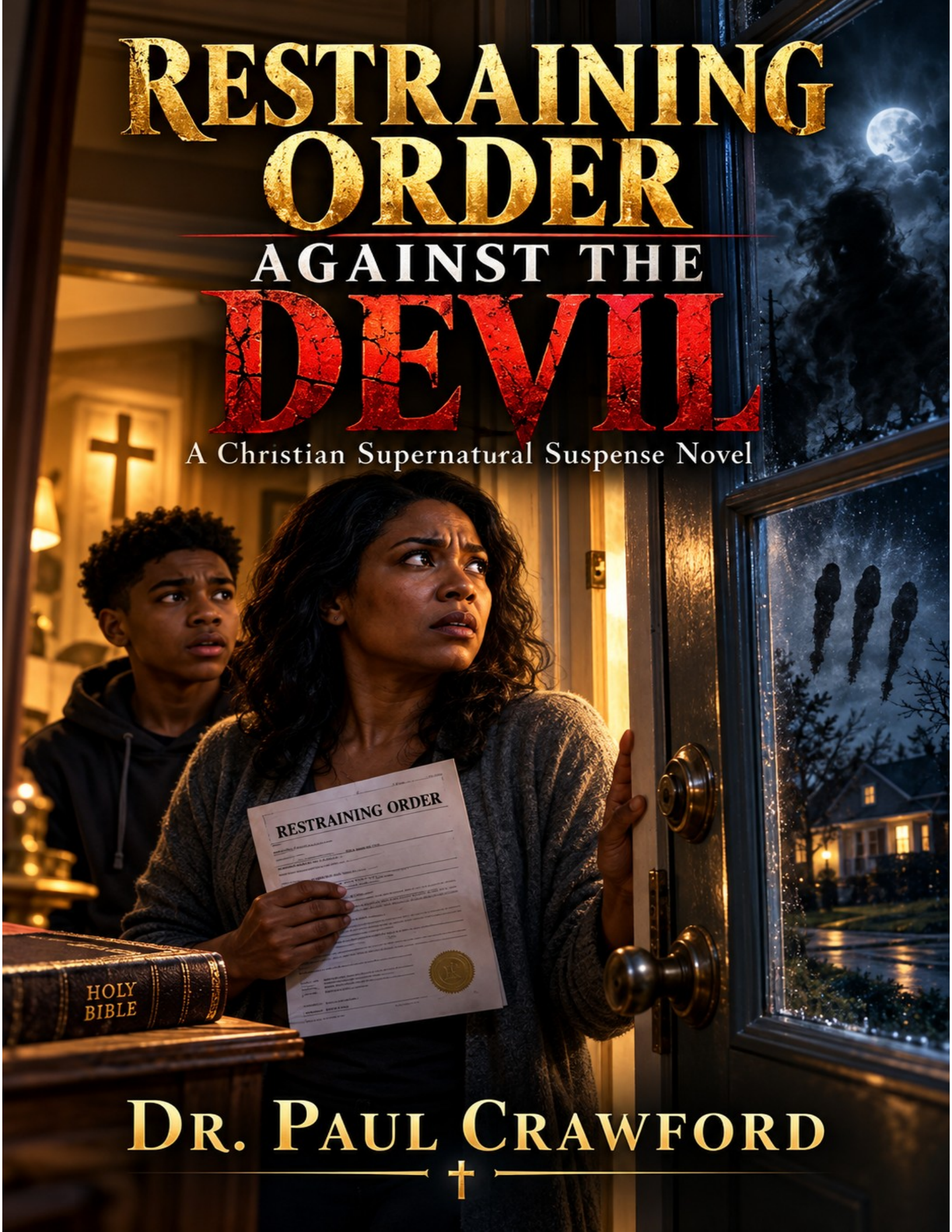

RESTRAINING ORDER
AGAINST THE
DEVIL
A Christian Supernatural Suspense Novel
RESTRAINING ORDER
HOLY BIBLE
DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

RESTRAINING ORDER AGAINST THE DEVIL

A Christian Supernatural Suspense Novel by Dr. Paul Crawford

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Chapter 1 — The Order

After years of abuse, **Maris Bellamy** finally obtains a restraining order against her estranged husband, **Garrick Bellamy**. For the first time, she believes the law may give her and her fifteen-year-old son, **Keaton**, the protection they desperately need. But on her first night home after the court hearing, someone knocks three times on her front door at exactly 3:17 a.m.

When Maris looks outside, no one is there.

Chapter 2 — Three Knocks

The knocking returns the following night at exactly the same time.

Maris calls **Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid**, convinced Garrick is violating the court order. Deputies search the property but find no intruder. The security cameras show nothing unusual.

Then Bramwell notices footprints in the frost.

They begin near the road.

They approach the house.

But halfway across the yard, they simply stop.

Chapter 3 — The Message on the Mirror

Keaton begins suffering terrifying nightmares involving a tall man dressed in black.

The next morning, Maris discovers five words written across her bathroom mirror:

THE ORDER DOES NOT COVER ME.

Terrified, she contacts **Pastor Corbin Thorne**, the pastor who helped her through the darkest months of her marriage.

Corbin immediately recognizes that Maris may be facing something far more complicated than a violation of a court order.

Chapter 4 — The Adversary

Keaton describes the mysterious figure from his dreams.

The man never gives his name.

Instead, he tells Keaton:

“Tell your mother the Adversary remembers.”

Corbin warns Maris not to allow fear to determine what she believes. At the same time, Sheriff Kincaid begins investigating Garrick.

Garrick denies everything.

And strangely, the evidence appears to support him.

Chapter 5 — The Burned Bible

Maris awakens to the smell of smoke.

Her Bible is lying burned on the kitchen table.

Nothing surrounding it has caught fire.

Keaton insists he heard someone walking through the hallway during the night.

Corbin visits the house and begins praying with Maris and Keaton.

Before leaving, he notices something carved underneath the kitchen table.

A circle.

Inside it are nine marks.

Chapter 6 — The Photograph

Pastor Corbin receives an anonymous envelope at the church.

Inside is an old photograph of nine people standing outside an abandoned farmhouse.

One of them is Maris's father.

On the back are the words:

THE NINTH PROMISE HAS NOT BEEN PAID.

Corbin takes the photograph to retired historian **Dr. Elowen Pryce**.

The moment Elowen sees it, she knows exactly what it means.

Chapter 7 — The Circle of Nine

Elowen reveals the forgotten history of a secret organization known as **The Circle of Nine**.

Decades earlier, nine respected citizens quietly gathered to investigate supernatural phenomena.

What began as curiosity became obsession.

What began as experimentation became ritual.

And during the group's final gathering, one person died.

The remaining members swore never to reveal what happened.

Chapter 8 — The Last Survivor

Corbin and Sheriff Kincaid track down **Orson Vale**, believed to be the final surviving member of the Circle of Nine.

Orson refuses to speak.

Then Corbin shows him the photograph.

Orson points toward Maris's father and asks:

“Does his daughter have a son?”

When Corbin says yes, Orson whispers:

“Then it has begun.”

Chapter 9 — What They Invited

Orson finally reveals part of the truth.

The Circle of Nine was not merely investigating spirits.

They were attempting to contact one.

They wanted knowledge.

Power.

Protection.

And information about the future.

During their final gathering, something answered.

Orson warns Corbin:

“We thought we were calling something into the room. We didn't understand that we were opening a door.”

Chapter 10 — The Confession

Maris searches through boxes belonging to her late father.

Hidden inside his old Bible, she discovers several handwritten pages.

They contain his confession.

He admits participating in the Circle of Nine.

He describes nine chairs, nine candles, and a voice that appeared to come from nowhere.

His final sentence reads:

“We thought we were opening a door we could close whenever we wanted.”

Beneath it, someone else has written:

“Doors work both ways.”

Keaton recognizes the words.

The man in his dreams has been saying the same thing.

Chapter 11 — Restraining Order Against the Devil

Sheriff Kincaid becomes frustrated with Corbin's spiritual explanation.

During a heated conversation, he asks:

“What do you want me to do, Pastor? Get a judge to sign a restraining order against the devil?”

Corbin answers:

“No. You don't take the devil to court.”

Kincaid asks:

“Then what do you do?”

Corbin replies:

“You take your stand in Christ.”

The statement becomes the turning point of the story.

Chapter 12 — The Stronghold of Fear

Corbin helps Maris understand that fear has ruled her life for years.

Garrick used fear to control her.

Now something else is attempting to use the same weapon.

Maris begins reclaiming her home spiritually and emotionally.

She prays.

She reads Scripture.

She refuses to respond to threatening messages.

But that night, something violently pounds against every window of the house at once.

Chapter 13 — The Shadow Beside the Bed

Keaton awakens unable to move.

A dark figure stands beside his bed.

The voice tells him:

“Your father belonged to anger. Your grandfather belonged to us. Eventually you will belong to something too.”

Terrified, Keaton remembers Corbin's teaching.

He forces one word from his mouth:

“Jesus.”

The figure disappears.

For the first time, Keaton begins seriously considering the faith he has spent years questioning.

Chapter 14 — Not All of It

Maris confronts Garrick.

She accuses him of stalking her and terrorizing Keaton.

Garrick angrily denies several incidents.

Then something moves behind Maris in the hallway.

Garrick's face turns pale.

Maris asks whether he is responsible.

He answers:

“Not all of it.”

Suddenly Garrick is no longer merely a suspect.

He is afraid too.

Chapter 15 — The Wooden Box

Orson reveals that the Circle of Nine placed personal objects inside a wooden box during their final ritual.

The box was buried beneath the abandoned farmhouse.

According to Orson, the ritual was never completed.

Sheriff Kincaid discovers that the property was recently purchased through a shell company connected to Garrick's identity.

Garrick insists someone used his name.

Then investigators discover that the ground beneath the farmhouse has recently been disturbed.

Chapter 16 — The Ninth Promise

Elowen uncovers a missing page from an old journal belonging to one of the Circle's members.

The writing refers repeatedly to something called **the Ninth Promise**.

The promise was supposed to complete what the Circle began.

But one member refused.

Corbin realizes Maris's father may have been that person.

And the unfinished agreement may explain why Maris and Keaton have become targets.

Chapter 17 — The Boy Is Gone

Maris awakens during the night and discovers Keaton missing.

His bedroom window is open.

His phone is gone.

Minutes later, she receives a message from his number:

COME TO THE HOUSE WHERE IT STARTED.

Maris immediately knows what it means.

The abandoned farmhouse.

Corbin and Sheriff Kincaid join her.

Outside, a violent storm begins moving across the county.

Chapter 18 — Nine Chairs

Maris, Corbin, and Kincaid enter the farmhouse.

Inside, someone has recreated the room described in her father's confession.

Nine chairs surround a wooden box.

Nine candles burn.

Nine names are written across the floor.

Keaton is somewhere inside the house.

So is Garrick.

Then Orson unexpectedly appears.

And the truth about the Circle's final gathering begins to emerge.

Chapter 19 — Take Your Stand

The person secretly continuing the work of the Circle of Nine is exposed.

Human deception and genuine spiritual darkness collide.

The farmhouse descends into chaos.

Keaton cries out for help.

Garrick confronts the consequences of his own actions.

Sheriff Kincaid witnesses events he cannot explain.

And Maris hears the voice that has haunted her family for decades.

“You belong to what your family began.”

Maris refuses.

“I don't belong to my family's past.”

The voice answers:

“Then who do you belong to?”

Maris grips her Bible.

“Jesus Christ.”

For the first time, she stands without running.

Chapter 20 — Who Won the War

The crimes connected to the Circle of Nine are finally exposed.

Garrick is held accountable for his abuse and the offenses investigators uncover.

Orson reveals the complete truth.

Keaton begins his own journey of faith.

