics called it at five-thirty-eight. He's cold, sir. Real cold. Been here a few hours, I'd say." Rafe pointed. "Silver 2009 Buick LaCrosse, Ohio plates, registered to a Walter J. Briggs, Grove City. Keys in the ignition, battery's dead from the hazards running all night. Wallet's in his back pocket. Driver's license matches. Walter James Briggs, age sixty-three."

The name meant nothing to Voss. He was almost dizzy with relief at how little it meant.

"Who found him?"

Rafe nodded toward the ambulance. Ottilie Mercerfield was sitting in the open back of it with a silver emergency blanket around her shoulders. A paramedic was trying to take her blood pressure. She was ignoring him and looking up at the billboard.

"Miss Ottilie. And the Briscoe kid. They come out every morning to pray." Rafe swallowed. "She was holding his hand when I got here, Chief. Kneeling in the ditch. In the dark. I had to help her up."

Voss looked at the old woman for a long moment. Then he looked back at the dead man.

"Call the coroner," he said. "And call Bellamy's for transport."

"Already done, sir." Rafe hesitated. "There's one more thing. Something in his coat. I didn't take it out. I figured you'd want to see it first."

It was a folded square of paper in the inside breast pocket of the dead man's overcoat. Voss put on a pair of nitrile gloves, crouched down in the frozen grass, and drew it out with two fingers. It was a receipt, a thin strip of white thermal paper, the kind every restaurant in America prints out by the million. At the top, in faded purple ink: CROSSROADS DINER — MERCY RIDGE, OH. Below that, a date and a time. Yesterday, 8:52 PM. 1 Coffee. 1 Apple Pie. Total $6.41. Thank You — God Bless!

He turned it over.

On the back, someone had written in pencil, in block capitals:

THE BILLBOARD KNOWS EVERYTHING.

Voss stayed crouched there in the ditch with the receipt between his gloved fingers for a long time.

The letters were large and careful and deliberate. They were not the cramped, hurried scrawl of a man jotting a note to himself. They were capitals. Thick downstrokes. Thin upstrokes.

Like the letters on the billboard.

Not exactly like. He knew that, even as his stomach turned over. The proportions were wrong. The K was clumsy, and the G did not close properly. It was the work of someone trying to letter like a sign painter, not the work of a sign painter. But it was close enough. Close enough that anybody who had spent the last two weeks looking at that billboard would think of only one man.

"Chief?" Rafe was crouching beside him, reading over his shoulder. "Is that ... does that say what I think it says?"

"Bag it," Voss said. He stood up. His knees cracked. "And Rafe. Nobody sees this. Not the county boys, not the press. Nobody. You understand?"

Rafe looked at him. "Yes, sir."

"I mean it. There'll be fifty reporters out here in an hour. If this gets out, it'll be on every channel in the country by noon. Billboard Jesus Death Note. We'll have every nut in America out here."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

But the young deputy was still looking at him in a way Voss did not like. It was not suspicion, not yet. It was something more like puzzlement, the look of a boy who has noticed that a piece does not fit and has not yet figured out why it bothers him.

"Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance." — Psalm 90:8 (KJV)

Thaddeus Bellamy came out himself with the funeral home's van at six-thirty.

He did not have to. He had two young men on staff who could have made the transport. But Thad Bellamy had run Bellamy & Sons Funeral Home on Locust Street for thirty-one years, and his father before him, and his grandfather before that. He had a rule that had come down from his grandfather. Nobody who died alone in Clinton County would be picked up by strangers. If there was no family to stand there, then a Bellamy would.

He was fifty-seven years old, tall and thin and stooped, with a long, gentle, mournful face and enormous hands. He wore a black overcoat and a black wool hat, and he moved slowly and quietly, the way men in his profession learn to move. He was a deacon at the little AME church on the east side of town. Most people in Mercy Ridge did not know that he had also been, for twenty-two years, the deputy coroner's investigator for Clinton County. It was an unpaid position. The county coroner was a family doctor in Wilmington who had a practice to run and did not like driving out to ditches at dawn. So Thad Bellamy did it for him. He looked. He took photographs. He made notes. And he called the coroner when there was something the coroner needed to see.

He knelt down in the ditch beside Walter Briggs with his camera and his notebook and spent twenty minutes there without saying a word.

Voss watched him from the shoulder. He did not like the way Thad was taking his time.

"Well?" he said finally. "Heart attack? Exposure? Man his age, out in the cold all night on his knees. It was nineteen degrees at three a.m."

Thad Bellamy did not answer right away. He was looking at the dead man's shoes. Black leather lace-ups, good ones, resoled more than once. He touched the heel of the left shoe with one long gloved finger.

"Could be," he said at last. "Could be his heart. He's the right age and the right build. Coroner'll know more after he's seen him." He stood up slowly. "But there's a couple of things I'd want him to look at."

"Like what?"

Thad pointed up the hill. "Miss Ottilie says she's seen people kneeling up there every morning. Right under the sign, at the top. That's where they go. Where the light is." He pointed down at the dead man. "He's not at the top. He's down here. Forty yards down the hill and across the shoulder, in the ditch."

"So he got up and walked down to his car and his heart gave out before he got there."

"Could be." Thad crouched down again and pointed to the dead man's trouser legs. "Except look at his knees. Wet through, and grass stains. Fresh ones. He was kneeling, that's for sure. Kneeling a long time." He moved his finger down to the shoes. "Now look at his heels. Both of them. See that? Scuffed. Fresh. Gravel ground into the leather. And the back of his coat, here, along the hem. Same thing."

Voss looked. He did not want to look. He looked.

"A man walks down a hill," Thad Bellamy said quietly, "he scuffs his toes. Not his heels. Not the back of his coat." He stood up and looked at Voss with his long, sad, gentle face. "Seems to me this man didn't walk down that hill, Chief. Seems to me somebody carried him. Or dragged him."

The wind moved across the frozen field. Up on the hill, the floodlights hummed.

"That's a lot to read into a pair of shoes, Thad," Voss said.

"It is," Thad agreed. "That's why I'd like the coroner to see it. And I'd like a state investigator out here before he's moved, if it's all the same to you."

"It's not all the same to me." Voss heard his own voice go hard. "This is my jurisdiction. An old man with a bad heart died on the side of the highway. We don't need the state. We don't need a circus. Bag him and take him to Wilmington. Let the coroner do his job."

Thad Bellamy looked at him for a long moment.

"Yes, Chief," he said. "I'll take him to the coroner."

He turned away. But Voss saw him glance at Rafe Dunning as he went, and saw Rafe glance back. And he saw something pass between the funeral director and the young deputy that he did not like at all.

> "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." — Ecclesiastes 12:14 (KJV)

By nine o'clock there were forty reporters on the shoulder of Interstate 71. By ten, the state highway patrol had closed the right lane for a mile in each direction because the news vans were causing accidents.

BILLBOARD JESUS: MAN FOUND DEAD BENEATH SIGN.

It was on every channel. The helicopters circled the hill. Somebody's drone footage of the body under its white sheet, with the face on the billboard looking down, was on every website in America by noon. Blaine Harker went on the air from Houston at eleven and declared that the death was "a sign and a wonder." He said the man had been "called home in the very shadow of the Savior's face." He announced that the Saturday after Thanksgiving would now be a memorial revival, and that commemorative T-shirts were available.

Voss spent the morning in his office with the door shut and the phone ringing, answering none of it.

Rafe had searched the silver Buick and brought him the inventory on a legal pad. A suitcase in the trunk with three days of clothes. A motel receipt from the Budget Inn in Wilmington, two nights. A King James Bible on the passenger seat with a cracked leather cover and a church bulletin from a Baptist church in Grove City tucked inside. A bottle of nitroglycerin tablets prescribed to Walter J. Briggs, half empty.

And, folded in the Bible, a computer printout of driving directions from the Budget Inn in Wilmington to an address in Clinton County. Eleven miles. Twenty-two minutes. Destination: Ridgeline Road.

Voss did not need to look at the house number. He knew whose mailbox it was.

He was sitting at his desk with the printout in front of him when Rafe knocked and came in without waiting to be told.

"Chief. Sorry. You need to see this." The young deputy laid a sheet of paper on the desk. It was a printout from the state's motor vehicle database. "Walter Briggs. I ran him for priors. Nothing. Clean as a whistle. But I ran his business history too, because of the Grove City address. He owned a company. Closed it in 2015 when he retired." Rafe tapped the page. "Briggs Recovery and Towing. Columbus. Twenty-four-hour flatbed service."

The room was very quiet.

Voss did not look up from the printout. He did not trust his face.

He saw it again. One-fifteen in the morning, in the rain. A flatbed wrecker from Columbus that nobody had called, with two men in dark coveralls. The BMW chained down. The taillights disappearing north into the dark.

He had never known their names. He had never let himself wonder.

"Lot of towing companies in Columbus," he heard himself say.

"Yes, sir." Rafe hesitated. "It's just ... his wallet, Chief. When I inventoried it. There was an old business card in the back, behind the photographs of his grandkids. One of his own cards, from the company. Real old, yellowed. And on the back somebody had written a date. Twenty years ago. October. And Mile 52." He paused. "The same date as the Arden case. The one with the missing photographs."

Brantley Voss sat very still behind his desk.

"I'm not saying it means anything," Rafe said quickly. "It's probably a coincidence. But I thought you'd want to know, since you worked that case. And with the note, and him being right there at the same place, and all ..." He trailed off. "Chief? You want me to look into it?"

"No," said Voss.

Rafe blinked.

"I'll handle it." Voss stood up. He picked up the driving directions and folded them and put them in his breast pocket. "You write it up as an unattended death pending autopsy. Probable cardiac event. That's all. Nothing about the note. Nothing about the card. Not until the coroner rules. Understood?"

There was a long silence.

"Yes, sir," said Rafe Dunning at last.

He went out. He closed the door very quietly behind him.

Voss stood alone in his office and listened to the young man's footsteps going away down the hall. He knew he had just made a mistake. He did not know yet how big a one.

"It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." — Hebrews 9:27 (KJV)

At the Crossroads Diner, the television over the pie case was showing the drone footage for the ninth time that morning. There was the hill, and the face, and the white sheet in the ditch. Then, for the first time, a photograph came up in the corner of the screen. It was a driver's license picture of a heavyset, gray-haired man with tired eyes and a shy, uncertain half smile.

VICTIM IDENTIFIED: WALTER BRIGGS, 63, GROVE CITY.

Tamsin Vale dropped the coffee pot.

It hit the floor behind the counter and burst. Hot coffee and glass went everywhere. Every head in the diner turned. Waverly came around the end of the counter at a run, and found the girl standing in the middle of the mess with her hands pressed over her mouth, staring up at the television.

"Honey? Honey, are you burned? Tamsin?"

"I served him," Tamsin whispered. "Last night. He was in my section. Booth six."

Waverly looked up at the screen. Then she took Tamsin by the arm and steered her through the swinging door into the kitchen, away from the eyes.

"He sat there an hour," Tamsin said. She was shaking. "Just coffee and pie. He kept looking out the window at the highway. He asked me if I knew who painted the sign. I said no. He asked you too. I heard him." She swallowed. "And then, when I brought his check, he looked at me. Really looked at me. Like the old man does. Like Zeke does. And he said ..."

She stopped.

"What did he say, honey?"

"He said, You look scared, miss." Tamsin's voice broke. "And I said I was fine. And he said, I've been scared twenty years. Don't you do it that long. It's not worth it. Nothing's worth it." She pressed her hands over her face. "And he left me a ten-dollar tip on a six-dollar check. And he went out to his car. And now he's dead."

Waverly put her arms around her.

"He was going to tell somebody something," Tamsin whispered into the older woman's shoulder. "Wasn't he? That's what everybody's saying. He was going to tell. And now he's dead." She pulled back, and her face was white. "Waverly, that's what they do. To people who are going to tell. That's what they do."

Under her shirt, against her skin, the flash drive on its chain felt as cold as a stone.

The burner phone in his glove box rang at twelve-forty, in the gravel lot behind the county garage.

"Who was he?" said the voice on the other end. No greeting. It was very calm.

"Walter Briggs," said Voss. "Grove City. He used to own a towing company."

There was a silence on the line. It went on for a long time.

"I see," said the voice at last.

"Did you know?" Voss said. "Did you know he was coming?"

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

"He was down here three days. Staying in Wilmington. He ate at the Crossroads last night. He had directions to Zeke Thornefield's house in his Bible. He was on his knees under that billboard half the night. Thad Bellamy says his trousers were soaked through at the knees. Whatever he came down here to say, he never got to say it. And now he's dead in the same ditch where—" Voss stopped. He was breathing hard. "Did you know?"

"What I know," said the voice, very quietly, "is that a sixty-three-year-old man with a bad heart and a prescription for nitroglycerin went out in nineteen-degree weather in the middle of the night and knelt on frozen ground for an hour. And his heart gave out. It's a tragedy. A sad, simple tragedy. And the sooner it's ruled that way and closed, the better for everyone. Including you."

"There's a note in his pocket. The billboard knows everything."

Another silence.

"Then I would think," said Sterling Blackmere slowly, "that the person you'd want to talk to is the man who owns the billboard. Wouldn't you?"

The line went dead.

He drove out to Ridgeline Road at two o'clock in the afternoon.

Zeke Thornefield was standing in the yard when the Tahoe came up the drive, as though he had been waiting. He had. Waverly had called him at eight. Silas had called at nine. Pastor Whitlock had called at ten and offered to come out, and Zeke had told him not to. He had known since the first call that the chief would come.

Voss got out of the car and stood by the open door. The two men looked at each other across the frozen yard.

"You know a man named Walter Briggs?" Voss said.

"No."

"He knew you. He had your address in his Bible. He was coming to see you." Voss took the folded driving directions out of his breast pocket and held them up. "He asked about you at the diner last night. Asked Waverly where he could find the man who painted the sign. She didn't tell him. He sat

there an hour and drank coffee and stared out the window at the interstate. Then he left. Six hours later he was dead under your billboard. With this in his pocket."

He took out a photocopy of the receipt and walked across the yard and held it out.

Zeke took it. He looked at the front. He turned it over. He read the four words on the back for a long time.

"That's not my hand," he said finally.

"It looks like your hand."

"It looks like somebody wanted it to look like my hand. That's not the same thing." Zeke held it up. "Look at the K, Brantley. The leg comes out of the wrong place. And the G's open. No sign painter alive would close a G like that. That's somebody who's been looking at my billboard for two weeks and trying to copy it." He handed it back. "Badly."

Voss took it. He folded it up and put it in his pocket.

"He was a tow truck driver," he said. "Twenty years ago. Out of Columbus. Had a flatbed." He watched Zeke's face. "You remember any flatbeds, Zeke? Twenty years ago? In October?"

Zeke Thornefield did not answer.

The wind came across the field and rattled the dead stalks of Hannah's roses. Somewhere out on Ridgeline Road a truck went by.

"He was on his knees up there last night," Voss said. His voice had gone low and rough. "An hour, maybe more. Praying. A man doesn't kneel on frozen ground at two in the morning unless he's got something heavy to put down. And now he's dead. And you put that thing up there." He jerked his head south, toward the interstate. "You started all this. You and your sign. You know that? Twenty years nobody said a word. Twenty years, it was over. And then you went and painted that face and those words, and now a man is dead."

Zeke looked at him for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet.

"No, Brantley," he said. "I didn't start it."

He took a step closer. The two old men stood face to face in the frozen yard, close enough to see each other's breath.

"You did," Zeke Thornefield said. "Twenty years ago. On that shoulder. In the rain. When you took me by the arm and told me I was never there."

It was the first time either of them had said it out loud. In twenty years. To anyone.

The words hung between them in the cold air like smoke.

Brantley Voss's face did not move. But something behind his eyes broke loose and slid, the way a shelf of snow slides off a roof. For a moment he looked very old, and very tired, and very afraid.

"And I went," Zeke said. "God forgive me. I went. And I've been sorry every day since." His voice cracked. "I'm not going to pretend I'm any better than you. I'm not. I kept your secret twenty years and called it minding my own business. That man in the ditch didn't die because of a billboard, Brantley. He died because of what happened on that shoulder. And you know it. And so do I."

Voss stood there for a long moment.

Then he turned without a word and walked back to the Tahoe and got in and drove away.

Zeke stood in the yard and watched the car go down the drive and turn onto Ridgeline Road. His hands were shaking. His heart was doing its complicated thing. He pressed one hand flat against his chest, over Hannah's letter.

"I said it, Lord," he whispered. "Out loud. To him." He closed his eyes. "That's a start, isn't it?"

> "So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are: for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it."
> — Numbers 35:33 (KJV)

At seven o'clock that evening, in the preparation room in the basement of Bellamy & Sons Funeral Home on Locust Street, Thaddeus Bellamy was doing what his grandfather had taught him to do. He went through a dead man's clothing one last time before it was sealed in a bag for the coroner.

He did it slowly and carefully, the way he did everything. Pockets. Cuffs. Collar. Lining.

In the lining of Walter Briggs's overcoat, along the bottom hem on the left side, his long fingers found something stiff. Someone had opened the lining seam and sewn it closed again, by hand, with black thread that did not quite match.

Thad picked the stitches open with a seam ripper. He drew out a small, flat, folded piece of paper sealed inside a plastic sandwich bag.

It was a tow ticket. An old one, the multi-part carbon kind that nobody used anymore, gone yellow and soft with age. BRIGGS RECOVERY & TOWING — COLUMBUS, OHIO — 24 HR. At the top was a date. Twenty years ago. October. A time: 1:15 AM. Location: I-71 NB, MM 52. Vehicle: BMW 750i, Black. There was a license plate number and a VIN. There was a destination address in Columbus that Thad did not recognize.

And at the bottom, on the line marked BILLED TO, there was a name. The carbon had smeared, and water had gotten into the bag at some point, and most of it had bled away into a purple blur. Only the last few letters were legible.

...ckmere.

Thad Bellamy stood under the fluorescent lights for a long time with the tow ticket in his gloved hand.

Then he took off his gloves and went upstairs to his office. He took out his cell phone and found a number he had saved that morning on the shoulder of the interstate.

It was not the chief of police.

"Deputy Dunning?" he said, when the young man answered. "It's Thad Bellamy. I'm sorry to call you at home. But I've found something. And I don't think it ought to go to the chief." He paused. "I think you'd better come down here. Tonight. And I think you'd better come alone."

> "For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad." — Mark 4:22 (KJV)

End of Chapter 10

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 11

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

PART THREE: WHEN DARKNESS FIGHTS THE LIGHT

As the truth begins emerging, powerful enemies become determined to silence the message.

Chapter 11: The Photograph from Twenty Years Ago

> "Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness." — Exodus 23:1 (KJV)

Maribel Sloane had come to Mercy Ridge to write about a con.

She knew what one looked like. She had spent sixteen years at Harbinger, a national magazine that still paid for long-form journalism. In those years she had written about eleven of them. A faith healer in Tulsa who planted his own "healed" cripples in the front row. A prosperity preacher in Phoenix with two Gulfstreams and a ministry that had not given a dollar to charity in nine years. And a megachurch in Atlanta. She did not like to think about the megachurch in Atlanta. The children in that story were grown now, and some of them still wrote to her. The pastor was serving fourteen years in a federal prison. She had a framed copy of his sentencing order on the wall of her apartment in Washington. She had put it there because she did not want to forget what religion looked like when it was hiding something.

She was forty-one. She was small and sharp-featured, with short dark hair going gray at the temples and reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She had a voice that could stay perfectly pleasant while it took you apart. She had been raised Catholic in Baltimore. She had stopped going to Mass at seventeen, the year her parish priest was quietly transferred to a parish in New Mexico. She had stopped believing in God at about the same time. She did not miss Him. Mostly she did not think about Him at all, except as a brand name that other people used to sell things.

Her editor had sent her to Ohio with a one-line assignment: The business of Billboard Jesus. Follow the money.

She had started with Blaine Harker, because that was where the money obviously was. She had found it within forty-eight hours. The T-shirts were sold through an LLC registered in Delaware. Its sole member was a holding company in Nevada. Its sole member was Blaine Harker's brother-in-law. Eleven thousand shirts sold in nine days. Twenty-nine ninety-nine each, cost of goods three-forty. None of it went to the man who had painted the billboard. None of it went to the town. She had the documents in a folder on her laptop, and she had the first four thousand words of the story drafted. It was going to be a good one.

Then a man named Walter Briggs died in a ditch under the face of Jesus. The story she had come to write turned into a different story, and Maribel Sloane began to be afraid.

> "A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape." — Proverbs 19:5 (KJV)

She went out to the billboard at five-thirty on the morning after the body was found, because that was when the old woman went.

The yellow police tape was gone. The ditch had been raked over. Someone had laid a small bunch of grocery-store carnations in the frozen grass where the dead man had been, with a hand-lettered card tucked into the cellophane: Walter. Jesus knows. At the top of the hill, in the blaze of the floodlights, the old woman was already settled in her lawn chair, with her blanket and her thermos.

Maribel climbed up to her with her notebook in her pocket and her recorder running.

"Mrs. Mercerfield? My name is Maribel Sloane. I'm a writer for Harbinger magazine. I wonder if I could ask you a few questions."

The old woman turned and squinted up at her through clouded eyes. "Well, sit down, honey. You'll get a crick in your neck standing there." She patted the frozen ground beside her chair. When Maribel hesitated, she reached down into a canvas bag at her feet and produced a folded stadium cushion with the Mercy Ridge High School Wildcats on it. "Here. I keep it for company."

Maribel sat. The ground was very cold.

She had done a thousand interviews. She knew how to do them. You started soft and you got harder. You let people talk, and you listened for the place where the story they were telling stopped matching the story underneath it. Every con had that place. It was usually money, sometimes sex, sometimes power. In the end it was always somebody getting something out of somebody else's faith.

She asked Ottilie Mercerfield how long she had been coming out here. Two weeks and three days. She asked who drove her. Tyler Briscoe, her neighbor's grandson, a good boy, waiting in his truck. She asked whether anyone paid her to be here. Ottilie laughed so hard she had to set down her thermos. She asked whether she knew who had painted the billboard. Ottilie said yes, she did, but it wasn't hers to tell, and the man didn't want anything from anybody. She asked whether anyone was making money from it. Ottilie said she understood that a preacher in Texas was selling T-shirts, and she supposed the Lord would deal with him in His own time.

Then Maribel asked about the man in the ditch.

The old woman was quiet for a long time.

"I held his hand," she said finally. "He was cold as ice. Been dead a while. His eyes were open. He was looking right up at Him." She nodded toward the face on the billboard. "I don't know who he was, or what he did, or why he came. But I know he was up here on his knees before he died. And I know whatever he was carrying, he brought it to the right place."

"You think that matters? That he prayed?"

Ottilie turned and looked at her. Her cloudy old eyes were surprisingly sharp.

"You're looking for the con, aren't you, honey," she said gently. It was not a question.

Maribel did not answer.

"I don't blame you. Lord knows there's enough of them. That Texas fella's one." Ottilie took a sip from her thermos. "But you won't find one here. There isn't one. There's just an old man who loved his wife and spent his burial money on a promise. And a lot of people driving by who needed to see a face." She smiled. "Somebody's hiding something out here, I expect. Somebody always is. But it isn't Him, and it isn't Zeke. You keep looking, you'll find who it is."

She turned back to the billboard and closed her eyes and began, quietly, to pray. After a minute, Maribel realized that she had heard her own name in it.

She sat there on the frozen ground for a long time, with her recorder running and her notebook unopened in her lap.

At eight-thirty she went to see the preacher.

She had seen the clip, of course. Everyone had. Local Pastor Slams Billboard Jesus. Eleven seconds of a mild, reasonable-sounding man in a blue sweater, warning against spectacle. She had also seen the other clip, the one some teenager had posted from the balcony. It showed the same man frozen at his own pulpit in front of two hundred people, unable to say a word. Between the two of them, she thought, there had to be a story. A preacher who denounced the billboard on Tuesday and then filled his church with it on Sunday. A man who had found a way to monetize a miracle and was embarrassed about it.

Pastor Callan Whitlock met her in his office. On the wall beside his desk hung a whiteboard with a column of numbers on it, and someone had recently wiped most of them away. Only the top one was left: 412. He offered her coffee. He looked as though he had not slept much. He did not ask what she wanted to know. He simply sat down across from her and waited.

So she asked him straight out.

"Is it a con, Pastor? The billboard. The crowds. Your full church. Is somebody making money off this?"

He considered the question with what seemed to be real care.

"Blaine Harker is," he said. "You probably know that already."

"I do."

"I don't think anybody else is. Not the man who painted it. Not the old women praying under it." He was quiet for a moment. "I said on television that it was spectacle. That it might do more harm than good. I want you to put this in your story, Ms. Sloane. I was wrong."

She had not expected that. She wrote it down.

"Why were you wrong?"

He looked down at his hands on the desk.

"Because I thought I was protecting people from being manipulated," he said. "My father was a tent evangelist. A very good one. He'd make people cry and then take their money. I swore I'd never be like him. And I wasn't. I never manipulated anybody." He looked up at her. "I also never brought anybody to Jesus in twelve years. Not really. I gave them a nice building and a nice sermon and a visitor packet. It took a sign on the side of the highway to show me that." He gave a small, tired smile. "If you're looking for a con in my church, Ms. Sloane, you've found him. It's me. Or it was. I'm trying to quit."

Maribel sat with her pen above her notebook. In sixteen years she had interviewed a great many preachers. She had never heard one say anything like that. Not without a camera running. Not without wanting something.

"Off the record," she said slowly. "Why are you telling me this?"

"On the record," said Callan Whitlock. "Because it's true. And because somebody told me the other night that the truth is the only thing worth giving away." He stood up. "If you want to know who's hiding something in this town, Ms. Sloane, I don't think it's anybody who goes out to that hill to pray. I think it's the people who won't go near it."

She left with her notebook full and her story in pieces. She did not yet know how to put it back together.

The Clinton County Courthouse in Wilmington had a records room in the basement that smelled of mildew and old paper. It had a clerk named Doris who had worked there for thirty-four years and did not like reporters. It took Maribel two hours, a box of pastries from the bakery on Main Street, and a great deal of patience. But by eleven o'clock she was sitting at a metal table under a buzzing fluorescent light with three boxes in front of her.

State of Ohio v. Gideon A. Kestrel.

She had found the case the night before, at two in the morning, in the Budget Inn on Route 68. She had been reading everything she could find online about the stretch of I-71 at Mile Marker 52. Walter Briggs was the second person to die on that shoulder. The first had been a feed-mill worker named Wesley Arden, twenty years ago, struck by a drunk driver while he changed a tire in the rain. The drunk driver was a twenty-five-year-old mechanic named Gideon Kestrel. He had been convicted of

aggravated vehicular homicide and sentenced to twenty years. According to the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction website, he was due to be released in two weeks.

It was probably nothing. A coincidence of geography. But Maribel had not survived sixteen years at Harbinger by ignoring coincidences.

She read the trial transcript straight through. It took three hours. It was short, as felony trials went, barely two days. The defense attorney had been court-appointed, a harried-sounding man with ninety other cases. He had called exactly two witnesses, one of them the defendant. Gideon Kestrel had testified that he had come upon the accident, not caused it. A black car, he said, had come up the shoulder at high speed, struck the man, and gone into the ditch beyond the billboard. He had stopped to help. He had performed CPR. He had told the arresting officer about the black car. The arresting officer had not believed him.

There had been no black car at the scene. The arresting officer said so. The tow logs said so. The paint transfer on the victim's clothing was red, and it matched the defendant's pickup. The defendant's blood alcohol level, two hours after the accident, was .09.

The jury had been out for an hour and forty minutes.

Maribel read the arresting officer's testimony twice. Sergeant Brantley Voss, Mercy Ridge Police Department. It was calm and orderly and professional, the testimony of a man who had done this many times. He described the scene, the victim, the defendant, the smell of alcohol, the damaged bumper. He described the evidence he had collected. On cross-examination, the harried defense attorney asked him only a few questions. One of them was this:

> Q: Sergeant, had you ever met the defendant before that night?
>
> A: No, sir. Never laid eyes on him before in my life.
>
> Q: So you had no prior relationship with him of any kind? No reason to have formed an opinion about him?
>
> A: None whatsoever. He was a stranger to me.

Maribel underlined it twice in her notebook. She did not know why. It was a routine question. It was a routine answer.

She was gathering up her things at three o'clock when Doris the clerk spoke from behind the counter, for the first time in four hours.

"His mother still lives out on Lytle Road," she said, without looking up from her computer. "Past Sabina. Trailer with the blue awning. Name's Ruby." She paused. "She comes in here once a year, on the anniversary. Asks to see the file. Just sits there with it in her lap for an hour, and then she gives it back." Doris looked up at last. Her eyes were red. "Twenty years. Every October. You go see her, you be kind."

> "Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy." — Proverbs 31:8–9 (KJV)

The trailer on Lytle Road was a single-wide with a blue aluminum awning and a ramp built of treated lumber up to the front door. There was a birdfeeder on a pole in the yard. A hand-painted sign beside the door said JESUS LIVES HERE. Under it, smaller, in a different hand: SO DOES RUBY.

Ruby Kestrel was seventy-four years old, tiny and bent, with a halo of wispy white hair and enormous glasses that made her eyes look like an owl's. She opened the door before Maribel could knock. She looked up at her for a long moment, and then she looked past her at the rental car in the drive.

"You're the magazine lady," she said. "From Washington. Doris called me."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry to come without calling ahead."

"Doris called ahead for you." Ruby Kestrel stepped back from the door. "Come in. I'll put on coffee. You'll want to see the book."

The trailer was spotless and very warm and smelled of coffee and Pine-Sol. Every flat surface held a framed photograph of the same young man. There he was as a gap-toothed boy in a Little League uniform. There he was as a lanky teenager with long hair, holding up a catfish. And there he was as a young man in a mechanic's work shirt with a name patch on the pocket, GIDEON, grinning beside a big rig with BLACKMERE FREIGHT lettered in gold on the door.

Maribel stopped in front of that one.

"He loved that job," Ruby said behind her. "First good job he ever had. Started at Blackmere's when he was twenty-two, washing trucks. By the time he was twenty-five he was their best diesel mechanic. Mr. Blackmere's own words." She set two mugs of coffee on the kitchen table. Then she went to a bookshelf in the corner and took down a heavy scrapbook bound in green vinyl. She carried it to the table in both arms, like something alive. "Sit down, honey. I'll show you."

She opened it.

It was Gideon Kestrel's whole life, pasted in with rubber cement on black paper pages. Birth announcement. Report cards. A blue ribbon from the county fair for a 4-H steer. A program from his high school graduation. A newspaper clipping about a car he had restored, a 1968 Camaro, that had won a prize at a show in Dayton.

And then, on a page by itself, under a sheet of yellowed plastic, a clipping from the Wilmington News Journal.

Maribel leaned forward.

The headline said: BLACKMERE FREIGHT UNVEILS 'DRIVE SAFE' BILLBOARD ON I-71. The date was June, twenty years ago. Four months before the night Wesley Arden died.

And there was a photograph.

It had been taken on the hill at Mile Marker 52, in bright summer sunlight. Maribel recognized the slope of the ground and the steel columns at once. Behind the people in the picture rose the billboard, freshly painted. It showed a big green Blackmere truck rolling down a highway beneath a blue sky, and big white letters: DRIVE SAFE, CLINTON COUNTY! — A MESSAGE FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS AT BLACKMERE FREIGHT.

In front of it stood three men.

In the middle was a tall, lean man of about forty in a light suit and sunglasses, silver already starting at his temples, smiling the easy smile of a man who owned most of what he could see. He was shaking hands with a lanky young man in a clean mechanic's shirt with a name patch on the pocket. The young man was grinning so widely that his whole face seemed to be made of it, and he was holding a framed certificate against his chest. On the other side stood a big, thick-necked police officer in a summer uniform with sergeant's stripes on his sleeve. He had one hand on the young man's shoulder, and he was smiling at the camera too.

Maribel read the caption three times.

Sterling Blackmere (center), president of Blackmere Freight, presents the company's Employee Safety Award to diesel mechanic Gideon Kestrel of Sabina, as Sgt. Brantley Voss of the Mercy Ridge Police Department's traffic safety program looks on. The billboard, painted by local artist E. Thornefield, will remind drivers on I-71 to slow down and drive carefully.

She sat very still at Ruby Kestrel's kitchen table.

Had you ever met the defendant before that night?

No, sir. Never laid eyes on him before in my life.

"He was so proud of that," Ruby Kestrel said softly. She touched the edge of the plastic with one bent finger. "Safety award. My boy. Mr. Blackmere shook his hand and told him he had a future at that company. The policeman put his hand on his shoulder and told him he was a credit to the county." Her voice was very steady. "Four months later the same policeman put him in handcuffs. And Mr. Blackmere never came to the trial. Never wrote. Never called. Never once."

Maribel could not speak.

"Gideon wrote him," Ruby went on. "From the jail. Before the trial. Mr. Blackmere, you know me. You know I don't drink and drive. Please help me. He never got an answer." She turned the page carefully. "And he wrote the policeman, every year, for nine years. From Lucasville. Never got an answer to those either."

On the next page was a single sheet of lined commissary paper, pasted in. It was a letter in a careful, cramped hand.