Sheriff Kincaid can explain some of what happened at the farmhouse.

But not everything.

Weeks later, Maris returns home from court with her extended protection order.

She places it inside a drawer.

Keaton asks:

“So is it really over?”

Maris looks toward the dark window.

For months she would have immediately checked outside.

This time she does not.

“The battle isn't over.”

She opens her Bible to James 4:7.

Then she smiles.

“But I finally know who already won the war.”

And for the first time in years, **Maris Bellamy is no longer afraid of what might be standing outside the door.**

PREFACE

There are some battles you can see coming.

There are others that arrive quietly.

A threatening phone call.

A knock in the middle of the night.

A shadow where no one should be standing.

A memory that refuses to stay buried.

A fear that seems to know exactly where you live.

Restraining Order Against the Devil was born from a simple but powerful idea: **What happens when a person receives legal protection from a human enemy, only to discover that the deepest battle cannot be settled in a courtroom?**

The law can establish boundaries.

A judge can issue an order.

A sheriff can make an arrest.

A court can declare that someone must stay away.

And those protections matter.

But there are spiritual battles that no document can settle.

There are fears that no signature can erase.

There are wounds that no courtroom can completely heal.

And there is an enemy whose greatest weapon is often not force, but fear.

This novel is a work of fiction, but the spiritual truths behind it are very real.

The Bible tells us plainly that evil exists.

It warns us that the devil seeks to deceive, tempt, accuse, divide, and destroy.

First Peter 5:8 warns believers to remain watchful because the adversary prowls like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that our struggle is not merely against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil.

Yet Scripture never teaches Christians to live terrified of darkness.

Quite the opposite.

The Bible teaches us to stand.

To resist.

To pray.

To put on the whole armor of God.

To submit ourselves to the Lord.

And above all, to remember that Jesus Christ has already won the decisive victory.

James 4:7 says:

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

That verse lies at the heart of this story.

Maris Bellamy begins this novel as a woman controlled by fear.

She has survived years of intimidation and abuse. When she finally receives a restraining order against her estranged husband, she believes she has taken the first step toward freedom.

Then something else begins knocking at her door.

Something the court cannot name.

Something the sheriff cannot easily explain.

Something connected to secrets buried in her family's past.

But the true journey of this novel is not simply about discovering who—or what—is haunting Maris.

It is about discovering whether fear will continue to control her.

That is where the story becomes deeply spiritual.

Fear can become its own kind of prison.

It can influence every decision.

It can cause us to assume the worst.

It can make shadows look larger than they are.

It can convince us that yesterday has permanent authority over tomorrow.

But faith does not mean pretending evil is imaginary.

Faith means recognizing that evil does not have the final word.

Throughout this story, Pastor Corbin Thorne repeatedly refuses to treat spiritual warfare as entertainment.

He does not rely on superstition.

He does not offer magical formulas.

He does not teach that Christians can manipulate spiritual forces by saying the right words in the right order.

Instead, he points people toward the truth of Scripture.

Toward prayer.

Toward repentance.

Toward courage.

Toward obedience.

And ultimately, toward Christ.

That distinction is important.

Christianity is not about becoming fascinated with darkness.

It is about walking in the light.

This novel contains frightening moments, mysteries, secrets, betrayal, human evil, and supernatural suspense. But darkness is never intended to be the hero of this story.

Jesus Christ is.

The central message is not that the devil is powerful.

The central message is that **Christ is greater**.

First John 4:4 declares:

“Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”

That is the truth I hope remains long after the final page has been turned.

Some readers may identify with Maris because they have known fear.

Others may understand Keaton's doubts.

Some may recognize Pastor Corbin's determination to stand upon Scripture even when circumstances become difficult to explain.

Others may understand Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid, who wants evidence before he believes anything he cannot see.

Wherever you find yourself in this story, remember this:

The Christian life does not promise that there will never be a battle.

It promises that believers never enter the battle alone.

The devil may accuse.

Fear may knock.

The past may return.

The darkness may seem close.

But there is still a name above every name.

There is still a Savior who has conquered sin and death.

There is still a cross.

There is still an empty tomb.

And there is still victory in Jesus Christ.

So as you enter the world of *Restraining Order Against the Devil*, remember the question that stands behind every chapter:

What do you do when the enemy refuses to stay away?

You stand in Christ.

You hold to the truth.

And you remember who has already won the war.

Dr. Paul Crawford

Restraining Order Against the Devil

A Christian Supernatural Suspense Novel by Dr. Paul Crawford

Prologue: The Ninth Chair

November 1996
The farmhouse stood at the end of a gravel lane that no longer led anywhere.
Daniel Whitlock killed his headlights a quarter mile out, the way they had all agreed, and let the pickup creep the last stretch in darkness. Frost cracked beneath the tires. Bare sycamores leaned over the lane like old men bending close to hear a secret.
Ahead, behind the filmed-over windows of the old Hollis place, a weak amber glow trembled.
Candlelight.
There had been no electricity out here since the widow Hollis died in 1971. No one had lived in the house since. No one in town even talked about it much anymore, which was exactly why Ambrose Lark had chosen it.

Daniel counted the vehicles parked among the dead apple trees. A Buick. Two pickups. Ruth Ellery's little station wagon. Orson Vale's feed-store truck with the dented tailgate. A black Lincoln that could only belong to the bank.

Seven.

He was the eighth.

He sat with both hands on the wheel and listened to the engine tick as it cooled. His breath fogged the windshield. Eleven miles behind him, his wife was asleep, and down the hall from her, his daughter was asleep beside a night-light shaped like a crescent moon. He had told his wife he was helping Orson inventory feed. She had not asked questions. She had stopped asking questions about Thursday nights a long time ago.

He had not come for power. He had told himself that a hundred times. He was not like Harlan Pike, who wanted to know which way the markets would turn, or like Ambrose, who wanted to know everything. Daniel only wanted to know what was coming. Whether the plant would close. Whether the cough his wife couldn't shake was something worse. Whether his little girl would grow up safe.

A man had a right to know what was coming for his family.

That was all this was.

On the seat beside him lay the thing Ambrose had told each of them to bring.

Something that belongs to you, Ambrose had said, in that warm classroom voice that had taught American history to half the county. *Something that carries your name, even if your name isn't written on it.*

Daniel had chosen his father's pocket watch. Brass. Scratched. Stopped years ago at some forgotten hour. It had seemed like the safest thing to give up. A dead man's watch. A dead man's time.

He reached for it, and his knuckles caught the latch of the glove box.

It fell open.

Inside, beneath the registration and a tire gauge, lay a small green New Testament with a cracked spine. His mother had pressed it into his hand the summer he left for college. *You'll want it someday, Danny,* she had said. *Maybe not soon. But someday.*

He had not opened it in nineteen years.

He looked at it for a long moment.

Then he shut the glove box, picked up the watch, and stepped out into the cold.

* * *

The front door was unlocked. The hallway smelled of mice and old wallpaper paste, and of something sweeter underneath, like candle wax and cloves.

Voices murmured from the parlor at the end of the hall. They stopped when his boots touched the floorboards.

"Daniel." Ambrose Lark stepped into the doorway, smiling. He wore his good wool overcoat and the same wire-rimmed glasses he wore when he passed the offering plate at First Methodist. "We were beginning to think you'd lost your nerve."

"Almost did."

"Almost is a kind of honesty. I'll take it." Ambrose clapped him on the shoulder. "Come in. We're nearly all here."

Daniel stepped into the parlor and stopped.

They had been meeting for almost two years. At first in living rooms, over coffee and pound cake. Then in the back room of the Grange hall. Then here. In the beginning they had only talked: about ghost stories and near-death experiences, about the lights old farmers swore they had seen moving over the river bottoms, about books Ambrose ordered by mail from places with no return address. It had felt like a club. A hobby. Respectable people asking questions the church preferred not to answer.

Then the questions had become experiments.

And the experiments had started to work.

Tonight the parlor had been emptied of everything except what Ambrose wanted in it.

Nine straight-backed chairs stood in a circle, each one facing inward.

Nine white candles stood on the floor before the chairs, their flames perfectly still.

Around the inside of the circle, someone had painted nine names onto the bare boards in neat, careful letters. Daniel found his own between ORSON VALE and RUTH ELLERY. Seeing it there made the back of his neck prickle. His name looked smaller on that floor than it had ever looked on a check or a mailbox.

At the center of the circle sat a wooden box.

It was about the size of a family Bible, dark walnut rubbed with oil, iron at the corners. The lid stood open. The inside was lined with something that might once have been red velvet.

Seven objects already lay inside it.

A wedding ring. A child's silver spoon. A brass key. A lock of gray hair tied with thread. A Masonic pin. A photograph folded face down. A rosary with a broken chain. Daniel looked away from that one quickly.

The others had already taken their seats. Ruth Ellery, the night nurse at County General, her hands clasped too tightly in her lap. Harlan Pike from the bank, still wearing his tie. Lorene and Walt Dobbins, who ran the hardware store and taught the young married couples' class on Sunday mornings. Orson Vale, thick-shouldered and red-faced, who sold feed and fertilizer and could not tell a story without laughing at the end of it.

Orson was not laughing tonight.

He met Daniel's eyes and gave him a small, tight nod, the kind men give one another at funerals.

Daniel counted again. Seven in the chairs, counting Ambrose. Eight, counting himself.

"Who are we waiting on?"

"No one," said a voice behind him.

He turned.

Celia Marsh stood in the hallway, unwinding a long gray scarf from her throat. She had come on foot, then. Her cheeks were pink from the cold and her eyes were very bright, brighter than anyone else's in the room.

She was the only one who looked glad to be there.

"Sorry," she said softly. "I wanted to walk the last part. I wanted to *feel* it."

Ambrose smiled at her the way a teacher smiles at a favorite student.

Then he closed the parlor door, turned the old iron key in the lock, and dropped the key into his coat pocket.

"Nothing comes in," he said. "Nothing goes out. Not until we're finished."

* * *

"Every one of you has sat in a pew and been told to be content with not knowing," Ambrose said.

He did not raise his voice. He never had to.

"Not knowing whether the crops will come in. Not knowing whether your children will be safe. Not knowing whether the lump is cancer, whether the bank will hold, whether the man you married will come home sober. We've been told that wanting to know is a sin." He looked around the circle, meeting each pair of eyes. "I don't believe that. I believe knowledge is a door. And doors are made to be opened."

"And closed," Ruth said. Her voice cracked on the word.

"And closed," Ambrose agreed gently. "A door is only a door, Ruth. We open it. We look. We close it again. That's all tonight is."

Celia knelt beside the box and laid something inside it: a small square of paper, folded many times over. She did not say what it was. Nobody asked.

Then everyone looked at Daniel.

He crossed the circle, careful not to step on the painted names, and set his father's watch on the faded velvet. His fingers lingered on it a moment longer than they should have.

Then he let go and took his seat.

Ambrose unfolded several handwritten pages and began to read.

Daniel had heard him read before, from the Declaration of Independence, from Lincoln, from the Psalms on Easter Sunday. This was nothing like that. The words did not belong to any language Daniel had heard in school or in church. They seemed to have too many edges. They caught in the air like burrs in wool.

The room grew cold.

Not winter cold. Something deeper, the way a cellar is cold, the way a well is cold. Daniel watched his breath leave his mouth in a slow white plume.

Then the candle flames moved.

All nine of them leaned inward at the same moment, toward the open box, as if something at the center of the circle had begun to draw breath.

Lorene Dobbins made a small sound in her throat.

Out in the hallway, beyond the locked door, a floorboard creaked.

Then another.

Slow, heavy footsteps moved down the hall toward the parlor. They stopped just outside the door.

Every person in the house was sitting in that circle.

Ambrose kept reading. His voice trembled now, but not from fear. Daniel recognized the sound. It was the sound of a man watching something he had wanted for a very long time come true.