Mama, the chaplain says forgiveness isn't something you feel. It's something you do, over and over, until one day you notice you feel it too. I'm doing it, Mama. Every day. I'm doing it for Mr. Blackmere and the sergeant and the man in the black car, whoever he was. I don't feel it yet. But I'm doing it.

Please try to do it too. I don't want you to carry this. It's too heavy for you. Give it to Jesus. He can carry it. Love, Gideon.

"I'm still trying," Ruby Kestrel said. She closed the scrapbook gently. "Twenty years. I'm still trying. Some days I get close." She looked up at Maribel through her enormous glasses. "He comes home on the fourth. December fourth. I'm going to make him chicken and dumplings. He always loved my chicken and dumplings." She smiled. "You come, honey, if you want. You'll see. He's not what you think. He's not what anybody thinks."

Maribel took a photograph of the clipping with her phone. She took six, from every angle, in the light from the kitchen window. Then she sat back and looked at the photograph on her screen. She enlarged it with two fingers, the way she always did, looking for the thing nobody else had seen.

At the far left edge of the frame, where the newspaper's layout editor had cropped it, there was something. Not a person. Part of one. The edge of a painter's scaffold, a work boot spattered with paint, and a hand. A man's hand, resting on a rung of the scaffold, holding a long-handled brush.

Painted by local artist E. Thornefield.

He had been there. Twenty years ago, in June, on that hill. Cropped out of the picture, but there.

> "The LORD looseth the prisoners: The LORD openeth the eyes of the blind: the LORD raiseth them that are bowed down: the LORD loveth the righteous." — Psalm 146:7–8 (KJV)

The door of her room at the Budget Inn was locked when she got back at eight o'clock that night. The Do Not Disturb sign was still hanging on the knob. Everything looked exactly as she had left it.

But it was not.

She knew it the moment she walked in. She had been doing this a long time. She had learned to leave small things in particular places. A hair across the zipper of her suitcase. Her pen at a precise angle on the nightstand. The corner of her laptop lined up with the edge of the desk.

The hair was gone. The pen had been moved half an inch. The laptop was where she had left it, but when she opened it, the folder on the desktop called KESTREL was gone. So was the folder called HARKER, and the one called BRIGGS. Not just deleted. Gone, scrubbed, as though they had never been there. Someone had known exactly what they were looking for and exactly how to find it.

She stood in the middle of the motel room with her heart pounding. It was the same motel where Walter Briggs had stayed. The same parking lot. Perhaps the same hallway.

Then she reached into her coat pocket and took out her phone. The six photographs of the clipping were there. The scans of the trial transcript were there, uploaded to a cloud server in Virginia that nobody in Clinton County, Ohio, could touch. She had learned that in Atlanta. Always two copies. Always one of them somewhere they can't reach.

She went to the window and moved the curtain one inch with one finger.

Across the parking lot, under a sodium light, a dark gray sedan was parked with its engine running. There was a man behind the wheel. She could not see his face. He was not looking at the motel. He was not looking at anything. He was just sitting there.

Maribel let the curtain fall. She sat down on the edge of the bed. For the first time in sixteen years of writing about cons, she found that her hands were shaking.

This was not a con. Cons did not delete your files and sit in the parking lot. Cons did not leave men dead in ditches.

Somebody in this town was hiding something worth killing for. And she had just found the edge of it, under a sheet of yellowed plastic in a scrapbook in a trailer on Lytle Road.

> "Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." — Amos 5:24 (KJV)

She did not sleep at the Budget Inn that night. She packed everything she owned into her suitcase in eleven minutes. She went out the back door by the ice machine and drove to the only place in the county she knew would be open and full of people at ten o'clock at night.

The Crossroads Diner was half full, even at that hour. There were truckers, pilgrims, and a church van from Indiana whose passengers had come to pray at the billboard after dark. Maribel took the back booth by the window, under the yellowed photograph of a high school football team, with her back to the wall and a clear view of the door. She ordered coffee and did not drink it.

At ten-forty, a young man in jeans and a canvas jacket came in and looked around and walked straight to her booth.

He was perhaps twenty-four, with red hair and a farm boy's freckles. He looked as though he had not slept in two days. He stood at the end of the table with his hands in his jacket pockets.

"Ms. Sloane?"

She looked at him without answering.

"My name's Rafe Dunning. I'm a deputy with the Mercy Ridge Police." He swallowed. "Off duty. I'm not here officially. Nobody knows I'm here." He hesitated. "I read your story about the church in Atlanta. Last year. My mom sent it to me. She said, That's what courage looks like. You didn't back down. Even when they came after you."

Maribel looked at him for a long moment. Then she nodded at the seat across from her.

He sat. He took out his phone, laid it on the table between them face down, and kept his hand on it.

"I can't take what I have to my chief," he said, very quietly. "And I don't know who else in this county I can trust. The sheriff golfs with Mr. Blackmere. The prosecutor's campaign was paid for by Mr. Blackmere. The coroner already ruled the man in the ditch a heart attack this afternoon, without an autopsy, because my chief asked him to." He took a breath. "Somebody told me you've been asking about the Kestrel case. Down at the courthouse. Doris, actually. She's my mom's cousin."

"Small town," said Maribel.

"Yes, ma'am. Real small." He turned his phone over and slid it across the table. "Last night the funeral director found this sewn into the lining of the dead man's coat. Walter Briggs. He gave it to me instead of the chief. I've got the original in a safe-deposit box in Wilmington."

Maribel looked at the photograph on the screen. A yellowed carbon tow ticket. BRIGGS RECOVERY & TOWING. A date twenty years ago, in October. 1:15 AM. I-71 NB, MM 52. BMW 750i, Black. At the bottom, on the line marked BILLED TO, a purple blur, and the last few letters of a name.

...ckmere.

She sat very still.

It was a black car, Gideon Kestrel had told the jury. It came up the shoulder and went into the ditch beyond the billboard.

There was no black car, the arresting officer had said.

Maribel took out her own phone. She opened the photograph of the clipping from Ruby Kestrel's scrapbook and slid it across the table to the young deputy.

He looked at it. He read the caption. He looked at the three men standing in front of the billboard in the June sunlight. The silver-haired businessman. The grinning young mechanic with his safety award. The big police sergeant with his hand on the young man's shoulder.

Maribel watched his freckled face go slowly white.

"That's my chief," Rafe Dunning whispered.

"He testified under oath," said Maribel quietly, "that he had never laid eyes on Gideon Kestrel before the night of the accident. That he was a total stranger." She tapped the screen. "That was taken four months earlier. On the same hill."

The young deputy did not say anything for a long time. He sat with her phone in his hand, looking at the photograph, as the diner clattered and murmured around them. A waitress was refilling coffee at the counter. A trucker was laughing at something. In the kitchen someone dropped a pan.

"What do we do?" he said at last. His voice was very young.

Maribel took her phone back. She looked out the window at the dark parking lot, and the dark highway beyond it, and the faint white glow on the southern horizon where the floodlights burned on the hill.

"We follow it," she said. "All the way down. And we make sure there are always two copies of everything, and one of them is somewhere they can't reach."

Behind the counter, a thin, dark-haired waitress with a name tag that said TAMSIN had stopped refilling a sugar dispenser. She was watching the back booth. She was watching the reporter and the young deputy with their heads together over two phones.

Under her shirt, against her skin, the flash drive on its chain had begun to feel warm.

> "The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment." — Proverbs 12:19 (KJV)

End of Chapter 11

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 12

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 12: The Prisoner Who Came Home

> "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." — Isaiah 61:1 (KJV)

On his last morning in the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility, Gideon Kestrel made his bed.

He did it the way he had done it every morning for twenty years. The sheet pulled tight, the corners folded at forty-five degrees, the thin gray blanket squared off at the foot. Nobody was going to inspect it. In two hours another man would be sleeping in this cell, on this mattress, under this blanket. But Gideon made the bed anyway. The chaplain had told him once that a man's character is what he does when nobody is checking. He had decided a long time ago that he wanted to be the kind of man who made his bed.

He was forty-five years old. He had been twenty-five when he came in. He had been a lanky, long-haired boy with grease under his fingernails and a 1968 Camaro he had rebuilt with his own hands. He had believed, vaguely, in God, the way you believe in the weather.

He was not that boy anymore. His long hair was gone, shaved down to gray stubble. His face was lined. He had a scar through his left eyebrow from his second year, when a man in the yard had decided he did not like the look of him. He had a GED, an associate's degree in business from a correspondence program, and a certificate in diesel engine repair from the prison vocational shop. He had read the Bible straight through eleven times. He had taught three hundred and forty men to read. He had been in a cell for seven thousand, three hundred and four days.

And he had forgiven the men who put him there. Not once. Every day. Some days twice.

The chaplain came for him at eight. The Reverend Amos Tolliver was a heavyset Black man of seventy with a white beard and reading glasses perched on top of his head. He had been the chaplain at Lucasville for thirty-one years, and he had walked hundreds of men out the gate. He stood in the doorway of the cell and looked at the made bed and smiled.

"Well, Brother Kestrel," he said. "You ready?"

"No, sir," said Gideon. "Not even a little."

"Good. The ones who say they're ready are the ones I worry about." The chaplain came in and sat down on the edge of the made bed, rumpling it, and patted the space beside him. "Sit with me a minute. Then we'll go."

They sat side by side in the narrow cell. Through the slit of a window, the December sky was gray and low.

"I've been thinking about what to say to you," Reverend Tolliver said. "Twenty years. That's a long time to have a man in your Bible study." He took off his glasses and polished them on his shirt. "And I keep coming back to Joseph. You remember Joseph?"

"Sold by his brothers. Thrown in prison for something he didn't do."

"And when he got out, and he stood in front of the men who did it to him, he had all the power in Egypt in his hands. He could have done anything. And you remember what he said?"

Gideon did. He had memorized it in his fourth year, on a night when he had wanted to die.

> "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." — Genesis 50:20 (KJV)

"You're going home to a town full of people who think you killed a man," the chaplain said quietly. "And some of the men who know you didn't are still there. Powerful men. Frightened men." He put his glasses back on. "They're going to be afraid of you, Gideon. They're going to think you've come back for revenge. Because that's what they'd do, if they were you."

"I'm not coming back for that."

"I know you're not. That's what's going to scare them most."

They gave him back his property at the release desk in a brown paper sack with his name and number on it in black marker.

A wallet with an Ohio driver's license that had expired nineteen years ago. Eleven dollars. A set of keys to a truck that had been sold at auction to pay his lawyer. A watch that had stopped. A pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a red flannel shirt, folded into a stiff square.

He shook out the flannel shirt. The sleeves were stiff and stained a dark rust brown from the wrists to the elbows. Twenty years had not faded it.

Wesley Arden's blood.

He stood at the release desk holding it for a long time. The corrections officer behind the counter, a young woman who had not been born when he came in, looked away.

"You don't have to keep that," the chaplain said quietly behind him.

"Yes, I do," said Gideon.

He folded it carefully back into its square and put it in the paper sack. He signed the release form. He took the gate money, seventy-five dollars in a sealed envelope. Then he walked down the long corridor and through the first steel door and the second, and out into the gray December air. For the first time in twenty years there was no fence between him and the sky.

> "When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing." — Psalm 126:1–2 (KJV)

His mother was waiting at the end of the walk.

She was so much smaller than he remembered. She was standing beside a rented sedan with both hands gripping an aluminum walker, in her good church coat and a knitted hat. Her enormous glasses were fogged from the cold. A small, dark-haired woman Gideon did not know stood beside her with a hand on her elbow.

For a moment neither of them moved.

Then Ruby Kestrel let go of the walker. It fell over on the pavement with a clatter. She took three steps toward him on her own, and he ran the rest of the way and caught her before she fell.

She was crying. He was crying. She held his face between her two small hands and looked at it, turning it a little in the gray light, like a woman looking at a photograph she had been afraid she would never see again.

"You got old," she said.

"So did you, Mama."

"I've got an excuse. I've been waiting on you." She pressed her forehead against his. "I made chicken and dumplings. They're in the cooler in the trunk. The magazine lady drove me."

Over his mother's head, Gideon looked at the dark-haired woman. She was standing by the car with her arms folded and her eyes very bright.

"Maribel Sloane," she said. "I'm a journalist. I'm writing about your case." She hesitated. "Your mother didn't have a ride. I hope it's all right."

Gideon looked at her for a long moment.

"You're writing about my case," he said slowly.

"Yes."

"Nobody's written about my case in twenty years."

"I know," said Maribel Sloane. "That's why I'm writing about it."

He asked her to take Interstate 71.

It was the long way. From Lucasville to Sabina, the quickest route ran north on Route 23 and then west on the back roads through Chillicothe. Maribel had the map up on her phone. She said so, carefully.

"I know," said Gideon from the back seat, where he sat beside his mother with her hand in both of his. "I know where it is. I want to see it."

Maribel met his eyes in the rearview mirror. Then she nodded and changed the route.

He had seen it on television. Everybody at Lucasville had. Three weeks ago, on a Monday night, Reverend Tolliver had come into the dayroom where two hundred men were watching a football game. He had changed the channel without asking anybody's permission, which nobody else in that building would have dared to do. There it was on the screen, on the national news. A face on a billboard above a highway. Two lines of red words.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

Two hundred men had gone completely silent. Gideon had been sitting in the back row. He had recognized the hill before he recognized the face. He had recognized the shape of the land, the rise of the grade, the steel columns. He had dreamed about that hill every night for twenty years.

And someone had painted the face of Jesus on it.

Now they came up the long grade in the rented sedan in the late afternoon, with the sun going low and red behind the cut cornfields. Gideon leaned forward between the seats. His mother's hand tightened on his.

There it was.

It was bigger than on television. Everything was bigger than on television. The face filled the sky. The eyes looked down the northbound lanes, steady and knowing. Beneath them were eight red words. They had not changed in three weeks. People in town said the old man who painted them had not been able to bring himself to paint another since the night a stranger died beneath them.

WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL? — JESUS

Gideon Kestrel read it. He thought about the twenty years. He thought about the long-haired boy with the Camaro and the safety award. He thought about the seven thousand, three hundred and four nights.

What would you give?

He had given everything. Every single thing he had. And in the bottom of that cell, with nothing left, he had found the one thing that could not be taken away.

Something inside him that had been clenched for twenty years let go.

"Stop the car," he whispered. "Please. Stop the car."

> "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me." — Psalm 142:7 (KJV)

Zeke Thornefield was on the hill when the rented sedan pulled onto the shoulder.

He had come out at four to check the splice on the floodlight feed. Bud Tackett had warned him the cold might crack the insulation. He had finished and was standing at the foot of the near column with his hands in his coat pockets, looking up at the words. Three weeks. He had not painted a new message since the morning Ottilie found Walter Briggs in the ditch. Every night he sat in the barn with the blank panels laid out and the chalk in his hand, and every night the words would not come. He was thinking that a man who could not confess had no business telling strangers what to say to God. He was thinking that he still could not paint the hands.

He heard the car door and turned.

A man was climbing the hill toward him. He was perhaps forty-five, lean and gray, with a shaved head and a scar through one eyebrow. He wore a thin windbreaker that was not warm enough for December, and he moved the way men move when they have not walked on uneven ground in a long time. Halfway up he stopped and stood looking down at the ditch beside the shoulder, at the place where the carnations were. Then he came on.

Zeke knew him before he was close enough to see his face.

He had not seen that face in twenty years except in his sleep. But he knew it. He knew it the way you know a sound you heard once in the dark and never stopped hearing. He had last seen it from forty feet up, through the rain and the floodlights. It had been younger then, with long wet hair plastered to its head, turned up toward the sergeant who was putting him in handcuffs. The mouth had been open. It had been saying But I stopped. I stopped to help him.

The man reached the top of the hill and stopped a few feet away and looked at Zeke. Then he looked up at the billboard. For a long time he did not say anything.

"They told me on the news," he said at last, "an old man painted it. A sign painter. Wouldn't give his name." He turned his head and looked at Zeke's hands, at the paint under the fingernails, and the brush sticking out of his coat pocket. "That's you, isn't it."

Zeke could not speak. He nodded.

The man held out his hand.

"Gideon Kestrel," he said. "I just got out of Lucasville this morning. Twenty years." He was still holding out his hand. "I saw your billboard on TV in the dayroom three weeks ago. Two hundred men in that room, and every one of them went quiet. I've never seen that happen. Not once in twenty years." His voice roughened. "I wanted to say thank you. Whoever you are. For putting Him up here. On this hill. Of all the hills in the world."

Zeke Thornefield looked at the hand held out to him.

It was a working man's hand, rough and scarred, with grease worked deep into the creases of the knuckles that would never come out. It was the hand that had pumped a dying man's chest in the rain. Zeke had watched it from forty feet up while a police sergeant switched the evidence bags on the hood of a cruiser.

He had watched it. And then he had gone home.

He took the hand. He did not know how. His own hand was shaking so badly that Gideon Kestrel noticed and covered it with his other one, gently, the way you would steady an old man.

"You all right, sir?"

"Bad heart," Zeke managed.

"Then you ought to sit down." Gideon guided him a few steps to the old folding lawn chair Ottilie Mercerfield left chained to the fence post, and lowered him into it. He crouched in front of him with a hand on his knee. "Just breathe. Slow. There you go."

Zeke breathed. He looked into the face of the man crouching in front of him. It was a kind face, lined and weathered, with steady gray eyes. There was no bitterness in it at all. That was the worst of it. He had braced for bitterness. He would have known what to do with bitterness.

"Twenty years," Zeke said. His voice cracked. "For something you didn't do."

Gideon looked up at him in mild surprise. "You believe that?"

"I know it."

"Most people don't." Gideon smiled a little. "Most people in this county think I'm the drunk who killed Wesley Arden." He looked down the hill toward the ditch and the carnations. "I don't blame them. The court said I did. The sergeant said I did. Mr. Blackmere never said anything at all." He was quiet for a moment. "There's somebody else who knows, too. Somebody else was here that night. I always thought so. I never knew who."

Zeke went cold all over.

"How do you ..." He could hardly get the words out. "How do you know that?"

"Because I saw a light," said Gideon Kestrel simply. "When I was doing CPR. I looked up for a second. There was a flashlight up there." He pointed at the catwalk, forty feet above them. "On the sign. Somebody was standing up there in the rain, watching. Then the light went off." He shrugged. "I told my lawyer. He said I was confused. Said it was a reflection." He looked up at the catwalk. "I used to lie in my cell and wonder about that person. Who they were. Whether they ever thought about me."

Zeke Thornefield sat in the lawn chair under the face of Jesus. He could not breathe. He could not move. He opened his mouth.

It was me. I was the light. I watched it all, and I went home, and I let you rot.

The words were right there, on his tongue, burning like coals.

They would not come out.

"I forgave them," Gideon said quietly. He was still crouching there with his hand on the old man's knee. "Whoever it was up there. Took me about eleven years. The chaplain helped." He looked up at the face on the billboard. "That's the thing I learned in there, sir. He was there when I was alone. Every night. Every single night. I wasn't alone even one of them." He smiled. "So whoever was up there that

night, I hope they know that. I hope they're not carrying it anymore. It's too heavy. Nobody ought to carry a thing like that."

He stood up. He squeezed Zeke's shoulder.

"You take care of that heart, sir," he said. "And thank you. For Him."

He went down the hill to the rental car. Halfway down he stopped beside the ditch and knelt in the frozen grass beside the carnations, where Wesley Arden had died and Walter Briggs had died. He bowed his head. Zeke could see his lips moving. He stayed there for a long time.

Then he got up and got into the car, and the car drove away north, toward Sabina, toward home.

Zeke Thornefield sat alone in Ottilie Mercerfield's lawn chair under the face of Christ, with the sun going down red behind him. He wept the way he had not wept since the night he found Hannah's letter. He wept with his whole body, with great tearing sobs that frightened the crows out of the hedgerow and sent them wheeling up into the dusk.

"I couldn't," he gasped. "Lord, I couldn't. He was right there. He was right there and I couldn't."

Above him, in the red light, the painted eyes looked down. Beneath them, in letters two feet high that he had lettered with his own hand, was the question he had asked thirty thousand strangers a day for three weeks. He had never once answered it himself.

What would you give to save your soul?

And in his head, over and over, in Gideon Kestrel's quiet voice: He was there when I was alone. Every night. I wasn't alone even one of them.

> "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." — Romans 12:20–21 (KJV)

Sterling Blackmere learned that Gideon Kestrel was home at six-fifteen that evening, from a phone call from the man named Pell.

"He stopped at the billboard," Pell said. "With the reporter and the mother. Spent ten minutes up there with the old man. Thornefield. Talking."

Sterling stood very still at the tall arched window of his office on the fourth floor of the Farmers Exchange Building, looking south into the dark toward the faint white glow on the hill.

"What did they say?"

"Couldn't get close enough to hear. But the old man was crying when Kestrel left. Sobbing. I watched him through the long lens for twenty minutes."

Sterling closed his eyes.

"And Kestrel?"

"Went home to his mother's trailer on Lytle Road. Lights are on. The reporter dropped them off and left. I've got eyes on the place."

"Keep them there. Day and night. I want to know everyone who goes in and everyone who comes out." Sterling paused. "And Pell. The girl. The waitress. I'm out of patience."

"Yes, sir. I'm close. She's with the old woman from the diner. I know where. I'm waiting for the right moment."

"Stop waiting."

He hung up. He stood at the window for a long time. Then he turned around and switched on the lamp and looked at the credenza beneath the window, at the row of silver frames. He had been in and out of this office all week, with his mind on other things. He had not looked at them once.

At the end of the row, one frame stood face up.

He had not left it that way. He had not touched it in nineteen years. The cleaning woman would not dare. Only one person had ever dared.

Sterling Blackmere stood alone in his office and looked at the face of his son. It was golden-haired, sunburned, eighteen years old, grinning at a camera in a white polo shirt. And he understood that his daughter had been here. That she had turned it over. That she was asking questions.

He laid the frame face down again, very gently, the way you would close the eyes of the dead.

His hand was shaking.

Chief Brantley Voss was at his desk at nine-forty the next morning when Marge buzzed him.

"Chief?" Her voice sounded strange. "There's a man out here to see you."

"Who is it?"

There was a pause on the line.

"He says his name is Gideon Kestrel."

Voss sat at his desk with the phone against his ear. He did not move. He did not breathe.

"Chief? You want me to tell him you're busy?"

He should say yes. He should say he was in a meeting, that he was out of the office, that he would call the man back. He should go out the back door to his car. He knew it the way you know that you should not step off a ledge.

"Send him in," he heard himself say.

He stood up when the door opened. He did not know why. Some old instinct, the instinct of a man raised to stand when someone enters a room.

Gideon Kestrel came in and closed the door quietly behind him.

He was not what Voss had expected. Twenty years of nightmares had prepared him for something else. A hulking, tattooed, prison-hardened man with dead eyes and a grudge. Instead, a lean, gray, quiet man in a borrowed winter coat stood just inside the door. His shaved head was bare and his hands hung loose at his sides. He looked older than forty-five. He looked tired. He looked, more than anything, calm.

They looked at each other across the office.

Voss saw the young man in the rain. The long wet hair. The bloody hands. But I stopped. I stopped to help him. He saw the June sunlight and the billboard behind them, and his own hand on the young man's shoulder. A credit to the county.

"Sergeant Voss," Gideon said. Then, correcting himself, gently: "Chief Voss. I'm sorry. Twenty years, I still think of you as Sergeant."

Voss could not speak.

"I'm not going to stay long," Gideon said. "And I didn't come to make trouble. I want you to know that first. I'm not here with a lawyer. I'm not here with a reporter. I'm not here to threaten you or ask you for anything." He paused. "I came because I made a promise. To myself and to God. Eleven years ago, in my cell. I promised that if I ever got out, the first thing I'd do was come and find you and tell you something to your face. So I'm doing it."

He took a step closer to the desk.

Voss's hand went, without his meaning it to, to the edge of the desk drawer where he kept his service weapon. He saw Gideon see it. He saw the man's eyes flick down to his hand and back up to his face. There was no fear in them. There was only a kind of sorrow.

"I forgive you," said Gideon Kestrel.

The words fell into the room like stones into still water.

"I know what you did. I've known for twenty years. I know you switched the bags. I know about the black car and the man in the raincoat. I know you lied on the stand." He said it all quietly, without heat, the way a man reads a list. "And I forgive you. I've been doing it every day for eleven years. Some days I mean it. Some days I'm just saying it, and hoping God'll make it true. But I'm saying it now, to your face, and I mean it. I forgive you, Brantley Voss."

Voss stood behind his desk. His face was gray. His mouth opened and closed.

"Why?" he whispered. It was the only word he could find.

Gideon looked at him for a long moment.

"Because Somebody forgave me first," he said. "For a lot of things. Things you don't know about. Things nobody knows about but me and Him." He shrugged slightly. "And because I don't want to carry you anymore. I carried you for nine years. You and Mr. Blackmere and the man in the black car. I carried all three of you in that cell every night. And you got so heavy I couldn't stand up." He turned

toward the door. "So I put you down. I'm giving you back to God. What you do with that is between you and Him."

He put his hand on the doorknob. Then he stopped and looked back.

"I hear you're going to be a grandfather," he said. "Christmas Eve. Marge told me, out front. She's real excited." He smiled faintly. "I hope it's a girl. I hope she's healthy. And I hope when she's old enough to ask you about your life, you can tell her the truth."

Then he opened the door and went out and closed it quietly behind him.

Brantley Voss stood behind his desk for a long time. Then his legs gave out, and he sat down hard in his chair, and he put his face in his hands.

He had been afraid of Gideon Kestrel for twenty years. He had been afraid of a lawsuit, a reporter, a hearing, a rage. He had been afraid of a man coming back to destroy him.

He had never once been afraid of this.

It was so much worse.

> "Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men ... Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." — Romans 12:17, 19 (KJV)

At noon, he took a legal pad out of his desk drawer. He uncapped a pen.

At the top of the first page, in his neat, square police officer's printing, he wrote:

To the Prosecuting Attorney of Clinton County, Ohio:

He sat looking at it for a long time.

I, Brantley Allen Voss, Chief of Police of the City of Mercy Ridge, being of sound mind, wish to make the following statement concerning the events of the night of

The pen stopped.

He sat there with it hovering above the page. Outside his door, Marge was on the phone. Somebody in the break room was microwaving popcorn. On the corner of his desk sat a small square photograph, grainy and gray, with a white crescent in the middle. On the back, in his daughter's handwriting: Hi Grandpa! See you Christmas Eve! ♥

He tore the page off the pad. He did not crumple it. He folded it in half, and in half again, and put it in the top drawer of his desk, under the parole board notice and Gideon Kestrel's last letter.

Then he closed the drawer.

But he did not lock it.

That night, in the trailer on Lytle Road, Ruby Kestrel set a bowl of chicken and dumplings in front of her son at the kitchen table. She sat down across from him with her own.

"Say grace, baby," she said. "It's been twenty years since I heard you say it at this table."

Gideon bowed his head. His mother reached across the table and took his hand. Outside, in a dark gray sedan parked across the road with its engine running and its lights off, a man with a long-lens camera was watching the window.

Gideon did not know that. Or perhaps he did. He had learned a great many things in twenty years about being watched.

He prayed anyway.

"Lord," he said, "thank You for this food. Thank You for Mama. Thank You for bringing me home." He paused. "And Lord, bless the old man on the hill. He's carrying something heavy. I could see it. Help him put it down." He was quiet for a moment. "And bless the chief. And Mr. Blackmere. And the man in the black car, wherever he is. And whoever's sitting out there in that car across the road tonight. Keep them warm. They look cold. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Ruby Kestrel opened her eyes and looked at her son across the table with her enormous owl's eyes full of tears.

"Amen," she said.

> "And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten ... And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you." — Joel 2:25–26 (KJV)

End of Chapter 12

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 13

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 13: The Daughter Who Hated God

> "And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him." — Luke 15:28 (KJV)

Juniper Thornefield ran six miles along the Chicago lakefront every morning at five-fifteen, in every kind of weather, and she had not missed a day in nine years.

She ran in sleet and in heat advisories. She ran the morning after her law school graduation and the morning after she made senior associate. She ran the morning after the man she had lived with for four years told her, very kindly, that he did not think she would ever let anyone all the way in. She ran with her earbuds in and no music playing. She found she could think better with the silence pressed against

her ears. She ran the same route every day, north from her building in Streeterville to the point at Fullerton and back. She ran it hard, as if something were chasing her.

Her therapist had pointed that out once. What do you think you're running from, Juniper? Juniper had paid her two hundred and ten dollars an hour for three years. She had stopped seeing her the following week.

She was thirty-four years old. She was a senior associate in the litigation department of Calloway Brandt LLP. She had a corner office on the forty-first floor with a view of the river and a reputation for taking depositions apart like a watch. She owned a condo, an Audi, and eleven identical navy suits. She had no pictures on her office walls. She had not been inside a church since she was nineteen years old, and she did not intend to go inside one again.

She had not spoken to her father in eleven years.

On the second Thursday in December, she came back from her run at six-twenty. She was standing in her kitchen in her running clothes, drinking water at the sink, when her phone rang. It was a number with a Washington, D.C., area code.

She almost let it go to voicemail. Something made her answer.

"Ms. Thornefield? Juniper Thornefield? My name is Maribel Sloane. I'm a reporter with Harbinger magazine. I'm sorry to call so early. I'm calling about your father."

Juniper set the glass down on the counter.

"I'm not interested in commenting on my father's billboard, Ms. Sloane."

"I'm not calling about the billboard." There was a pause. "Not exactly. Ms. Thornefield, I don't know how much you've been following the news out of Mercy Ridge. A man died under that sign three weeks ago. There was a note in his pocket that someone tried to make look like your father's handwriting. Someone cut the power to his floodlights. Someone let the air out of his tires in the middle of the night and left him a note about his heart. A very wealthy man has offered him half a million dollars to take the sign down. Your father burned the check. And the people who want that sign gone have started following me, too." Another pause. "Your father won't talk to me. He won't talk to anyone. I don't think he'd call you if he were in trouble. So I'm calling you."

Juniper stood at the kitchen sink. Outside her window, the sky over the lake was beginning to go gray.

"Why?" she said at last. "Why would you call me? You don't know me."

"Because I've been a reporter for sixteen years," said Maribel Sloane quietly. "And I've learned what it sounds like when people are scared. Everybody in that town is scared, Ms. Thornefield. Except your father. And that's what scares me."

> "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up." — Psalm 27:10 (KJV)

She told herself she was not going.

She went to work. She sat in her corner office and reviewed deposition transcripts and did not see a word of them. At eleven she went into a partners' meeting and was asked a question about a motion schedule. She realized she had not heard it. At two she canceled a call with a client. At four she sat at her desk with the door shut and typed Mercy Ridge billboard death into a search engine. She read everything she could find for two hours.

At seven o'clock that night, she was in her Audi on the Dan Ryan Expressway, headed south.

She did not pack properly. She threw three suits and her running shoes and a toothbrush into a gym bag. She did not tell her firm where she was going. She sent a text to her assistant: Family emergency. Out tomorrow and Monday. Will check email. She stared at the words family emergency for a long time before she sent it. She had not used the word family about herself in eleven years.

It was five hours and twenty minutes from Chicago to Mercy Ridge. The fastest way was I-65 to Indianapolis, I-74 to Cincinnati, and then I-71 north. She had not driven it since she was nineteen, in the other direction, with her mother eight days in the ground and her father standing in the gravel driveway in the rearview mirror. He had not tried to stop her. She had never forgiven him for that either.

She drove through the night with the radio off.

Somewhere past Indianapolis, around midnight, she found herself remembering her mother's kitchen. She remembered sitting at the table with a box of crayons when she was very small, and her mother leaning over her and guiding her fat little fingers around a pencil. Thick on the way down, Junie. Thin on the way up. That's how Daddy does it. That's how all the best letters are made.

She gripped the wheel and drove faster.

She came up the long grade on I-71 northbound at six-forty in the morning, just as the sun came up.

She knew it would be there. She had seen it a hundred times on the internet in the last eighteen hours. She had made herself look at it until it was just an image on a screen, the way she did with autopsy photographs in wrongful-death cases. She had prepared herself for it the way she prepared for a hostile witness.

None of it helped.

The face came over the rise in the gold light. She saw it, and every defense she had built in fifteen years fell down at once.

It was her mother's Jesus.

It was not a Jesus. It was not the Jesus of the Sunday-school pictures or the stained-glass windows or the plastic dashboard statues. It was the one from the barn. It was the one she had sat in front of on a sawhorse as a little girl, swinging her legs and watching her father work. The weathered face. The scar on the bridge of the nose. The dark beard, darker on the left. The eyes that followed you around the barn. She had been afraid of those eyes when she was four. She had loved them when she was ten. At

nineteen, on the night after her mother's funeral, she had stood in the barn door and screamed at them. Her father had been out in the yard, and he had not come.

There they were, forty feet wide, looking down the interstate at her.

And beneath them, in red letters, in her father's hand:

WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL?

Juniper Thornefield pulled onto the shoulder below the hill and sat in her Audi with the engine running and both hands on the wheel. She was shaking with a fury so pure and so old that it felt almost like joy.

"Mama," she said out loud, in the empty car. "He gave Mama. That's what he gave. That's what all of you gave. You gave my mother."

> "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." — Ephesians 6:4 (KJV)

There was an old woman at the top of the hill in a lawn chair.