Then Ambrose stopped.

And something else spoke.

You called.

It did not come from the hallway. It did not come from the box. It seemed to come from directly behind each of their chairs at once, close enough to stir the hair at the back of Daniel's neck. It was not loud. It was not monstrous. It was quiet and patient and almost kind.

That was the worst part. Later, when Daniel tried to remember it, that was always the worst part.

It sounded like it loved them.

"We did," Ambrose whispered. Tears stood in his eyes. "We called. We want to know."

Everyone wants to know.

And then it began to tell them.

It told Harlan Pike that the bank examiners would come in March and find nothing, and Harlan laughed out loud, a high, startled laugh, and covered his mouth. It told Ruth Ellery that her mother would die on a Tuesday in her sleep, without pain, and Ruth bowed her head and wept with relief. It told Walt Dobbins where his brother had hidden the money their father left. It told Lorene something so softly that no one else could hear it, and afterward she would not look at her husband.

It told Orson Vale nothing at all. It only said his name, slowly, as if tasting it.

Then it said:

Daniel Whitlock.

Daniel's heart lurched.

Your little girl sleeps with the moon beside her bed. She is afraid of the dark.

A pause.

Clever girl.

The cold went through Daniel like a nail. Across the circle, Orson Vale turned his head and stared at him, and the blood drained out of Orson's broad red face until it was the color of candle wax.

Daniel had never told any of them about the night-light.

He had never said his daughter's name inside that circle.

He had never said it anywhere near this house.

What is given must be answered, the voice said. *Knowledge for knowledge. A door for a door. Promise me.*

Ambrose answered first. "I promise."

The candle in front of his chair leapt up tall and thin and burned blue.

The voice moved around the circle, and one by one they answered it. Daniel could not hear what each of them promised. They spoke too low, and each seemed to promise something different, something meant only for the thing that was listening. Harlan's promise was short. Ruth's was a whisper. Walt's voice shook. Orson's broke in the middle. Celia's took the longest of all, and she smiled while she said it.

After each one, the voice said a single word.

Accepted.

And after each one, another candle burned blue.

Eight blue flames.

One white.

The voice turned to him. Daniel did not know how he knew that, only that he felt it, the way you feel someone standing behind you in an empty room.

And you, Daniel. The ninth. Promise me.

His mouth opened.

The words were right there. He could feel them waiting on his tongue, easy and smooth as river stones. *I promise.* It would be so simple. Everyone else had done it. And it knew things. It knew about the plant and the cough and the years ahead. It could tell him whether his little girl would grow up safe.

Then, from nowhere, he remembered his mother's kitchen.

He was seven years old, sitting on the counter, and she was washing supper dishes and singing under her breath. *What a friend we have in Jesus.* The window over the sink was fogged with steam. Her hands were red from the hot water.

And he remembered a verse he had not thought about since vacation Bible school, a verse printed on a felt banner in the church basement in letters cut from yellow cloth.

Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

He did not know whether he believed it.

But he knew, with a certainty that went all the way down, that whatever was in this room was not his friend.

"No," Daniel said.

The silence that followed was total.

Every head in the circle turned toward him.

"Daniel." Ambrose's whisper was frantic. "Daniel, you can't stop now. The circle isn't closed. It has to be nine. It has to be—"

"I said no." Daniel stood. His chair scraped back across the boards. "I'm not promising it anything. I'm not giving it anything else." He took a step toward the center of the circle, toward the box. "And I want my father's watch back."

He reached for it.

Every candle in the room went out at once.

* * *

They did not gutter. They did not hiss. There was no smoke.

One instant there was light, and the next there was a darkness so complete that Daniel could not see his own outstretched hand.

Someone screamed. Lorene.

Someone else was praying, a ragged, broken string of words. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* It was Walt Dobbins, and it was the first time in two years that anyone had spoken that Name inside the circle.

Then came the knocking.

Three knocks.
On the parlor door.
From the hallway side.
They were not loud. They were slow and even and unhurried, the knocks of someone who knew the door would be opened eventually and was willing to wait.
Knock.
Knock.
Knock.
No one moved. No one breathed.
Daniel's hands found the lighter in his jacket pocket. His thumb slipped on the wheel once, twice. On the third try the flame caught, small and yellow and shaking.
In its light he saw the face of his own wristwatch.
3:17.
That was impossible. They had arrived a little before midnight. Ambrose had read for twenty minutes, half an hour at most. But the hands of the watch did not lie, and when Daniel looked later, every watch in the room said the same thing.
Three hours of their lives had gone somewhere, and none of them could say where.
Ruth Ellery was the first to see Ambrose.
He lay on his side within the circle, across the painted letters of his own name, one arm stretched toward the wooden box. His glasses had come off and lay a foot from his face. His eyes were open.
Ruth went to him on her knees. She pressed two fingers to his throat, then laid her ear against his chest. She stayed that way for a long time.
When she sat up, her face was gray.
"He's gone."
No one spoke.
"His heart," Ruth said. She said it too quickly, the way people say a thing they have decided to believe. "He had a bad heart. Everyone knew that. It was his heart."
Daniel looked past her, at the center of the circle.
The lid of the box was closed.
No one had touched it. He would have sworn to that before any judge in the state. He had been reaching for it when the lights went out, and his hand had closed on nothing but cold air.
The lighter grew hot in his fingers.
And then, so close to his ear that he felt cold breath move across his skin, the voice spoke one last time. It did not sound kind anymore.
Eight promises given.
One owed.
Daniel did not turn around. He could not have turned around if his life depended on it.
It is not forgotten, Daniel Whitlock. What you will not pay, what comes after you will pay.
"No," Daniel whispered. His voice was barely a breath. "You'll get nothing. We're closing this. It's over."
Something shifted in the dark behind him. It might have been amusement.
You opened a door.
A pause.
Doors work both ways.
Then it was gone.
Daniel knew the moment it left, the way you know a train has passed after the rails stop singing. The air in the parlor turned from cellar-cold to merely winter-cold. Lorene's sobbing grew louder, as if something had been pressing on it and had finally let go.
The nine candles stayed dark.

No one tried to light them again.

* * *

The key was still in Ambrose's coat pocket. Orson found it with shaking fingers and unlocked the parlor door.

The hallway was empty.

Daniel held the lighter low and looked at the floor. A thin gray skin of dust lay over the boards from the front door all the way to the parlor. His own boot prints were there, and Celia's, and the prints of all the others who had come in before them.

There were no other footprints.

Whatever had walked down that hallway and knocked on that door had left no mark at all.

It was Harlan Pike who began talking first about how things would be handled. Harlan had always been good at handling things. Ambrose had a bad heart; half the congregation knew it. Ruth knew the county coroner, and the coroner was a reasonable man. A sixty-one-year-old schoolteacher with a history of chest pains did not need an autopsy. He did not need questions. He needed a quiet funeral and a kind obituary.

No one argued.

The box was harder.

"Burn it," Walt said. "Burn the whole thing. Burn the house."

"No." Celia Marsh had not cried. Her eyes were still bright, though something in them had gone very still. "You don't burn something like that. You don't know what it would let loose." She looked down at the closed lid. "It goes in the ground. Here. Where it was made."

So Orson and Walt carried it down into the cellar, where the floor was packed dirt, and dug a hole in the far corner with a rusted spade they found hanging on the wall. Daniel held the light. He would not touch the box. He would not even stand close to it. He watched the dirt fall on the lid and thought of his father's watch inside, ticking at no hour at all in the dark.

When it was done, they stood together in the cold parlor, eight living people around nine empty chairs, and swore that none of them would ever speak of that night again.

Not to their husbands or wives.

Not to their pastors.

Not to their children.

Daniel swore it with them. He would keep silent. That much he would promise, and he would keep that promise for the rest of his life, or very nearly.

But he had promised the other thing nothing.

And every person in that room knew it.

* * *

Orson caught him at his truck.

The sky had begun to go gray in the east. Frost silvered the hood of the pickup and the dead branches of the orchard. Orson's breath came in short, hard clouds.

"It said your girl's name, Dan."

"It didn't say her name."

"It knew it." Orson grabbed his sleeve. "It knew about the light by her bed. How did it know that?"

"I don't know."

"And when you said no—" Orson stopped. He looked back at the black windows of the farmhouse. "What did you do in there? What does that mean, that you said no?"

Daniel opened his mouth and found he had nothing to put in it.

"I don't know that either."

Orson let go of his sleeve. For a long moment the two men only looked at each other, two grown men who had come here for answers and were leaving with nothing but questions.

"I hope it was enough," Orson said finally. "God help us, Dan. I hope it was enough."

Daniel did not answer.
He did not know whether God would help any of them. He was not sure, after tonight, that God would want to.
* * *
He drove home with the radio off.
At the end of his own driveway, he stopped the truck and sat for a long time with the engine running. The house was dark except for one window on the second floor, where a small crescent of light glowed against the curtain.
He opened the glove box.
The little green New Testament was right where he had left it. He picked it up. The cracked spine bent easily in his hands, as if it remembered being read.
He carried it into the house and up the stairs and stood in the doorway of his daughter's room.
She was asleep, one arm flung over her head, her hair tangled across the pillow. The moon-shaped night-light painted her face pale gold. She looked very small. She looked like something the world could take without even noticing.
Daniel Whitlock knelt beside her bed.
He had not prayed in nineteen years. He had forgotten how. He did not know the right words, and he was not sure anyone was listening for them.
In the end, he only had three.
"Not her. Please."
He stayed there on his knees until the sun came up.
* * *
Years later, Daniel would write it all down on folded pages and hide them in the one place he believed no one would ever look. He would write about nine chairs and nine candles and nine names. He would write about the locked door and the voice that came from nowhere, and the moment every candle went out at once.
He would write, *We thought we were opening a door we could close whenever we wanted.*
He would never write about what he heard that first morning, just before dawn, as he knelt at his daughter's bedside with his mother's Testament pressed between his hands.
Three soft knocks.
Not on the front door.
On the wall above her bed.
Then nothing more.
Not for a long, long time.
The thing that had answered in the Hollis farmhouse was in no hurry. It had been patient since before the first garden. It could wait for a little girl to grow up.
It could wait for that little girl to have a son.
It remembered.

Chapter 1: The Order

Maris Bellamy had learned to read a room the way other people read the weather.
She could tell from the sound of a car door whether the evening would be quiet. She could tell from the way a man set his keys on a counter whether she should start supper or start apologizing. She could tell, from fifteen feet away and without looking up, the exact moment her husband's patience ran out.
She felt it now.

Courtroom B of the county courthouse was small and overheated and smelled of floor wax and wet wool. Rain ticked against the tall windows. Maris sat at the petitioner's table with her hands folded on a manila folder so they would not shake, and she did not look to her left.

She did not have to.

Garrick Bellamy sat at the other table in a charcoal suit she had picked up from the dry cleaner's herself, back when picking up his suits was one of the hundred small duties that kept the peace. His hair was freshly cut. His tie was the blue one his mother had given him, the one he wore to church when he was asked to read Scripture from the platform. He sat with one ankle crossed over his knee, relaxed, a little bored, a man waiting through a misunderstanding.

That was the face he showed the world.

Maris had spent sixteen years with the other one.

"Mrs. Bellamy." Judge Harriet Ames peered over her reading glasses. She was a small, gray-haired woman with a voice like a closing drawer. "You've stated in your petition that the respondent has threatened you on multiple occasions. I need you to tell the court about the incident on October nineteenth."

Maris's mouth went dry.

She had practiced this. She had practiced it in the car and in the shower and on her knees beside her bed. Her advocate from the women's shelter had practiced it with her twice. Pastor Corbin had sat across from her in his cluttered office and listened to her say it out loud, start to finish, and had not looked away once.