Juniper did not mean to get out of the car. But she did. She stood on the shoulder in her running jacket in the cold, looking up. The old woman turned in her chair, the way old women do when they feel someone watching them, and squinted down the hill through thick glasses.

Then she called out, in a voice like a cracked bell, "Juniper? Juniper Thornefield? Is that you?"

Juniper went cold.

"I'd know that walk anywhere," the old woman called. "You've got your mama's walk. Come up here, child. My knees won't make it down."

She knew the voice before she knew the face. Ottilie Mercerfield. Second-grade Sunday school, Mercy Ridge Community Chapel. Construction-paper arks and felt-board Bible stories and graham crackers with apple juice. And fifteen years ago, at the edge of an open grave, a small spotted hand holding hers so tightly it hurt. Your mama's not in that box, sweetheart. Don't you ever believe she is.

Juniper had pulled her hand away.

She climbed the hill now because she did not know how not to. She stood beside the lawn chair. Ottilie Mercerfield looked up at her for a long time through her cloudy eyes, and then she reached up and took Juniper's hand in her own. It was the same small, spotted hand, much thinner now. She held on to it the way she had at the grave.

"You came home," she said.

"I'm not home," said Juniper. Her voice was hard. "I'm just here."

"Well," said Ottilie Mercerfield placidly, "that's a start."

She did not let go of Juniper's hand. Juniper did not pull it away. They stayed that way for a while, the old woman in the lawn chair and the young woman standing beside her, looking up at the face on the billboard in the rising light.

"He's been painting that face since before you were born," Ottilie said quietly. "Did you know that? Your mama told me once. He started it on their first anniversary. Promised her he'd put it somewhere the whole world could see it someday." She squeezed Juniper's hand. "Took him forty-some years. But he kept it."

"He didn't keep anything," said Juniper. "He let her die. And then he quit. On God, on me, on all of it."

Ottilie was quiet for a long moment.

"Maybe so," she said finally. "Maybe so, honey. But he's not quit now." She looked up at the face. "And I don't think you drove all night from Chicago to tell me that."

> "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers." — Malachi 4:6 (KJV)

The farmhouse on Ridgeline Road looked smaller than she remembered, and older. The paint was peeling. The porch sagged. Her mother's roses had gone wild along the fence line, a tangle of bare brown canes. The barn was the same.

There were no lights on in the house except in the kitchen.

She did not knock. She had never knocked on that door in her life. She walked up the steps and turned the knob, and it was not locked. It had never been locked. She walked into the kitchen.

Her father was sitting at the table in his flannel shirt with a cup of coffee in front of him and an open Bible beside it. He looked up.

For a long moment neither of them said anything.

He was so old. That was the first thing. In her mind he had stayed fifty-three, big and broad-shouldered with dark hair going gray, standing in the gravel driveway. The man at the table was gaunt and white-haired, with deep lines bracketing his mouth. His big hands were spotted and trembling a little around the coffee cup. There was a row of prescription bottles on the windowsill above the sink.

And across from him, pushed in neatly the way her mother had always left it, was her mother's chair.

"Juniper," her father said.

He said it the way you say a word you have not said out loud in a very long time, to see if you still remember how. He started to stand. She saw his hand go to the edge of the table, and his knuckles whiten as he pushed himself up. She saw him sway.

"Don't," she said.

He stopped, half risen.

"Don't get up. Don't hug me. Don't say you're glad to see me." She stood just inside the door with her car keys in her fist. "I didn't come to make up, Dad. I came because a reporter called me at six in the morning and told me somebody's trying to kill you. And I came because I want you to tell me why."

He sat back down slowly. "Why what?"

"Why that." She jerked her head toward the south, toward the interstate. "Why Mama's Jesus. On a billboard. For the whole world. Why now, after fifteen years. Why you can paint come home in letters six feet tall for thirty thousand strangers a day, when you couldn't pick up a telephone and say it to me." Her voice cracked and she hated it. "Eleven years, Dad. Not one phone call."

"You changed your number," he said quietly. "Twice."

"You could have found it. You found eighteen thousand dollars for a billboard. You found the time to paint Jesus forty feet high. You could have found my number."

He did not answer. He looked down at his coffee.

"And you want to know what I'd give to save my soul?" She was shaking now. "I'll tell you what you gave. You gave Mama. You and your church and your God. She had cancer and she quit chemo because Reverend Pruitt and the prayer chain told her to trust the Lord. She came home and she died in that bed in there. And you let her. You stood there and held her hand and let her die, because you thought God was going to fix it. And then He didn't, and you didn't even have the decency to keep believing in Him. You just quit. You quit on Him, and you quit on me, and you sat out here in the dark for fifteen years. And now you want to tell the whole country about Jesus?"

The kitchen was very quiet. The clock over the stove ticked. Somewhere outside a crow called.

Her father sat with his hands around his coffee cup and looked at her for a long time. He did not argue. He did not defend himself. He did not quote a verse at her. He just looked at her, with his tired gray eyes that her mother had once said were the kindest eyes in Clinton County.

"Is that what you've believed?" he said at last. "All this time?"

"It's what happened."

"No, honey," said Zeke Thornefield. "It isn't."

He told her.

He told her sitting at the kitchen table, with his hands flat on the oilcloth and his voice low and steady. He did not look away from her once.

Her mother had not stopped chemotherapy because of the prayer chain. She had stopped because the doctors in Columbus had told her it was not working. The tumor had spread to her liver and her lungs in spite of it. Another round would buy her perhaps three weeks, and she would spend all three of them too sick to lift her head. Dr. Nakamura had sat on a rolling stool in a little room at the James Cancer Center and told them so. Her mother had listened to all of it. Then she had turned to Zeke and said, I want to go home. I want to see the snow. I want to die in my own bed with you holding my hand.

"Reverend Pruitt didn't tell her to trust the Lord," he said. "He told her to fight. He drove up to Columbus three times to beg her to try another round. Your mama told him no. She was kind about it, but she told him no." He paused. "She was the bravest person I ever knew, Junie. She knew exactly what she was doing."

Juniper stood just inside the door, gripping her keys so hard that the edges cut into her palm.

"Then why didn't anybody tell me?" Her voice came out small. "I was at Ohio State. Mama called me every Sunday. She said she was fine. She said the treatments were working. She said not to come home, to finish my exams. And then you called me on a Tuesday in December and said, you'd better come now. And I got here and she was ..." She stopped. "Why didn't anybody tell me?"

Her father closed his eyes.

"Because she made me promise not to," he said. "She wanted you to finish your semester. She said you'd worked so hard to get there, and she didn't want you to lose it because of her. She said, Let her have one more good fall, Zeke. Let her be nineteen a little longer." His voice broke. "I shouldn't have done it. I should have told you. I know that now. I knew it then. But she asked me, and I never could say no to her. Not once in thirty years."

He got up slowly, holding on to the table. He went to the drawer beside the sink and took out an envelope. It was worn soft at the edges, as though it had been unfolded and refolded many times. On the front, in block capitals, in her mother's hand, was a single word: ZEKE.

He held it out to her.

"She left this behind the painting," he said. "In the barn. I found it six weeks ago. Fifteen years it was sitting there, and I never knew." He was still holding it out. "There's something in it for you. At the bottom."

Juniper looked at the envelope for a long time. Then she took it.

She read it standing in the kitchen doorway in her running jacket, with the morning light coming in the window behind her. She read the whole thing. She read about the promise in the barn, and about paint Him big enough that nobody can ignore Him, and about paint the hands. And at the bottom, in her mother's shaking handwriting:

P.S. Take care of Juniper, even when she won't let you. Especially then.

She stood there for a long time. She did not cry. She had not cried in front of her father since she was fourteen. She was not going to start now.

But she could not make her hand let go of the letter.

> "When Israel was a child, then I loved him ... I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love." — Hosea 11:1, 3–4 (KJV)

"Then why did you stop?" she said finally.

She did not look up from the letter.

"If it wasn't God's fault. If it wasn't the church. If it was just cancer, and Mama chose, and she was brave." She made herself look up. "Then why did you stop being my father? Because you did, Dad. You stopped long before she died. I was fourteen. Something happened when I was fourteen. You came home one night and you were never the same. You stopped laughing. You stopped looking at Mama. You stopped looking at me. You still went to church, and you still said grace, and you still painted Bible verses on people's barns. But you weren't there anymore. It was like living with a man who'd gone away and left his body behind." Her voice shook. "I used to lie in bed and hear Mama crying in the kitchen at night. And I didn't know why. Nobody ever told me why. And then she got sick, and then she died, and then you went away completely. And I thought, That's what God does. That's what faith is. It's a family that smiles in the third pew on Sunday morning, and goes home and doesn't talk to each other. Secrets. Everybody keeping secrets for Jesus."

Her father had gone very white.

He sat down slowly at the table. For a long time he did not say anything. He looked at his hands.

"There's a thing," he said finally. His voice was hoarse. "A thing that happened. When you were fourteen. You're right about that. You're right about all of it."

Juniper waited.

"I can't tell you," he said. "Not yet." He looked up at her, and his eyes were wet. "I want to. God knows I want to. I've wanted to tell somebody for twenty years. I tried to tell a man last week, a man who deserved to hear it more than anybody alive. I couldn't. It wouldn't come out." He pressed his hand flat on the table. "But I will, Junie. I'm close. I promise you I'm close."

"Promise." Juniper laughed, and it was an ugly sound. "That's what this is all about, isn't it? Your promises. Your promise to Mama. Your billboard." She folded the letter and set it on the table in front of him. "You promised her you'd take care of me, Dad. That's in there too. And you kept the other promise instead. The one with thirty thousand people a day watching."

She walked out of the kitchen and down the hall.

> "To every thing there is a season ... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." — Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, 7 (KJV)

Her room was exactly as she had left it.

He had not touched it. She saw that at once. Fifteen years, and he had not even opened the door. There was dust on everything, thick and gray. Her high school pennants were still on the walls, and her debate trophies on the shelf. Her Ohio State sweatshirt hung over the back of the desk chair. She had tossed it there the morning she drove back to Columbus and had never come back for it. Her bed was still made with the quilt her mother had sewn for her twelfth birthday, in purple and green, her favorite colors that year.

She sat down on the edge of the bed. Dust rose around her in the slanting light.

She stayed there for a long time.

Later, much later, she got up and went down the hall to the spare room. She did not know why. The door was closed. She opened it.

It smelled of cedar and dust and, very faintly, impossibly, of her mother. Her mother's sewing machine sat under its cover by the window. The dresser stood against the wall. Its bottom drawer was open. A stack of folded sweaters lay on the bed beside it, as if someone had taken them out and not been able to put them back.

And at the foot of the bed stood her grandfather's cedar chest.

She remembered it. Her grandfather had built it as a wedding present for her mother. It had always stood there, at the foot of the spare bed, with her mother's best quilts inside it and a lace runner on top. When Juniper was small, she used to climb inside it to hide during games of hide-and-seek. Her mother always pretended not to know where she was.

Juniper knelt down in front of it. She put her hand flat on the lid. The wood was cool and smooth under her palm.

She did not open it. She did not know why. She only knelt there with her hand on the lid for a long time, the way you might rest your hand on a sleeping animal. Then she stood up and went out and closed the door behind her.

She would not open it for another five days. By then, everything would have changed.

She was standing at the kitchen sink at eleven o'clock that night, washing a coffee cup that did not need washing, when she saw the headlights.

They were at the bottom of the long gravel drive, out on Ridgeline Road. They were not moving. They were just sitting there, a pair of white lights in the dark, with the dim shape of a vehicle behind them. As she watched, they went off. Then the vehicle sat there in the dark.

Juniper Thornefield had spent nine years as a litigator. She had cross-examined private investigators and process servers and men who did surveillance for a living. She knew what it looked like.

She dried her hands. She went to the refrigerator. Stuck to the door with a magnet shaped like an ear of corn, beside a calendar from the Clinton County Farm Bureau, was an index card. It had been printed on an ordinary laser printer. She had noticed it that morning and had not let herself read it.

She read it now.

STRESS IS BAD FOR THE HEART.

She stood in her mother's kitchen with the card in her hand, and something inside her changed. It did not soften. It did not forgive. It was something harder and colder and more familiar than either. It was

the thing she felt at the start of every trial, when she looked across the courtroom at the other side and knew who they were.

She took out her phone and walked to the window. She zoomed in as far as it would go and took eleven photographs of the dark vehicle at the bottom of the drive. She could not make out the license plate. It did not matter. She would find out.

Then she called her firm's after-hours line and left a message for the managing partner. She was taking two weeks of personal leave, effective immediately. She would explain on Monday.

Then she put on her running jacket and went out the back door, across the frozen yard, to the barn.

The light was burning over the workbench. The big door was open a foot. She slid it the rest of the way, and it groaned on its track the way it always had.

The painting stood against the back wall, uncovered.

She walked across the dusty floor and stood in front of it. She was a little girl again on a sawhorse, swinging her legs. Why doesn't Jesus have any hands, Daddy? And her father, not looking up from his brush: I haven't gotten to them yet, Junie. I'm waiting till I'm good enough.

The hands were still empty. The penciled outlines on bare white gesso. The two small circles in the palms.

Thirty years, and he had never been good enough.

She heard the barn door groan behind her and did not turn around.

Her father came and stood beside her, a few feet away. He did not touch her. He did not say anything. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets and looked up at the painting with her, the way they had looked at it together when she was small.

After a long time, Juniper spoke without turning her head.

"There's a car at the bottom of the drive," she said. "It's been there two hours. There's a card on your refrigerator. Somebody cut your lights and let the air out of your tires. A man died under your sign. And the richest man in the county wants your billboard gone badly enough to pay half a million dollars for it."

"I know," said her father.

"You can't fight that by yourself. You're sixty-eight years old and your heart's no good. You don't even have a lawyer."

"No."

"You do now."

He turned his head and looked at her.

"I'm staying," Juniper said. She still did not look at him. Her voice was flat and hard. "Two weeks. Maybe longer. I'm going to find out who's in that car, and who's paying them, and I'm going to bury them. That's what I do. I'm very good at it." She paused. "But I want you to understand something, Dad. I'm not doing it for you. And I'm sure not doing it for Him." She lifted her chin toward the face on the canvas. "I'm doing it for Mama. Because she asked you to take care of me, and you didn't. So I'm going to take care of you. And then I'm going back to Chicago."

The barn was very quiet. The bulb buzzed overhead.

"That's enough," her father said at last. His voice was rough. "That's more than enough, Junie. More than I deserve."

She did not answer.

But she did not leave, either. She stood there beside him in the cold barn for a long time, the two of them looking up at the face her mother had loved and the empty hands her father could not finish. Neither of them said another word.

At the bottom of the drive, out on Ridgeline Road, the dark car started its engine and pulled slowly away.

> "Is any thing too hard for the LORD?" — Genesis 18:14 (KJV)

End of Chapter 13

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 14

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 14: Take Jesus Down

> "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." — Matthew 10:28 (KJV)

The first letter came on a Monday.

It was in the mailbox at the end of the drive with the electric bill and a seed catalog and a sympathy card from a woman in Oregon. She wrote that she had seen the billboard on television and wanted the painter to know that her late husband would have loved it. Juniper brought the mail in at noon and set it on the kitchen table. Then she saw the plain white envelope at the bottom of the stack and went still.

No return address. A Columbus postmark. EZEKIEL THORNEFIELD in block capitals, printed by a laser printer, on a self-adhesive label.

"Don't touch it," she said.

Her father looked up from his coffee. "It's my mail, Junie."

"I know. Don't touch it." She went to the drawer by the sink, found a pair of her mother's old dishwashing gloves, and pulled them on. Then she slit the envelope along the top with a steak knife and drew out a single sheet of white paper by the corner.

Three words, in the same block capitals, centered on the page.

TAKE IT DOWN.

Juniper looked at it for a long time. Then she slid it back into its envelope. She took a gallon freezer bag out of the pantry, sealed the envelope inside it, and wrote the date and time on the bag in black marker.

Her father watched all of this without a word.

"You've done this before," he said finally.

"Threat letters? Twice. Once for a client. Once for me, after a verdict." She set the bag on top of the refrigerator, out of reach, as though it might bite. "People who send them want you to react. They want you scared. They want you to do something stupid." She stripped off the gloves. "So we don't react. We document. We keep everything. And we don't do anything stupid."

"Like what?"

"Like take it down."

Her father looked at her across the kitchen table for a long moment. Something moved in his face that she could not read.

"No," he said. "We won't do that."

> "In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me." — Psalm 56:11 (KJV)

The country had not stopped watching Mile Marker 52.

If anything, it was watching harder. Blaine Harker's Billboard Jesus Revival had come and gone the Saturday after Thanksgiving. There had been eleven thousand people in a cornfield across from the interchange, a stage built on two flatbed trailers, and a gospel choir flown in from Houston. There had been a forty-foot inflatable replica of the billboard, which had collapsed in a gust of wind during the altar call, to the delight of every late-night comedian in America. And there had been nine hundred and forty thousand dollars in "seed gifts," collected in plastic buckets passed along the rows by volunteers in matching black T-shirts.

Harker had never once said the name of the man who painted the billboard. He had never once gone to see it.

The following Tuesday, Harbinger magazine published Maribel Sloane's story. It was eleven thousand words long, titled The Gospel of the Bucket. It ran with photographs of the Delaware shell company's filings and the Nevada holding company's, and of Blaine Harker's brother-in-law's new boat. By

Friday, the attorneys general of Texas and Ohio had both opened inquiries. Two hundred and eleven stations had dropped Victory Hour. And a satellite channel had suspended Harker's contract pending review.

None of it touched the billboard. If anything, it made the billboard shine brighter. People drove a thousand miles to see the face that the huckster had tried to sell. They came to see the plain old painted face, with no T-shirts and no buckets and nobody standing in front of it taking up an offering.

They came at all hours now. Somebody had started leaving candles at the foot of the hill, little glass votives from the dollar store, and somebody else had started lighting them. By the second week of December there were hundreds. On cold, still nights they glowed in a long flickering line along the fence, and you could see them from a mile away on the highway. A night shift of volunteers had organized itself without anyone asking. Bud Tackett's linemen, the Church of Christ men from Sabina, some bikers from Dayton, two retired nurses. They sat in folding chairs at the foot of the hill all night, in shifts, with thermoses and flashlights, keeping the candles lit.

Nobody had to tell them why. Everyone in Clinton County had heard about the floodlights being cut, and the tires, and the man in the ditch.

The billboard was not alone anymore.

The second letter came on Wednesday.

Juniper had started running again, the way she always did. Five-fifteen every morning. She did not run the lakefront now but Ridgeline Road, three miles out and three miles back, in the dark, past frozen fields and sleeping farmhouses. She ran with a headlamp and a reflective vest, and with her phone in her pocket set to share her location with Maribel Sloane. Maribel had insisted.

The envelope was the same. Columbus postmark. Laser-printed label. Juniper put on the gloves and opened it at the kitchen table, and her father watched.

There was no letter this time. Only a photograph.

It was a picture of Juniper. She was running on Ridgeline Road in the blue light just before dawn, in her black running tights and her reflective vest, with her headlamp on and her breath smoking in the cold. It had been taken from very close. From the edge of a field, perhaps, or from behind a hedgerow. Close enough to see the expression on her face. Close enough to see the name of the running shoes on her feet.

On the back, in the same block capitals:

PRETTY DAUGHTER.

Juniper sat very still at the kitchen table, holding the photograph in her gloved hands.

She had been threatened before. She had been followed once, after a verdict, for three days, by a private investigator hired by a client on the losing side. She had told herself afterward that she had not been afraid. Now, sitting at her mother's kitchen table and looking at her own face in a stranger's

photograph, she understood that she had lied to herself then. She knew it because of how much more frightened she was now.

Her father reached across the table and took the photograph out of her hands.

He looked at it for a long time. His face did not change. But she saw his hand begin to shake. It was not the slow tremor of an old man with a bad heart. It was something else, something that started in his arm and ran down into his fingers until the photograph rattled.

"Dad?"

He set the photograph down on the table very carefully. He got up. He walked out the back door and across the frozen yard to the barn without his coat, and she heard the big door groan on its track.

She found him twenty minutes later, standing in front of the painting with his fists clenched at his sides. He was breathing hard. His face was a color she had never seen it.

"They can come at me," he said, without turning around. His voice was very low. "That's fine. I'm an old man. I've had my life. Let them come." He turned and looked at her, and his eyes were terrible. "But they don't get to look at you. You hear me, Junie? They don't get to come within a mile of you."

It was the first time since she was fourteen years old that she had seen her father angry for her.

She did not know what to do with it. So she did the only thing she knew how to do.

"Then we go to the police," she said.

> "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about." — Psalm 3:6 (KJV)

Chief Brantley Voss took the report himself.

Juniper had expected a deputy, a clerk, a form. Instead, when she gave her name at the front desk of the Mercy Ridge Police Department, the gray-haired dispatcher looked up at her sharply. She picked up the phone, and a minute later the chief came out of his office in person and held the door for her.

She knew him. Of course she knew him. Everybody in Mercy Ridge knew Chief Voss. He had coached her Little League team for two summers when she was eight and nine. He had handed out the trophies at the end-of-season picnic. He had come through the receiving line at her mother's funeral and shaken her father's hand and said something she did not remember.

He was older now. Thicker in the neck, grayer, with deep lines in his face. He sat down across the desk from her and took the two plastic bags she handed him, and he looked at them. He looked at the first letter. He looked at the photograph of her running in the dark. He looked at it for a very long time.

"When did these come?" he said.

"Monday and this morning. Columbus postmark on both."

"Anyone else handle them?"

"Only me. With gloves."

He nodded. He wrote it down. He asked the right questions in the right order, the way a good policeman does. Had she seen anyone on her runs? Any vehicles? Did her father have any enemies? Any disputes with neighbors? He wrote down everything she said in a neat, square hand.

But he did not look at her. That was what she noticed. In twenty minutes, he did not once look her in the eye. He looked at the bags, and his notepad, and the window, and the wall behind her head. And when she told him about the car parked at the bottom of the drive at night, his pen stopped moving for a moment. When she told him about the man who had offered her father half a million dollars, it stopped for longer.

"Chief," she said finally. "Do you know who's doing this?"

He looked up. For just a second, his eyes met hers.

She had cross-examined four hundred witnesses. She knew what she saw in them.

"No, ma'am," said Chief Voss. "I don't."

He walked her to the door. He told her he would send the letters to the state lab for prints and DNA. He told her he would have a patrol car swing by Ridgeline Road twice a night. He told her to vary her running route and to keep her phone with her. At the door he paused, with his hand on the frame, and looked at her for the second time.

"The last time I saw you," he said, "you were nineteen. At your mother's funeral. You wouldn't sing." He was quiet for a moment. "I didn't blame you."

Then he went back into his office and closed the door.

Juniper stood on the front steps of the police station in the cold, with her keys in her hand, trying to understand what had just happened.

"Ms. Thornefield?"

A young deputy with red hair and freckles had come out the side door and was standing at the bottom of the steps with his hands in his jacket pockets. He did not look at her directly. He looked out at Main Street, the way men do when they are talking about the weather.

"Rafe Dunning," he said quietly. "I'm a friend of Maribel's."

She came down the steps and stood beside him, and looked out at Main Street too.

"Those letters came through the U.S. mail," he said. "Threats through the mail are a federal crime. Title eighteen, section eight seventy-six. You know that. You're a lawyer." He still did not look at her. "The FBI has a field office in Cincinnati. I'd call them. Today. I'd give them copies of everything. And I wouldn't count on the state lab ever getting what you just gave the chief."

Juniper turned and looked at him.

"What are you telling me, Deputy?"

Rafe Dunning met her eyes for just a moment. His freckled face was very young and very tired.

"I'm telling you to call the FBI, ma'am," he said. "That's all I can tell you. For now."

He went back inside.

She called the FBI from the parking lot. By four o'clock that afternoon she was talking to a Special Agent Dana Whitfield of the Cincinnati field office. She was a calm, careful woman who listened to the whole story without interrupting, and at the end of it said, "Ms. Thornefield, I'd like to drive up and see you tomorrow."

> "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn." — Isaiah 54:17 (KJV)

The third letter came on Thursday.

It was not a letter, exactly. It was a newspaper clipping. It was the obituary of Walter James Briggs from the Columbus Dispatch, with a small photograph of a heavyset, gray-haired man with tired eyes and a shy, uncertain half smile. Beloved husband, father, and grandfather ... member of Grove City Baptist Church ... retired owner of Briggs Recovery & Towing ... in lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Gideons International.

Across the bottom, in the same block capitals, in black marker this time:

HE TALKED TOO MUCH. SO DO YOU.

Juniper read it at the kitchen table in her gloves. Then she looked up at her father.

She had been watching him for three days now. She had seen him angry. She had seen him shaken. She had seen his hands tremble.

She had never seen him like this.

All the color had gone out of his face. He was staring at the clipping on the table between them, at the photograph of the tired-eyed man, as though it were something that had crawled up out of the ground. His mouth had gone slack. His breath was coming fast and shallow, and his hand had gone to his chest, to his shirt pocket, where she knew he kept her mother's letter.

"Dad. Dad, look at me."

He did not look at her.

"He talked too much." Juniper's voice was very quiet. "What does that mean? What did that man talk about? He was coming to see you. Maribel told me. He had your address in his Bible." She leaned across the table. "And they think you talk too much too. About what? You don't talk to anybody. You haven't talked to anybody in fifteen years. So what do they think you know?"

He did not answer.

"Dad. A man is dead. They're sending me pictures of myself. They're telling you you're next. And you know why. I can see it on your face. You know exactly why." Her voice cracked. "Is this it? Is this the thing? The thing that happened when I was fourteen?"

Her father closed his eyes.

"Not yet, Junie," he whispered. "Please. Not yet."

She stared at him. Then she got up from the table so fast that her chair fell over backward. She walked out of the kitchen, out the front door and down the steps. She stood in the frozen yard with her arms wrapped around herself in the cold until she could breathe again.

When she came back in, he was still sitting at the table with his eyes closed and his lips moving.

He was praying. She had not seen her father pray since she was nineteen years old.

> "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." — Psalm 23:4 (KJV)

The last letter came on Friday.

One sentence. Centered on the page, in the same block capitals as the others.

TAKE JESUS DOWN, OR WE WILL PUT YOU IN THE GROUND.

Juniper read it standing at the kitchen counter in her mother's dishwashing gloves. She sealed it in a freezer bag and wrote the date and the time on it. She set it on the refrigerator with the others. Then she stood very still with her hands flat on the counter, thinking.

She thought the way she did before closing arguments, very fast and very cold, turning the problem over and over until she could see all sides of it at once.

Then she picked up her phone and called Maribel Sloane.

"How fast can you get a camera crew to the billboard?" she said.

There was a pause on the line. "Why?"

"Because they want him alone," said Juniper. "In the dark. In the middle of nowhere. With nobody watching." She looked out the kitchen window at the barn. "So I'm going to make sure the whole country is watching. Every single day. Every single night. If anything happens to my father, I want it to happen in front of eleven million people." Her voice was flat. "Nobody gets put in the ground with the whole world watching."

Another pause.

"That's either brilliant," said Maribel Sloane slowly, "or the most dangerous thing I've ever heard."

"It's both," said Juniper. "Noon tomorrow. Bring everyone."

She hung up. She turned around.

Her father was standing in the kitchen doorway. He had heard every word.

"You didn't ask me," he said.

"No. I didn't." She lifted her chin. "Are you going to say no?"

He looked at her for a long moment. Then, slowly, something moved at the corner of his mouth. It was not a smile, exactly. But it was the closest thing to one she had seen on his face in fifteen years.

"Your mama used to do that," he said. "Decide things and then tell me." He shook his head. "No, Junie. I'm not going to say no."

> "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." — Acts 4:20 (KJV)

They came at noon on Saturday. More of them than Juniper had dared to hope.

There were four national networks and a dozen local stations. There was a wire service, and a crew from the BBC who had been in Cincinnati for a story about something else and had driven up on the strength of a single text message. There were satellite trucks lined up a quarter mile along the shoulder. The highway patrol had closed the right lane in both directions and stood with their arms folded at either end of the line, waving traffic past.

And there were the people. Hundreds of them. They had heard about it on the radio and on Facebook, and from the volunteers who sat with the candles at night. They stood on the hill and along the fence and down the shoulder in the bright, cold December sun.

Juniper saw faces she knew and faces she did not. Ottilie Mercerfield was in her lawn chair at the top of the hill, wrapped in two blankets. Waverly Pike and Silas Quenby stood together by the fence. Pastor Callan Whitlock stood with his wife, Elowen, holding her hand. A small, gray-haired woman in a good gray coat stood a little apart from everyone, by herself. Someone whispered that she was Delphine Ransom, who had not been seen at church in nine years. A slight blond girl in a Wilmington College sweatshirt stood between her parents. Juniper recognized her from the video. A huge bearded trucker in a Werner jacket stood with his cap in his hands.

And near the bottom of the hill stood a lean, gray-haired man with a shaved head and a scar through one eyebrow, beside a tiny old woman with a walker and enormous glasses. People were looking at them and whispering. The man did not seem to notice. He was looking up at the face on the billboard.

At noon, Zeke Thornefield walked up the hill.

He walked slowly. Juniper walked beside him, ready to catch him if he stumbled. He did not stumble. He wore his good flannel shirt and his barn coat and the work boots he had painted the billboard in, with paint still on the toes. He stopped at the foot of the near column, under the face of Christ. He turned around and looked at the cameras and the microphones and the hundreds of faces looking up at him. Juniper saw him swallow.

He had not spoken in public since he gave the eulogy at his own father's funeral forty-seven years ago.

Maribel Sloane stepped forward with a single microphone. She did not ask him anything. She just held it out.

Zeke looked at it for a long moment. Then he reached into his coat pocket and took out the four plastic freezer bags. He held them up so the cameras could see.

"Somebody's been sending me letters," he said. His voice was rough, but it carried. "This last one came yesterday. I'll read it to you." He held up the last bag and read it, slowly, every word. "Take Jesus down, or we will put you in the ground."

A sound went through the crowd. It was not a gasp, exactly. It was lower and harder than that.

Zeke lowered the bags. He stood there in the cold sunlight, a gaunt old man in a barn coat, and looked out at the faces and the cameras.

"I'm sixty-eight years old," he said. "I've got a bad heart. Doctor says maybe five good years, if I'm lucky. I'm not a brave man. I want you to know that. I've been a coward most of my life. About a lot of things." He paused. "But I'm going to tell whoever sent these letters something. I want them to hear it. Wherever they are."

He turned and looked up at the face on the billboard. Then he turned back to the cameras.

"You can tear down my billboard," said Ezekiel Thornefield. "You can burn my painting. You can even take my life." His voice cracked, and then steadied. "But you cannot erase Jesus Christ from this world."

For a moment, nobody moved.

Then someone at the top of the hill began to clap. Juniper turned and saw that it was Ottilie Mercerfield. She was clapping her small spotted hands together in her lawn chair, slowly, with tears running down her face. Then Waverly Pike joined in, and Silas Quenby, and Pastor Whitlock. Then the trucker in the Werner jacket, and the girl from the video and her parents. Then Delphine Ransom, alone by the fence, with her hand over her mouth. And then the whole hill, hundreds of people clapping in the cold December sun under the face of Christ, while the cameras rolled.

Gideon Kestrel did not clap. He stood at the bottom of the hill beside his mother with his head bowed and his eyes closed, and his lips were moving.

Juniper Thornefield stood beside her father under the billboard and looked out at the crowd, and found that she could not see very clearly. She put her hand on her father's arm. It was the first time she had touched him in fifteen years.

He looked down at her hand. He did not say anything. He put his own hand over it, rough and paint-stained and shaking, and left it there.

> "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." — John 16:33 (KJV)

By six o'clock that evening, his words were on every television in America.

You can tear down my billboard. You can burn my painting. You can even take my life. But you cannot erase Jesus Christ from this world.

Ministers read them from pulpits on Sunday morning in Atlanta and Seattle and Lagos and Seoul. A college football coach in Alabama read them to his team before a bowl game. Students painted them on a bridge over a highway in Texas. Somebody printed them on a banner and hung it from an overpass on I-71 a mile south of the billboard. Three different songwriters in Nashville posted demos of songs built around them by Monday morning. A United States senator from Ohio quoted them on the Senate floor.

That night, Juniper lay on the purple-and-green quilt in her childhood bedroom and watched the clip on her phone. She watched it again, and again. She told herself she was studying it the way she studied video of a witness, looking for tells.

That was not why she was watching.

On the little screen, at the very end of the clip, there was a moment the networks had all kept. A gaunt old man in a barn coat stood under the face of Christ with the crowd clapping around him. A young woman in a navy running jacket stood beside him, and she put her hand on his arm. He looked down at it, and he put his own hand over hers.

She had not known the camera was on them.

She watched that moment eleven times. On the twelfth, she stopped the video there, with the two hands on the screen, one on top of the other. She lay in the dark looking at it until the screen went black on its own.

Her mother would have liked that picture, she thought. Her mother would have printed it and put it on the refrigerator.

Sterling Blackmere watched them on the television in his office on the fourth floor of the Farmers Exchange Building. He had the sound off. He watched them eleven times as the evening news cycled through. Each time, the camera showed the gaunt old man in the barn coat, and the plastic bags, and the face on the billboard looking down. Each time, it showed the crowd. Hundreds of people. Clapping.

Dashiell Crowe stood in the doorway behind him.

"Did you send those letters?" said Crowe.

Sterling did not turn around.

"I asked you a question, sir." Crowe's voice was very quiet. "Did you send those letters? Because I didn't. I let the air out of his tires. I cut his lights. That's all I did. I never sent any letters. And I sure never took a picture of his daughter."

"No," said Sterling Blackmere, still watching the screen. "You didn't. You haven't done anything I've asked you to do in three weeks, Dashiell. You were supposed to burn his barn. You came back with a full gas can and a story about a man praying." He turned his head at last. "Mr. Pell has been considerably more useful."

Crowe stood very still in the doorway.

He was thinking about a hill at two-thirty in the morning. A man in a long dark coat on his knees in the floodlights, weeping. I'll tell them everything. And a second set of headlights coming slowly up the long grade from the south, as Crowe turned around in the median and drove away.

"The night Briggs died," Crowe said slowly. "There was another car. Coming up the hill. After I left." His mouth was dry. "Was that Pell?"

Sterling Blackmere looked at him for a long moment. His face was perfectly calm.

"I would be very careful, Dashiell," he said softly, "about the questions you ask. You have a little girl in Dayton, I believe. Lily. Ten years old. She goes to St. Albert's. Third row from the window, I'm told." He turned back to the television. "Good night."

At eleven-forty that night, Zeke Thornefield stood at his kitchen window and looked out at the dark.

At the bottom of the long gravel drive, out on Ridgeline Road, a vehicle was parked with its lights off. He could just make out its shape against the faint glow of the snow on the fields. It had been there for an hour.

Juniper came and stood beside him. She looked out at it too.

"I'll call Agent Whitfield," she said.

"In the morning," said her father. "Let them sit there. Let them watch." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Go to bed, Junie. Nobody's coming up this drive tonight. Not with the whole world watching."

She went. He stayed at the window a while longer, and then he went out to the barn.

He did not know, then, who was in the car at the bottom of the drive. He would not find out for several days. He did not know that it was a pickup truck and not a sedan. He did not know that the man behind the wheel was a former Army military policeman named Dashiell Crowe, with a pump shotgun across his lap and a thermos of coffee on the seat beside him. Crowe had called his ex-wife in Dayton at nine o'clock that night and told her to take their daughter to her mother's house in Kentucky in the morning and not to tell anyone where she had gone. Then he had driven to Ridgeline Road and turned off his lights.

He sat there all night with his eyes on the road and his hands on the shotgun.

He was not watching the farmhouse. He was watching for a dark gray sedan.

For the first time in three weeks, the man in the car at the bottom of the drive was there to keep somebody alive.

> "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day ... For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." — Psalm 91:5, 11 (KJV)

End of Chapter 14

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 15

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 15: The Third Message

> "Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops." — Luke 12:3 (KJV)

The words came to him at three in the morning, the way the first ones had.

Zeke had been sitting in the barn on the overturned bucket for most of the night, as he had sat every night for three weeks. The three blank panels lay on the floor in front of him, primed white. The stick of chalk was in his hand, and the painting with its empty hands leaned against the back wall. In three weeks he had written nothing on the panels. He had tried a dozen times. GOD IS LOVE. HE IS RISEN. BE STILL AND KNOW. All of them were true. None of them would stay. Each time he had wiped the chalk away with the side of his hand and sat back down on the bucket.

He knew why. He had known since the afternoon on the hill with Gideon Kestrel's hand on his knee.

A man who could not tell the truth had no business painting it on a hill for thirty thousand strangers a day.

But tonight he had stood on that hill in front of the whole country. He had held up four plastic bags and read a death threat out loud. He had said the words that were now on every television in America. You cannot erase Jesus Christ from this world. And afterward, in the truck on the way home, with Juniper silent in the passenger seat beside him, he had heard a voice in his head. It was very clear and very quiet, and it sounded very much like Hannah.

No, Zeke. And you can't erase what you saw, either.

He sat on the bucket in the cold barn with the chalk in his hand, and at three in the morning he knelt down on the first white panel and began to write.

He did not have to think about it. The words came out of the chalk as if they had been waiting there. When he was done, he sat back on his heels and looked at them, and his whole body went cold.

Six words. Under the limit, for once. He did not need the extra word this time. These six said everything.

He was still kneeling there at five-thirty when the barn door groaned open behind him. Juniper came in, in her running clothes, with her headlamp in her hand.

"I saw the light," she said. "Dad, you've been out here all night. Your heart—"

She stopped. She was looking past him, at the panels on the floor.

She read them. He watched her read them. He watched her face change.

"Who's that one for?" she said quietly.

Zeke Thornefield looked down at the chalk letters for a long time.

"Me, mostly," he said.

> "There is no darkness, nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves." — Job 34:22 (KJV)

She did not go running that morning.

She sat on a sawhorse in the barn with a cup of coffee and watched him paint. He worked with a two-inch flat brush and a can of deep red enamel, kneeling on a folded moving blanket, the way he had worked his whole life. She had not watched him letter since she was a girl. She had forgotten what it was like.

He did not hurry. He did not use a straightedge or a template. He loaded the brush, wiped it against the rim of the can, and pulled it down the chalk line in one long, steady stroke, thick and even. Then he lifted it and turned it and came back up thin as a hair. Down thick. Up thin. Every letter. His hand had been shaking for three weeks. It was not shaking now.

Thick on the way down, Junie. Thin on the way up. That's how Daddy does it.

She watched him for three hours. Neither of them said a word.

Some time after eight o'clock, she noticed that she had been holding her coffee cup without drinking it for a long time. She noticed that her eyes were wet. She did not know when that had started. She set the cup down on the workbench and went back into the house before he could see.

They hung it at two in the morning on Monday, in a hard, still cold, nine degrees under a sky full of stars.

They were not alone this time. They had not been alone for weeks.

The night shift was on duty at the foot of the hill, eleven of them, in folding chairs wrapped in blankets beside the long line of candles. When Silas's nephew's flatbed pulled onto the shoulder with the three new panels, they got up without being asked. Bud Tackett's linemen set up the bucket truck and the lights. The bikers from Dayton handed panels up to the lift. Two retired nurses from Wilmington stood at the bottom of the hill with a thermos of coffee and a box of Waverly's biscuits.

Juniper stood beside them in her father's spare barn coat, which was three sizes too big for her. She watched him ride the lift basket up into the floodlights with the impact driver in his hand. She was terrified the whole time. She did not say so.

At two-forty, while they were bolting up the last panel, one of the volunteers began to sing.

It was one of the retired nurses, a heavyset woman named Bernice from Wilmington. She did not sing loudly. She sang the way you sing to yourself in the kitchen when you think nobody is listening. It was an old hymn, the one they sang at every funeral in Clinton County.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me ...

The other nurse joined her. Then one of the bikers, a big man with a gray ponytail and a voice like a cello. Then Bud Tackett, from the bucket truck. Then the linemen, and the night shift, and Silas Quenby at the controls of the lift. He did not usually sing, and he sang now in a cracked old baritone with his eyes fixed on the basket forty feet above him.

I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

Up in the basket, Zeke Thornefield drove the last bolt and stopped. He held on to the rail and looked down at them. There were fifteen people in the frozen dark at the foot of a billboard on the side of an interstate, singing.

Juniper did not sing. She had not sung that hymn since her mother's funeral.

But she did not stop them, either.

> "For thou wilt light my candle: the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness." — Psalm 18:28 (KJV)

Ottilie Mercerfield read it at five-sixteen in the morning, from her lawn chair, through her cataracts, moving her lips.

YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM THE TRUTH. — JESUS

She read it twice. Then she folded her small spotted hands in her lap and bowed her head.

"Oh, Lord," she whispered. "Here it comes."

Tamsin Vale read it from the passenger seat of Waverly Pike's Oldsmobile at five-forty, on the way to the diner, the way she had read the others.

She did not say anything. She did not make a sound. But Waverly, glancing over, saw the girl's hand go to her throat, to the chain under her shirt. She saw it close around something there and hold on.

Waverly did not say anything either. She drove on to the diner. She unlocked the door and turned on the lights and the grill and the coffee makers. She did the whole morning rush, a hundred and forty covers. Tamsin worked beside her without speaking, with her face white and set.

At two-thirty in the afternoon, in the lull before the supper crowd, Waverly turned the sign on the door to CLOSED. She took off her apron and hung it on the hook. Then she took Tamsin by the hand and walked her out to the Oldsmobile.

"Where are we going?" said Tamsin.

"Home," said Waverly. "You've got something you need to show me. And I don't think it ought to wait another day."

Tamsin looked at her. Then she looked south, toward the interstate, toward the far white rectangle on the hill.

She got in the car.

> "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" — Esther 4:14 (KJV)

They watched it at Waverly's kitchen table, on her grandson's old laptop, with the blinds drawn and the door locked.

Tamsin's hands shook so badly she could not get the flash drive into the port. Waverly took it from her gently and did it herself. One file. A date in April. 11:47 PM.

"I worked for him for two years," Tamsin said. She was not looking at the screen. She was looking at her hands. "Warren Hale. I was his executive assistant. I ran his calendar, his house, his travel, everything. He had a big place in Indian Hill, on the river. Six bedrooms. Security cameras everywhere, inside and out. He was a strange man. Kind of sad. Nervous. He drank a lot, at night, alone. He was always looking over his shoulder." She swallowed. "He and Mr. Blackmere had been partners for twenty-five years. Real estate. Hotels. Mr. Blackmere put up the money and Mr. Hale did the deals. They were building something together in Clinton County. Blackmere Crossing. Mr. Hale had sunk everything into it."

Waverly reached across the table and took her hand.

"That spring, something changed," Tamsin said. "Mr. Hale started having trouble sleeping. He started going to church. A little Methodist church in Madeira, by himself, on Wednesday nights. He started saying things. Strange things. That he'd done something terrible a long time ago, for Mr. Blackmere. Something he'd never told anybody. That he couldn't carry it anymore." Her voice dropped. "He told me once, late, when he'd been drinking, that he'd made a car disappear. Twenty years ago. A black car. He said he'd had it crushed at a scrapyard he owned in Columbus, with something still on the hood. And a boy went to prison because of it. And he'd never been able to forget."

Waverly's hand tightened on hers.

"The night of April twenty-third, I was working late. I was in the little office off the kitchen. He'd asked me to finish some travel arrangements. He thought I'd gone home. I heard the front gate open at eleven-thirty. I heard voices. Mr. Blackmere's voice. I knew it. And another man's." She finally looked at the laptop. "I didn't go out. I was scared. But the office had a monitor for the security system. I could see the cameras."

She reached out and pressed the space bar.

The video began to play.

It was a security camera feed, slightly fish-eyed, in black and white. It showed a large, handsome room with a stone fireplace and leather chairs and a wall of windows looking out on dark water. There was a time stamp in the corner. 23:47:12.

Three men were in the room.

One was a heavyset man in his sixties in a cardigan sweater, standing by the fireplace with a drink in his hand. Warren Hale. His back was to the camera, then he turned, and his face was gray and frightened.

One was a tall, lean, silver-haired man in a camel-hair overcoat, standing in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets. Even in grainy black and white, even with no sound, Waverly knew him at once. She had seen him at the Rotary and the bank and the Christmas parade every year for thirty years.

The third man stood by the door. He was perhaps forty, fit, in a dark quarter-zip pullover. He did not move.

There was no sound. Tamsin had copied only the video. But there did not need to be sound.

Warren Hale was talking. He was agitated. He set his drink down on the mantel so hard that it spilled. He was gesturing, pointing at Sterling Blackmere, shaking his head. At one point he took something out of his pocket, a cell phone, and held it up. He was jabbing at it with his finger, saying something over and over.

Sterling Blackmere did not move. He stood with his hands in his pockets and listened. His face showed nothing at all.

Then, at 23:49:31, Sterling Blackmere turned his head very slightly toward the man by the door, and nodded once.

The man in the quarter-zip crossed the room in four steps. He took the phone out of Warren Hale's hand. Hale reached for it. The man shoved him, hard, with both hands flat on his chest.

Warren Hale went backward. His heel caught the edge of the stone hearth. He fell, and the back of his head struck the corner of the raised fireplace. His whole body jerked once. Then it lay still on the floor, with one arm flung out across the rug.

Nobody moved for a long time.

Then the man in the quarter-zip crouched down and put two fingers against Hale's throat. He looked up at Sterling Blackmere. He shook his head.

Sterling Blackmere stood in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets and looked down at the body of the man who had been his partner for twenty-five years. His face did not change. After a long moment he took one hand out of his pocket. He took a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his mouth with it, carefully, and put it back. Then he said something to the man in the quarter-zip, a few words. The man nodded.

The video ended at 23:52:08.

The kitchen was very quiet. The refrigerator hummed.

"I copied it off the system," Tamsin whispered. "Right then. With my hands shaking. Before they could find the recorder. Onto a flash drive I had in my purse for work. I could hear them in the other room. The other man, carrying something heavy. I went out the back door, through the kitchen, through the garden. I didn't take my car. I walked four miles to the bus station in the dark. By morning the whole recording system had been wiped. The police called it a disappearance. They said he'd been depressed and drinking. That he'd probably gone into the river. His car was found at a boat ramp in Kentucky two days later."

She looked up at Waverly with her face white and wet.

"And they wanted to question me. Because I disappeared the same night. Because I was the last person who saw him. Because Mr. Blackmere told the police I'd been stealing from Mr. Hale and that they'd argued." She pressed her hands over her face. "I've been running ever since. Seven months. I couldn't go to the police in Cincinnati. Mr. Blackmere plays golf with the county prosecutor. I couldn't go to anybody. Who would believe me? A waitress with a fake name, against Sterling Blackmere?"

Waverly Pike sat at her kitchen table for a long time without saying anything.

Then she got up, and came around the table, and put her arms around the girl, and held on.

"Honey," she said into Tamsin's hair. "I believe you. And so does He." She pulled back and held the girl's face in her two rough hands. "And now we're going to find somebody else who will."

> "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them ... But all things that are reproved are made manifest by the light." — Ephesians 5:11, 13 (KJV)

Waverly called Zeke at four o'clock. Zeke handed the phone to Juniper.

Juniper Thornefield was at Waverly's kitchen table by four-thirty, in a navy suit she had not worn in two weeks. She had a yellow legal pad in front of her, and the laptop turned toward her. She watched the video twice without a word, with her pen not moving. When it ended the second time, she sat back in her chair and took off her reading glasses and was quiet for a long moment.

Then she looked across the table at the thin, dark-haired girl who was trying very hard not to cry.

"What's your name?" said Juniper. "Your real name."

Tamsin looked at her for a long time.

Then she told her. It was the first time she had said it out loud in seven months. Her voice cracked in the middle of it, like a board giving way.

Juniper wrote it down at the top of the legal pad.

"All right," she said quietly. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to be your lawyer. Pro bono. You don't pay me anything, ever. Anything you say to me from this moment on is privileged. Nobody can make me tell it." She tapped the laptop. "This is evidence of a homicide. Maybe a murder. It's also

the best evidence I have ever seen in my life. Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, you and I are going to drive to Cincinnati. We're going to walk into the FBI field office together. We're going to sit down across the table from a Special Agent named Dana Whitfield. And you're going to tell her everything you just told Waverly. And I'm going to be sitting right next to you the whole time."

Tamsin stared at her. "The FBI?"

"The FBI. Not the county. Not the city. Not anybody Sterling Blackmere plays golf with." Juniper closed her legal pad. "They'll want the original drive. They'll make a forensic copy. We'll keep a copy too, somewhere nobody can reach it. Maribel Sloane taught me that."

"And then what?"

Juniper looked at her for a long moment. Something in her hard lawyer's face softened just slightly.

"And then you stop running," she said. "That's what."

> "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." — Joshua 1:9 (KJV)

Chief Brantley Voss saw the third message at six-twenty-two that morning.

He had stopped changing his route. There did not seem to be any point. He came up the long grade in the left lane at seventy-four miles an hour with his coffee in the cupholder. He looked up, the way he looked up every morning now, the way a man touches a sore tooth with his tongue.

YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM THE TRUTH.

He did not swerve. He did not stop. He drove to work.

At ten-fifteen, two people walked into the Mercy Ridge Police Department and asked to see him.

One was a calm, compact woman in her forties with short graying hair and a dark pantsuit. She showed Marge a badge in a leather folder. Special Agent Dana Whitfield, Federal Bureau of Investigation. The other was a tall, thin man from the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation with a briefcase and a face like a closed door.

Voss met them in his office. He shook their hands. He offered them coffee. They declined.

"Chief Voss," said Agent Whitfield pleasantly, "we're here about two matters. The first is a series of threatening letters sent through the U.S. mail to a resident of your jurisdiction, Mr. Ezekiel Thornefield. His daughter tells me she filed a report with you last week, and that you sent the originals to the state lab." She opened a notebook. "The state lab tells me they never received them."

Voss said nothing.

"The second matter," said Agent Whitfield, in the same pleasant voice, "is the death of a Mr. Walter Briggs, of Grove City, at Mile Marker 52 on November twenty-second. I understand the county coroner ruled it a cardiac event. I understand he did so without an autopsy, at your request." She turned a page.

"Yesterday a federal magistrate in Cincinnati signed an order for the exhumation of Mr. Briggs's body and a full forensic autopsy. It'll be done in Columbus on Wednesday."

The room was very quiet.

"We'll also need the complete case file for State of Ohio versus Gideon A. Kestrel," said the man from the BCI. He set a document on the desk. "This is a subpoena. Including the evidence logs. Including the scene photographs."

Voss looked at the subpoena on his desk for a long time.

"Who," he said finally, very quietly, "gave you the tow ticket?"

Agent Whitfield looked at him with her calm gray eyes and said nothing at all.

She did not need to. Voss already knew.

He found Rafe Dunning in the evidence room in the basement at eleven-thirty, alone, with a box of old files.

The young deputy looked up when the door opened, and saw who it was, and stood up. He did not look away. His freckled face was very pale. But he did not look away.

"You went to the FBI," said Voss.

"Yes, sir."

"Behind my back."

"Yes, sir." Rafe's voice shook, but it held. "You told me to write up a man with drag marks on his heels as a heart attack, sir. You told me to bury a note and a business card and a date. You took a tow ticket out of a dead man's coat lining, or you would have, if Thad Bellamy had given it to you." He swallowed. "And then I saw a picture of you, Chief. Twenty years ago. On that hill. With your hand on Gideon Kestrel's shoulder. Four months before you testified you'd never laid eyes on him."

Brantley Voss stood in the doorway of the evidence room.

"I looked up to you, sir," said Rafe Dunning. His eyes were wet. "My whole life. You coached my Little League team. You came to my dad's funeral. You're the reason I wanted to be a cop." He stopped. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do. You can fire me. I'll understand."

Voss looked at the young man for a long time. At his open, honest, frightened face. At the box of old files on the table.

I was like that once.

"I'm not going to fire you, Rafe," he said at last. His voice came out very tired. "You did your job." He turned to go. Then he stopped, with his hand on the door frame, and did not look back. "You did it better than I ever did mine."

He went back upstairs.

"Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom." — Psalm 51:6 (KJV)

Maribel Sloane called him at two o'clock.

She was very polite. She told him that Harbinger was preparing to publish a story about the conviction of Gideon Kestrel. It would include a photograph from the Wilmington News Journal showing him, Sterling Blackmere, and Kestrel together on the hill at Mile Marker 52, four months before the accident. It would include his sworn testimony that he had never met Kestrel. It would include a tow ticket for a black BMW and the results of an exhumation and autopsy. She was calling to give him an opportunity to comment. The magazine's deadline was Wednesday at noon.

"Chief Voss?" she said, when he did not answer. "Are you there?"

"I'm here."

"Do you have any comment?"

He sat at his desk with the phone against his ear and looked at the small square photograph on the corner of the blotter, grainy and gray, with a white crescent in the middle. Hi Grandpa! See you Christmas Eve!

Christmas Eve was three days away.

"Not yet," said Brantley Voss. "Call me Tuesday night."

The burner phone rang at five-forty, in the gravel lot behind the county garage, in the dark.

"I understand you had visitors," said Sterling Blackmere.

Voss did not answer.

"Let me explain something to you, Brantley, so there's no confusion." The voice was very calm. "If you talk, you talk alone. I'll have six lawyers in a room by morning, and every one of them will say the same thing. A rogue police sergeant falsified evidence twenty years ago for reasons of his own. Maybe a grudge against the defendant. Maybe a bribe from someone else. I barely knew him. I certainly never asked him to do anything." A pause. "And your daughter's baby will grow up visiting her grandfather on Sundays in a room with a glass wall, at Lucasville. In the same cell block where Gideon Kestrel spent twenty years. Think about that."

Voss sat in the dark with the cheap plastic phone against his ear.

"Briggs," he said. "The night he died. Was it Pell?"

A long silence on the line.

"Good night, Brantley," said Sterling Blackmere.

The line went dead.

Voss sat there for a long time. Then he started the Tahoe and drove out of the lot. He did not drive home. He drove south on Harlan Creek Road to the new bridge over the creek, the one that had reopened three weeks ago. He stopped in the middle of it and got out and stood at the railing in the cold. The creek below was black and running fast with snowmelt.

He looked at the burner phone in his hand. It held one number. He had used it four times in nine years.

He threw it as far as he could out over the water. He did not hear it go in.

Then he drove home. He kissed his wife. He ate his supper.

Janelle watched him across the table the whole time. She had made his mother's recipe for chicken and noodles, the one she made when he had a cold or a bad day at work. She did not say anything until he had put down his fork with half of it still on the plate.

"Brant," she said quietly. "You'd tell me. Wouldn't you? If something was wrong?"

He looked at her. Thirty-four years. She had stood beside him at the Little League games and the funerals, and in the second pew every Sunday. He had held her hand in the hospital in Dayton the night Kelsey was born. She had never once asked him about the money that paid Kelsey's tuition, or why a sergeant got made chief over three men with more seniority.

He had always thought that was because she trusted him. He looked at her now across the supper table, and for the first time he wondered whether she had simply been afraid to ask.

"Soon, Jan," he said. His voice was hoarse. "I'll tell you soon. I promise."

She looked at him a long time. Then she reached across the table and put her hand over his, and did not say anything else.

At nine o'clock he went down to his den in the basement and sat in his leather chair under the commendation from the governor. He took a folded square of paper out of his breast pocket. He had taken it out of his desk drawer at the office that afternoon after Agent Whitfield left.

To the Prosecuting Attorney of Clinton County, Ohio. I, Brantley Allen Voss, Chief of Police of the City of Mercy Ridge, being of sound mind, wish to make the following statement concerning the events of the night of

He uncapped a pen.

He wrote one more line.

October 19th, twenty years ago, on Interstate 71 at Mile Marker 52.

Then he stopped, and sat for a long time with the pen in his hand and the page on his knee, in the dark, under the plaques.

But it was one more line than he had written before.

> "Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates." — Zechariah 8:16 (KJV)

At eleven-fifty that night, a dark gray sedan turned off Route 3 onto the quiet residential street on the east side of Mercy Ridge where Waverly Pike lived. It went slowly, with its headlights off, and stopped at the curb three houses down from a small white bungalow. There was an Oldsmobile in the driveway, and one light was on in the back bedroom.

The man behind the wheel was named Pell. He had been told to stop waiting.

He sat for a long time watching the window. At eleven-fifty-eight, the light in the back bedroom went out.

He waited twenty more minutes. Then he reached up and switched off his dome light. He opened the car door very quietly and stepped out into the cold.

In the back bedroom of the white bungalow, under a quilt that smelled of cedar, Tamsin Vale lay asleep with her hand closed around a small black flash drive on a chain at her throat. In nine hours she was going to walk into the FBI field office in Cincinnati and tell the truth.

Pell began to walk up the dark street toward the house.

> "He that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God." — John 3:21 (KJV)

End of Chapter 15

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 16

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

PART FOUR: THE TRUTH THAT SETS MEN FREE

Before a town can experience spiritual renewal, its darkest secrets must be brought into the light.

Chapter 16: The Sin of Silence

> "And if a soul sin, and hear the voice of swearing, and is a witness, whether he hath seen or known of it; if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity." — Leviticus 5:1 (KJV)

Pell was halfway up Waverly Pike's front walk when the porch swing creaked.

He stopped. His hand went inside his jacket.

There was a man on the swing. Pell had not seen him from the car. The porch was deep and dark, and the man had been sitting perfectly still in the shadows at the far end, wrapped in a blanket, with his hands folded in his lap. Now he leaned forward a little into the faint glow of the streetlight, and Pell saw a lean, gray, shaved head and a scar through one eyebrow.

"Evening," said Gideon Kestrel.

Pell did not answer. He stood very still on the frozen walk.

"Cold night to be out," Gideon went on, in the same mild voice. "Miss Waverly asked me to sit up with them tonight. After supper. She had a feeling. Women like her get feelings." He tilted his head. "I know you. You're the man in the gray car across from my mother's trailer. Six nights running. I waved to you Thursday. You didn't wave back."

Pell's hand stayed inside his jacket.

"I spent twenty years in Lucasville," Gideon said. "You learn things there. You learn to sit still. You learn to see in the dark. You learn what a man's hand is doing when he puts it inside his coat like that." He did not move from the swing. "I'm not armed, friend. I don't own anything but a Bible and a flannel shirt. But I've seen your face now. And I've got a real good memory for faces. Twenty years of nothing to do but remember them."

Somewhere down the street, a dog began to bark.

"And I called Deputy Dunning when you shut your dome light off," Gideon added. "About four minutes ago. He lives on Elm. That's two streets over."

At the end of the block, headlights swung around the corner. Then the blue and red strobes of a light bar came on and lit up the frozen lawns.

Pell turned and walked quickly back down the dark street to his car. He did not run. Men like Pell never ran. The gray sedan pulled away from the curb without its headlights. It was gone around the corner before the cruiser reached the house. But Rafe Dunning had been watching for that car for two weeks. He read the plate as it passed under the streetlight, and he said it out loud into his radio twice so that he would not forget it.

Gideon Kestrel sat on the porch swing with the blanket around his shoulders and his hands folded, and he did not get up. When the young deputy came running up the walk with his hand on his holster, Gideon looked up at him and smiled.

"He's gone," he said. "Sit down a minute, Deputy. You look cold." He made room on the swing. "We'll keep watch together till morning."

Inside, in the back bedroom, Tamsin Vale slept on. She never knew.

> "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."
> — Psalm 34:7 (KJV)

An hour earlier, four miles away, Juniper Thornefield had opened her grandfather's cedar chest.

She did not know why she chose that night. She had come home from Waverly's at nine with her legal pad full of notes and her head full of a black-and-white video she would never forget. She had sat at the kitchen table for an hour working out what to say to Agent Whitfield in the morning. She had gone to bed at ten-thirty. At eleven she had gotten up again.

She went down the dark hall in her socks. She opened the door of the spare room and turned on the lamp. She knelt in front of the cedar chest at the foot of the bed, the way she had knelt ten days before, and put her hand flat on the lid.

This time she lifted it.

The smell of cedar came up into her face, sharp and clean, and under it, faintly, her mother. Lavender. Jergens lotion. The smell of Sunday mornings when she was small. Her mother's best quilts lay folded inside, the wedding-ring quilt and the double star and the one with the appliqué tulips that had been on her parents' bed when Juniper was a child. She lifted them out one at a time and laid them on the bed.

At the bottom of the chest, under the last quilt, was a shoebox.

It was an ordinary shoebox, from a store in Wilmington that had closed years ago, tied around with a length of faded blue grosgrain ribbon. On the lid, in her mother's handwriting, in pencil, were two words.

FOR JUNIPER.

Juniper knelt on the braided rug with the shoebox in her lap for a long time before she untied the ribbon.

On top was a single sheet of her mother's grocery-list paper, folded once.

> Junie —
>
> If you've found this, then it's time. I've prayed a long time about when it would be time, and I've left that up to the Lord. If you're the one holding it, then I guess He decided.
>
> What's in here is going to hurt you. I'm sorry. I couldn't make it right myself. I didn't know how. I didn't have the courage. Maybe you will.
>
> Don't hate him, baby. He's carried this a long time, and it's nearly broken him. Help him put it down.
>
> I love you both more than my life.
>
> — Mama

Underneath the note were three things.

> "If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it?" — Proverbs 24:11–12 (KJV)

The first was a photograph.

It was a real photograph, a four-by-six color print from a drugstore, gone slightly orange with age. It had been taken on a bright summer day on a grassy hill. Behind it rose a billboard, freshly painted: a

big green truck rolling down a highway under a blue sky, and white letters. DRIVE SAFE, CLINTON COUNTY! — A MESSAGE FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS AT BLACKMERE FREIGHT.

In front of the billboard stood three men. A tall, silver-haired man in a light suit and sunglasses was shaking hands with a grinning young mechanic, who held a framed certificate against his chest. A big police sergeant stood on the other side with his hand on the young man's shoulder.

Juniper knew all three of them. Two of them had been on every news channel in America for a month. The third had stood at the bottom of the hill at the press conference three days ago, beside his mother, with his head bowed and his lips moving.

But that was not what made her breath stop.

Behind the three men, a painter's scaffold stood against the face of the billboard. On the scaffold, eight feet off the ground, a fourth man was standing. He had paint-spattered jeans and a sunburned neck and a long-handled lettering brush in one hand. He had turned to look down at the little ceremony below him, and he was smiling. It was a crooked, unguarded smile. She had not seen that smile since she was fourteen years old.

Her father.

On the back of the photograph, in her mother's hand: Zeke's Drive Safe board. June. So proud of him.

Juniper turned it over and looked at it again for a long time. Her father, smiling on a scaffold, in the same picture with Sterling Blackmere and Chief Voss and Gideon Kestrel. Four months before.

The second thing was a newspaper clipping. It was small, a single column from the Wilmington News Journal, dated the twentieth of October, twenty years ago.

SABINA MAN CHARGED IN FATAL I-71 CRASH. A Sabina man, twenty-five, had been arrested early Thursday morning and charged with aggravated vehicular homicide and driving under the influence, after a pedestrian was struck and killed on Interstate 71 at Mile Marker 52. The victim, Wesley Arden, thirty-one, of Sabina, had been changing a tire. The arresting officer was Sgt. Brantley Voss of the Mercy Ridge Police Department.

In the margin of the clipping, in pencil, in her mother's handwriting, small and cramped, as though she had written it quickly and in secret:

Zeke was there. He drove out to look at the Mile 52 job that night. Came home 4 a.m., mud to the ankles, white as a sheet. Sat in the barn till dawn. Won't say a word. Won't look at me. — H.

Juniper's hands had begun to shake.

The third thing was at the very bottom of the box. It was a sheet of yellow legal paper folded into quarters. When she unfolded it, she saw that it had been burned. The whole bottom third was gone, charred away into a brown, crumbling edge. The top was scorched and curled. Someone had pulled it out of a fire before the fire could finish it.

It was written in pencil, in block capitals. Thick downstrokes. Thin upstrokes.

Her father's hand.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN —

MY NAME IS EZEKIEL THORNEFIELD. I AM A SIGN PAINTER IN MERCY RIDGE. ON THE NIGHT OF OCTOBER 19 I WAS ON THE CATWALK OF THE BILLBOARD AT MILE 52 ON I-71, LOOKING AT A JOB. AT ABOUT 11:50 PM I SAW A BLACK BMW COME UP THE SHOULDER AT HIGH SPEED AND STRIKE A MAN WHO WAS CHANGING A TIRE. THE BMW WENT INTO THE DITCH NORTH OF THE SIGN. A YOUNG MAN IN A RED PICKUP STOPPED AND TRIED TO HELP THE VICTIM. HE DID NOT HIT HIM. I SAW IT. THE DRIVER OF THE BMW WAS PRESTON BLACKMERE. HE WAS DRUNK. SGT. VOSS CAME AND TALKED TO HIM. THEN SGT. VOSS MADE A PHONE CALL. STERLING BLACKMERE CAME IN A GREEN RANGE ROVER. THEY TALKED. A FLATBED TOOK THE BMW AWAY. THEN I SAW SGT. VOSS ON THE HOOD OF HIS CRUISER WITH TWO EVIDENCE BAGS, AND HE SWITCHED

That was where the burn began. Below it, there were only a few charred, broken words. ... BUMPER ... NEVER ... THE BOY IS INNOCENT ... I AM SORRY ... Then nothing but a brown, crumbling edge.

Juniper Thornefield knelt on the floor of her mother's sewing room at midnight with the half-burned page in her hands. She read it four times. She was not crying. She was past crying. She was very cold, all the way through, colder than she had ever been in her life.

Something happened when I was fourteen.

This was it. This was all of it. Her father had seen it. He had written it down. He had held the truth in his hands, in pencil, on yellow legal paper. Then he had put it in the fire, and gone to church on Sunday and sung the hymns. And a twenty-five-year-old boy had gone to Lucasville for twenty years.

And her mother had pulled it out of the fire. And kept it. And waited.

She put the page back in the box very carefully. She put the clipping and the photograph and her mother's note on top of it. She put the lid on the box. She stood up with the box in her arms and walked down the dark hall and out the back door. She crossed the frozen yard in her socks to the barn, where the light was burning.

"When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long." — Psalm 32:3 (KJV)

He was sitting on the overturned bucket in front of the painting with a brush in his hand.