Still, for a long moment, nothing came.

Across the aisle, Garrick shifted in his chair. Just slightly. Just enough.

She knew that movement. It meant *careful.*

"He came home late," Maris said. Her voice sounded thin in the big room. She made herself go on. "He'd found out I had opened a checking account in my own name. Just a small one. For emergencies." She swallowed. "He took my phone and threw it against the wall. He told me if I ever tried to leave, he would make sure I never saw my son again. Then he put his hand around my throat and pushed me back against the refrigerator and held me there."

The courtroom was very quiet.

"How long?" the judge asked.

"I don't know. Long enough that I couldn't breathe." Maris looked down at the folder. "Long enough that I thought about what Keaton would find when he came downstairs."

"Was your son present?"

"He was upstairs. He heard it." Her voice broke, and she hated that it broke, and she kept going anyway. "He came down. He's fifteen. He got between us."

Garrick's attorney, a soft-spoken man named Whitfield with a gold pen he kept clicking, rose to object to the characterization. The judge waved him back down without looking at him.

"Go on, Mrs. Bellamy."

So Maris went on.

She told them about the photographs, the bruises on her neck that her advocate had insisted she document, bruises she had covered with turtlenecks for two weeks. She told them about the text messages that came after she left, forty-one of them in a single night, the tone swinging from tender to murderous and back again. *I love you. Come home. You'll regret this. Nobody will believe you. You're nothing without me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.* She told them about the night his truck had idled at the end of the shelter's street for three hours with the headlights off.

When Garrick's turn came, he was calm and sad and reasonable.

He spoke of stress at work. Of a marriage that had grown difficult. Of a wife who was, he said gently, *fragile,* who had always struggled with anxiety, who saw threats where none existed. He loved his son.

He loved his wife. He had never laid a hand on either of them in anger. He was a deacon at Grace Fellowship. People could vouch for him.

He was very good.

He had always been very good.

For one terrible moment, Maris watched the judge listen and felt the old, familiar certainty rise in her chest. *Nobody will believe you.* Sixteen years of learning that her own memory was not to be trusted. Sixteen years of wondering whether she really had heard what she heard, seen what she saw, felt what she felt.

Then Judge Ames turned a page in the file, looked at the photographs for a long time, and set them down.

"Mr. Bellamy," she said, "I've been on this bench for twenty-two years. I have heard a great many husbands explain how fragile their wives are." She took off her glasses. "The petition is granted."

The words did not land all at once. They came to Maris slowly, like sound underwater.

The judge was still speaking. A full order of protection, effective immediately, for a period of one year. The respondent was to have no contact with the petitioner or the minor child, direct or indirect. He was to remain at least five hundred feet from her residence, her workplace, and the child's school. He was to surrender any firearms within twenty-four hours. Any violation would result in arrest.

"Do you understand the order, Mr. Bellamy?"

Garrick stood. He buttoned his jacket.

"Yes, Your Honor."

He did not look at Maris.

Not until the judge had left the bench, not until the bailiff had called the next case and the room had filled with the shuffling of papers and the murmur of lawyers. Then, as he passed behind her chair on his way to the aisle, Garrick paused for just a second.

He did not touch her. He did not say anything that anyone else could have heard.

He only leaned down, close enough that she could smell the cedar of his aftershave, and breathed out a single soft word.

"Paper."

Then he was gone.

* * *

Keaton was waiting in the hallway outside the courtroom, slouched on a wooden bench with his hood up and his earbuds in, staring at nothing.

Pastor Corbin Thorne sat beside him.

They made an odd pair. Keaton was all elbows and silence, fifteen years old and already taller than his mother, with Garrick's dark hair and, Maris sometimes thought with a twist of fear, Garrick's jaw. Corbin was in his late fifties, broad and slightly rumpled, with reading glasses pushed up into thinning gray hair and a tweed jacket that had been out of style for as long as Maris had known him. He was not saying anything to Keaton. He seemed to understand that the boy did not want anything said.

Both of them stood when she came through the doors.

"Well?" Keaton pulled out one earbud.

Maris held up the paper.

It was only a few pages, stapled at the corner, still warm from the clerk's printer. ORDER OF PROTECTION across the top in heavy black letters. The judge's signature at the bottom. Her name. Keaton's name. Garrick's name. The words *SHALL NOT* appearing again and again down the page like fence posts.

Keaton read the top of it. Something in his shoulders let go a quarter of an inch.

He did not hug her. He was fifteen. But he stepped close enough that his arm pressed against hers, and he left it there, and Maris had to look up at the ceiling for a moment until her eyes cleared.

"Thank God," Corbin said quietly.

Keaton's mouth tightened. "God didn't sign it. The judge did."
"Keaton—"
"It's fine, Maris." Corbin smiled a little. "He's right. Judge Ames signed it. I'm just grateful she did."
Keaton looked at the pastor for a second as if waiting for the sermon that usually followed. When it did not come, he put his earbud back in and looked away.
"Mrs. Bellamy?"
A tall man in a brown sheriff's department jacket was coming down the corridor toward them, rain still beaded on his shoulders. He was somewhere in his mid-forties, lean and weathered, with close-cropped hair going silver at the temples and the kind of steady, unhurried walk that made other people step aside without being asked.
"Sheriff Kincaid," he said, and offered his hand. "Bramwell Kincaid. I'm told congratulations are in order, though I imagine it doesn't feel much like a celebration."
"Not really," Maris admitted.
"No. It never does." He glanced down at the order in her hand. "My deputies will serve the firearms surrender this afternoon. I've also put your address on the patrol list. You'll see a car go by a few times a night for the next couple of weeks. That's not because I expect trouble. It's because I'd like your husband to see it too."
"Thank you."
"Don't thank me yet." Kincaid's gray eyes were serious. "I want you to understand something, Mrs. Bellamy. That paper is a good thing. It gives me the authority to act. But it's a piece of paper. It doesn't stand on your porch at night. If he comes within five hundred feet of you, if he calls, if he sends a message through a friend, if he so much as drives down your street, you call 911 first and me second. Don't wait to be sure. Don't talk yourself out of it. You understand?"
Paper, Garrick had breathed against her ear.
Maris nodded.
Kincaid handed her a card with a cell number written on the back in blue ink. Then he nodded to Corbin, with the slightly guarded courtesy of a man who respected pastors in general without being entirely sure what to make of them, and headed back down the hall.
* * *
Corbin walked them to the parking lot under his big black umbrella.
"You're going home tonight?" he asked.
"We have to sometime." Maris unlocked her little Honda. "Six weeks at the shelter. Keaton's been sleeping on a cot. The house is in my name. My father left it to me." She hesitated. "Garrick never liked it there. He never liked anything that was mine first."
"Would you like Diane and me to come by? She'd bring a casserole. She always brings a casserole. It's practically a sacrament with her."
Maris laughed, and the sound surprised her. She could not remember the last time she had laughed.
"Maybe tomorrow. I think tonight I just want to—" She stopped, not sure how to say it. *Be in my own house without being afraid.* "Be home."
Corbin nodded as if he understood exactly.
Then, before she got into the car, he did something he had done many times in his office over the past year, something she had once found awkward and now found she needed. He put one hand lightly on her shoulder and bowed his head right there in the rain-soaked parking lot.
"Lord, thank You for what happened in that courtroom today. Thank You that justice still means something. Watch over Maris and Keaton tonight. Cover their home. Give them rest. And remind them that they're not alone in that house, not for one minute. In Jesus' name."
"Amen," Maris whispered.
In the back seat, Keaton stared out the opposite window and did not say anything at all.
* * *

They drove home through the early dark.

The rain thinned as they left town and turned to a raw, misting cold. The wipers squeaked across the glass. Farmland opened up on either side of the highway, black fields and the far-off lights of farmhouses, then the long wooded stretch along Copper Creek where the road narrowed and the trees closed in.

"Can I ask you something?" Keaton said.

It was the first thing he had said since the parking lot.

"Of course."

"Do you actually think it'll work? The order?"

Maris kept her eyes on the road. She wanted to say yes. She wanted to say it so firmly that both of them would believe it.

"I think it's the best thing we've ever had," she said finally. "I think the law is on our side now. That's more than we had yesterday."

Keaton was quiet for a while.

"He doesn't care about the law," he said. "He doesn't care about anything he can't control."

"I know."

"So what happens if he just—ignores it?"

"Then he goes to jail."

Keaton made a sound that was not quite a laugh. "After."

Maris did not answer that, because there was no answer, and they both knew it. A restraining order did not stop a man. It only told the world what would happen to him afterward.

She reached over and squeezed his knee. He let her.

Ten minutes later, the headlights swept across the mailbox at the end of the lane, the one with WHITLOCK still painted on the side in her father's careful hand. She had never had the heart to change it.

The house waited at the top of the rise, dark and square against the sky.

Home.

* * *

The house smelled closed up. Dust and cold radiators and, faintly, the lemon oil Maris's mother had rubbed into the banister every Saturday of Maris's childhood, a smell that had somehow soaked into the wood and never left.

She went through every room turning on lights before she let Keaton bring in the bags.

Kitchen. Dining room. The little front parlor with her father's recliner still angled toward a television nobody watched. The downstairs bathroom. The pantry. The back porch. She checked the closets. She checked behind the shower curtain. She knew how it looked. She did it anyway.

Keaton stood in the front hall with a duffel bag over each shoulder and watched her without comment. He had watched her do things like this his whole life. He had stopped asking why years ago.

The locks were new. Pastor Corbin's men's group had come out the Saturday before with a locksmith from the congregation and changed every one of them, front and back, plus a deadbolt on the cellar door. They had also mounted a video doorbell beside the front door and two small cameras under the eaves, one covering the front yard and the lane, one covering the back. Earl Gifford, a retired electrician with enormous hands, had set up the app on Maris's phone and walked her through it three times.

Anything moves out there, you'll know about it before it reaches the porch, he had said. *You'll see it plain as day.*

Twenty minutes after they got home, there was a knock at the back door, and Maris's heart slammed so hard against her ribs that she nearly dropped the kettle.

It was only old Lyle Purcell from the farm across the road, bundled in a barn coat, with Boaz straining at the end of a leash.

The shelter had not allowed pets. For six weeks, Mr. Purcell had kept the big, graying golden retriever in his mudroom and, by his own account, fed him far too much bacon. Boaz hit the kitchen floor like a furry avalanche, nails scrabbling on the linoleum, and threw himself first at Keaton and then at Maris, whining and wriggling and thumping his tail against the cabinets.

For the first time all day, Keaton smiled. Really smiled. He went down on his knees and buried his face in the dog's neck, and Boaz licked his ear, and Maris had to turn back to the stove.

"Heard about the court," Mr. Purcell said gruffly. He was eighty if he was a day, and he had known Maris since she was in diapers. "Good. That's good." He glanced out the back window toward the dark lane. "I'm up most nights anyhow. Bad hip. I see anybody pull in here that ain't supposed to, I'll call it in. You want, I'll come over with the shotgun."

"Please don't come over with the shotgun, Mr. Purcell."

"Well. Offer stands."

After he left, Maris heated two cans of soup and they ate at the kitchen table with Boaz sprawled across Keaton's feet. The house creaked and settled around them. The radiators knocked as the furnace caught up. Old house sounds. Sounds she had grown up with.

For a little while, it almost felt normal.

* * *

Keaton took the bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall.

It had been Maris's room when she was a girl. The wallpaper was still the faded yellow she had picked out at eleven, little sprigs of white flowers she had thought were the height of sophistication. The bed was the same narrow iron bed. On the shelf above it, behind a stack of Keaton's paperbacks, stood a cheap plastic night-light shaped like a crescent moon, its bulb long since burned out.

She had never been able to throw it away.