He looked up when the barn door groaned. He saw her face, and he saw the box in her arms with the blue ribbon trailing from it. He saw the words on the lid. All the color went out of him.

"Junie," he said.

She walked across the barn floor and set the box down on the workbench in front of him. She took the lid off. She took out the half-burned page and held it up in front of his face.

"The boy is innocent," she read. Her voice was very quiet. "I am sorry."

He did not say anything.

"You saw it." She was still holding the page up. Her hand was shaking. "You were there. You were up on that catwalk and you saw all of it. The car. The boy. Mr. Blackmere. Chief Voss switching the bags. You saw it, Dad. And you wrote it down. You knew exactly what you were supposed to do." Her voice cracked. "And then you burned it."

"Yes," said her father.

"And Gideon Kestrel went to prison for twenty years."

"Yes."

"Twenty years. While you painted Bible verses on barns. While you taught Sunday school. While you sat in the third pew and sang Amazing Grace." She was crying now. She had sworn she would not, and she was. "Why?"

He set the brush down very slowly in the can of turpentine. He put his hands on his knees. He looked up at her. He did not look away. For the first time since she was fourteen years old, her father looked her straight in the eye and did not look away.

"Because I was afraid," he said.

He told her all of it.

He told her about the rain and the floodlights. He told her about the sound the BMW made when it hit Wesley Arden. He had heard it from forty feet up over the roar of the downpour, and he would hear it every night for the rest of his life. He told her about the young man in the red pickup who stopped and ran to help, and the blood on his hands. He told her about the drunk boy in the BMW, and the green Range Rover, and the man in the expensive raincoat who walked up the shoulder without looking at his son. He told her about the flatbed. He told her about Sergeant Voss bent over the hood of his cruiser in the rain with two evidence bags, one in each hand.

And he told her about climbing down off the catwalk, shaking so hard he could barely hold the ladder. And the big hand closing around his arm at the bottom. And the voice in his ear. Go home, Zeke. You hear me? You go on home. You were never here.

"And I went," he said. "God forgive me, I went."

He told her about the week after. He told her about sitting at the kitchen table at three in the morning with a pencil and a legal pad, writing it all down in his best block capitals. He was going to take it to the prosecutor in Wilmington. He had his coat on and his keys in his hand at six in the morning.

"Then why didn't you?"

He was quiet for a long time.

"Old Ambrose Blackmere," he said finally. "Sterling's father. You never knew him. He died when you were little." He looked down at his hands. "When I was twenty-four and your mama and I wanted to

buy this farm, no bank in Clinton County would give a sign painter a mortgage. Ambrose Blackmere did. Out of his own pocket. On a handshake. He gave me my first real job, lettering his trucks. Forty of them. He sent me every customer I had for ten years. Everything I had, this house, this barn, the business, all of it, I had because of that old man." His voice was rough. "And the boy in that BMW was his grandson. Preston. I'd painted his name on a Little League banner. I'd watched him grow up."

Juniper stood very still.

"I told myself I couldn't do that to Ambrose," her father said. "I told myself he was an old man, and it would kill him. I told myself the boy was nineteen and drunk and stupid, and he hadn't meant it. I told myself it would be my word against a police sergeant's, and nobody would believe a sign painter." He shook his head slowly. "I told myself that the young fella in the pickup had a lawyer, and he'd get off. That the jury would see the truth. That it wasn't my business. That God would sort it out."

"And then?"

"And then he didn't get off. And by then it had been eight months. And I'd waited too long. And every day I waited, it got harder to go." He closed his eyes. "And then Ambrose died, the next spring. And Preston died in Arizona the year after, of the drugs. And I told myself, well, now it doesn't matter. Now there's nobody left to hurt but Brantley Voss and Sterling. And the boy in prison would be out in a few years anyway." He laughed, and it was a terrible sound. "A few years. Twenty, Junie. Twenty years."

He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"I put that paper in the woodstove the morning I was going to take it to Wilmington. I had my coat on. Your mama came in the kitchen and saw me standing there watching it burn. She didn't say anything. She just looked at me." His voice broke. "I didn't know she'd pulled it out. I never knew. I thought it was gone."

He bowed his head.

"I've been afraid my whole life," he said. "Afraid of Brantley. Afraid of Sterling. Afraid of losing this farm. Afraid of what people would say. Afraid of what God would say. I painted Jesus on a billboard for the whole world to see, and I put I know what you did on it. And every single morning I drove past it and thought, that's for them. That's for Brantley and Sterling." He was weeping now, openly, with his big paint-stained hands hanging between his knees. "It was never for them. It was for me. It was always for me. He knew what I did. He's known every day for twenty years. And He's been standing on that hill with His arms out, waiting for me to come home."

Juniper Thornefield stood in the cold barn and looked at her father.

She had imagined this moment for fifteen years. She had rehearsed it. She had cross-examined him a thousand times in her head, in the shower, on the lakefront at five in the morning. In every version she was cold and precise and devastating, and he had no answer.

She had not imagined this. Her father on an overturned bucket, sixty-eight years old, weeping like a child, with all of it finally out of him and lying on the barn floor between them.

She had nothing to say. Every word she had rehearsed was gone.

So she did the only thing she could think of. She knelt down on the dusty floor in front of him and put her arms around his neck.

He made a sound she had never heard a man make. Then his arms came around her, and he held on to her the way a drowning man holds on to a rope, and the two of them knelt there on the barn floor and wept. Above them, the painted Christ held out His unfinished hands.

> "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." — Psalm 32:5 (KJV)

It was nearly three in the morning when she spoke again.

They were sitting side by side on the barn floor with their backs against the workbench and an old moving blanket around their shoulders. The shoebox was between them. The half-burned page lay on top of it.

"You have to tell him," Juniper said quietly. "Gideon. Before anybody else. Before the FBI. Before Maribel. Before me, even, really." She looked at her father. "You have to tell him first. To his face."

"I know." He was looking up at the painting. "I tried. On the hill. The day he came home. He sat me down in Ottilie's chair and put his hand on my knee and told me he saw a flashlight on the catwalk that night. He said he'd always wondered about the person up there. He said he'd forgiven them." Zeke's voice was hoarse. "And I sat there with it in my mouth, Junie. Right there. And it wouldn't come out."

"It came out tonight."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Yes," he said. "It did." He looked down at the half-burned page. "Your mama knew I'd need it someday. Didn't she."

"She knew." Juniper picked up her mother's note and read it again. Help him put it down. "She knew all of it. And she waited. Five years she lived with it, and she never forced you. She just prayed. And kept it." She folded the note. "And then she gave it to me."

They sat there a while longer.

"I want to go now," her father said. "Tonight. Before I lose my nerve. Before the sun comes up and I start telling myself all the reasons to wait."

Juniper looked at her watch. "It's three in the morning, Dad."

"He told me in prison he never slept past four. Twenty years of counts." Zeke pushed himself up off the floor, slowly, holding on to the workbench. "I'll sit in the truck outside his mother's trailer till his light comes on. I've kept him waiting twenty years. I can wait an hour."

He held out his hand to her.

She looked at it for a moment. A big, rough, paint-stained hand, shaking a little. The hand that had lettered every Blackmere truck in Clinton County and painted a twelve-foot Good Shepherd on the wall of the chapel's children's wing. The hand that had written the truth in pencil, and then put it in the fire. The hand that had painted the face of Christ forty feet high on a hill.

She took it, and let him help her up.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

> "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." — Matthew 5:23–24 (KJV)

The light came on in the trailer on Lytle Road at four-oh-six.

Zeke had been sitting in the truck at the end of the gravel drive for fifty minutes with the engine off, in the dark, in the cold. Juniper sat beside him with the shoebox in her lap. Neither of them had said a word. When the yellow square of the kitchen window lit up, her father sat very still for a long moment. Then he opened the truck door.

"You want me to come?" Juniper said.

"No," said her father. "This one's mine."

She watched him walk up the drive in the gray dark, slowly, an old man in a barn coat. She watched him climb the treated-lumber ramp to the door under the blue aluminum awning, past the hand-painted sign. JESUS LIVES HERE. SO DOES RUBY. She watched him stand there with his hand raised for a long time before he knocked.

The door opened. Gideon Kestrel stood in it, in a flannel shirt and sock feet, with a cup of coffee in his hand. He had come home from Waverly Pike's porch an hour before. He looked down at the old man on his ramp.

Juniper could not hear what they said. She could only watch.

She saw her father's mouth moving. She saw his hands come up, open, empty, the way a man holds out his hands to show he has nothing in them. She saw him talk for a long time. She saw his shoulders begin to shake. She saw him stop, and drop his head, and stand there on the ramp with his hands still held out.

Gideon Kestrel set his coffee cup down on the porch rail.

He came out onto the ramp in his sock feet in the cold. He took the old man's two outstretched hands in his own two hands, and held them. He stood there holding them for a long moment, looking at Zeke. Then he said something. Juniper saw his lips move. It was not long. Four or five words.

Then he pulled her father into his arms.

Juniper Thornefield sat in her father's truck at four-fifteen in the morning at the end of a gravel drive on Lytle Road. She watched the man her father had let rot in prison for twenty years hold him on a wooden ramp under a hand-painted sign while he wept. She put her face down on her mother's shoebox and cried in a way she had not cried since she was nineteen years old.

Later, on the way home, with the sky going gray in the east, she asked him what Gideon had said.

Her father was quiet for a long time. He drove with both hands on the wheel. His face was wet and very calm.

"He said, I know. I knew on the hill." Zeke swallowed. "He said he saw my hands shaking when he held them. And he knew. And he'd been praying every night since that I'd come." He was quiet a moment more. "And then he said, Welcome home, Mr. Thornefield."

> "And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." — Luke 15:21 (KJV)

At nine o'clock that morning, in the FBI field office in Cincinnati, Special Agent Dana Whitfield sat across a conference table from two women. One was a thin, dark-haired girl with a flash drive on a chain around her neck. The other was a lawyer in a navy suit with a yellow legal pad and a shoebox tied with blue ribbon.

At eleven-thirty, when the girl had finished telling her story and the video had been played three times, the lawyer opened the shoebox. She laid out a photograph, a newspaper clipping, and a half-burned sheet of yellow legal paper on the table.

"This is a statement by my father," said Juniper Thornefield. "Written twenty years ago. Never delivered." She slid it across the table. "He's waiting in the lobby. He'd like to finish it. Today. On the record. Under oath."

Agent Whitfield looked at the half-burned page for a long time. Then she looked up.

"Bring him in," she said.

That night, Zeke Thornefield went out to the barn at ten o'clock, the way he had gone out every night for six weeks.

He did not sit on the bucket. He did not stare at the empty hands.

He went to the workbench. He opened a can of oil paint he had mixed that afternoon, a warm, deep flesh tone with a little burnt sienna in it. He opened a second can, smaller, of a dark, rich crimson. He chose a brush, a fine sable round he had not used in twenty years. He went to the painting and pulled the bucket up close and sat down in front of it. Juniper sat on a sawhorse behind him with her coffee, the way she had sat when she was small.

He looked up at the face for a long moment. The eyes looked back at him. Knowing. Unflinching. Glad he had come.

Then he lifted the brush. His hand was perfectly steady.

He began with the left hand.

He painted it the way he had painted everything else, slowly and carefully, with love. He painted the long fingers of a carpenter. He painted the calluses at the base of each finger, and the broad palm, open, held out to whoever was standing in front of it. He painted it reaching toward them the way a father reaches when a child comes running up the road.

And in the center of the palm, inside the small penciled circle that had waited there empty for twenty years, he painted the wound.

He painted it small and dark and terrible, the way it must have been. Not pretty. Not stylized. A wound. The mark of a nail driven through a man's hand. Driven there for the man in the black car, and the sergeant with the evidence bags, and the businessman in the raincoat. Driven there for the sign painter on the catwalk who climbed down and went home and kept silent for twenty years.

When he finished the left hand, he sat back and looked at it for a long time. Then he began the right.

It was nearly two in the morning when he set the brush down.

Juniper had not moved from the sawhorse. She came and stood beside her father and looked up at the painting.

The face. The eyes. The open arms. And the hands, finished at last, held out, with the wounds in the palms.

> "Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." — John 20:27 (KJV)

"Mama said to paint them for you," Juniper said softly. "In the letter."

"I know," said her father. His voice was barely a whisper. "I couldn't. Not till tonight." He was looking at the wounds in the painted palms. "Thirty years, I thought I had to be clean enough to paint them. Good enough. Worthy." He shook his head slowly. "That was never it, Junie. That's what she was trying to tell me. Nobody's clean enough. That's why He has them."

> "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me." — Isaiah 49:16 (KJV)

End of Chapter 16

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 17

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 17: Confessions in the Dark

> "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." — James 5:16 (KJV)

Special Agent Dana Whitfield called Chief Brantley Voss at four-ten on Tuesday afternoon.

She did not waste words. She never did. She told him that she had spent the morning taking a sworn statement from Ezekiel Thornefield. She told him what was in it: a black BMW, a drunk nineteen-year-old named Preston Blackmere, a green Range Rover, a flatbed tow truck, and a police sergeant on the hood of his cruiser with two evidence bags. She told him that Mr. Thornefield had also provided a partial written statement, dated twenty years ago, that said the same things. She told him that Walter Briggs's body would be exhumed in the morning. She told him that the Bureau had additional evidence concerning Sterling Blackmere, which she was not at liberty to describe.

"I'd like you to come to Cincinnati tomorrow morning at ten, Chief," she said. "With counsel, if you have it. I think you'd be wise to have it."

Voss sat at his desk with the phone against his ear. He looked out his office window at Main Street, at the Christmas wreaths on the lampposts and the lights strung across the street between the bank and the hardware store.

"Am I under arrest?" he said.

"Not today," said Agent Whitfield. "Tomorrow, that depends a great deal on you." There was a pause. "I've been doing this twenty-two years, Chief Voss. I've learned that how a man walks into my office matters. Whether he comes on his own or whether we come to get him. Whether he brings the truth with him or makes us dig it out of him one shovel at a time." Another pause. "Ten o'clock. I'll be waiting."

She hung up.

At six-forty, Maribel Sloane called. She was polite, as always. She reminded him that Harbinger's deadline was noon tomorrow. She told him that she now had a sworn statement from an eyewitness, and that she would be naming him. She asked whether he had any comment.

"Not yet," said Brantley Voss. "Call me in the morning."

At seven-fifteen, his phone rang a third time. It was Kelsey's husband, Mark. He sounded out of breath.

"Mr. Voss? It's happening. Her water broke an hour ago. Two days early. We're at Miami Valley. She's asking for you and Mrs. Voss."

> "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." — Psalm 139:23–24 (KJV)

Pastor Callan Whitlock had been looking for Hollis Fenwick for nine days.

Hollis had not come to church. He had not answered his phone. His apartment over the laundromat in Sabina was dark every night. His landlord said he had not paid December's rent. His mother in Hillsboro had not heard from him since Thanksgiving. His girlfriend, Abby, now his ex-girlfriend, said she had blocked his number in August. She did not want to know.

Callan had looked for him every day. He had driven to Sabina and knocked on the apartment door. He had driven to Hillsboro and sat in Hollis's mother's kitchen and held her hand while she cried. He had driven the back roads around Wilmington looking for a white Corolla. He had prayed for him, or tried to. He had sat in his office with his head in his hands, saying the young man's name over and over, because no other words would come.

It was Elowen who found him, in the end.

She had come home on Saturday, as she had promised. They had not talked about her leaving, or about the unfinished note in his wallet. They had been very gentle with each other, the way you are gentle with someone who has been sick. On Tuesday night at seven-thirty, she was driving home from the Kroger in Wilmington. She passed the Dollar General on Route 68 and saw a white Corolla parked alone at the far end of the empty lot, behind the dumpster, with its engine running and its windows fogged.

She called Callan from the parking lot.

He was there in eleven minutes. He would not remember the drive.

Elowen was standing beside the Corolla in the cold with her phone in her hand and her face white. The driver's door was open. Hollis Fenwick was slumped sideways across the front seat with his head against the passenger door. His lips were blue. His chest was not moving. There was a syringe on the floorboard beside his foot.

"I called 911," Elowen said. Her voice was shaking. "They said eight minutes. Cal, he's not breathing. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

Callan knelt in the open door of the car.

For a moment he could not move. He had knelt beside a hundred hospital beds. He had prayed over the dying and anointed them with oil and held their hands. He had never knelt beside a boy who was dying right in front of him in a Dollar General parking lot, with blue lips and a needle on the floor.

Then something came back to him. It was a training session two years ago in the fellowship hall, a lady from the county health department with a little nasal spray in a white box. Every church should have these, Pastor. You never know. He had nodded politely, put the box in the glove compartment of his car, and never thought about it again.

He ran to his car. He tore open the glove compartment. It was there, under the registration and the owner's manual.

He did not remember how to use it. He read the instructions on the box by the light of the dome lamp with his hands shaking so badly he could barely hold it. He tilted Hollis's head back. He put the nozzle in his nose. He pressed the plunger.

Nothing happened.

He knelt in the frozen gravel beside the car, holding the young man's limp hand, and waited. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty.

And Callan Whitlock began to pray.

Not the way he had prayed for twelve years. Not Heavenly Father, we just lift up. Not anything he had learned in seminary. He did not choose the words. They came up out of him from somewhere he had not been in a very long time, raw and loud and ragged, in a voice that did not sound like his own.

"God. God, please. Please. Don't let him die. Not like this. Not in a parking lot. Not because I didn't do anything. I saw it. I saw it for months and I didn't do anything. I gave him a vacation. I gave him a vacation, God. He was dying and I gave him time off because it was easier than helping him." He was sobbing now. "This is my fault. Not his. Mine. I'm supposed to be his shepherd. I let him walk out the door. Please. Please. Take me instead if You have to. But don't let him die. Please, God. Please."

Hollis Fenwick gasped.

It was a horrible sound, a great ragged sucking breath like a man coming up from the bottom of a lake. His whole body jerked. His eyes flew open. He stared up at Callan without recognizing him. Then he turned his head and vomited onto the floor of the car, and gasped again, and began to cough. And he was breathing.

Somewhere down Route 68, a siren was coming.

Callan knelt in the gravel with Hollis's hand in both of his, weeping, and could not stop.

> "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?" — Luke 15:4 (KJV)

Miami Valley Hospital in Dayton was an hour and ten minutes from Mercy Ridge. Brantley Voss made it in fifty-one minutes, with Janelle beside him in the passenger seat gripping the armrest and praying out loud.

The labor and delivery waiting room on the fourth floor was nearly empty at nine o'clock on a Tuesday night two days before Christmas. A young father was asleep in a chair in the corner with his mouth open. A small artificial Christmas tree on a side table blinked red and green. A television on the wall was tuned to a cable news channel with the sound off.

Mark came out to see them at nine-twenty, in scrubs, grinning and terrified. Kelsey was fine. The baby was fine. It was going to be a while. Hours, probably. The doctor said maybe morning. They could see her for a minute, one at a time, and then they would have to wait.

Janelle went first. Voss stood alone in the waiting room in his overcoat with his hands in his pockets, looking at the blinking Christmas tree.

The television on the wall was showing the billboard.

He did not want to look at it. He looked. It was the clip of Ezekiel Thornefield standing on the hill in his barn coat, holding up the plastic bags. Then the camera cut to the face of Jesus above him, forty feet high. Then it panned down to the red words.

YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM THE TRUTH.

Janelle came back. Her eyes were wet and shining. "She's so beautiful, Brant. She's so tired and so beautiful. Go on in. She's asking for you."

He did not move.

Janelle looked at him. Thirty-four years. She knew every expression his face could make. She had sat across from it at ten thousand suppers.

"Brant," she said. "What is it?"

"Sit down, Jan," he said. His voice did not sound like his own. "Please. I need to tell you something. And I need to tell you before I go in there and look at my daughter."

He told her everything.

He told her in a hospital waiting room on the fourth floor of Miami Valley Hospital, at nine-thirty on a Tuesday night, two days before Christmas. A Christmas tree blinked beside them and a young father slept in the corner. He did not look away from her. He did not soften it. He did not leave anything out.

He told her about the rain and the floodlights and the tan Buick. He told her about the young man with bloody hands doing chest compressions in the gravel. He told her about the drunk boy in the BMW, and the phone call, and the green Range Rover, and the four minutes with their backs to the highway. Old Chief Harlan's retiring in three years. Your daughter. Kelsey, isn't it. She'll want to go to college someday.

He told her about the evidence bags on the hood of his cruiser. He told her about the blood test that got lost and the one that did not. He told her about the trial, and the testimony, and never laid eyes on him before in my life. He told her about the nine unopened letters in the gun safe and the one he had finally opened. He told her about Walter Briggs. He told her about the burner phone at the bottom of Harlan Creek. He told her about Gideon Kestrel walking into his office two weeks ago and saying I forgive you.

He told her that Kelsey's college tuition had come from Sterling Blackmere. That the chief's job had come from Sterling Blackmere. That the down payment on the house on Cobblestone Court had come, in a roundabout way that no one would ever be able to trace, from Sterling Blackmere.

He told her that tomorrow morning at ten o'clock he was expected at the FBI field office in Cincinnati.

When he was done, he stopped talking. He sat with his big hands hanging between his knees and waited.

Janelle Voss did not say anything for a very long time.

She sat beside him in the plastic waiting room chair with her hands folded in her lap and her face perfectly still. She looked at the blinking Christmas tree. She looked at the young father asleep in the corner. She looked at the silent television, where the face on the billboard was still looking out at both of them.

Then she turned and looked at her husband.

"Twenty years," she said quietly.

"Yes."

"You let that boy sit in prison for twenty years. For our house. For your badge. For Kelsey's tuition." Her voice did not rise. It did not break. "You stood beside me in church every Sunday for twenty years and sang the hymns."

"Yes."

"I asked you." Her eyes filled. "Do you remember? The year they made you chief. I asked you how you got it over Dale Tilson and the Morrow boy, when they'd both been there longer. And you said Mr. Blackmere put in a good word. And I let it go. I let it go, Brant, because I didn't want to know." She pressed her hand over her mouth. "God forgive me, I didn't want to know."

He could not speak.

She sat there for a long time with her hand over her mouth and the tears running down her face. Then, slowly, she lowered her hand. She wiped her face with the back of it, the way she had done when Kelsey was small and had scraped her knee, and she needed to be strong for her.

"You're going to tell them," she said. "Tomorrow. All of it. Everything you just told me. You're not going to leave out one word."

"Yes."

"And you're going to tell Kelsey. Not tonight. Not with the baby coming. But soon. Before she hears it on the news. You're going to sit down with her and tell her yourself."

"Yes."

"And I'm going to be sitting right beside you." Janelle took his hand. Her grip was very hard. "Tomorrow, in Cincinnati. And with Kelsey. And in court, if it comes to that. And on visiting days, if it comes to that." Her voice shook. "I don't know if I can forgive you, Brantley. I don't know yet. I'm going to have to ask God to help me with that, because I can't do it by myself. But I'm not going to let you do this alone." She squeezed his hand so hard it hurt. "That's not what thirty-four years means."

Brantley Voss put his face down on his wife's hand and wept.

> "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness ... For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me ... Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." — Psalm 51:1, 3, 10 (KJV)

The emergency department at Clinton Memorial in Wilmington was bright and loud and smelled of disinfectant. Callan sat in a plastic chair in the hallway outside Hollis Fenwick's curtained bay for four hours, and did not move.

The doctor had come out at nine-fifteen. Hollis was going to live. The naloxone had worked, barely. Another two minutes, maybe three, and it would not have. He would be admitted overnight for observation and then, if he agreed, transferred to a treatment facility in Dayton. A social worker would talk to him in the morning.

"Are you family?" the doctor asked.

Callan opened his mouth to say no, I'm his pastor.

"Yes," he said instead.

At eleven o'clock, Hollis's mother arrived from Hillsboro. She fell into Callan's arms in the hallway and sobbed. She went into the curtained bay and he heard her weeping, and her son weeping with her. At midnight, a nurse brought him a cup of terrible coffee and a blanket. At twelve-thirty, Elowen came back from the house with a change of clothes for him and sat down in the plastic chair beside him and took his hand.

They sat there a long time without talking.

"You prayed," she said finally, very quietly. "In the parking lot. I heard you."

"I know."

"Cal." She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were wet. "That was him. That was the man I married. The one who prays like he's talking to someone sitting at the kitchen table." Her voice broke. "I haven't heard that voice in five years. I'd started to think he was gone."

Callan did not answer. He could not.

At one o'clock in the morning, the curtain of the bay slid back, and Hollis's mother came out. She was exhausted and swollen-eyed. "He's asking for you, Pastor," she said.

Callan went in.

Hollis lay in the narrow hospital bed with an IV in his arm and oxygen tubes in his nose. He looked very young and very gray. His eyes were open. When Callan came in, they filled with tears.

"Pastor," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so ashamed."

Callan pulled a chair up beside the bed and sat down and took the young man's hand. It was cold and thin, with the IV taped to the back of it.

"No, Hollis," he said. "I'm the one who's sorry."

Hollis stared at him.

"I knew," Callan said. "For months. I smelled the peppermint. I saw your hands. I found you on the floor of the choir room. And I sent you home on vacation because it was easier than doing what I was

supposed to do." His voice cracked. "I wasn't your pastor, Hollis. I was your manager. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You deserved a shepherd. You got a man with a whiteboard."

The young man in the bed began to cry.

Callan held his hand and did not let go. After a while, without planning to, without deciding to, he bowed his head and began to pray out loud again. He did not pray the way he had prayed in the parking lot, in terror. He did not pray the way he had prayed for twelve years, in the smooth, worn, empty words. He prayed the way Elowen had described in the kitchen. Like a man talking to Someone sitting right there at the side of the bed, Someone he had known a long time ago and had just found again.

He did not know how long he prayed. He only knew that at some point he heard Hollis praying too, very softly, in a ragged, hoarse whisper. And behind him, in the curtained doorway, he heard Elowen crying, and Hollis's mother. And he knew, with a certainty he had not felt since he was twenty-three years old in a terrible little apartment in Indianapolis, that Someone was in the room.

> "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips ... Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me." — Isaiah 6:5, 8 (KJV)

Clara Janelle Henderson was born at three-twelve on Wednesday morning, the twenty-third of December, at Miami Valley Hospital in Dayton. She weighed seven pounds, four ounces. She had a full head of dark hair and her grandmother's chin and a voice that could be heard at the nurses' station.

They let him hold her at four-thirty.

Brantley Voss stood by the window of his daughter's hospital room in the gray light before dawn. He had his granddaughter in his arms, wrapped in a striped hospital blanket with a little knit cap on her head. She was so light. She weighed almost nothing. He had carried a grown woman out of a burning house on Locust Street. He had never held anything so heavy in his life.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. They were dark and unfocused, a newborn's eyes, seeing nothing yet.

I hope when she's old enough to ask you about your life, you can tell her the truth.

"Hello, Clara," he whispered. "I'm your grandpa." His voice broke. "I'm going to have to tell you some things someday. Hard things. About me." He swallowed. "But I'm going to tell you the truth. All of it. I promise. Starting today."

Behind him in the bed, Kelsey was asleep, exhausted. Mark was asleep in the chair. Janelle stood in the doorway with her arms folded and tears running down her face, watching her husband hold their granddaughter by the window as the sun came up over Dayton.

> "Children's children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers." — Proverbs 17:6 (KJV)

He walked into the FBI field office in Cincinnati at nine-fifty-two that morning, eight minutes early, with his wife beside him.

He had not slept. He had not shaved. He was wearing yesterday's uniform under his overcoat. He had his badge on his belt and his service weapon in its holster.

Special Agent Dana Whitfield met them in the lobby. She looked at him for a long moment with her calm gray eyes. Then she looked at Janelle, and back at him.

"Chief Voss," she said.

"Not for long," said Brantley Voss.

He unclipped the badge from his belt. He unbuckled the holster and drew out the service weapon, slowly and carefully, with two fingers on the grip and the muzzle pointed at the floor, the way he had been trained thirty-five years ago. He laid them both on the reception counter between them.

Then he reached into the breast pocket of his overcoat and took out a sheet of yellow legal paper. It had been folded and unfolded so many times that the creases were wearing through. He had finished writing it at six o'clock that morning, in the hospital cafeteria, with a cup of coffee and his granddaughter's picture on his phone.

It was three pages now. Both sides.

To the Prosecuting Attorney of Clinton County, Ohio, and to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I, Brantley Allen Voss, Chief of Police of the City of Mercy Ridge, being of sound mind, wish to make the following statement concerning the events of the night of October 19th, twenty years ago, on Interstate 71 at Mile Marker 52 ...

He held it out to her.

"I'd like to make a statement," he said. "All of it. Every word. I won't need a lawyer for this part." He paused. "And I'd like to give you a name. The man who drove the gray sedan. The one who was on that hill the night Walter Briggs died. I don't know what happened up there. But I know who sent him. And I know who he works for." His voice was steady. "I think you know too. But I'd like to say it. Out loud. On the record. I've been not saying things for twenty years."

Agent Whitfield took the paper from his hand. She did not look at it yet. She looked at him.

"Come on back, Mr. Voss," she said quietly.

At eleven-forty, before he went in to the second interview, he stepped out into the hallway and called Maribel Sloane.

"You wanted a comment," he said.

"Yes."

"Write this down." He closed his eyes. "I did it. All of it. Everything Ezekiel Thornefield said. I lied under oath, and I falsified evidence, and an innocent man went to prison for twenty years because of me. There's no excuse. I'm not going to offer one. I've given a full statement to the FBI this morning.

I've resigned. I'd like to say I'm sorry to Gideon Kestrel and his mother, and to Wesley Arden's wife and son, and to the people of Mercy Ridge. But sorry isn't enough, and I know it. I'll accept whatever comes."

There was a long silence on the line.

"Is that all?" said Maribel Sloane softly.

Brantley Voss looked down the hallway at his wife. She was sitting in a plastic chair outside the interview room with her hands folded in her lap and her eyes closed, praying.

"No," he said. "Put this at the end. I had a granddaughter this morning. Her name is Clara. I want her to grow up knowing her grandfather told the truth. Even if he told it twenty years late."

> "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 (KJV)

Callan Whitlock got back to Mercy Ridge at eleven o'clock Wednesday morning, after Hollis had been transferred to the treatment center in Dayton with his mother beside him in the ambulance.

He did not go home. He went to the chapel.

He walked into his office and stood in front of the whiteboard. Somebody had wiped it a few weeks ago, all but the top number, the one in old Reverend Pruitt's handwriting. 412. He had left that one there as a kind of penance.

He picked up the eraser and wiped it off.

Then he picked up a blue marker and wrote, in his own neat, slanted printing, a single line across the top of the empty board.

Ezekiel 34:16.

> "I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick." — Ezekiel 34:16 (KJV)

He sat down at his desk and made three phone calls.

The first was to Merle Pettibone. He told the old treasurer that the church would not be taking any money from Victory Hour International, or from anybody else who wanted something for it. If the district closed them in June, they would close. But until then, the doors of Mercy Ridge Community Chapel would stay unlocked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for anybody who drove off that interstate looking for help. He would be there. He would sleep on the couch in his office if he had to.

There was a long silence on the line.

"About time," said Merle Pettibone gruffly. Then he cleared his throat. "I'll take the first night shift. I don't sleep anyway."

The second call was to a number in Dayton, written in heavy pencil capitals on the back of a pledge card.

"Ray? It's Pastor Whitlock. Callan. From the chapel." He took a breath. "I owe you an apology. When you called me from the road and asked me what to do, I told you I didn't know. I was telling the truth. But I should have said something else, too." His voice was steady. "I should have said, I'll come with you. So I'm saying it now. Next time you go to Dayton, to that door, I'm coming with you. I'll stand on the porch beside you as long as it takes. And if he doesn't open it, we'll go back the next week. And the week after that."

On the other end of the line, in the cab of a truck somewhere on Interstate 70, a big bearded man began to cry.

The third call was to Elowen.

"Come to the church," he said. "Please. I want to pray with you. In the sanctuary. Just us." He paused. "It's been a long time. I'm sorry it's been so long."

Brantley Voss came to the chapel at five o'clock that afternoon.

He had driven back from Cincinnati alone. Janelle had gone back to Dayton to be with Kelsey and the baby. He had no badge and no gun and no idea what he was going to do next. He had driven past his house on Cobblestone Court without stopping. He had driven past the police station. He had driven past the Farmers Exchange Building, where the lights were on in the fourth-floor corner office. Then he found himself pulling into the parking lot of Mercy Ridge Community Chapel. He did not know why.

The front door was unlocked. A hand-lettered sign was taped to it at eye level: OPEN. ALWAYS. COME IN.

He went in.

The sanctuary was dim and quiet. Pastor Whitlock was sitting alone in the front pew with his Bible open in his lap and his head bowed. He heard the door and looked up, and saw who it was. He did not look surprised.

"Brantley," he said.

Voss stood in the aisle with his hat in his hands.

"I don't know why I came," he said. His voice was hoarse. "I've been sitting in the second pew of First Methodist for twenty years. Singing. Putting my envelope in the plate. And I never once prayed. Not really. Not the whole time." He swallowed. "I don't know how anymore, Pastor. I tried on the side of the highway a month ago, under that sign. Nothing came out."

Callan Whitlock closed his Bible. He stood up and came down the aisle, and put his hand on the big man's shoulder.