When Maris was small, her father had kept that little moon burning every single night. Not just when she was afraid. Every night, without exception, for years. Once, when she was nine or ten and trying to be grown up, she had switched it off before bed. In the morning she found it on again and her father asleep in the hallway outside her door, sitting up against the wall, his Bible open face down on his knee.

She had asked him about it once, years later. He had only smiled in that tired way he had and said, *Your old man worries, that's all.*

He had died when Keaton was four. She had never asked again.

Maris still could not sleep in a completely dark room. Sixteen years of marriage had not cured her of it. Garrick had mocked her for it and then, eventually, used it, flipping the bedroom lamp off as the last word in an argument and leaving her lying rigid in the blackness until she heard him snoring.

Tonight, in her parents' old bedroom at the other end of the hall, she left the lamp on.

She set the order of protection on the nightstand beside it, squared neatly, where she could see it.

Then she sat on the edge of the bed with her Bible in her lap and tried to pray.

It did not come easily. It rarely did anymore. For most of her marriage, prayer had been something performed in public, in the second pew at Grace Fellowship, with Garrick's arm draped possessively across the back of her shoulders and his voice rising strong and sure in the hymns. Afterward, in the car, he would critique the sermon. At home, he would close the bedroom door.

It had taken Pastor Corbin months to help her see that the God Garrick talked about on Sunday mornings and the God she was meeting in the pages of the Gospels were not the same. The first was a weapon. The second had wept outside a tomb.

Thank You, she prayed finally. *Thank You for today. Please let it be over. Please just let it be over.*

She read a psalm. The ninety-first. *Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night.* She read it twice, the second time half aloud, the words thin in the big quiet room.

When she went to check on Keaton, his light was already off. She could hear his slow, heavy breathing through the door.

Boaz was not with him.
She found the dog lying at the top of the stairs, at the end of the hallway farthest from the bedrooms, his chin on his paws. When she called him, his tail thumped once against the floor.
He did not get up.
"Come on, boy. Come on. Bed."
Boaz looked down the long, dim hallway toward her bedroom door, and a low sound came from somewhere deep in his chest. Not a growl. Something closer to a whine.
Then he put his head back down on his paws and stayed where he was.
He's been gone six weeks, Maris told herself. *Everything smells different. He'll settle.*
She left him there.
She checked the locks one more time. Front. Back. Cellar. She opened the camera app and looked at the empty porch, the empty yard, the long empty lane glowing pale gray under the infrared. Mr. Purcell's porch light burned across the road. Somewhere out there, a sheriff's cruiser would be making its slow pass in an hour or so.
The law was on her side now.
She climbed into bed, pulled the quilt up to her chin, and lay looking at the order on the nightstand until the words blurred.
She was asleep by midnight.
* * *
She did not know what woke her.
One moment she was nowhere, sunk in the deep, dreamless sleep of someone who had not truly rested in months. The next she was lying on her back with her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling, her heart already racing as if it had heard something the rest of her had missed.
The lamp was still on.
The house was silent. No radiators. No wind. No creaking. The kind of silence that has a weight to it.
Maris turned her head toward the nightstand. The order of protection lay where she had left it. Beside it, her phone's screen glowed faintly.
3:16.
She lay still and listened.
Nothing.
You're home, she told herself. *You're in your father's house. The doors are locked. The cameras are on. The sheriff is driving by. You're safe. Go back to sleep.*
The last digit on the phone changed.
3:17.
And downstairs, someone knocked on the front door.
Three times.
Not pounding. Not the frantic hammering of a neighbor with an emergency, and not Garrick's furious fist, which she knew the way she knew her own heartbeat. These were slow, deliberate knocks, evenly spaced, unhurried.
Knock.
Knock.
Knock.
The knocks of someone who had all the time in the world.
Then silence again.
Maris could not move. Every muscle in her body had locked, the way it used to lock when she heard Garrick's truck in the driveway late at night. For a long, long moment she lay rigid under the quilt, not breathing, waiting for the next sound. Footsteps on the porch. The rattle of a doorknob. Glass breaking.
Nothing came.

She made herself sit up. She made herself pick up the phone. Her thumb was shaking so badly it took her three tries to open the camera app.

The front-porch view loaded slowly, a gray, grainy square.

The porch was empty.

She stared at it. The welcome mat. The two rocking chairs her mother had painted green. The porch rail. The steps. Beyond them, the frosted lawn sloping down to the lane, every blade of grass sharp and silver in the infrared.

No one.

She switched to the camera under the eaves. The yard. The lane. Her little Honda in the drive. Nothing moved. She switched to the back. The porch, the clothesline, the dark line of trees along the creek. Nothing.

She opened the doorbell's event history.

The last motion recorded at the front door had been at 6:42 that evening, when she and Keaton came in with the bags.

There was nothing after that.

No motion. No alert. No recording. According to the camera mounted eighteen inches from the door, no one had come up those steps in more than eight hours.

But someone had knocked.

She had heard it. She had *heard* it.

The old voice rose up from somewhere deep inside her, the one Garrick had spent sixteen years cultivating. *You're fragile. You're anxious. You see threats where none exist. You dreamed it. You always do this.*

"Mom?"

Maris nearly screamed.

Keaton stood in her doorway in a T-shirt and sweatpants, his hair flattened on one side, his face white in the lamplight.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Something in her chest gave way. Relief and terror together, so tangled she could not tell them apart. She had not dreamed it.

"Yes," she said. "I heard it."

"Was it him?"

"I don't know. The cameras don't show anything."

"Then how—"

"I don't *know,* Keaton."

They went down together. Maris went first, with her phone in one hand and her father's old flashlight from the nightstand drawer in the other, turning on every light as she went. Keaton came behind her, carrying the fireplace poker he had grabbed from the parlor on some instinct neither of them mentioned.

At the top of the stairs, they found Boaz.

The dog was on his feet. He stood rigid at the head of the staircase, staring down into the front hall at the closed front door. The fur along his spine had risen into a stiff ridge from his neck to his tail.

He was not barking.

That was what frightened Maris most. Boaz barked at deer. He barked at the mail truck. He barked at the wind. But now he stood perfectly silent, his lips drawn back just slightly from his teeth, trembling from head to tail, and he would not go down.

"Boaz," Keaton whispered. "Hey. Hey, buddy."

The dog did not look at him.

They went down without him.

The front hall was cold. Colder than the rest of the house, Maris thought, though perhaps that was only the draft from the old door. She stood in front of it for a long moment with her hand on the new deadbolt.

Kincaid's voice came back to her. *You call 911 first and me second. Don't wait to be sure. Don't talk yourself out of it.*

Call and say what? *Someone knocked on my door, but the camera shows nobody there?* She could already see the deputy's polite, careful face. She could already hear Garrick's attorney in some future courtroom, clicking his gold pen. *Mrs. Bellamy, how many times have you called the sheriff's department about knocks that no one else heard and no camera recorded?*

Fragile.

She did not call.

Instead, she reached past the deadbolt and flipped on the porch light.

Then she leaned to the narrow pane of glass beside the door and looked outside.

The porch was empty. The rocking chairs sat side by side, perfectly still. The welcome mat lay square in front of the door. Frost glittered on the boards and on the rail and on the steps, an unbroken white glaze shining under the yellow bulb.

Beyond the porch, the yard sloped away into darkness. The lane was empty. Across the road, Mr. Purcell's porch light still burned. Somewhere far off, a dog was barking, thin and faint.

No car. No figure. No movement anywhere.

No one was there.

Maris stood with her forehead almost touching the cold glass for a long time. Keaton waited behind her, the poker hanging from his hand.

"Mom," he said quietly. "What was that?"

"Old house," she heard herself say. "The radiators. The pipes. They knock sometimes when the heat comes on. It used to happen when I was a girl."

Keaton looked at her.

"The furnace isn't even running," he said. "And radiators don't knock three times and stop."

She had no answer for that.

They did not go back to bed. Keaton dragged his comforter down to the couch in the front parlor and lay there with every lamp in the room switched on, pretending to sleep. Maris sat on the bottom step of the staircase with her phone in her lap, opening the camera app every few minutes, watching the empty porch and the empty lane until the gray squares on the screen began to blur.

At the top of the stairs, Boaz kept his watch on the door and did not lie down once.

Upstairs, on the nightstand beside the lamp, the order of protection lay exactly where she had left it, with Judge Ames's signature at the bottom and Garrick's name in bold letters and the words *SHALL NOT* running down the page like fence posts.

For the first time, it occurred to Maris that the order said a great deal about what Garrick Bellamy could not do.

It said nothing at all about what to do when someone knocked and no one was there.

Outside, the frost went on silvering the porch boards, smooth and white and undisturbed.

And far down the lane, past the reach of the cameras and the porch light and the sheriff's slow patrols, something that had waited a very long time went on waiting.

Chapter 2: Three Knocks

> *I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety. — Psalm 4:8*

Morning came the way it always did after a bad night, slowly and without apology.

The windows over the front parlor went from black to charcoal to the thin, colorless gray of late November. Somewhere across the road, Mr. Purcell's rooster announced the day with more enthusiasm than it deserved. The furnace clicked on. The radiators began, one by one, to tick and knock and hiss as the heat moved through the old pipes.

Maris listened to them from the bottom step of the staircase, where she had spent the last three hours. Those were radiator sounds. Irregular. Clattering. Familiar. A dozen small knocks, then a long hiss, then a rattle from the dining room, then silence, then another knock somewhere upstairs.

They sounded nothing at all like what she had heard at 3:17.

Her neck ached. Her feet were numb inside her socks. Her phone had dropped to eleven percent from opening the camera app over and over, watching the same gray porch and the same empty lane until the images stopped meaning anything. On the couch in the parlor, Keaton slept at last, sprawled sideways under his comforter with one arm hanging to the floor and his mouth open, looking for a moment like the little boy he had been not so very long ago.

The fireplace poker lay on the rug beside him.

Maris stood, wincing, and climbed the stairs.

Boaz was still at the top. He had finally lain down sometime before dawn, but his head was up and his eyes were open, and he was still looking at the front door. When she touched his head he leaned into her hand and sighed, a long, shuddering dog sigh, and his tail moved once against the floor.

"I know," she whispered. "Me too."

In her bedroom, the lamp was still burning. The order of protection lay on the nightstand exactly where she had left it. Beside it lay her father's Bible, the big black King James with the cracked leather cover and the gilt worn off the edges, the one she had brought down from the attic the week before because she could not bear to leave it in a box any longer.

She sat on the edge of the bed and opened it at random, the way her mother used to do on hard mornings, the way Pastor Corbin had gently told her was not really how it was meant to be read.

It fell open to the Psalms. It nearly always did. The pages there were softer than the rest, the corners darker, as if a thumb had turned them ten thousand times.

Psalm 4. Someone, years ago, had underlined the last verse in pencil.

I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety.

She read it twice.

Then she closed the book and sat with both hands flat on the cover, and for a long time she did not move.

Only, she thought. Not the cameras. Not the new locks. Not Judge Ames, not Sheriff Kincaid, not the order on the nightstand. *Thou, Lord, only.*

She wanted to believe that. She wanted it more than she had wanted anything in a long while.

But she had not slept in peace last night. She had not slept at all.

* * *

In daylight, the front porch looked ordinary.

Maris stood on it in her coat with a mug of coffee going cold in her hand and looked at everything twice. The welcome mat. The green rocking chairs. The porch rail, its white paint flaking. The door itself, solid oak, painted a deep red by her mother in 1994 and not painted since.

She ran her fingers over the wood at the height where a fist would land.

Nothing. No mark. No scuff.

The frost had mostly burned off the boards by now, leaving them dark and damp. If anyone had stood there in the night, there was no sign of it left.

She looked up at the little black eye of the doorbell camera. It looked back at her, blinking a patient blue light.

You'll see it plain as day, Earl Gifford had promised.