"Neither did I," he said quietly. "Until last night. On my knees in a Dollar General parking lot." He smiled a little. "Turns out you don't need to know how. You just need to stop pretending you do."

He led him down to the front of the church and knelt beside him at the communion rail. It was the same place where Ray Doolin had knelt, and Verity Ashcombe, and two hundred strangers on a Sunday in November. Then Callan Whitlock put his arm across the shoulders of the man who had sent Gideon Kestrel to prison, and he prayed. He prayed out loud, plainly, the way you talk to someone sitting at the kitchen table. And after a long time, in a voice so rough and quiet that Callan could barely hear it, Brantley Voss began to pray too.

Outside the tall windows of the sanctuary, the sky to the southwest had begun to turn a strange, bruised, yellowish green.

On the radio in the church office, a weather bulletin had interrupted the Christmas music. An unseasonable warm front was pushing up out of Kentucky, colliding with the cold air that had sat over Ohio all December. The National Weather Service had issued a severe thunderstorm watch for Clinton County, through midnight. Damaging winds. Possible hail. Frequent lightning.

A December thunderstorm. The old men at the Crossroads Diner would say later that they had not seen one like it in forty years.

> "The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet." — Nahum 1:3 (KJV)

End of Chapter 17

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 18

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 18: The Night They Tried to Destroy Jesus

> "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." — Isaiah 43:2 (KJV)

At seven-forty on Wednesday evening, a clerk in the Clinton County Recorder's Office recorded a deed. She had been asked to stay late, and paid two hundred dollars in cash for her trouble. The deed conveyed the last interest in the old Harlow farm, forty-one acres along Interstate 71 at Mile Marker 52, to a company called Crossing Holdings. Crossing Holdings belonged to Sterling Blackmere.

His attorney called him at seven-fifty-two to tell him it was done.

Sterling took the call at the window of his fourth-floor corner office in the Farmers Exchange Building. Eleven miles south, too far to see but not too far to feel, was a hill.

"Sterling," said the attorney carefully. "Whatever you're thinking of doing tonight, don't. The Bureau has Voss on paper as of this morning. There'll be a grand jury in Cincinnati the first week of January. Anything you do now will be read aloud in that room. You need to sit very still."

"I own the land, Martin."

"You own the dirt. Thornefield owns the structure and the ground lease. There's a process. We file after the holiday —"

"There's no time for a process."

He hung up.

On the credenza behind him, in a silver frame, was a photograph of a ten-year-old boy in a Little League uniform. The banner behind the boy read BLACKMERE FEED & GRAIN — GO TIGERS! in neat red hand-lettering. Sterling had not looked at that photograph directly in years. He did not look at it now.

He had a theory, and he held on to it the way a drowning man holds on to a piece of wood. The theory was that it was the face. Take the face away, and the town would forget again. People always did.

It was not a good theory. Some part of him knew that. But it was the only one he had left.

He called Columbus. Lyle Garrity of Garrity Wrecking & Salvage did not want to send a crew out the night before Christmas Eve, in a severe thunderstorm watch, to take down a billboard that had been on the national news for a month.

"Triple the bid," said Sterling. "Cash. My man will meet your crew at the site with the deed. You'll be gone before midnight."

There was a long silence. Then Lyle Garrity said, "Dub'll bring the crane."

Sterling made one more call, to a number that was not saved in his phone.

"It's tonight," he said. "Make sure they finish."

"And if Thornefield shows up?" said Pell.

Sterling Blackmere looked out at the town his father had built.

"Then make sure they finish," he said.

> "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD." — Proverbs 21:30 (KJV)

The night shift at the foot of the hill had been watching the sky since four o'clock.

There were nine of them tonight. Silas Quenby was there in his old orange highway department rain jacket, because he was always there. So were the two retired nurses from Wilmington with their thermos, three bikers from Dayton, and a quiet young mechanic from Sabina who had come every night since Thanksgiving and never said why. And Verity Ashcombe was there, home from college for Christmas, with a box of new candles. The wind was going to be bad, and the old ones would never stay lit.

It did not feel like December. The wind was warm and strange, and over Kentucky the clouds flickered with soundless lightning.

Above them in the floodlights, the face of Jesus looked south into the coming storm. Below it were the two open hands Zeke had added three days ago, with the nail wounds small and dark in the palms. Below the hands were the red words:

YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM THE TRUTH.

At ten-thirty-eight, Silas Quenby saw the headlights.

A flatbed with a forty-ton crane folded on its back. A truck pulling a man-lift. A white pickup with GARRITY WRECKING & SALVAGE — COLUMBUS, OHIO on the door. And at the back, without its lights, a gray sedan.

Silas had worked thirty-eight years for the Ohio Department of Transportation. He knew what a demolition crew looked like.

"Verity," he said quietly. "Call Zeke."

> "The voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters." — Psalm 29:3 (KJV)

Juniper answered the phone in the farmhouse on Ridgeline Road. She listened, said "We're coming," and hung up. Then she stood in the kitchen doorway and looked at her father.

He was at the kitchen table with her mother's Bible open in front of him, the one with the pressed violets and the margins full of small, cramped pencil handwriting. He had been reading the same page for an hour. He looked up and saw her face, and he knew.

"They're taking it down," he said.

"There's a crane." Her voice was steady. "Dad, listen to me. Sterling recorded the deed tonight. He knows he can't win in daylight. I'll call a judge at home. I'll have a restraining order by morning. And the panels can be repainted. You don't need to go out there."

Zeke closed the Bible. He stood up slowly, with one hand flat on the table.

"Junie," he said. "There are nine people sitting under a tarp at the bottom of that hill. One of them's nineteen years old. One of them's seventy-three and thinks he's thirty." He took his barn coat off the hook. "And somewhere in one of those trucks is a man named Pell."

She opened her mouth, and closed it.

"I'm not going to save the painting," her father said gently. "I sat on a catwalk once in the rain and watched something terrible happen on that hill. Then I climbed down and went home." He buttoned his coat. "I'm not going home this time."

Dashiell Crowe was already on the back porch in the dark with his truck keys in his hand. He did not say anything. He held the door.

On her way out, Juniper picked up the little brown bottle of her father's heart pills from the counter and put it in her pocket. Then she called the Mercy Ridge Community Chapel, which was open, now, all night.

Callan Whitlock was still in the sanctuary. Brantley Voss had stayed until nearly eight, kneeling at the rail and then sitting in the front pew, talking about things he had never told anyone. Then Elowen had come with a casserole and three forks, and they had eaten in the front pew like teenagers at a lock-in.

Merle Pettibone came to the sanctuary door with his face gone gray.

"That was Juniper Thornefield," he said. "There's a crane at the billboard."

Callan stood up. So did Brantley Voss.

"There'll be cameras," Callan said.

"I've been hiding from cameras for twenty years, Pastor." Voss put on his hat. "I'd like to stop."

At the office door, Callan turned back. "Merle. The prayer chain. Tell them —" He did not know what to tell them.

But Merle Pettibone had been treasurer of that church for thirty-one years and had buried two wives out of it, and he knew. "I'll tell them to pray," he said. "And I'll tell them where." He reached up beside the office door and took hold of the frayed old rope that ran up through the ceiling to the steeple. It had not been pulled since the Fourth of July two years ago.

He pulled it.

The chapel bell rang out over Mercy Ridge in the warm, wet dark, slow and steady, on the night before Christmas Eve. Up and down Church Street, the porch lights began to come on.

> "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." — Psalm 46:1–2 (KJV)

By the time Zeke's truck came over the rise at eleven-oh-six, the crane was standing up.

Its long yellow boom rose against the lightning. The man-lift had crawled halfway up the slope, and two men in hard hats were riding its basket toward the catwalk. Another man stood at the base of the near column with a cutting torch hissing blue. At the bottom of the hill, in the glare of the headlights, stood the crew foreman. He was a big, slope-shouldered man with a gray goatee and a clipboard in his hand.

There were already more than a hundred people on the shoulder. They stood along the snow fence with candles that would not stay lit, and flashlights, and Bibles. The night shift had dragged their folding chairs to the foot of the slope and were simply sitting in them, nine people in a row between the crane

and the hill. Silas sat in the middle with his arms folded. Verity sat beside him with her eyes closed and her lips moving.

Zeke got out of the truck. The foreman turned around.

"You Thornefield? Dub Mayhew, Garrity Wrecking." He held up the clipboard. "Mister, I got a recorded deed says the owner wants this structure off his ground tonight. I'm sorry. But I got a crew to pay, and that crane costs four hundred an hour whether it swings or not."

"That deed is for the dirt, Mr. Mayhew." Juniper stepped forward in her father's spare barn coat. "My father owns the structure, with a valid ground lease through 2031. If you take one panel off that sign tonight, I will sue you, and Mr. Garrity, and your bonding company. And I will win."

Dub Mayhew looked at her. He looked at the row of folding chairs, and up at the face on the hill. His jaw worked.

"Lady," he said, almost pleading, "I just do what the paper says."

"Then read the paper," said a voice behind him.

A man stepped out of the dark beside the gray sedan. He had a pale, ordinary face you would forget the moment it was gone.

"The paper says this structure is a hazard and a traffic danger," said Pell pleasantly. "A man has already died at the bottom of this hill. And the paper says you get paid triple, Mr. Mayhew. Tonight. In cash. It says nothing about lawyers from Chicago."

Behind Juniper, Dashiell Crowe went very still.

Zeke did not look at Pell. He walked past him as though he were not there, and stood in front of the foreman in the headlights. The warm rain had begun to fall in fat, scattered drops on his bare gray head.

"Mr. Mayhew," he said. "You go to church?"

Dub blinked. "My wife does. Methodist. Up in Grove City."

"Grove City." Zeke nodded slowly. "There was a man from a church in Grove City who died on this hill a month ago. Walter Briggs. He knelt in that grass right there in the middle of the night and begged God to forgive him. Somebody made sure he never got to say what he came here to say." He did not turn around. "I think you know who."

The foreman's eyes flicked toward the gray sedan, and back.

"I'll tell you what I told the TV people," said Zeke quietly. "You can tear down my billboard. You can burn my painting. You can even take my life. But you cannot erase Jesus Christ from this world." He looked up at the face. "That's not a threat, son. It's just the truth. Nobody's afraid of that painting. I did it with house paint. What they're afraid of is what happens when people look at it. And that's already happened. You can't take that down with a crane."

Lightning lit the whole sky white from horizon to horizon. The thunder came a second later, so close that people in the crowd cried out and ducked. Then the rain came, all at once, in a roaring gray sheet.

> "And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out." — Luke 19:40 (KJV)

Dub Mayhew stood in the downpour for a long time with the water running off his hard hat. Then he lifted his radio.

"Kenny. Tyler. Bring the basket down."

"No," said Pell softly. He stepped past the foreman and took the radio out of his hand, as easily as taking a pencil from a child. "This is Mr. Blackmere's representative. Cut the braces. Now."

"Hey," said Dub. "That's my crew —"

On the slope, the man with the torch hesitated. Then he did what men usually do when two bosses give two orders in the rain. He obeyed the louder one. He put the blue flame to the steel brace of the near column.

A shout went up. Somebody pushed through the snow fence, and then a dozen people did. Two of the crew jumped down off the flatbed to stop them, and a big biker from Dayton shoved the first one in the chest. In an instant the bottom of the hill was a churning, slipping, shouting knot of bodies in the mud and the headlights. A folding chair went over. A woman screamed.

"STOP!" Callan Whitlock had arrived just in time to see it start. He did not know what else to do. He climbed onto the bed of Silas Quenby's pickup and stood in the rain with his arms raised over his head like a man at a revival, and he shouted at the top of his lungs. "STOP IT! IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, STOP!"

And here and there, people actually did.

Brantley Voss waded into the middle of it. He had broken up a hundred bar fights in thirty years. He did it the way he always had, pulling men apart by their collars and putting his own body between them. Men looked up, recognized him, and stopped out of pure astonishment.

Pell had not moved. He stood at the edge of it all with the radio in his hand, watching the torch, as calm as a man waiting for a bus.

Dashiell Crowe walked up to him through the rain.

"I left this hill at two-fifty-one in the morning, a month ago," Crowe said. "You came up it at two-fifty-six. I've had a long time to think about those five minutes." He held out his hand. "Give the man back his radio."

Pell's free hand went toward his jacket.

Crowe hit him once, very hard, the way the Army had taught him twenty-five years ago. Pell went down in the mud. Crowe knelt on his back, took a small flat pistol from inside his jacket, and slid it across the gravel into the headlights. "RAFE!" he shouted. Officer Rafe Dunning had just come screaming up the shoulder with his light bar going. He was out of his cruiser and running, with his handcuffs already in his hand.

Up on the hill, the torch had cut halfway through the brace.

> "The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion." — Proverbs 28:1 (KJV)

Nobody ever knew for certain what started the fire.

The fire marshal's report would blame old conduit, an emergency splice, a junction box four feet from a cutting torch, and the lightning. Silas Quenby put it more simply. "It was old," he said, "and somebody put a torch to it."

What the crowd saw was a flash at the base of the near column. It was blue-white and low, and it came from inside the junction box, with a crack like a gunshot. The man with the torch was thrown backward down the slope. Every floodlight went out at once. For one long second the hill was completely dark.

Then the conduit caught. Fire ran up the column like a lit fuse, toward the catwalk forty feet above.

The catwalk was old creosoted timber, seventy years dry. Behind the painted panels was a lattice of old wooden stringers and braces. It went up like kindling. In less than a minute the whole bottom edge of the sign was burning. The rain hissed and steamed on the hot plywood and could not put it out. On the slope, a hundred and fifty people stood frozen and watched the hem of the painted robe begin to burn.

And on the catwalk, the two men from the man-lift had just stepped off onto the boards.

"KENNY! TYLER!" Dub Mayhew was screaming into the radio Crowe had thrown back to him. "GET IN THE BASKET!"

The first man made it. He threw himself over the rail into the basket, and the operator swung it away from the flames.

The second man did not. He was younger and slighter, and farther down the catwalk. The flames came up through the boards between him and the basket, and he ran the other way. He went over the rail onto the old steel ladder on the far column and climbed down it fast, through the smoke, hand over hand.

Fifteen feet from the bottom, a burning section of the catwalk tore loose and fell.

It struck the ladder and the boy on it and carried them both down in a shower of sparks. When the wind cleared the smoke for a moment, people could see him. He lay on his back at the foot of the far column, pinned under a ten-foot length of burning catwalk, with one arm moving feebly. The fire was running down the timber toward him.

And high above him, the whole face of the billboard groaned. It leaned forward a few inches toward the highway.

"The near column," said Silas Quenby hoarsely. "They cut the brace. It's going."

> "He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." — Daniel 3:25 (KJV)

Juniper would remember afterward that she never saw her father start to run.

She turned to say something to him, and he was not there. He was already twenty yards up the slope, running heavily, the way a seventy-year-old man with a bad heart runs uphill in the mud. He was running straight into the fire.

"DADDY!"

She went after him. Crowe caught her around the waist and held on. She hit him with her fists and screamed, and he did not let go.

Zeke did not hear her. He heard his own heart doing its complicated, stumbling thing in his chest. He heard the roar of the fire. And underneath both, far away, he heard a tire iron falling on gravel. He had heard it from forty feet up twenty years ago, and done nothing.

The heat hit him like a wall. He put his arm over his face and kept going.

The boy under the timber was conscious. He was maybe twenty, with a thin, freckled face streaked with soot and blood. He was pushing at the burning wood with one hand. His other arm lay at a wrong angle in the mud.

"Mister," he gasped. "My leg's stuck — I can't —"

"I know, son." Zeke dropped to his knees beside him. "What's your name?"

"T-Tyler."

"All right, Tyler. I'm Zeke. We're going to get you out."

He got his gloved hands under the burning timber. The heat came straight through the leather. He lifted, and nothing happened. He set his feet and lifted again, with everything he had, until his heart slammed against his ribs and his vision went gray. The timber rose an inch. Then it slipped back, and the boy screamed.

"Lord," said Ezekiel Thornefield, on his knees in the fire. "I can't. I never could do it by myself. Please."

Then there were two more hands on the timber beside his.

They were a working man's hands, rough and scarred, with grease worked into the knuckles that would never come out. Twenty years ago, at the bottom of this same hill, they had pumped a dying man's chest in the gravel and the rain.

Gideon Kestrel did not say anything. He had heard the prayer chain on Waverly Pike's porch and driven Route 68 at ninety miles an hour. He set his shoulder under the timber beside the old man's, looked at Zeke once through the smoke, and nodded.

They lifted together.

The timber came up off the boy's chest, off his leg. It rose a foot, then two, and hung there burning. It was held up in the air by the man who had gone to prison and the man who had let him go. Then Callan

Whitlock came sliding down the mud on his knees, grabbed Tyler by the harness, and dragged him out across the steaming grass.

"He's out! Let it go!"

They let it go. It fell in a fountain of sparks.

Above them, the near column sheared through where the torch had cut it, with a shriek of tearing steel that rose over the thunder. The whole burning face of the sign came away from the hill.

It fell slowly, the way great things fall, swinging forward on the far column like a door on a single hinge. Then the far column buckled too. Fifty feet of painted plywood and burning timber came down through the rain, toward the place where Callan knelt in the mud with the injured boy in his arms. Callan saw it coming. He would tell Elowen later that he had time to think one thing: Thank You. Thank You for the last day. It was enough.

Zeke saw it coming too.

He was on his feet, though he never remembered standing. He threw himself downhill at the pastor and the boy and drove them forward with his whole weight. The three of them went tumbling down the wet slope, out from under the shadow of the falling sign.

All three of them, almost.

The bottom edge of the great painted face came down across the slope with a sound like the end of the world. It missed Callan Whitlock by four feet, and Tyler by six. It did not miss Ezekiel Thornefield.

> "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." — John 15:13 (KJV)

For a long moment there was no sound on the hill but the rain.

The fire was out. It had died the instant the burning frame hit the soaked ground, smothered in the mud and the downpour. Steam and smoke rolled up off the slope into the beams of the crane's work lights.

The billboard had come down face-up. It lay at a broken angle in the mud, its steel bones twisted beneath it, its edges blackened and smoking. The bottom of the robe had burned away, and most of the red letters with it. But the face had not burned. The rain had soaked the upper panels before the flames could reach them. The face of Jesus lay on the hillside looking straight up into the storm, with the rain running down it like tears. The two painted hands were still reaching out of the scorched wood.

And at the bottom edge of the wreckage, half under it, lay an old man in a barn coat.

Juniper got to him first. Nobody knew how she got loose from Crowe. She fell to her knees in the mud beside him.

"Daddy. Daddy."

He lay on his side with his eyes closed and blood in his gray hair. The edge of the frame lay across his legs and lower back. She put her face against his and could not tell whether he was breathing or whether it was only the rain.

"Somebody help me!"

They came. Gideon and Crowe, Dub Mayhew and his crew, Brantley Voss, Silas Quenby, and a dozen men whose names nobody ever wrote down. They got every hand that would fit under the edge of the frame. Dub Mayhew shouted one, two, three, LIFT, and the ruined billboard rose a foot. Callan and Juniper drew the old man out from under it, inch by inch, onto the open grass.

One of the retired nurses knelt and pressed two fingers to his throat. She held them there for a very long time.

"There's a pulse," she said finally. "Weak. Very irregular. But it's there. Who's called the squad?"

"Twelve minutes," said Rafe Dunning. He had Pell handcuffed in the back of his cruiser. "They can't fly the helicopter in this. They're coming by road."

"His heart pills," said Juniper, fumbling the brown bottle out of her pocket. The nurse read the label in somebody's flashlight beam and gently shook her head.

"Not now, honey. Not with his pressure like this." She closed Juniper's fingers back over the bottle. "Hold his hand. Talk to him. He can hear you."

Juniper took off his burned glove. She held his bare hand in both of hers, the big, rough, paint-stained hand that had painted the face of Christ on the hill.

"Daddy, it's Junie. I'm right here. Don't you dare leave me. Do you hear me? Not now. I just got you back."

Callan knelt on the other side of the old man. He had no Bible and no notes. He put his blistered hand on Zeke's chest and prayed out loud, plainly, the way he had learned to pray thirty hours ago in a Dollar General parking lot.

"Lord Jesus. This is Your servant. You know everything he's done. You always knew. And You called him home anyway, and he came." His voice broke. "He spent his whole life running from You. Tonight he ran toward You. Into the fire. For a boy he'd never met. For me. Lord, please don't let it end on this hill. Let him see his daughter's face. Let him hear what she's waited fifteen years to say to him. In Jesus' name."

"Amen," said Juniper.

Then Gideon said it, and Crowe, and Brantley Voss, standing in the rain with his hat in his hands. Then Silas, and Elowen, and Verity. Then the crew, and the nurses, and the bikers. Then a hundred and fifty people on the shoulder of Interstate 71, holding dead candles in the rain.

Amen.

> "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." — Romans 5:8 (KJV)

At the back of the crowd, a woman began to sing.

It was Delphine Ransom. She had heard the chapel bell from her back porch and somehow known. She stood by the snow fence, soaked to the skin, singing in a thin, cracked alto. She had not sung a hymn in nine years.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me.

Verity joined her. Then the nurses. Then, from near the crane, a deep, rough, tuneless baritone that made people turn and stare. It was Dub Mayhew of Garrity Wrecking & Salvage, with tears running down into his gray goatee.

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

By the second verse the whole hillside was singing.

They sang while the nurses worked over the old man in the mud. They sang while Tyler Rusk lay on a borrowed blanket beside the crane with a broken arm, a crushed leg and burned hands. He was alive, and crying, and he kept asking, Who was he? Who was that old man? They sang while Brantley Voss stood alone in the glare of the work lights with his head bowed. Television cameras were on him from three directions, and he did not move away.

Juniper did not sing. She knelt in the mud holding her father's hand and talked to him without stopping. She told him she was sorry about fifteen years of unanswered letters. She reminded him of the day he lifted her onto a scaffold at nine to paint a red letter G, and told him she had kept that day folded inside her all the years she hated him. She told him she loved him, over and over.

Once, only once, his fingers moved in hers.

The ambulance came over the rise at eleven-forty-four, its lights painting the wet hillside red and white. The crowd parted for the paramedics without being asked. Juniper climbed into the back beside her father, still holding his hand, and the doors closed.

They were taking him to Mercy Ridge General Hospital. The crowd stood on the shoulder and watched the red lights go north through the rain until they disappeared over the hill.

> "He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still." — Psalm 107:29 (KJV)

At eleven-fifty-eight, two minutes before the storm watch for Clinton County expired, the rain stopped.

It did not taper off. It stopped, as though a faucet had been turned off. The wind died. The clouds tore apart from the west, and for the first time in three days the stars came out over Mercy Ridge, clean and cold and very bright.

Most of the crowd did not go home. They sat on tailgates or stood along the fence, praying quietly in twos and threes. Verity went up and down the snow fence with her new candles, relighting them one by one. In the still air, they stayed lit.

Callan Whitlock sat on the tailgate of Silas's truck with Elowen's head on his shoulder. He was mud and soot from head to foot. His hands were burned, and he had not noticed yet. After a while he got up and walked slowly up the slope, past the twisted columns and the scorched timbers and the flattened place in the grass where Ezekiel Thornefield had lain. He stood at the edge of the wreckage and looked down.

Along the scorched lower edge of the last unburned panel, beneath the reaching hands, two words remained of the red letters Zeke had painted four days ago. They were blistered and smoke-stained and running a little at the edges from the rain. But they were still perfectly legible, in Zeke's careful, old-fashioned sign-painter's capitals.

THE TRUTH.

Above them, the face of Jesus looked up at the clearing stars. The rain had washed the soot from it. Its eyes were the same eyes that had looked down the interstate since the day the paint went up. They had looked at a police chief with blood on his hands, a grieving widow, a frightened girl with another name, a pastor without a prayer. And at a sign painter who had spent fifteen years running from God and had finally, tonight, run the other way.

They had brought a crane to take that face down. And it was down. It lay in the mud at the bottom of the hill, broken and burned.

But it was still looking up.

Callan knelt in the wet grass beside it. Eleven miles north, the doors of an ambulance bay were opening under the lights. A gurney rolled fast through them, with a woman in a mud-soaked barn coat running beside it, still holding an old man's hand.

The pastor bowed his head.

"Your word shall stand," he whispered. "Whatever happens tonight. Your word shall stand."

> "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever." — Isaiah 40:8 (KJV)

End of Chapter 18

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 19

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 19: The Man Who Finally Came Home

> "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." — Luke 15:20 (KJV)

The surgeon came out at two-fifteen in the morning on Christmas Eve.

Her name was Dr. Anjali Mehta. She was small and tired, in blue scrubs with a paper cap still on her head. She stopped in the doorway of the surgical waiting room at Mercy Ridge General Hospital and looked around at the people in it. She had clearly not expected so many.

There were more than thirty of them. Callan Whitlock sat in the corner with both hands wrapped in white gauze. Elowen sat beside him. Gideon Kestrel stood by the window with his mother, Ruby, in her wheelchair. Dashiell Crowe sat by the door, where he could see the hallway, out of habit. Silas Quenby was still in his orange rain jacket. Merle Pettibone had driven over from the chapel after the bell. Waverly Pike had come with a grocery sack of biscuits nobody ate. And Brantley Voss sat alone at the far end of the room with his hat on his knee. Nobody had asked him to leave. Nobody had sat down beside him either.

Juniper stood up. She was still wearing her father's spare barn coat, stiff with dried mud.

"I'm his daughter," she said.

Dr. Mehta came over and sat down beside her, so that they were at eye level. Juniper had sat across from a great many people giving bad news. She knew what it meant when someone sat down first.

"Your father is alive," the surgeon said. "I want you to hear that before anything else."

Juniper nodded. She could not speak.

"He has a fractured pelvis and four broken ribs. One of the ribs punctured his left lung. He had a great deal of internal bleeding, and we've stopped it. Those injuries are serious, but by themselves, I think he would recover from them." She paused. "It's his heart I'm worried about. He has an old arrhythmia. Did you know that?"

"I knew he took pills," said Juniper. "He never told me what for."

"The trauma and the blood loss put his heart under enormous strain. It went into a dangerous rhythm twice on the table. We brought him back both times." Dr. Mehta's voice was gentle. "He's on a ventilator in intensive care. He's sedated. We can't move him to Dayton or Cincinnati until he's more stable, and I don't know when that will be. The next forty-eight hours will tell us a great deal." She hesitated. "Ms. Thornefield, he's seventy years old. I'd be lying to you if I said I wasn't worried."

"Can I see him?"

"In a little while. Fifteen minutes an hour. One person at a time."

Juniper said thank you. She said it the way she said it to judges, clearly and politely. Then she walked out of the waiting room and down the hall. She did not know where she was going until she got there.

It was a pair of wooden doors propped open with a rubber wedge. A small brass sign beside them read CHAPEL — ALL ARE WELCOME.

> "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" — Psalm 139:7 (KJV)

The chapel was small and dim, with six short pews and a stained-glass window lit from behind by a bulb. It showed a shepherd with a lamb across his shoulders.

Juniper sat down in the last pew. She had not been inside a church to pray since the day of her mother's funeral, fifteen years ago. She had walked out of that one before the last hymn.

She did not know how to start. She sat with her hands in her lap and looked at the shepherd in the window. After a while she found that she was talking out loud, very quietly, the way her mother used to.

"I don't know if You're there," she said. "I've spent fifteen years telling everyone You're not. I've been very good at it." Her voice shook. "I was angry with You for taking her. I was angry with him for letting You. I was angry that he sat by her bed and prayed when he should have been — I don't know. Doing something. Fighting. And then she died anyway, and he just stood there in the driveway and let me go." She pressed her hands over her face. "And tonight I watched him run into a fire for a boy he didn't know. And I understood something. He wasn't standing still all those years. He was running. Away from You. Just like me."

The window glowed in the dark. The shepherd's face was turned down toward the lamb.

"So I'm not running anymore," whispered Juniper Thornefield. "I don't know what that means yet. But I'm not running. Please don't take him. Not now. Not when we've only just started." She was crying now. "But if You do — if You do — then please let him know I came. Please let him know I came home."

She stayed there until the nurse came to find her.

> "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." — Psalm 34:18 (KJV)

Special Agent Dana Whitfield came to the hospital at seven-thirty that morning. Maribel Sloane was with her.

They found Juniper in the ICU family lounge with a cup of vending-machine coffee she had not touched. Callan Whitlock was asleep in a chair beside her, sitting up, with his bandaged hands in his lap. Gideon Kestrel was standing at the window, looking out at the gray morning.

"I'm sorry about your father," said Agent Whitfield. "I wanted you to hear this from me before it's on the news. It will be by nine." She sat down. "Sterling Blackmere was arrested at his home at six-ten this morning. He's charged with the murder of Warren Hale and with conspiracy to murder Walter Briggs. There'll be more charges."

Gideon turned around from the window.

Juniper put down her coffee. "Tell me," she said. "All of it. Please."

So Dana Whitfield told her.

The man called Pell was named Garrett Pell. He was forty-three years old. He had been an Army military policeman, then a private security contractor overseas, then, for eleven years, a "consultant" to Blackmere Development. He had said nothing since his arrest except his name and the word lawyer. But he did not need to say anything.

The autopsy on Walter Briggs had been done in Columbus the day before. Walter Briggs had not died of a heart attack. There were tiny burst blood vessels in his eyes and face, and bruises on the inside of his lips. There were fibers in his nose and mouth. The medical examiner called it smothering. Someone had held something over his face until he stopped breathing. Then they had carried him down the hill and laid him in the ditch.

The fibers matched a stadium blanket found in the trunk of Garrett Pell's gray sedan.

There was more in the trunk. A dark quarter-zip pullover, which was what the man in Warren Hale's security video had worn. Walter Briggs's cell phone, which had been missing since the night he died. And a yellow legal pad. On it, dozens of times, someone had practiced printing the same four words in capital letters. THE BILLBOARD KNOWS EVERYTHING. They had been copied, letter by letter, from photographs of the side of a Blackmere Feed & Grain delivery truck. Ezekiel Thornefield had lettered that truck by hand thirty years before.

"They wanted it to look like your father wrote the note," Agent Whitfield said. "Like he was some kind of crank. Or worse. If the billboard man was mixed up in a death, nobody would believe anything the billboard said."

Juniper sat very still. "Why was Briggs here at all?"

"He was the tow-truck driver." Maribel spoke for the first time. "Twenty years ago. He's the one who hauled the BMW away from that ditch at one-fifteen in the morning, before the state police got there. He took it to a scrapyard in Columbus owned by Warren Hale. Somebody paid him five thousand dollars in cash to forget he'd ever seen it." She took a breath. "He kept the tow ticket. He sewed it into his coat. He never forgot."

"He saw the billboard on the news in November," said Agent Whitfield. "I know what you did. Come home. According to his phone, the afternoon before he died, he called Blackmere Development. Twice. He asked for Sterling by name. He left a message with the receptionist." She opened her notebook and read it. "Tell him it's Walt Briggs from the tow company. Tell him I'm going to the police. Tell him he should come with me. It's not too late for either of us."

For a long time nobody in the room said anything.

"He wanted to bring him along," said Callan Whitlock quietly. He was awake. "He drove down here to confess, and he called the man who paid him off and invited him to come too."

"Yes," said Agent Whitfield.

"And Sterling sent Pell instead."

"Yes."

Gideon Kestrel had not moved from the window. "And me?" he said finally. His voice was very low.

Agent Whitfield turned to face him. "The Clinton County prosecutor filed a motion at eight o'clock last night to vacate your conviction, Mr. Kestrel. With Chief Voss's statement, and Mr. Thornefield's, and the tow ticket, I'm told the judge will sign it the first week of January." She paused. "There's one more thing. Warren Hale's old scrapyard foreman is eighty-one and living in Zanesville. Yesterday he told us the BMW sat in the back lot for a week before they crushed it. There was blood on the hood. He took a photograph with a disposable camera, because it scared him. He's kept it in a cigar box for twenty years." She looked at Gideon. "Everybody kept something, it seems. Everybody was waiting for somebody to go first."

Gideon turned back to the window. His shoulders were shaking. Ruby wheeled herself across the room and took his hand and held it, and did not say a word.

> "For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad." — Luke 8:17 (KJV)

The agents had come for Sterling Blackmere at six-ten that morning.

He was awake when they came. He had not slept. He was sitting in his study in the big stone house on the ridge above Mercy Ridge, in his shirtsleeves, with the television on and the sound turned down. The same clip had been playing for four hours. A hillside at night in the rain, a burning billboard, an old man in a barn coat running up the slope into the smoke. Then the great painted face coming down.

He had watched it perhaps a hundred times.

When the doorbell rang, he got up and answered it himself. There were six agents on his front steps and three cars in his circular drive with their lights going. He looked at them without surprise.

"I'd like to get my coat," he said.

They let him. An agent went with him. In the front hall, Sterling Blackmere stopped by a small table. On it was a silver-framed photograph that he had brought home from the office last night. He did not remember deciding to bring it. A boy of ten in a Little League uniform, squinting into the sun.

"May I take this?" he said.

The agent looked at him. Then he looked at the photograph and nodded.

In the back of the car, with his hands cuffed in front of him, Sterling Blackmere held the picture of his son in his lap. The car went south on Interstate 71 toward Cincinnati. At Mile Marker 52 it passed a dark hill where a few candles were still burning in the gray dawn around something lying in the grass. Sterling did not look at the hill. Instead, for the first time in eighteen years, he made himself look at the photograph directly. He looked at the gap-toothed grin, and the bat on the boy's shoulder, and the red hand-lettering on the banner behind him. BLACKMERE FEED & GRAIN — GO TIGERS!

It was Ezekiel Thornefield's lettering. He had forgotten that. He had forgotten that the old man had painted that banner for his father, for nothing, as a gift, because Preston's team could not afford one.

The agent in the front seat glanced in the mirror once. The prisoner was looking down at the photograph in his lap. His face had not changed. But his shoulders were shaking, and there were tears falling on the glass.

> "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." — Galatians 6:7 (KJV)

At one-forty that afternoon, Zeke's heart stopped.

Juniper was in the room when it happened. She was sitting beside the bed holding his hand and reading aloud to him from her mother's Bible, which Crowe had brought from the farmhouse. She was reading the Psalms because her mother had underlined so many of them. She had reached the twenty-third. Then the monitor above the bed made a sound she would hear in her sleep for the rest of her life, and the green line on the screen went wild and then flat.

Then the room was full of people.

A nurse took her by the shoulders and moved her out into the hallway, kindly but firmly. Through the glass she saw them working. She saw the paddles. She saw her father's body jump on the bed and fall back. She saw Dr. Mehta's face, very calm, giving orders. She saw them do it again.

She did not pray in words. She stood in the hallway with her mother's Bible pressed against her chest and her eyes shut, and she said one word over and over. She did not realize until afterward that it was not God, or please, or Daddy.

It was Jesus.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.

At one-forty-seven, the green line on the screen began to jump again. It was ragged and uneven. But it was there.

Dr. Mehta came out into the hallway, peeling off her gloves. She looked at Juniper for a moment.

"He's back," she said. "He's a stubborn man, your father."

"Yes," said Juniper. She began to laugh and cry at the same time. "Yes. He is. He really, really is."

> "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." — Psalm 30:5 (KJV)

Brantley Voss drove out to Lytle Road at four o'clock that afternoon.

He had sat in the hospital waiting room for fourteen hours. Nobody had spoken to him except Pastor Whitlock, who had brought him a cup of coffee at dawn and sat beside him for a while without saying anything. At three-thirty, Ruby Kestrel had rolled her wheelchair across the room and stopped in front of him.

"Gideon's taking me home to rest," she said. "You come by the house, Mr. Voss. Four o'clock. I'll put the coffee on."

He sat in the Tahoe at the end of the gravel drive for ten minutes before he could make himself get out. The house was small and white, with a blue aluminum awning and a ramp of treated lumber up to the front door. Beside the door, in neat hand-lettering, was a sign. JESUS LIVES HERE. SO DOES RUBY.

Brantley Voss had testified under oath twenty years ago that he had never laid eyes on Gideon Kestrel before that night. He had sat in the courtroom and watched this woman's face when the jury came back. He walked up the ramp now with his hat in his hands, and his legs did not want to carry him.

Ruby opened the door before he knocked. She was a tiny woman with white hair and bright, sharp eyes. She looked up at him for a long moment.

"Come in," she said. "It's cold."

He sat at her kitchen table. She poured him coffee in a cup with a chip in the rim. Gideon leaned in the kitchen doorway with his arms folded and said nothing.

Brantley Voss did not drink the coffee. He put his big hands flat on the table on either side of the cup and looked at them.

"Mrs. Kestrel," he said. "I don't have the right to ask you for anything. I know that. I didn't come to ask. I came to tell you to your face what I did. You deserve to hear it from me. Not from the television."

And he told her.

He told her everything, slowly, without excusing any of it. When he was finished, he sat with his head down. The clock on the wall ticked. Somewhere outside, a dog was barking.

Ruby Kestrel reached across the table. She put her small, wrinkled hand over one of his.

"Mr. Voss," she said. "My boy wrote me a letter from Lucasville when he'd been in there a year. He said forgiveness isn't something you feel. It's something you do, over and over, until one day you notice you feel it too." Her eyes were wet, but her voice was steady. "I've been doing it for nineteen years. Every morning. Out loud. I forgive Brantley Voss. Some mornings I said it through my teeth. Some mornings I couldn't say it at all, and I said it anyway." She squeezed his hand. "I didn't feel it till about two weeks ago. When Gideon came home from your office and told me he'd said it to your face. And I noticed I felt it."

Brantley Voss put his face down on his arms on Ruby Kestrel's kitchen table and wept like a child.

After a while, Gideon came and sat down at the table across from him. He did not say anything. He just stayed there.

> "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." — Ephesians 4:32 (KJV)

At five o'clock, a nurse's aide wheeled a young man up to the glass wall of the intensive care unit.

He had a cast on his right arm and another on his left leg, which stuck straight out in front of the wheelchair on a padded board. Both his hands were wrapped in gauze. A thin, tired woman in a Kroger uniform walked beside him with her hand on his shoulder. She had driven down from Columbus in the night still wearing it.

Juniper came out into the hallway.

"You're his daughter," said Tyler Rusk. It was not a question. "I saw you. On the hill. You were screaming at him."

"Yes."

He looked through the glass at the old man in the bed, at the tubes and the machines. His freckled face crumpled.

"I took the job for the money," he said. "Mr. Garrity said triple. I've got a baby coming in March. I seen that billboard on TV a dozen times, and I made fun of it, ma'am. I said it was a bunch of Bible-thumpers getting worked up over a cartoon." He swallowed. "I was on that catwalk with a wrench, going to take it apart. And he came up that hill into the fire for me anyway. He didn't even know my name. He asked me my name. Who does that?"

Juniper did not answer right away. She looked through the glass at her father.

"Somebody who knows what it's like to be on the wrong side of something," she said finally. "And somebody who got a second chance."

Tyler wiped his eyes awkwardly with the back of his bandaged hand.

"What did it mean?" he said. "The first one. I know what you did. Come home. I never understood it."

Juniper thought about it. "It means God already knows the worst thing about you," she said slowly. "And He wants you to come home anyway."

The young man sat very still in the wheelchair. His mother's hand tightened on his shoulder.

"My dad lives in Marion," Tyler said, very low. "I ain't talked to him in three years. We had a fight about my girlfriend. I said some things." He looked up at his mother. "Mama, can I borrow your phone?"

She gave it to him. He held it awkwardly in his bandaged fingers and dialed a number from memory. Juniper walked a little way down the hall to give him privacy. But she heard him say, in a cracked, scared voice, "Dad? It's Tyler. Merry Christmas. I'm in the hospital, but I'm okay. Listen, Dad, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Can I come home?"

> "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee." — Luke 15:18 (KJV)

Mercy Ridge Community Chapel held its Christmas Eve candlelight service at seven o'clock that night, the way it had for a hundred and twelve years.

Callan Whitlock had almost canceled it. His hands were burned. He had not slept in two days. And he had nothing prepared. But at five o'clock, Merle Pettibone called to tell him that there were already cars parked along Church Street. At six, Elowen called to say there were people standing in the snow on the front steps, waiting for the doors to open, because there was no room in the sanctuary left.

The snow had started at four. It was the first real snow of the winter, soft and heavy and windless. It fell straight down out of a white sky onto a town that had stayed up all night.

He went.

There were six hundred people in a sanctuary built for three hundred. They stood in the aisles and along the walls and up in the old choir loft. They stood in the fellowship hall with the doors open, and out on the front steps in the falling snow. Ray Doolin was there, in a clean shirt. Delphine Ransom was at the old piano, which she had not played in public for nine years. Verity Ashcombe was there with her parents. Dub Mayhew was there with his wife from Grove City. He had driven back down through the snow to say he wanted to see the place where those people had come from.

Callan stood in the pulpit with his white-wrapped hands resting on the open Bible. He did not have any notes. He looked out at all of them for a long time.

"I was going to preach about the shepherds," he said finally. "That's what I preach every Christmas Eve." A few people smiled. "But I want to read you a different story tonight. Jesus told it. It's about a boy who took everything he had and went as far away from his father as he could get. And spent it all. And ended up in a pigpen in a far country, starving."

He read it to them from Luke fifteen. He read it slowly. When he came to the twentieth verse, his voice cracked, and he had to stop.

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him," he said. "And had compassion. And ran."

He closed the Bible.

"Back in November, a man in this town painted a face on a billboard. He wrote seven words under it. I know what you did. Come home. And a lot of people thought those words were a threat." He looked out over the crowd. "I thought so too, God forgive me. I thought it was about guilt. About getting caught." He shook his head. "But it wasn't. It never was. Read it again. I know what you did. That's the worst news in the world. Come home. That's the best. And they're on the same sign. They were always on the same sign. That's the gospel, friends. God knows exactly what you did. Every bit of it. And He's still standing out on the road, watching for you. And when He sees you coming, He doesn't wait for you to get all the way there. He runs."

He looked down at his bandaged hands.

"Last night I watched an old man run into a fire for somebody who'd come to tear down everything he loved. That's what it looks like. That's what the Father looks like. Running toward you while you're still a great way off."

Then Delphine Ransom began to play "Silent Night." Six hundred people lit their candles one from another. The light spread down the aisles and out the open doors onto the snowy steps, until the whole church glowed.

> "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." — Isaiah 9:6 (KJV)

Ezekiel Thornefield woke up at eleven-twenty on Christmas Eve.

They had taken him off the ventilator at nine. Dr. Mehta had said he might not wake until morning, or for days. Juniper had not left. She sat beside the bed in the dim ICU room with her mother's Bible open on her knees. Outside the window the snow was still falling, and through the glass she could hear, very faintly, church bells from all over town.

She looked up from the page, and her father's eyes were open. He was looking at her.

For a moment neither of them said anything.

"Junie," he whispered. His voice was a ruin, rough and almost gone.

"I'm here, Daddy." She took his hand. "I'm right here."

His eyes moved slowly around the room. The monitors. The window. The snow. "The boy," he said.

"Tyler. He's two floors down. A broken arm, a broken leg, and burns on his hands. He's going to be fine. His mother drove down from Columbus. She's been to see you three times." Juniper's voice wobbled. "Pastor Whitlock is fine. Gideon's fine. Everybody's fine, Daddy. Everybody but you."

The corner of his mouth moved. It might have been a smile. "And the sign?"

"It came down." She did not lie to him. "It's lying on the hill. But the face didn't burn. And the hands. There's people out there right now with candles. In the snow. Silas says they won't go home."

He closed his eyes. For a moment she was afraid. Then he opened them again.

"Sterling?" he said.

"Arrested this morning. And Pell. And Gideon's conviction is being thrown out." She told him, briefly, about the tow ticket and the legal pad and the message Walter Briggs had left with a receptionist the day before he died. It's not too late for either of us. Her father's eyes filled. A tear ran down the side of his face into the pillow.

"Poor Walt," he whispered. "Poor Sterling."

Juniper held his hand for a long time. The bells had stopped. The machines beeped softly.

Then she asked him. She had been waiting to ask it for fifteen years, though she had not known until that moment what the question was.

"Daddy," she said. "Why did you put Jesus on that billboard?"

He looked at her for a long while. Then he smiled, weakly, and it was the smile she remembered from when she was nine years old on a scaffold.

"Because I spent half my life trying to hide from Him," he said.

She waited.

He wet his cracked lips. It took him a long time to say the rest, a few words at a time, with pauses in between to breathe.

"After your mama. I quit. Quit church. Quit God. Quit you, nearly." His fingers moved in hers. "Told myself it was because He took her. Wasn't true. It was the catwalk. Twenty years of it. I couldn't look at Him. Every time I prayed, I saw that boy's hands." He breathed. "So I hid. In the barn. In the quiet. Fifteen years." He looked at her. "And then I found her letter. Behind the painting. Put Him where the whole world can see Him."

"I know," said Juniper. "I read it."

"I thought I was painting it for them. For Brantley. For Sterling." His voice was almost gone. "I wasn't. Junie, I put Him on a hill beside the highway because I couldn't hide from Him there. Every morning I had to drive past. Every morning He was looking at me. I know what you did." He closed his eyes. "I painted that for me. It was always for me. I was the one who needed to come home."

Juniper laid her forehead down on the back of his hand. She stayed like that for a while.

"Then I've got something to tell you," she said, without lifting her head. "Last night. In the chapel downstairs. I came home too."

She felt his hand tighten on hers. It was not strong. But it was there.

"Your mama," he whispered. "She prayed for that. Every night. Fifteen years in that Bible."

"I know. I read those too." Juniper lifted her head. Her face was wet. "Daddy. I forgive you. For the funeral, and the driveway, and all of it. I forgive you. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I didn't come home sooner."

Ezekiel Thornefield could not speak. He lay in the hospital bed with his daughter's hand in his and wept without making a sound. After a while he moved his thumb, slowly, back and forth across her knuckles, the way he had when she was small and woke up afraid in the night.

"You remember," he said finally, "what Gideon said to me? On his ramp. You were in the truck."

"I saw his lips move. I couldn't hear."

"Five words." The old man smiled. "I forgive you. Come in."

Outside, the snow kept falling on Mercy Ridge, on the dark farms and the sleeping town, and on the hill beside the interstate where the fallen face of Christ lay looking up. Fifty candles were burning around it in the snow. In room 4 of the intensive care unit at Mercy Ridge General Hospital, an old man and his daughter held on to each other's hands. Neither of them said anything more for a long time. There was nothing more that needed to be said.

At midnight, it was Christmas.

> "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers." — Malachi 4:6 (KJV)

End of Chapter 19

Billboard Jesus — Chapter 20

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Chapter 20: The Billboard That Could Not Be Silenced

> "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." — John 3:16 (KJV)

The mail came at eleven, the way it did every day now, in a canvas sack.

The carrier was a cheerful young woman named Brianna. She had given up trying to fit it in the box at the end of the drive sometime in February. She carried the sack up to the porch and set it down beside Zeke's rocking chair with a grunt.

"Lighter today," she said. "Only about two hundred. You're slipping, Mr. Thornefield."

"Getting old," said Zeke.

It was the twenty-third of June. Six months to the day. The fields along Ridgeline Road were green and high, and the air smelled of cut hay and honeysuckle. Zeke sat on the porch in the shade with his cane hooked over the arm of the rocker and a glass of iced tea sweating on the boards beside him. He was thinner than he had been. He walked slowly now, with the cane. He would never climb a ladder again. Dr. Mehta had told him that in March, in a tone that allowed no argument, and he had not argued. His heart did its complicated thing less often these days. When it did, he sat still and waited and said the twenty-third Psalm, and it passed.

He opened the letters one at a time with Hannah's old silver letter opener. He read every one. It took him most of every afternoon.

There was a letter from a Baptist church in Tulsa that had rented a billboard on Interstate 44. It said COME HOME in red letters, under a painting of an open door. There was one from a Korean Presbyterian congregation in Los Angeles whose youth group had painted JESUS KNOWS. JESUS LOVES. COME HOME. across the side of a laundromat. There was a photograph from a truck stop in Rawlins, Wyoming, where someone had hand-lettered HE IS WAITING FOR YOU on a plywood sign by the diesel pumps. There was a letter in pencil from an inmate at the prison in Lucasville. He wrote that the chaplain had pinned a newspaper photograph of the billboard on the chapel wall, and that eleven men had prayed in front of it in one week.

Maribel Sloane had counted them for a story in May. More than two thousand churches in forty-four states had put up signs. Billboards and barn roofs. Water towers and storefronts. Church marquees and the backs of semitrailers. Not every one had a portrait. Not every message was the same. But every one of them pointed to the same Man.

You can tear down my billboard, an old sign painter had said to the television cameras. But you cannot erase Jesus Christ from this world.

It turned out he had been right.

> "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."
> — Isaiah 55:11 (KJV)

Juniper came out onto the porch at noon with two sandwiches on a plate and her laptop under her arm.

She had not gone back to Chicago. She had told the firm in January that she was taking a leave of absence. In March she told them she was not coming back. In April she had rented a small office over the hardware store on Main Street in Wilmington. The sign on the window said THORNEFIELD LAW in gold-leaf capitals, with a thin black shadow. It was the first sign her father had lettered since the hospital. He had done it sitting in a kitchen chair on the sidewalk, with his hand shaking a little and half the town watching, and it was perfect.

Most of her clients could not afford a Chicago lawyer. Most of them could not afford any lawyer. Her biggest case was Gideon Kestrel's wrongful imprisonment claim against the State of Ohio. She had not sent him a bill. She never would.

"Silas called," she said, sitting down on the top step. "He wants us at the hill tomorrow morning. Sunrise. He was very particular. Five-forty-five."

Zeke looked at her over his reading glasses. "What for?"

"He wouldn't say."

"Junie."

"He wouldn't say, Daddy." She bit into her sandwich and did not look at him. "And you're not to drive down 71 before then. I promised him. You take Route 68 to the diner, same as you've been doing."

Zeke had not driven past the hill since Christmas. In January, after the fire marshal finished his report, a crew from the electric co-op had cut up the wreckage and hauled it away. They had done it gently, with Bud Tackett supervising. The panels with the face and the hands were not burned. They were taken down carefully and wrapped in moving blankets and carried to the chapel. They hung now on the back wall of the fellowship hall, forty feet wide, where every person who came in for coffee had to walk under them. Since March, Juniper said, there had been a tarp over something on the hill. Silas would not talk about it. Neither would Bud Tackett. Neither would anybody else.

Zeke looked at his daughter for a long moment. She was eating her sandwich with great concentration.

"All right," he said.

She was wearing her mother's small gold cross on a chain around her neck. She had worn it every day since Easter, when she went forward at the end of the service in Mercy Ridge Community Chapel. Six hundred people had watched her kneel at the rail where Ray Doolin had knelt, and Verity Ashcombe, and Brantley Voss. She was not baptized yet. She said she wanted to understand what she was doing first. She was reading the Gospel of John with Elowen Whitlock on Tuesday nights, slowly, a chapter a week, and arguing about every verse.

Zeke thought her mother would have liked that very much.

> "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."
> — Proverbs 22:6 (KJV)

He drove to the Crossroads Diner at two o'clock, by Route 68, the long way.

The lunch rush was over. The young woman behind the counter saw him come in and had his coffee poured and his pie on the plate before he reached the back booth. Apple, no ice cream.

She was not hiding anymore. She had testified for two days before a federal grand jury in Cincinnati in February. She had sat in the witness chair with her hands folded and her chin up, and she had told them what she saw on the night of April twenty-third. In March the grand jury indicted Garrett Pell for the murders of Warren Hale and Walter Briggs. It indicted Sterling Blackmere for the murder of Warren Hale and for conspiracy in the death of Walter Briggs. Their trials were set for September. Pell had still not said a word. Sterling Blackmere had pleaded not guilty and then, in May, had fired his lawyers. Nobody knew yet what that meant.

In April, Waverly Pike had made the young woman a partner in the Crossroads Diner. It was a twenty-five percent share, on a handshake.

She set the pie down in front of Zeke and slid into the booth across from him.

"I drove down to Ashland last weekend," she said. "To see my mom. First time in four years." She turned her coffee cup slowly on the table, the way Waverly did. "She cried the whole time. So did I. We went to church on Sunday, the little Methodist one I grew up in. The preacher's the same one who baptized me. He's ninety. He remembered me." She smiled. "He called me by my name."

Zeke set down his fork.

"You remember what you told me," she said. "In the truck, that night. That He knew my real name before my mama ever said it."

"I remember."

She looked at him across the table with her clear, steady eyes. They were not frightened anymore.

"It's Rebecca," she said. "Rebecca Ann Lowe. Becky, at home." She laughed a little, shakily. "I haven't said it out loud to anybody in Mercy Ridge. Not even Waverly. I wanted you to be the first."

Zeke Thornefield reached across the table and took her hand in his big, paint-stained one.

"Rebecca," he said. "That's a good name. It's a Bible name."

"I know. Mama picked it on purpose." She wiped her eyes. "Waverly says I can be Tamsin at the diner if I want. She says a person can answer to the name she was running under and the name she was saved under both, as long as she knows which one is true." She smiled. "I think I'll be Becky."

> "But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." — Isaiah 43:1 (KJV)

On the way home, he stopped at Kestrel Auto Repair.

It was on Route 68, two miles north of the diner, in a cinder-block building that had been a tractor dealership forty years ago. Gideon had bought it in April with the first payment from the State of Ohio. His conviction had been vacated on the sixth of January, in a courtroom in Wilmington so full that people stood in the hallway. The judge had looked down at him from the bench and said, "Mr. Kestrel, on behalf of the State of Ohio, I am sorry." Then she took off her glasses and wiped her eyes, which nobody in that courtroom had ever seen her do.

The sign over the bay doors said KESTREL AUTO REPAIR — HONEST WORK — FAIR PRICES, in red and black, with a thin gold outline. Zeke had lettered it in May from a stepladder that Gideon held with both hands the whole time, lecturing him about his heart.

Tyler Rusk was in the second bay with his head under the hood of a Silverado. His leg had healed with a limp that the doctors said he would keep. Gideon had hired him in April, when the casts came off and Garrity Wrecking & Salvage closed its doors. His son had been born on the ninth of March, six pounds and eleven ounces. The baby's name was Ezekiel Wade Rusk. Tyler had brought him to the farmhouse in a car seat when he was two weeks old. He set him in the old man's lap without asking, and Zeke had sat on the porch holding him for an hour and could not speak.

Gideon came out of the office wiping his hands on a rag. He was smiling. He smiled more now. Not a lot. But more.

"Got another one," he said. He took an envelope out of his shirt pocket. "Came Thursday."

It was from the Federal Correctional Institution in Morgantown, West Virginia. Brantley Voss had pleaded guilty in March to obstruction of justice and to perjury in the state court. He had not asked for leniency. The judge had given him forty-six months. He had reported to Morgantown on the first of May. Janelle drove down every other Saturday with Kelsey and the baby. People said that Clara Janelle Henderson, at five months, was the only person who could make the former chief laugh.

He wrote to Gideon every week. Gideon wrote back every week, and he had never once let a letter sit unopened.

"He's started a Bible study," said Gideon. "Tuesday nights. Him and four other men. Says he doesn't know what he's doing. Says he figures that's about the right place to start." He folded the letter and put it back in his pocket. "He asked about you. He asks every time."

"Tell him I'm still here," said Zeke. "Tell him the Lord's not done with either of us yet."

> "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" — Psalm 133:1 (KJV)

Delphine Ransom spent that afternoon at the Sugar Grove Cemetery, the way she did every Wednesday now. She was not alone.

The young woman beside her was twenty-three years old. She was a dental assistant in Wilmington, with a soft voice and a nervous laugh and a habit of tucking her hair behind her ear. Her name was Kayla Brandt. She had stood on Dell's front porch in the snow on the second of January and knocked. When Dell opened the door, she had said, "Mrs. Ransom, I'm the one who called you. I'm sorry it took me so long."

Then she had sat in Dell's kitchen and told her what happened at the old quarry nine years ago.

Kayla had been fourteen. She had gone to the party because an older girl invited her, and she had wanted very badly to be invited. Somebody gave her something to drink. Later, a nineteen-year-old named Trent Lowry had walked her to his truck, holding her up by the arm. She was too drunk to walk, and too drunk to understand what was happening. Nobody else at that party tried to stop him.

Hope Ransom did.

She pulled the truck door open and dragged Kayla out by the wrist. She screamed at Trent Lowry in front of everyone. She put Kayla in the back seat of her own car and drove her home to her grandmother's house in Sabina, and walked her to the door. Then she started home herself. And Trent Lowry followed her in his truck, with his high beams on, right on her bumper, mile after mile on the dark county roads. He was furious. He was humiliated. And he knew that his father, a Clinton County sheriff's deputy, would be very interested in what Hope Ransom might say in the morning.

On the curve on Old Quarry Road, he bumped her bumper. Only once.

Then he drove away.

His father was the deputy who worked the crash. The file was closed in six weeks. Single-vehicle accident. Excessive speed. Driver inexperience. And a few days after the funeral, Trent Lowry had found fourteen-year-old Kayla Brandt outside the Dollar General. He told her very quietly what would happen to her grandmother if she ever said one word.

She had not said one word for nine years. Then she drove past a billboard on Interstate 71 with seven words on it, and she had to pull over.

Kayla gave a statement to Rafe Dunning in January. Rafe was acting chief now. In February the state Bureau of Criminal Investigation reopened the case. In April, Trent Lowry walked into the BCI office

in London, Ohio, with a lawyer and told them everything. He was twenty-eight. He had a wife and two children, and he told the agents he had not slept a full night in nine years. He was charged in May with involuntary manslaughter and leaving the scene of a fatal accident. His father resigned from the sheriff's office the same week.

Dell and Kayla knelt in the grass beside the small gray stone. HOPE ELIZABETH RANSOM. BELOVED DAUGHTER. Kayla had brought daisies. Dell had brought the cross-stitch from Hope's bedroom wall. It said JESUS LOVES ME in crooked pink and purple thread. She set it against the headstone for a while, the way she always did, before she took it home again.

"She was running home," said Dell softly. "That's what you said, on the phone. She wasn't running away from me. She was running home."

"She was," said Kayla. "She told me in the car. She said, I'm going home and telling my mom everything. My mom'll know what to do." Kayla's voice broke. "She was so sure. She was so sure you'd know what to do."

Dell Ransom closed her eyes.

For nine years she had believed that her daughter died hating her. She had believed that her last words to Hope were the last words that mattered. Don't you bother coming home. Now she knew that her daughter had died a hero. Hope had pulled a frightened child out of a truck and driven her home, and then she had turned toward her own mother's house in the dark, sure of her welcome.

"I'm praying for him," Dell said after a while. "Trent Lowry. Every morning. Out loud. Ruby Kestrel told me how. You say it whether you feel it or not." She opened her eyes. "I don't feel it yet."

Kayla took her hand.

"You will," she said. "That's what Ruby told me too."

> "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." — Psalm 116:15 (KJV)

The letter from the district office came to Mercy Ridge Community Chapel the same week.

Merle Pettibone read it aloud at the Tuesday night board meeting. He read it twice, because Hollis Fenwick asked him to. The review of Mercy Ridge Community Chapel was concluded. No merger. No closure. Average Sunday attendance since January had been four hundred and thirty-one. The district superintendent had added a line at the bottom in his own handwriting. Callan, whatever you're doing, don't stop.

Callan Whitlock did not know exactly what he was doing. He only knew what he had stopped doing. The whiteboard in his office no longer had numbers on it. It had names. People who had walked through the unlocked front door at two in the morning. People who had knelt at the rail. People who needed a ride to Dayton, or a casserole, or a job, or a pastor to sit with them in a hospital waiting room. When the names filled the board, Elowen copied them into a notebook. Then Callan wiped it clean and started again. There were eleven notebooks now.

The doors were still unlocked. Merle still took the Friday night shift.

Hollis Fenwick had come home from the treatment center in Dayton in February. He had been clean a hundred and eighty-three days. He did not lead worship on Sunday mornings yet. He said he was not ready, and Callan did not push him. But on Thursday nights he played his grandfather's Martin guitar in the fellowship hall for the recovery group. Thirty people sat in folding chairs under the burned edges of the great painted face.

Ray Doolin's son had opened the door in Dayton on the Saturday before Easter. Callan had been standing on the porch beside Ray when it happened, the fifth Saturday in a row. Ray's son had looked at the big bearded man on his step for a long time. Then he had stepped back and held the door open. He did not say anything. He did not need to.

And on the last Monday of every month, Callan drove to the federal detention center in Butler County and sat across a steel table from Sterling Blackmere.

It had been Sterling's idea. The first request had come in February, in a single line written on lined paper. Pastor Whitlock. I would like to speak with someone. I don't know who else to ask. They did not talk about the case. Mostly they did not talk at all. Sterling had asked for a Bible in March. He did not say what he was reading. But in April he had given Callan a sealed envelope addressed in a careful, cramped hand to Mr. Ezekiel Thornefield, Ridgeline Road.

Zeke had opened it at the kitchen table. There was one sheet of paper inside, with four lines on it.

You painted Preston's banner. For nothing. I had forgotten. I have been trying to remember what else I forgot.

I am sorry.

S.B.

Zeke had read it a long time. Then he had written back. He wrote three pages. He never told anyone what he said, not even Juniper. He only said, when she asked, "I told him the door's still open. That's all. It's always open."

> "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." — Luke 15:7 (KJV)

Silas Quenby came up the drive at eight o'clock that evening in his old pickup. He climbed the porch steps slowly and sat down in the other rocker without being asked, the way he had for fifty years.

They sat for a while, watching the fireflies come up out of the hay field.

"I got something to tell you, Zeke," said Silas finally. "Should have told you a long time ago. Juniper knows. I made her promise to let me be the one."

Zeke waited.

"Edna Harlow," said Silas. "Old Mrs. Harlow. Who owned the hill." He looked out at the fields. "I mowed her road for the county for thirty years. She used to bring me lemonade. Toward the end, when she was ninety-some and nearly blind, she called me up to the porch one day and gave me an envelope. Said, Silas, you hold on to this. When the time comes, you'll know what to do with it." He shook his head. "I thought she was wandering. I put it in my Bible and forgot it. Twenty-two years."

"What was in it?"

"Her will. Handwritten. Signed and dated, and witnessed by her preacher and his wife. Both of 'em long dead now." Silas reached into his shirt pocket and took out a photocopy, folded in quarters, and handed it across. "I found it in January, looking up a verse. I took it to Junie. She took it to the probate judge in Wilmington. Took four months. The judge ruled in May." He cleared his throat. "It's good, Zeke. It's a good will. That means the heirs never owned that hill to sell. And Sterling never bought it."

Zeke unfolded the paper. The handwriting was old-fashioned and shaky and very firm.

My father built the sign on the hill in 1951 and painted JESUS SAVES on it, and the advertising men painted it over when I was too old to stop them. I leave the hill and the sign to Mercy Ridge Community Chapel, on this one condition. That they put the Lord back up on it where folks can see Him.

Edna Mae Harlow.

Zeke read it three times. Then he folded it carefully and held it in his lap and looked out at the fireflies.

"Hannah," he said softly. "She said the same thing. Put Him where the whole world can see Him."

"I know," said Silas. "I read the letter, remember. In the diner." He rocked slowly. "Two women who never met, forty years apart, asking for the same thing. I figure the Lord was trying to get your attention, Ezekiel."

"Took Him long enough."

"Took you long enough," said Silas Quenby.

> "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." — Matthew 24:35 (KJV)

After Silas went home, Zeke walked out to the barn with his cane and a flashlight, the way he still did most nights.

The barn smelled the way it always had, of turpentine and old wood and hay. But the easel at the far end stood empty. In February he had given Hannah's painting to the chapel. It was the original, the one she had begged him to finish, with the face and the open arms and the hands that had waited twenty years for their wounds. It hung now on the wall behind the pulpit at Mercy Ridge Community Chapel. On Sunday mornings the light came through the east windows and fell across it. Callan said people stood in front of it after the service for an hour sometimes, saying nothing.

Zeke stood in front of the empty easel and turned off the flashlight. He stood in the dark for a while.

"Thank You," he said. It was all he could think of to say. "Thank You for not giving up on me. Thank You for waiting."

The barn was quiet. Outside, the fireflies were rising out of the hay. Far off to the south, too far to hear, the trucks were rolling north on Interstate 71 through the warm June night, past a hill with a tarp on it.

He went back to the house and slept all night without waking, for the first time in twenty years.

> "I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me." — Psalm 3:5 (KJV)

They left the farmhouse at five-twenty the next morning, in the dark.

Juniper drove. Zeke sat beside her with his cane between his knees. They went down Ridgeline Road and onto Route 68 and then south on Interstate 71, toward Mile Marker 52. It was the road he had driven every morning for months, and had not seen in six.

The sky in the east was turning gray, then pearl, then a pale and spreading gold.

There were cars on the shoulder. Zeke saw them from a mile away. There were dozens, then a hundred, parked bumper to bumper along the grass, with people standing beside them. Juniper slowed and pulled into the maintenance turnout where his truck had sat on an October afternoon a long time ago.

He knew them all. Silas, in his orange jacket. Callan and Elowen. Merle Pettibone. Gideon and Ruby, with Tyler and his girl and the baby. Rebecca Ann Lowe and Waverly Pike, with a box of biscuits. Dell Ransom and Kayla Brandt. Hollis Fenwick with his guitar. Ray Doolin and a younger man with the same broad shoulders. Verity Ashcombe. Dashiell Crowe and a girl of about twelve who must be his daughter. Bud Tackett. Rafe Dunning in his uniform. Maribel Sloane with a notebook she was not writing in. Janelle Voss, holding a baby in a sun hat. And four hundred others whose names he knew, or had prayed for, or had never met.

They were standing on the slope. They were facing the hill.

Zeke got out of the car slowly, with his cane. Juniper came around and took his other arm. Together they walked to the bottom of the slope, and the people stepped aside to let them through. Then he looked up.

There was a billboard on the hill.

It stood on new steel columns, painted white. The catwalk was new, and there were no wooden braces anywhere. The face of it was forty-eight feet wide. Somebody had painted the whole thing as a sunrise. Deep blue at the top went to rose, and then to a blazing gold along the bottom edge. It was the broad Ohio sky over the interstate at dawn, the way it looked right now over the fields behind them. It was the same sky Hannah had painted thirty years ago, behind the face on the canvas in the barn.