She went back inside and called the doorbell company's customer service line and spent forty minutes on hold listening to a looping instrumental version of a song she half recognized. When a young man finally answered, he walked her through the device settings with cheerful patience. Motion sensitivity: high. Recording: enabled. Night vision: enabled. Connection: strong.

"Everything looks like it's working perfectly, ma'am," he said. "If someone was at your door, the camera would have caught it."

"Would it catch someone knocking? Even if they were standing to the side?"

"The field of view is a hundred and sixty degrees, so unless they were, like, flattened against the wall —" He laughed a little, then seemed to think better of it. "It would catch the audio, anyway. The microphone's pretty sensitive. You'd hear the knock on the recording even if you couldn't see who did it."

"There isn't any recording."

A pause on the line.

"Then, um. With respect, ma'am, I don't think anyone knocked."

She thanked him and hung up and sat at the kitchen table with her face in her hands.

* * *

Keaton came in a little after ten, hair wild, comforter still around his shoulders like a cape. He poured himself a bowl of cereal, sat down across from her, and ate half of it in silence before he spoke.

"I'm not going to school."

"I already called you in."

He looked up, surprised. Then he nodded and went back to his cereal.

"I called the doorbell company," she said. "Everything's working. It didn't record anything."

"So it wasn't Dad."

"I don't know that."

"If it was Dad, the camera would've gotten him." Keaton set down his spoon. "Unless he knows how to get around it. He's good with that stuff." He frowned. "But he'd want us to know it was him. That's the whole point with him. He wants you to know."

Maris looked at her son and thought, not for the first time, that he had learned far too much about his father far too young.

"Maybe it was the house," she said. "Old houses make noises. When I was a little girl—"

"Mom."

She stopped.

"I know what I heard." Keaton's voice was quiet but steady. "Three knocks. Like this." He reached out and rapped the table with his knuckles, slow and even. *Knock. Knock. Knock.* The sound made the hair on her arms stand up. "That's not a radiator. Somebody did that."

They sat with it for a while.

Outside, a pickup rattled past on the road. Both of them turned to look. It kept going.

"What was Grandpa like?" Keaton asked suddenly.

The question caught her off guard. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I barely remember him. You never talk about him. This was his house." He shrugged, picking at the edge of the comforter. "I was just thinking about it last night. Lying there. Wondering if he ever heard stuff like that."

Maris opened her mouth to say *of course not* and then, for some reason, did not say it.

She thought of the moon-shaped night-light. She thought of finding her father asleep in the hallway outside her bedroom door, sitting up against the wall, with his Bible open face down on his knee. Not once. More than once. Many times, in fact, now that she let herself remember it. She had always thought it was sweet. A father who worried.

She had never once wondered what he was worried about.

"He was quiet," she said finally. "He was kind. He read his Bible every morning at this table before anybody else was up." She touched the worn wood. "Right where you're sitting. I used to come down and find him here in the dark with just the little light over the stove on, reading."
"Was he religious? Like, actually? Not like Dad?"
The question hung there.
"Not like your father," Maris said. "No. Not like that at all."
* * *
Pastor Corbin and Diane Thorne arrived at a quarter past four, as the light was already beginning to fail, bearing exactly what Corbin had promised: a chicken-and-rice casserole the size of a small suitcase, still steaming under its foil.
Diane was a short, brisk woman with silver hair cut close to her head and reading glasses on a beaded chain around her neck. She had taught third grade for thirty years and still walked into every room as if it might need straightening. Within ten minutes she had found the good serving spoons, put the kettle on, scolded Boaz for begging, slipped him a piece of chicken when she thought no one was watching, and asked Keaton four questions about school that somehow got four real answers out of him.
Corbin stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the front hall with his hands in his jacket pockets and looked around the old house with quiet interest.
"I've driven past this place a hundred times," he said. "I never knew it was your family's."
"My father bought it in '89. I grew up here." Maris handed him a mug of coffee. "After he died, I couldn't sell it. Garrick wanted to. He said it was a money pit. He said it was full of ghosts." She heard herself say the word and wished she hadn't. "Of my father, I mean. Memories."
Corbin glanced at her over his mug. He did not say anything.
That was one of the things she had learned about him over the past year. Pastor Corbin Thorne was a great noticer. He did not miss much, and he did not rush to say what he had noticed. He simply filed it away, and waited, and sometimes, weeks later, he would bring it back out so gently that you hardly realized he had been carrying it all that time.
She had first walked into his church eleven months ago on a Wednesday night because it was the one place in the county where she was sure Garrick would never go. New Hope Chapel was a small white clapboard building on Mill Road with a gravel parking lot and a steeple that leaned very slightly to the east. It had perhaps a hundred members on a good Sunday. Garrick called it "that hillbilly church."
She had sat in the very last pew during the midweek Bible study with her coat still buttoned, ready to leave at any moment. Corbin had been teaching from Ephesians. She remembered almost nothing of what he said except one verse, which he had read twice, slowly, in his rough, unhurried voice:
For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.
Afterward, everyone else had gone downstairs for coffee. Maris had stayed in her pew. And Corbin, without being asked, had come and sat down two seats away from her and said, "You look like someone who's tired of wrestling."
She had burst into tears in front of a total stranger. She had not cried in front of anyone in nine years.
"You look tired," he said now.
Maris almost laughed. "That's what you said the first time I met you."
"I meant it then too." He set his mug down on the hall table. "How was the first night?"
She hesitated.
It would have been so easy to tell him. He was standing right there, kind and patient and solid. He had believed her about Garrick when her own mother-in-law had not. He had sat beside her in the emergency room the night of the refrigerator. He had found her the advocate, the shelter, the attorney who worked for almost nothing.
But every word of what had happened last night sounded, when she rehearsed it in her head, exactly like the woman Garrick had described to the judge. *Fragile. Anxious. Sees threats where none exist.*

Someone knocked on my door and the camera says nobody did. My dog stared at the door all night. My son and I sat up with a fireplace poker until dawn.
She had fought so hard, for so long, to be believed.
She could not stand the thought of watching the doubt come into Corbin's eyes.
"It was strange being back," she said. "I didn't sleep much."
It was not a lie. It was not the truth either.
Corbin looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly, the way he did when he was filing something away.
"That's to be expected," he said. "It'll take time. Your body has spent years on high alert. It doesn't know yet that it's allowed to stand down."
He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a small white index card. He had a habit of carrying them, a little stack held together with a rubber band, and of handing them out to people the way other men handed out business cards. On this one, in his blocky printing, was a single verse.
For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. — 2 Timothy 1:7
"Put it somewhere you'll see it," he said. "The bathroom mirror's good. Nobody can avoid the bathroom mirror."
Maris turned the card over in her fingers.
"A sound mind," she said softly.
"That's my favorite part." Corbin smiled. "Fear is a liar, Maris. It always tells you that you're losing your mind. But the Lord didn't give you that spirit. Whatever's speaking fear into your life, it isn't Him."
She looked up at him sharply. He was gazing at her with mild, steady eyes, as if he had not said anything particularly important at all.
In the kitchen, Diane laughed at something Keaton said.
It was a good sound. Maris held onto it.
* * *
They stayed for supper. Diane insisted. Keaton ate three helpings of casserole and, when Diane asked what he was reading for English, actually told her about it at length. Corbin asked a few questions about the house and listened to the answers. No one mentioned Garrick. No one mentioned the court. For one hour around her mother's old dining table, with the lamps lit and the windows black and the radiators ticking, Maris let herself feel something that was almost like peace.
Before they left, Corbin prayed. He did not make a production of it. He simply stood in the front hall with his hand on the newel post and bowed his head, and Diane took Maris's hand on one side and, after a moment's hesitation, Keaton's on the other.
Keaton allowed it. He did not close his eyes.
"Father," Corbin said, "You told us that You will neither slumber nor sleep. That You are the keeper of Israel, and the keeper of this house too. So we ask You to keep it. Keep Maris and Keaton tonight. Set a watch over this door. And whatever comes against them, in the dark or in the daylight, let it find that this home belongs to You. In Jesus' name."
"Amen," said Diane firmly.
"Amen," whispered Maris.
Keaton said nothing. But as the Thornes' headlights swung away down the lane, Maris noticed that he stood at the narrow window beside the door watching them go until the taillights disappeared completely into the trees.
* * *
A little after eight, Mr. Purcell came across the road with his cane to check on them, as he had said he would.

Maris met him on the porch. She asked, as casually as she could manage, whether he had happened to see anyone on the lane the night before.

The old man shook his head. "Nope. I was up from two till near five with this hip. Sat in the front room with the lights off and the radio low, watching the road like I said I would." He jerked his chin at the lane. "Not one car. Not one truck. Sheriff's cruiser came by once around one-thirty and once around four. That's all."

"You didn't see anyone walking? On foot?"

Mr. Purcell squinted at her. "On foot? Out here? At night, in that cold?" He shook his head again. "No, ma'am. Didn't see a living soul."

He started down the steps, then paused and turned back.

"Did see your porch light come on, though," he said. "Round about three-twenty. Thought maybe the boy had gotten up for something." He studied her face in the yellow glow of the porch light, and his own grew a little more serious. "Everything all right over here, Maris?"

She made herself smile.

"Everything's fine, Mr. Purcell."

He looked at her a moment longer. Then he nodded and went on down the steps, and she watched him limp across the road to his own house, where he turned on his porch light, and then, after a moment, every other light downstairs.

Maris went inside and taped Corbin's index card to the bathroom mirror.

Not the spirit of fear.

She read it three times. Then she went and checked the locks.

* * *

> *Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. — Psalm 121:4*

She did not intend to sleep at all that night.

She made a plan instead. Plans were what she had always done when she was afraid. In the worst years with Garrick, she had planned constantly: which routes to the car were fastest, which drawer the spare key was in, which neighbors' lights were on late, how many dollars she had hidden in the lining of the winter coat he never noticed her wearing. Plans did not make her safe. But they gave her hands something to do while her heart was busy being afraid.

So she made a plan.

She would stay downstairs, in her father's recliner in the front parlor, facing the hall and the front door. She would keep the hall light on and the porch light off, so that anyone outside would be visible to her and she would not be visible to them. She would keep her phone charged and in her hand, with the camera app open. She would keep Sheriff Kincaid's card on the arm of the chair. And if anyone knocked, she would not hesitate this time. She would not talk herself out of it.

Don't wait to be sure.

Keaton wanted to stay up with her. She sent him to bed at eleven.

"If you hear anything, you stay in your room," she told him. "You lock the door. You don't come down. You understand?"

"Mom—"

"I mean it, Keaton."

He looked at her for a long moment, fifteen years old and trying to decide whether he was a child who obeyed or a man who protected. Then he went upstairs. She heard his door close. She did not hear the lock.

Boaz did not go with him. He went to the top of the stairs again and lay down there, his nose pointed at the front door.

Maris turned off every lamp in the parlor except one, a small brass reading lamp on the end table beside the recliner. She wrapped herself in her mother's afghan, set her phone on her knee, and opened her father's Bible on her lap.

She did not read straight through. She hunted. She turned to the places she half remembered from Sunday school, from Corbin's sermons, from the underlined verses in the margins of this very book. She read them half aloud, softly, the way she had heard her father reading in the early mornings when she was a girl and he thought no one was awake.

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. Her father had drawn a small, careful star in the margin beside it.

The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.

Proverbs 18. Another star.

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. That one he had underlined twice, so hard that the pencil had nearly gone through the thin paper.

She found herself turning the pages more slowly, looking not at the verses now but at the marks. So many marks. Stars and underlines and brackets, small dates written in the margins, a word or two here and there in her father's cramped, slanting hand. *Again,* he had written beside one passage. *Still,* beside another. Beside Psalm 91, the psalm about the terror by night, there was a date.

11/22/96.

She looked at it for a long time. She had been eleven years old that November. She could not remember anything special about it. Thanksgiving, probably. School.

The night-light shaped like a moon.

She turned the page.

* * *

The hours went by slowly.

Midnight. The furnace kicked on and the radiators clattered and hissed and Maris jumped at every sound and then made herself sit back and breathe. Twelve-thirty. The sheriff's cruiser went by on the road, slowing at the end of the lane, its headlights sweeping briefly across the trees before it moved on.

One o'clock. The house settled into the deep stillness of a cold night. One-thirty. Two.

She checked the cameras every ten minutes. The porch. The yard. The lane. The back. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

At two-thirty she realized she had been reading the same verse over and over for several minutes without seeing it, and that her eyes kept sliding closed. She got up and made a cup of instant coffee and drank it standing at the kitchen counter. She splashed water on her face at the kitchen sink. She came back and sat down and pulled the afghan around her shoulders.

At three o'clock the house was so quiet she could hear the second hand of the old clock on the parlor mantel. Her father's clock. A wedding present to her parents. It had kept perfect time for forty years.

Three-oh-five. Three-ten.

She found she was holding her breath, and made herself let it out.

It was a one-time thing, she told herself. *It was a dream. It was the house. It was Garrick, testing you, and he got what he wanted, and he won't risk it again with the cruiser going by. It is not going to happen again. Nothing is going to happen.*

Three-fifteen.

At the top of the stairs, Boaz lifted his head.

Maris saw it out of the corner of her eye, and every nerve in her body went tight. The dog had not moved in two hours. Now he was up on his front legs, ears forward, staring down at the front door. A soft, thin whine came out of him, like air escaping from a tire.

Three-sixteen.

The second hand of the mantel clock ticked. Ticked. Ticked.

Maris could not breathe.

The minute hand moved.
Three-seventeen.
Knock.
She flinched as though she had been struck.
Knock.
The sound filled the front hall, heavy and hollow, the unmistakable sound of knuckles on old oak. Not a radiator. Not a branch. Not the house settling. Someone standing on the other side of that red door, close enough to touch it.
Knock.
Then nothing.
The silence afterward was worse than the knocking. It rang in her ears.
Maris's thumb was already on the phone. She looked at the screen. The doorbell camera's live view was open, as it had been all night.
The porch was empty.
The welcome mat. The rocking chairs. The rail. The steps. The frost-white lawn beyond, perfectly still. No figure. No shadow. No movement of any kind. The little indicator in the corner of the screen that would turn red when the camera detected motion was gray.
But she had heard it. She had heard it with her own ears, wide awake, sitting twenty feet from the door, watching the screen.
She was not dreaming. She was not fragile. She was not imagining things.
Someone had knocked.
At the top of the stairs, Boaz began to bark. Not his ordinary bark, not the cheerful racket he made at deer and delivery trucks. This was a deep, hoarse, frantic sound, almost a howl, the hair standing in a ridge along his back, his whole body shaking with it.
Upstairs, a door banged open.
"Mom!"
"Stay there!" Maris was on her feet, the afghan sliding to the floor, the Bible tumbling off her lap. "Keaton, stay in your room!"
She was already dialing.
The call connected on the first ring.
"911, what is your emergency?"
"My name is Maris Bellamy." Her voice was shaking so hard she could barely form the words. She made herself slow down. "I live at 4410 Copper Creek Road. I have an order of protection against my husband. Garrick Bellamy. Somebody is knocking on my front door. Somebody is at my house right now."
"Ma'am, can you see the person?"
"No." She stared at the empty porch on her phone screen. "No. I can't see anyone."
"Are you in a safe place right now?"
"I'm inside. The doors are locked. My son is upstairs."
"Stay inside, ma'am. Keep the doors locked. Don't open the door for anyone. I'm sending deputies to you right now. Can you stay on the line with me?"
"Yes."
She stayed on the line. With her other hand, fumbling, she found Sheriff Kincaid's card on the arm of the recliner and, holding the phone against her shoulder, she sent him a text with clumsy, trembling thumbs.
This is Maris Bellamy. Someone at my door again. Called 911.
She looked at the word *again* and almost deleted it. Then she pressed send.
The reply came in less than a minute.
On my way.

* * *

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

The first cruiser arrived at 3:31.

Maris saw its lights before she heard it, red and blue pulsing through the trees along Copper Creek Road and then sweeping up the lane, throwing the shadows of the bare maples across the yard in long, jerking strokes. A second cruiser was right behind it. Both pulled up hard on the gravel at the foot of the porch steps. Doors slammed. Flashlight beams leapt out across the frost.

The 911 dispatcher, a calm woman named Rhonda who had stayed on the line the entire time, said, "Ma'am, my deputies are on scene now. You can go ahead and let them in when they come to the door."

Maris thanked her in a voice she did not recognize.

A moment later, someone knocked.

She flinched so violently that she dropped the phone.

It was only an ordinary knock, quick and businesslike, followed by a woman's voice: "Sheriff's department! Mrs. Bellamy?" But for a full second Maris could not make her legs move toward the door.

The deputy on the porch was a compact young woman with a dark braid tucked into the collar of her jacket and a name tag that read ALVARADO. Behind her, a tall, heavyset older deputy with a gray mustache was already moving down the steps with his flashlight, sweeping the beam across the yard. HOLLISTER, his tag said.

"Are you all right, ma'am? Anyone hurt?"

"No. No, we're fine. My son's upstairs." Maris pulled the afghan tighter around her shoulders. "Someone knocked. At 3:17. Three times. Just like last night."

Deputy Alvarado's eyebrows rose slightly. "Last night?"

Maris felt her face go hot. "I didn't call last night. I wasn't sure. I thought—" She stopped. "I should have called."

"Yes, ma'am," said Alvarado, not unkindly. "You should have. But you called tonight. That's good." She took out a small notebook. "Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

Maris told her. The watch. The dog. The clock on the mantel. The knocks. The empty porch on her phone screen. Alvarado wrote it all down without comment, then spoke briefly into the radio clipped to her shoulder.

"Hollister and I are going to clear the property," she said. "I need you to stay inside with the doors locked until we come back. Okay?"

Maris nodded.

She watched them from the front window. The two flashlight beams split apart and moved around the house in opposite directions, sliding over the siding, the windows, the shrubs along the foundation. One beam disappeared around the back. The other went down toward the old detached garage at the edge of the yard, where her father had kept his workbench and his fishing tackle and where her own car had never once been parked because the door stuck. She saw the beam move inside it, sweep the rafters, sweep the corners, and come back out.

Then both beams went down toward the woods along the creek and moved slowly along the tree line, back and forth, back and forth.

Behind her, the stairs creaked.

Keaton stood halfway down, fully dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, his sneakers untied. Boaz pressed against his legs, still trembling.

"I told you to stay in your room."

"There are cops here," Keaton said, as though that settled it. He came down the rest of the way and stood beside her at the window. "Did they find anything?"

"Not yet."

They watched the flashlights in silence.

* * *

Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid arrived at 3:52 in his own pickup, a battered gray Ford with a light bar he had clearly never bothered to install properly. He came up the porch steps in jeans and work boots and the brown department jacket, a knit cap pulled down over his ears, his face creased and unshaven. He looked like a man who had been asleep forty minutes ago and had not forgiven anyone for it yet.

But his voice, when he spoke to her, was gentle.

"Mrs. Bellamy. You and the boy all right?"

"We're all right."

"Good." He looked past her into the house, taking in the lamp, the recliner, the fallen afghan, the open Bible face down on the floor where it had landed. Something flickered in his face and was gone. "Let me talk to my deputies a minute. Then I'd like to look at those cameras with you."

He went back down the steps. Through the window, Maris watched him stand in the yard with Alvarado and Hollister, the three of them in a tight knot, their breath fogging in the beams of the cruisers' headlights. Hollister shook his head several times. Alvarado gestured toward the woods, then toward the garage, then spread her hands. Kincaid listened, nodding slowly, his hands in his jacket pockets. Then he said something to Alvarado, and she walked back to her cruiser and got on the radio.

When Kincaid came back inside, he brought the cold with him. He took off his cap and stood turning it in his hands in the front hall.

"No sign of anyone," he said. "They walked the whole property. House, yard, garage, the tree line down to the creek. No vehicles on the road in either direction. No one hiding. Doors and windows all secure, no sign anyone tried them." He paused. "I've got a unit headed over to your husband's place now."

"He's in an apartment in town," Maris said. "The Lakeview. Over the dry cleaner's on Second Street."

"We know." Kincaid's mouth tightened slightly. "We've had his address since the hearing."

She made coffee because she did not know what else to do. Kincaid sat at the kitchen table, in her father's chair, and she set the phone in front of him with the doorbell app open, and he went through it slowly and carefully, the way she imagined he did everything.

He looked at the live view. He looked at the settings. He scrolled back through the event history, one entry at a time. He played the last recorded clip, the one from 4:16 the previous afternoon, when Diane and Corbin had arrived with the casserole, and then the one from 7:51, when they left. He watched Mr. Purcell come up the steps at 8:09 and go back down them at 8:14.

Then nothing. Not one event between 8:14 p.m. and the arrival of Deputy Alvarado at 3:31 a.m.

He set the phone down.

"The microphone on these is sensitive," he said. "I've got the same one at my house. My neighbor's cat sets it off." He rubbed his jaw. "If somebody stood on that porch and knocked on that door, it should have recorded. Motion or sound, either one."

"I know how it sounds," Maris said quietly.

He looked up at her.

"I know how it sounds," she said again, and to her horror her voice was cracking. "I know exactly how it sounds. It sounds like a frightened woman who can't tell the difference between what's real and what isn't. It sounds exactly like what Garrick told the judge I was. And I swear to you, Sheriff, I was awake. I was sitting right there in that chair with this phone in my hand, and somebody knocked on that door three times, and the camera didn't see anybody, and I don't know how that's possible, but it happened."

Kincaid was quiet for a moment.

"I heard it too," Keaton said from the doorway.

Both of them turned. Keaton was leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded, Boaz sitting against his legs.

"Both nights," he said. "Three knocks. Slow. Like this." He reached over and rapped the doorframe with his knuckles. *Knock. Knock. Knock.* "And the dog heard it too. He's never been scared of anything in his life. Look at him."