Across the sunrise, in tall, clean, careful letters, were the words:

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD…

And below, larger, in deep red:

JOHN 3:16

Below that, in small, neat capitals along the bottom of the sign, there was a line that he had to squint to read.

IN HONOR OF ONE MAN WHO REMINDED US THAT JESUS IS STILL CALLING SINNERS HOME.

Zeke Thornefield stood at the bottom of the hill and looked up at it for a long time.

He was a sign painter. He had been a sign painter for fifty years. He looked at the lettering the way he looked at every sign he had ever passed on a highway. It was good lettering. It was not perfect. The spacing between the W and the O in WORLD was a hair too wide. The brush had wobbled on the long downstroke of the J. But it was honest work, careful work, done by somebody who had been taught right.

And on the G in GOD, at the end of the curve, there was a small red curl. It was the same curl he had shown a nine-year-old girl on a scaffold at the Blackmere Feed & Grain, a long time ago. He had held her up so she could reach.

He turned and looked at his daughter.

Juniper's eyes were full. She had paint under her fingernails. He noticed it now. She'd had paint under her fingernails since March. She had told him it was from repainting the office.

"Bud ran the lift," she said. "Silas held the ladder. Verity's art class painted the sky. Becky and Waverly fed everybody. Gideon welded the columns. Half the town came out at night with flashlights for three months." Her voice shook. "I did the lettering, Daddy. With your brushes. I hope that's all right. I wanted to do it the way you taught me."

The sun broke over the fields behind them. Light poured across the painted sky and lit the red letters until they blazed. Down on the interstate, a semitrailer heading north let go a long, low blast of its air horn. Then another. Then a pickup, and a minivan full of children, and a car with Kentucky plates. They honked as they passed in the early morning light, the way people had honked at the old sign for two months the winter before. On the hillside, four hundred people began to cheer.

"What do you think, Daddy?" Juniper said.

Ezekiel Thornefield wiped a tear from his cheek with the back of his big, rough, paint-stained hand.

"I think," he said, "that's the best advertisement this world will ever see."

Then Hollis Fenwick began to play, softly, on his grandfather's guitar. Dell Ransom began to sing. Then all of them sang, on the hill beside the highway in the sunrise, with the trucks going by.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.

Zeke did not sing. He stood at the bottom of the hill with his cane in one hand and his daughter's hand in the other. He looked up at the words his daughter had painted. Somewhere a long way off, he

thought, a tired man in a car was coming over the rise. He might be running from something. Maybe he had done something he could not undo. Maybe he had stopped believing anybody was waiting for him.

And in a moment he would look up and see it.

> "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." — John 3:17 (KJV)

End of Chapter 20

Billboard Jesus — Epilogue

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

Epilogue: The Message That Never Comes Down

> "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days." — Ecclesiastes 11:1 (KJV)

Interstate 80, Nebraska — Ten Years Later

Nathan Pryor had been driving west for nineteen hours. He was no longer sure why.

He had left Indianapolis at six o'clock the previous morning, before his wife woke up. He left a note on the kitchen counter beside the coffee maker, where she would see it first. It was four sentences long. He had written it eleven times. In the end it said the only true things he could think of. I lost it. All of it. I'm sorry. Don't look for me.

He had lost it all. The college fund. The retirement account. The equity in the house. He had lost it a little at a time over three years, on his phone, in the bathroom, in the car, at two in the morning. He had always been sure the next one would win it back. Lauren did not know. She would know by now. The bank would have called, or she would have opened the statement he had been hiding in the glove box. She would have sat down at the kitchen table with the statement in one hand and his note in the other. He could see her face. He had been seeing it for nineteen hours. It was why he could not stop driving.

He had a duffel bag in the back seat with three changes of clothes. He had four hundred dollars in his wallet. He had no plan. He was forty-four years old, and somewhere in Iowa he had realized that he had driven past his whole life and could not think of a single reason to turn around.

It was a little after one in the morning. The interstate was empty except for the trucks. The Nebraska dark was enormous on every side, flat and black and starless under low cloud. Now and then the lights of a farmhouse showed far off across the fields and slid slowly behind him. The radio was off. He had turned it off in Illinois because every song was about somebody going home.

He had seen the signs before. Everybody had. They had been everywhere for years now, so common that people had stopped talking about them. On barns in Kentucky. On water towers in Texas. On the backs of trucks, on church marquees, on hand-painted plywood stuck in the ground beside county

roads. Some were professional and expensive. Some looked like children had painted them. Not every one had a picture. Not every message was the same. But they were all saying one thing, more or less, and Nathan Pryor had spent nineteen hours not reading any of them.

The fuel light came on outside Kearney.

He took the next exit. At the top of the ramp, in the wash of his headlights, there was a sign.

It was not much of one. A sheet of plywood on two four-by-four posts, painted white, with a little peaked roof of tin over the top to keep the rain off. Somebody had painted an open door on it. It was a plain wooden door standing open, with warm yellow light coming out. Under the door, in careful red capital letters, were five words.

HE KNOWS. HE LOVES YOU.

And under that, larger:

COME HOME.

Nathan stopped the car at the top of the ramp. He did not mean to. His foot came off the gas and went to the brake by itself, and he sat there with the engine running and the turn signal ticking.

In the bottom right corner of the sign, very small, in neat black letters, someone had painted MM52.

He did not know what it meant. He did not know why the sign made his hands shake on the wheel. He sat there until a truck came up the ramp behind him and flashed its lights. Then he turned right, toward the glow of a truck stop a quarter mile down the road.

> "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." — Psalm 139:7–8 (KJV)

The truck stop was the kind that never closed. Twenty diesel lanes under white lights. A restaurant with a counter. A store selling beef jerky and phone chargers and plastic Jesus figurines for the dashboard. Nathan filled his tank. He went inside and bought a coffee he did not want. Then he walked back out into the cold to his car and stood beside it, because he could not think of anything else to do.

At the far end of the lot, past the last row of parked semis, there was an old travel trailer with its lights on.

It was set up on blocks, with a wooden porch built onto the front and a string of white Christmas lights along the roofline, though it was only October. There was a hand-lettered sign over the door. TRUCKERS' CHAPEL — ALWAYS OPEN — COFFEE'S ON. And in the bottom right corner of that sign, very small: MM52.

He walked over. He did not decide to. He just found himself walking.

The door was open. Inside, it was warm and smelled of coffee and old carpet. There were two short rows of folding chairs facing a little wooden table with a Bible on it. Above the table, thumbtacked to

the paneling, was a faded photograph of a billboard on a hill. It showed the face of Jesus, forty feet wide, with His arms open, and seven red words underneath. Nathan could not read them from the door.

A big man was sitting in a recliner in the corner with a paperback in his lap and his reading glasses down on his nose. He was in his sixties, with a gray beard down to the middle of his chest and forearms like fence posts. He looked up.

"Come on in," he said. "Shut the door, it's cold. Coffee's there. You want some?"

"I've got some." Nathan held up his cup. He stayed in the doorway. "I just — I saw the sign. At the exit. I didn't know there was a chapel."

"Most folks don't." The big man closed his book. "Name's Ray."

"Nathan."

"Sit down, Nathan. You look like a man who's been driving a long time."

Nathan sat down in one of the folding chairs. He had not meant to do that either. Ray did not say anything. He just sat in his recliner and waited, the way a man waits for a deer to come out of the woods. He was in no hurry, and he did not look directly at it.

"What does MM52 mean?" Nathan said finally. "It was on the sign. And on yours."

Ray smiled. He nodded toward the photograph on the wall.

"Mile Marker Fifty-Two," he said. "Interstate 71, in Ohio. Little town called Mercy Ridge. There was an old sign painter there. Fella named Zeke. One day he went out and bought a rusted-out billboard with his burial money, and he painted Jesus on it. And seven words." Ray looked at the photograph. "Most of these signs you see around, they trace back to that one, one way or another. Folks put that mark on them so people would know where it started. Zeke wouldn't let anybody put his name on anything. So they put the mile marker."

Nathan got up and walked to the photograph. He stood in front of it and read the red words under the painted face.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.

He stood there for a long time.

"I knew him," said Ray quietly, behind him. "Zeke. Not well. I met him once or twice. I was a lot like you, the first time I drove past that sign. I'd done something I couldn't undo. I'd left a boy behind in Dayton, Ohio, who wouldn't open his door to me. I pulled over on the shoulder and cried like a baby." He paused. "Took me a while. Took me a lot of Saturdays on a porch. But that door opened, in the end. My boy's got three kids now. They call me Pop."

Nathan did not turn around. His shoulders had begun to shake.

"I don't know what you did, son," said Ray Doolin. "I'm not going to ask. That's between you and Him. But I know He knows. And I know He hasn't changed His mind about you."

"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." — Luke 19:10 (KJV)

Nathan Pryor told him anyway.

He sat in the folding chair in the travel trailer at the edge of a truck stop in Nebraska at two o'clock in the morning, and he told a bearded stranger all of it. The phone. The bathroom. The college fund. His daughter, who was fifteen and wanted to be a veterinarian. His son, who was eleven and still let him say goodnight. The note on the counter. Lauren's face. Nineteen hours on the interstate, with nothing ahead of him but the dark.

Ray listened. He did not interrupt. He did not quote anything. When Nathan finished, Ray got up out of his recliner with a grunt, came over and sat down in the folding chair beside him, and put one huge hand on the back of his neck. He held it there, the way you hold a child who has been crying too long.

"Here's what I know," Ray said. "I know you can't fix it tonight. You can't get the money back. You can't make it so it didn't happen. And I know that's what's had you driving. You figure if you can't fix it, you might as well be gone." He paused. "But that ain't the choice, Nathan. That never was the choice. The choice is whether you go home broke or don't go home at all. And that woman and those two kids would rather have you broke than not have you."

"She won't want me back."

"Maybe not." Ray did not pretend. "Maybe not tonight. Maybe not for a long time. That's hers to decide. But it ain't yours to decide for her by driving to Wyoming." He squeezed the back of Nathan's neck. "You know what that old sign painter told me once? He said he spent fifteen years hiding from God because of one thing he did. Fifteen years. And the whole time, God was standing out on the road waiting. Not with a stick. With His arms open. Zeke said the worst part wasn't the thing he did. It was all the years he wasted being afraid to come home."

Nathan put his face in his hands.

"I'd like to pray for you," said Ray. "If that's all right. You don't have to say anything. I'll do the talking."

Nathan nodded without lifting his head.

So Ray Doolin prayed. He did not pray long. He prayed plainly, the way you talk to someone sitting at the kitchen table. He prayed for Lauren, and for a fifteen-year-old girl who wanted to be a veterinarian, and for an eleven-year-old boy. He prayed for the man beside him by name. He asked God to give Nathan Pryor enough courage to make one phone call, and to turn the car around, and to be there when he got home.

When he finished, he took his hand off Nathan's neck and sat back.

"There's a phone on the wall there," he said. "If you'd rather not use your own."

Nathan looked at his phone for a long time. Then he took it out of his pocket. He had turned it off in Iowa. There were thirty-one missed calls and eleven voicemails. He did not listen to them. He pressed the first name in the list.

She answered before it finished ringing once.

"Nathan?" Her voice was shredded, hoarse. She had been crying for a long time. "Nathan. Oh, God. Where are you? Where are you?"

"Nebraska." He could barely get it out. "Lauren. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I lost it. I lost all of it. I didn't know how to tell you —"

"I don't care." She was sobbing. "I don't care about the money. I thought you were — I thought — I've had the police looking for you since noon. The kids —" She stopped. He heard her take a breath. "Just come home. Do you hear me? Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. But you come home."

Nathan Pryor sat in a folding chair in a truck stop chapel in Nebraska and wept. Ray Doolin quietly got up and went outside onto the little porch, and stood looking up at the clouds, which were beginning to break.

> "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." — Luke 15:24 (KJV)

He left at three-thirty. He drove east.

At the bottom of the ramp, before he merged onto the interstate, he looked once in the rearview mirror. He could see the back of the little plywood sign at the top of the exit, dark against the sky. He could not see the words from this side. But he knew what they said. He thought he would probably know for the rest of his life.

The sun came up over Iowa a little after seven. It came up red and then gold over the stubble fields and the long white lines of the interstate, the way it must have come up over the world on the first morning. Nathan drove into it with his eyes stinging. And now that he was looking, he saw them everywhere.

A barn roof outside Council Bluffs with JESUS in white letters ten feet tall. A water tower near Atlantic. A church marquee in a town too small to have a name on the exit sign: HE'S BEEN WAITING. COME ON IN. A hand-painted board nailed to a fence post at the edge of a cornfield, so weathered he could barely read it: COME HOME. Every one of them had been there on his way west. He had driven past every one in the dark with his eyes on the road and his mind on nothing but getting away.

He had not been able to see them. Now he could not stop seeing them. It was as if the whole country had been holding up signs for him all night, the whole way across, and patiently waiting for him to turn his head.

He stopped for coffee in Des Moines and called his daughter. She was crying too hard to say much. But before she hung up she said, Daddy, drive careful. Okay? Just drive careful and come home.

He said he would.

He never went back to Kearney. He never learned the sign painter's full name, or what had happened on a hill in Ohio on a night of rain and fire. He never knew that the big bearded man in the travel trailer

had once knelt on the carpet of a dying church with his face in his hands, unable to pray. He never knew that the plywood sign at the top of the exit had been built and painted the summer before by a youth group from a Lutheran church in Grand Island. They had seen a photograph of an old woman's lawn chair at the top of a hill. They had read about a sign painter who would not let anyone put his name on anything.

He only knew that he had been running away in the dark, and somebody had left a light on.

That was enough. It has always been enough.

> "So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase." — 1 Corinthians 3:7 (KJV)

Mercy Ridge, Ohio

That same morning, nine hundred miles to the east, Juniper Thornefield Marsh drove down Interstate 71 at a quarter past six. Her husband, Daniel, who taught American history at Wilmington High School and could not draw a straight line, was home making pancakes. There was a nine-year-old girl in the passenger seat and a coffee can of brushes on the floor.

It was the third Saturday in October. Every year on the third Saturday in October, they repainted the letters.

It had been her father's idea, the first year, when he could no longer climb. A sign's like a garden, Junie. You don't tend it, it goes back to weeds. So every October she went up on Bud Tackett's lift with her father's brushes and his can of red enamel. She went over every letter of FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD and every number of JOHN 3:16. Her father sat in a lawn chair at the bottom of the hill in his barn coat with a thermos of coffee. He called up corrections the whole time, loud enough to be heard on the interstate. Your J is leaning, Junie. Watch that W.

He did that for four Octobers.

He died in the fifth spring, in his sleep, in the farmhouse on Ridgeline Road. He was seventy-five years old. It was a Sunday morning in April, a week after Easter. Juniper found him in his chair by the window with her mother's Bible open on his knees and his reading glasses folded on top of it. He had been reading the fifteenth chapter of Luke. The window was open, and the curtains were moving a little in the warm air, and he looked as if he had just closed his eyes to listen to something.

They had buried him next to her mother, on the little rise in the Sugar Grove Cemetery, under a maple. Eleven hundred people came. They stood among the stones and out along the road and in the hay field beyond the fence. Callan Whitlock preached. Gideon Kestrel and Brantley Voss carried the casket side by side, with Tyler Rusk and Dashiell Crowe and Ray Doolin and Silas Quenby's grandson. Delphine Ransom played the old pump organ they had carried out from the chapel. Somewhere at the back of the crowd, a man in a gray suit stood alone and wept the whole time. Juniper learned later that he had driven up from Kentucky. He had seen the sign on the news years before and walked into a church for the first time in his life. He had never met Ezekiel Thornefield. He just wanted to be there.

The gravestone was plain gray granite. Juniper had lettered it herself, in her father's style, with a small red curl on the G.

EZEKIEL THORNEFIELD SIGN PAINTER HE CAME HOME.

> "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." — Psalm 116:15 (KJV)

The lift was waiting at the bottom of the hill when they pulled into the turnout. Bud Tackett was too old to run it now. His grandson ran it, a lanky boy of nineteen who had grown up hearing the story.

There were already a few people on the slope. There were always a few. A man and his wife from Pennsylvania who had driven out to see it. Two college girls taking pictures. An old woman in a lawn chair at the top of the hill with a blanket over her knees and her Bible open in her lap. Juniper did not know her. She did not need to. There was always somebody in a lawn chair at the top of the hill. There had been for ten years.

"Can I do the curl this year?" said the girl in the passenger seat. "Please, Mama. You said when I was nine."

Juniper looked at her daughter.

Hannah Grace Marsh was nine years old. She had her grandmother's dark hair and her grandfather's gray eyes and his big, square, capable hands. She had been born a year and a half after the night of the fire. Her grandfather had held her on the porch in his rocking chair when she was two days old. He had looked at her for a long time without saying anything. Then he said, Well. Hello, Hannah. I've been waiting for you.

He had taught her to hold a brush when she was four. When she was five he had put her on his knee in the barn and let her paint a red curl on a scrap of plywood. He held her hand steady with his own, the way he had once held Juniper's on a scaffold at the Blackmere Feed & Grain.

"Yes," said Juniper. "I said when you were nine."

They went up together in the lift basket in the early light. Juniper did the lettering, the way she always did, slowly and carefully. Her daughter handed her brushes and held the can and watched every stroke. The interstate ran past below them in the morning traffic. Every few minutes a truck went by and sounded its horn, and the girl waved.

When they came to the G in GOD, Juniper stopped. She handed her daughter the fine sable round, the one her father had used to paint the wounds in the hands. She held the basket steady.

"Slow," she said. "From the wrist. Like Grandpa showed you."

Hannah Grace Marsh leaned out over the rail with her tongue between her teeth. She painted the small red curl at the end of the curve. It was a little wobbly. It was a little too thick at the bottom.

It was perfect.

> "One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts." — Psalm 145:4 (KJV)

They sat in the lift basket for a while afterward, forty feet up, eating biscuits from the Crossroads Diner and looking out over the country. Mercy Ridge lay to the north in the morning haze. You could see the white steeple of the chapel above the trees, and the water tower, and the long gray ribbon of Route 68.

Juniper thought about all of them. She did that every year, up here.

Sterling Blackmere had pleaded guilty that first September. He did it so that Rebecca Lowe would not have to testify again, and he said so in open court. He was sentenced to thirty years. In his third year at the federal prison in Ashland, Kentucky, he was baptized in a steel tank in the prison chapel. Callan Whitlock drove down to do it. Sterling wrote to Juniper every Christmas, one page, in his careful, cramped hand. He never asked for anything.

Garrett Pell was convicted at trial of two murders and sentenced to life. He never said a word, to the jury or to anyone. Juniper prayed for him every morning, out loud, the way Ruby Kestrel had taught her. She did not feel it yet.

Brantley Voss came home after three years and two months. He and Gideon Kestrel ran a house on the edge of Wilmington now. It was a big old Victorian with a wraparound porch and a sign over the door that Juniper had lettered herself. THE OPEN DOOR. Men lived there when they came out of prison and had nowhere else to go. Gideon taught them to fix engines. Brantley taught them to fill out job applications and show up on time. Both of them taught the Tuesday night Bible study, and both of them said they still did not know what they were doing. Ruby Kestrel had died the year before at eighty-eight, at home, under her blue awning. Her son held one hand and the former chief of police held the other.

Callan Whitlock was still the pastor of Mercy Ridge Community Chapel. The doors were still unlocked. There were sixty-four notebooks of names now on the shelf in his office. Elowen had started a school for the children of the families who had moved to Mercy Ridge for the church. Hollis Fenwick led worship every Sunday morning. He had been clean ten years and four months, and he still played his grandfather's guitar.

Rebecca Lowe owned the Crossroads Diner now. Waverly Pike had retired to a rocking chair on her front porch and came in every morning anyway to criticize the biscuits. Rebecca had married Rafe Dunning, the police chief of Mercy Ridge, in the chapel. Waverly gave her away. Delphine Ransom played the piano that day too. She played it every Sunday now. And three years ago, she had stood in the front pew as mother of the bride when Kayla Brandt was married.

Silas Quenby had died at eighty in his booth at the Crossroads, with a crossword in front of him and a pencil in his hand. He had filled in every square but one. Maribel Sloane had written a book. It was called Seven Words, and it had been translated into thirty-one languages. She had given every dollar of it to the Come Home Sign Fund.

The Fund was run out of a back room at the chapel by two retired schoolteachers and a part-time bookkeeper. It had paid for signs in all fifty states and in eleven countries. There was a billboard in Lagos and a painted wall in São Paulo. There was a hand-lettered banner outside a refugee camp in Jordan, and a sign above a highway in the mountains of Guatemala. No two of them were alike. Not every one had a portrait. Not every message was the same. But in the bottom right corner of every one, very small, someone had painted MM52.

Her father had never let anyone put his name on anything. It isn't about me, Junie, he used to say. It never was. I'm just the fella who held the brush.

> "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." — 1 Corinthians 15:58 (KJV)

Juniper's phone buzzed in her pocket.

It was a text from Elowen Whitlock. Elowen ran the chapel's night line now, a toll-free number painted at the bottom of the signs in some states, under COME HOME. It rang all night in the chapel office. Volunteers sat by it in shifts, and they wrote down every name.

Thought you'd want to see this, Elowen had written. Came in at 4:10 a.m. Man named Nathan, calling from the road somewhere in Nebraska, headed east. Said he saw the sign at the Kearney exit, and a trucker named Ray gave him our number. Said to tell whoever started all this that he's going home. Said he doesn't know who you are, but thank you.

Juniper read it twice. Then she held the phone so her daughter could see.

"Who's Nathan?" said Hannah.

"I don't know," said Juniper. "Somebody on his way home."

She looked down at the sign below them. The fresh red letters were drying in the morning sun. FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD. There was a small, wobbly red curl at the end of the G. She thought about her father in his barn, fifteen years alone with a painting he could not finish. She thought about her mother's letter behind the frame. Put Him where the whole world can see Him. She thought about one old man with a bad heart and his burial money, on a rusted catwalk forty feet above the interstate, painting seven words because he could not think of anything else to do.

He had never known about Nathan. He had never known about the man in the gray suit from Kentucky, or the refugee camp in Jordan, or the travel trailer in Nebraska with the Christmas lights. He had never known about most of them. He had only known that he was supposed to paint, and so he painted. And then he trusted God with the rest.

That was all he had ever done. It had turned out to be more than enough.

"Mama," said Hannah. "Do you think Grandpa knows? About all of them?"

Juniper put her arm around her daughter. She looked up past the sign, past the hill, into the wide, clean blue of the October sky.

"I think he knows," she said. "I think he's sitting in a lawn chair somewhere with a thermos of coffee, with your grandma beside him, telling her my J is leaning."

Hannah laughed. Down on the interstate a semitrailer went by heading north, and let go a long, low blast of its horn. Then another. The girl leaned over the rail and waved with both arms. The drivers waved back. Then they went on up the long grade toward Columbus and Cleveland and all the places beyond. And for a moment, every one of them looked up.

The message is still there. You can see it if you drive Interstate 71 through Clinton County, Ohio, at Mile Marker 52. The sky is painted gold at the bottom. The letters are red and careful, repainted every October by hand, with a small red curl on the G.

It never comes down. It never will. Because it was never really about the sign.

It was about the One the sign was pointing to. He is still standing out on the road. He is still watching for you. And when He sees you coming, He doesn't wait for you to get all the way there.

He runs.

> "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." — Revelation 22:17 (KJV)

The End

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There are moments in life when God uses the simplest things to communicate the greatest truths.

Sometimes it is a sermon preached from a pulpit. Sometimes it is a Scripture verse spoken by a friend. Sometimes it is a quiet prayer offered by someone who cares. And sometimes, it may be something as ordinary as a billboard standing beside a busy highway.

That is the inspiration behind Billboard Jesus.

Every day, millions of people travel the highways of America. They pass churches, homes, businesses, restaurants, and countless billboards advertising products and services. Everywhere we look, someone is trying to capture our attention, influence our thinking, or convince us that we need something to make our lives better.

But I began thinking about a different kind of billboard.

What if, instead of advertising something people could purchase, a billboard reminded them of Someone who had already paid the greatest price for them?

What if a simple message about Jesus Christ caused someone to stop and consider the condition of their soul?

What if one man's willingness to publicly proclaim his faith began changing an entire community?

Those questions became the foundation for this novel.

At the center of this story is Ezekiel Thornefield, an elderly sign painter who has spent much of his life struggling with grief, regret, and spiritual disappointment. Zeke is not a famous evangelist, a successful pastor, or a wealthy businessman. He is simply an ordinary man who has made mistakes, suffered heartbreaking losses, and spent years believing that his opportunity to accomplish something meaningful for God has passed.

Yet God is not finished with him.

Through one simple act of obedience, Zeke becomes involved in something far greater than he could ever have imagined.

His billboard displays seven words:

“I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.”

Those words become the driving force behind a story filled with mystery, suspense, conviction, forgiveness, and redemption.

But the message is not merely about exposing the sins of others.

It is about the God who already knows everything about us and still calls sinners to repentance.

The Bible reminds us in Hebrews 4:13 that nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Every thought, every action, every secret, and every motive is completely known to Him.

That truth can be frightening when we consider our sins.

Yet it becomes a message of incredible hope when we understand the grace and mercy offered through Jesus Christ.

God knows our failures.

He knows our regrets.

He knows the things we have done that nobody else knows about.

He knows the burdens we carry, the tears we have shed, and the mistakes we wish we could undo.

And still, through His Word, He calls sinners to turn from sin and come to Him through Jesus Christ.

Jesus declared in Matthew 11:28:

> “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

What a wonderful invitation!

Christ does not promise that our past never happened or that our actions have no consequences. Rather, He offers forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and new life to those who repent and trust in Him.

That is one of the central truths I wanted to communicate throughout Billboard Jesus.

Another important message of this novel is that God can use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

Too often, Christians believe that meaningful service to God is reserved for pastors, missionaries, evangelists, or individuals with special talents and opportunities.

But the Bible teaches otherwise.

God used shepherds, fishermen, farmers, servants, widows, and countless ordinary individuals to accomplish His purposes.

The effectiveness of Christian service has never depended upon human recognition, financial wealth, or worldly influence.

It depends upon the Lord who works through His people.

Zeke Thornefield represents the Christian who wonders whether his best years are behind him.

He represents the believer who has experienced spiritual failure.

He represents the individual who wonders whether God can still use someone with a troubled past.

His story reminds us that age does not prevent faithfulness, personal failure does not place a repentant believer beyond God's grace, and the opportunities to serve Christ do not necessarily end when our circumstances change.

As long as God grants us life, we should desire to live for His glory.

Throughout this novel, you will also encounter individuals struggling with different spiritual problems.

Some are hiding terrible secrets.

Some are consumed by guilt.

Some have allowed bitterness to destroy their relationship with God.

Some have become so familiar with religious activities that they have forgotten the joy of truly knowing Jesus Christ.

Others have never understood the meaning of salvation.

Although these characters are fictional, their struggles reflect genuine experiences found throughout our world.

Behind the doors of beautiful homes, people carry terrible burdens.

Behind respected reputations, people sometimes hide shameful secrets.

Even behind church pulpits, spiritual discouragement can quietly take root.

The reality is that every person needs the grace of God.

Romans 3:23 declares:

> “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

No individual is exempt from that truth.

Not the wealthy businessman.

Not the police officer.

Not the grieving widow.

Not the frightened young woman.

Not even the preacher standing behind the pulpit.

Every one of us is a sinner in need of the Savior.

And that is why the message of Jesus Christ remains the greatest message this world will ever hear.

I also wanted this story to demonstrate that genuine Christianity involves more than religious words.

It requires truthfulness, integrity, compassion, repentance, and obedience to God's Word.

It is possible to speak about forgiveness while refusing to forgive.

It is possible to condemn dishonesty while hiding our own deception.

It is even possible to proclaim the gospel publicly while neglecting our private relationship with the Lord.

These contradictions are reflected in the struggles of several characters, including Zeke himself.

His journey reminds us that the message we proclaim must first confront our own hearts.

James 1:22 teaches:

> "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

Christian testimony is not simply about what we say.

It is also about how we live.

My prayer is that readers will recognize this important truth as the story unfolds.

While Billboard Jesus contains mystery, danger, betrayal, and suspense, it is ultimately a story about hope.

It is about the hope of forgiveness.

The hope of reconciliation.

The hope of spiritual restoration.

And, above all, the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

I want to make something very clear: the billboard in this novel possesses no supernatural power. It is simply a sign painted by an ordinary man. The power to save sinners and transform lives belongs to God alone.

Romans 1:16 declares:

> “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.”

That is the message I want readers to remember long after they finish the final chapter.

The power is not in the paint.

It is not in the wood or steel.

It is not in the size of the sign or the number of people who see it.

The power is in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the founder of Crawford Bible Commentary, and through my years of Bible teaching, preaching, and writing, my desire has always been to help people understand the Scriptures and recognize the greatness of our Lord and Savior.

Although Christian fiction allows us to explore biblical truths through imaginary characters and circumstances, those truths must remain firmly grounded in the Word of God.

The characters in Billboard Jesus are fictional. Mercy Ridge is a fictional community. The events surrounding the billboard are products of imagination.

But the spiritual truths concerning sin, repentance, judgment, forgiveness, grace, and salvation are very real.

And the Jesus Christ proclaimed throughout this novel is not fictional.

He is the eternal Son of God, who came into this world, lived a sinless life, died upon the cross for sinners, was buried, and rose again on the third day.

He alone is the Savior.

Acts 4:12 declares:

> “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

Perhaps, as you read this story, you will recognize something of yourself in one of its characters.

Perhaps you have wandered away from God.

Perhaps guilt from the past has robbed you of peace.

Perhaps you have experienced a terrible loss and have struggled to understand why God allowed it.

Perhaps you once served the Lord faithfully but have gradually become discouraged.

Or perhaps you have never personally trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Whatever your circumstances, I hope this novel encourages you to open your Bible, examine your heart, and consider the wonderful invitation of the gospel.

There is one final thought I would like to leave with you.

Imagine driving down a long stretch of highway.

Your mind is occupied with the troubles of life.

The miles pass.

The traffic continues.

The world moves around you.

Then, unexpectedly, you see a billboard containing a simple message:

“JESUS CHRIST STILL SAVES SINNERS.”

Would you keep driving without giving it another thought?

Or would you consider what those words mean for your eternal soul?

That is the question at the heart of this book.

We live in a world filled with voices demanding our attention. Yet amid all the noise, the message of Jesus Christ remains unchanged.

He came to seek and to save the lost.

He died for sinners.

He rose again.

And salvation is available through faith in Him.

My sincere prayer is that Billboard Jesus will entertain you through its suspense, challenge you through its characters, and, most importantly, remind you of the transforming power of the gospel.

Because the greatest message ever proclaimed was not written on a roadside billboard.

It was demonstrated upon a cross at Calvary.

And that message is still changing lives today.

Thank you for reading Billboard Jesus. May this story encourage you to stand boldly for Christ, live faithfully according to His Word, and never underestimate what God can accomplish through one person willing to serve Him.

May all the glory belong to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Dr. Paul Crawford Author and Founder of Crawford Bible Commentary

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." — Romans 10:13 (KJV)

A Closing Prayer

“Father, I thank You for every reader who has walked through these pages. For the one who does not yet know You, I pray they would hear Your voice and receive Your Son, Jesus, as Lord and Savior. For the one who already believes, I pray You would set their heart ablaze with urgency—to speak, to share,

to love, and to never be silent. May we all live as faithful watchmen, sounding the trumpet until the day You call us home. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen."

THE BIBLE WAY TO HEAVEN

1. Admit you are a sinner.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

No one is good enough to go to Heaven on his own merit.

No matter how much good we do, we still come short.

2. Realize the penalty for sin.

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a)

Just as there are wages for good, there is punishment for wrong.

The penalty for our sin is eternal death in a place called Hell.

3. Believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again for you.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Romans 10:9)

4. Trust Christ alone as your Saviour.

"...But the gift of God is eternal life though Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Eternal life is a gift purchased by the blood of Jesus and offered freely to those who call upon Him by faith.

Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved forever. Being saved is a one-time event.

Dr. Paul Crawford is more than just a Christian Author; His books are a source of inspiration and guidance on your spiritual journey. His books are created with a deep sense of faith and a desire to uplift and inspire all who read.

BILLBOARD JESUS

A Christian Inspirational Suspense Novel

He painted Jesus for the world to see.
He never imagined the whole world
would start looking at him.

When retired sign painter Ezekiel Thornefield purchases an abandoned roadside billboard, he believes he is simply doing one last good thing for God.

But seven words beneath a giant portrait of Christ ignite a firestorm: **'I KNOW WHAT YOU DID. COME HOME.'**

Secrets begin unraveling. A powerful businessman demands the sign's removal. A police chief fears exposure. A grieving widow finds hope. And a frightened young woman discovers that forgiveness may be closer than she ever imagined.

Then a dead man is discovered beneath the billboard.

As threats escalate and the entire nation watches, Ezekiel must confront the one secret he has kept buried for twenty years.

Because sometimes the most powerful sermon is not preached from a pulpit.

Sometimes it stands beside a highway.

A powerful Christian novel about redemption, hidden sin, second chances, and the Savior who never stops calling sinners home.

Dr. Paul Crawford