Kincaid looked at Boaz, who was still trembling, his ears flat against his head.
Then he looked back at Maris.
"Mrs. Bellamy," he said, "I've been doing this job for twenty-three years. I want to tell you something, and I want you to hear it the way I mean it." He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "I believe you heard something. I believe your boy heard it. I don't know what it was yet. I don't know how it got past that camera. But not knowing what something is isn't the same as not believing it happened. You understand the difference?"
Maris nodded. She did not trust herself to speak.
"My mother had a verse she used to quote at me when I was a kid," Kincaid said. "Usually when I'd broken something and hidden it. *There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed.*" A faint, wry smile. "I didn't much like it back then. But it turned out to be the best training I ever had for police work. Things come out. They always come out, eventually. People leave traces. They make mistakes. Whoever's doing this is going to make one."
The radio on his belt crackled.
"Sheriff, Unit Four."
Kincaid unclipped it. "Go ahead."
"I'm at the Lakeview, Second Street. Subject answered the door after about two minutes of knocking. Appeared to have been asleep. Sweatpants, T-shirt, hair all messed up. He was not real happy to see me." A pause. "His truck's parked in the lot out back. Windshield's frosted solid. I put my hand on the hood. Stone cold. That truck hasn't moved in hours, Sheriff."
Kincaid's eyes stayed on Maris.
"Copy that. Anything else?"
"Just one thing. He asked me what this was about, and I told him there'd been a disturbance at his wife's residence. And he said—" The deputy hesitated. "He said, 'Tell Maris she should be careful. That old house of her daddy's has always been strange.'"
The kitchen was very quiet.
"Copy," Kincaid said finally. "Write that down word for word. Come on back."
He clipped the radio back onto his belt. For a long moment, he sat looking at the table, his jaw working. Then he pushed back his chair and stood.
"I'm going to go take a look around myself," he said, reaching for his cap. "Before the sun comes up and burns everything off."
* * *

> *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. — 1 Peter 5:8*

Maris followed him out.
She told herself she did it because it was her house and her yard and she had a right to know. The truth was simpler. She could not stand to sit in that kitchen one more minute, waiting.
She pulled on her father's old barn coat from the hook by the door, the one that still smelled faintly of pipe tobacco and motor oil, and went out onto the porch. Keaton came behind her as far as the doorway and stopped there, one hand on Boaz's collar. The dog would not cross the threshold. He pressed himself against Keaton's legs and whined.
The cold was savage. It went straight through the barn coat and her flannel pajamas and took hold of her bones. Overhead the sky had not yet begun to lighten. The stars were hard and bright and very far away. Down at the foot of the steps, the two cruisers sat idling, their light bars dark now, exhaust rising in slow white columns. Deputy Hollister leaned against his fender with a thermos. Alvarado was in her driver's seat, typing on the laptop mounted to the dash.
Kincaid stood at the bottom of the porch steps with a big black flashlight in his hand. He was not sweeping it around the way the deputies had. He was holding it low, almost at his knees, and pointing it

nearly flat along the ground, so that the beam skimmed across the frosted lawn like light across the surface of a pond.

"Learned this from an old game warden," he said without turning around. He must have heard her on the steps. "You shine a light straight down on frost, it all looks the same. White. But you come in low, from the side, every little dent throws a shadow. Every blade somebody bent. Every place a foot came down."

He moved the beam slowly to the left, across the part of the yard nearest the driveway. Maris could see it at once: the trampled, darker paths where the deputies had walked, curving around the side of the house, down to the garage, back again. A confusion of tracks and scuffs, shadows everywhere.

Then he swung the light slowly to the right, across the open front lawn that sloped from the porch down toward the road.

It was smooth. A broad, unbroken sheet of white, glittering in the beam, every blade of grass rimed and stiff and standing upright. The deputies had walked around it, not across it. There was no reason to cross it. There was nowhere on it to hide.

Kincaid kept moving the light. Slowly. Patiently. Down toward the road.

Then he stopped.

"Huh," he said softly.

Maris came down the steps and stood beside him. She followed the beam with her eyes.

At first she did not see it. Then she did, and once she had seen it she could not understand how she had missed it.

Footprints.

A single line of them, dark and distinct against the silver frost, each one throwing a small, crisp shadow in the low light. They began down near the road, beside the mailbox that still said WHITLOCK, at the place where the gravel shoulder met the grass. And from there they came up across the lawn.

Toward the house.

Not wandering. Not hesitating. In a perfectly straight line, as if whoever had made them had known exactly where they were going and had all the time in the world to get there.

Kincaid walked down beside the line, careful to keep well off to the side of it, holding his light low. Maris followed. Her slippers crunched in the frost. Somewhere behind her, she heard the cruiser door open and Deputy Alvarado's boots on the gravel.

At the bottom of the yard, Kincaid crouched beside the first print.

It was a shoe. A man's shoe, long and narrow, the heel clearly defined, the toe slightly pointed. But there was something wrong with it, and it took Maris a moment to see what.

There was no tread.

The print was perfectly smooth. No ridges, no lugs, no pattern of any kind. Just the clean, flat outline of a sole pressed down into the frozen grass.

"Leather sole," Kincaid murmured. "Like a dress shoe. Old style. My granddad wore shoes like that to church." He shook his head slowly. "Nobody walks across a frozen field at three in the morning in church shoes."

He took a small tape measure from his jacket pocket, laid it beside the print without touching the frost, and photographed it with his phone. The flash was blinding in the dark.

"Thirteen inches, near enough," he said. "That's a big man." He glanced up at Maris. "What size does your husband wear?"

"Eleven," she said. "Eleven and a half in boots."

Kincaid nodded and wrote it down.

Then he stood and followed the prints up the yard, and Maris and Alvarado followed him.

The stride was long. Longer than Kincaid's own, Maris noticed, and he was not a short man. The prints were evenly spaced, perfectly even, each one exactly the same distance from the last, as if the walker

had been counting his steps. They did not drag. They did not slip. They went straight up the slope toward the red front door with the steadiness of a man walking down a church aisle.
One after another after another.
And then, halfway across the yard, they stopped.
Kincaid stopped too.
He stood very still with the flashlight in his hand, its beam pooled on the frost in front of him. For a long moment no one said anything at all.
The last two prints sat side by side, toes pointed toward the house. They were deeper than the others. Noticeably deeper. As if whoever had made them had stood in that exact spot, motionless, for a long, long time.
And beyond them, there was nothing.
No more prints leading forward to the porch. No prints turning back toward the road. No prints leading off to either side. Kincaid swept the light in a slow, wide circle, low across the ground, around and around, ten feet out, twenty feet, thirty. The frost lay smooth and white and unbroken in every direction. Every blade of grass stood upright and untouched, glittering.
The footprints came up out of the road, walked halfway across the yard, and stopped.
As if whoever made them had simply stepped off the face of the earth.
"Sheriff," said Alvarado. Her voice was very quiet. "How does somebody do that?"
Kincaid did not answer at once. He walked a wide circle around the last two prints, crouching every few feet, shining his light across the frost from one angle and then another. He looked for the marks a board might have left, laid down and picked up again. He looked for drag marks, for scuffs, for anything that might have been brushed or smoothed over. He looked up into the branches of the old maple that stood thirty feet off, as though someone might have swung down from it on a rope.
There was nothing.
"I don't know," he said finally. "Some kind of trick. Has to be." He straightened slowly, his knees cracking. "Somebody walked in wearing something on their feet, stood here, and then—" He stopped. He did not finish the sentence. There was no way to finish it that made sense.
He photographed everything. Every print, the whole line from the road, the last two from every angle, the unbroken frost all around them. He had Alvarado string yellow tape between two stakes from the cruiser trunk, a little square around the place where the footprints ended, as if it were a crime scene. Perhaps it was.
Then he turned and looked at the house.
Maris turned too.
She was standing just beside the last two prints now, close enough to see the shadow inside each one. And she found herself looking where they had been looking. Where whoever had stood here, for a very long time, in the cold and the dark, had been looking.
She had assumed it was the front door.
It was not.
From this exact spot, the front door was off to the left, half hidden behind the porch post. What lay straight ahead, directly in line with those two pointed toes, was the second floor of the house. The window at the far end.
The window of the little bedroom with the yellow wallpaper, where a burned-out moon still stood on the shelf.
Keaton's room.
At that moment, as if he had felt her looking, Keaton stepped back from the front door into the lighted hall, and the porch light fell across the frost between them, and Maris felt the ground tilt very slightly beneath her feet.
Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about.

The words came to her from nowhere. From some Sunday-school classroom thirty years gone. From the pages of her father's Bible, where she knew without checking that she would find them underlined. *Walketh about.* Not roaring. Walking. Patiently. Quietly. In the dark. Looking for a door.

"Mrs. Bellamy?"

Kincaid was watching her. She did not know how long he had been watching her.

"Somebody is trying very hard to frighten you," he said quietly. "I want you to know I'm taking this seriously. I'm going to have a car sit at the end of your lane tomorrow night. All night. And I'm going to have a long talk with your husband in the morning."

"It wasn't his size," Maris said.

"No. It wasn't." Kincaid put away his phone. "Which means either he had help or somebody else is involved. Either way, I'm going to find out who."

Maris looked down at the two deep prints at her feet. Then up at the dark window at the end of the house.

"And if it isn't somebody?" she whispered.

Kincaid did not answer.

He stood beside her in the bitter cold with his flashlight pointed at the ground, a tall, tired man who had spent twenty-three years believing that every mystery had a human hand behind it somewhere. And for the first time since she had met him, Maris saw him look uncertain.

Then he cleared his throat and turned away and began giving instructions to Alvarado in a low voice, and the moment passed.

* * *

The sun came up at 7:04.

Maris watched it from the porch, wrapped in her father's coat, a mug of coffee cooling in her hands. The sky went pale gray, then pink, then a thin, washed-out gold. The light came sliding down the far hills and across Mr. Purcell's fields and over the road and up the slope of her front lawn.

And as it came, the frost began to melt.

She watched the footprints go. The silver around them dulled to gray, then to wet green. The crisp shadows inside each print softened and blurred. One by one, starting at the road and working up the yard, the dark marks faded into the dew until there was no way to tell where they had been.

By seven-thirty, nothing was left but a little square of yellow tape fluttering around a patch of ordinary wet grass.

As though no one had ever been there at all.

Behind her, the door opened. Keaton came out and stood beside her in his sweatshirt, his arms wrapped around himself against the cold. He looked down at the tape for a long time.

"Mom," he said finally. "Grandpa's Bible. The one you were reading last night."

"What about it?"

"Did he ever write anything in it?" Keaton did not look at her. "About this house? About—anything like this?"

Maris thought of the stars in the margins. The double underlines. *Again. Still.* The small, careful date beside the psalm about the terror by night.

11/22/96.

"I don't know," she said.

It was the truth. She had never looked.

She put her arm around her son, and he let her, and they stood together on the porch of her father's house in the thin November sunlight. Across the road, Mr. Purcell's rooster crowed again.

Maris closed her eyes.

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

She had not slept in two nights.

She prayed that the One who was supposed to be keeping watch over this house had not slept either.

Chapter 3: The Message on the Mirror

> *It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep. — Psalm 127:2*

The deputy arrived at nine o'clock that night, just as Kincaid had promised.

Maris watched from the front window as the cruiser came slowly up Copper Creek Road and turned in at the foot of the lane, then backed around so that its nose faced the house. The headlights went dark. The engine kept running. A thin ribbon of exhaust rose into the cold, and behind the windshield a small glow appeared and faded and appeared again: the deputy's phone, or a laptop, or the dashboard lights.

It was Deputy Hollister, the big man with the gray mustache. He had walked up to the porch when he arrived and handed her a thermos lid of coffee she hadn't asked for and told her, in a slow, gravelly drawl, that he had a daughter about her age and that nobody was getting up this lane tonight without going through him first.

"You get some sleep, Mrs. Bellamy," he had said. "That's an order. I'll do the watching."

She had thanked him, and meant it, and had not believed for one moment that she would sleep.

She had now been awake for almost forty hours.

Her body had passed through exhaustion and out the other side into a strange, buzzing lightness. Her hands trembled. Her eyes burned. Twice that afternoon she had found herself standing in the middle of a room with no memory of walking into it. Once she had poured orange juice into her coffee. Keaton had watched her dump it into the sink without saying a word, and then, very gently, had taken the carton out of her hand and put it back in the refrigerator himself.

She checked the locks at ten. Front. Back. Cellar. She checked the camera app. The porch. The yard. The lane, where the dark shape of Hollister's cruiser sat at the bottom like a rock in a stream.

On the front lawn, Kincaid's little square of yellow tape still fluttered around a patch of grass that looked exactly like every other patch of grass.

She did not let herself look at it for long.

Keaton went up at ten-thirty. He stopped on the landing and looked down at her.

"You're actually going to bed tonight, right?"

"There's a deputy at the end of the lane."

"That's not an answer."

She almost smiled. "I'm going to bed."

He studied her a moment longer. Then he nodded and went on up. She heard his door close. This time she heard the lock turn.

Boaz took up his post at the top of the stairs. He lay with his chin on his paws, facing down toward the front door, and when Maris came up past him he thumped his tail once and did not move.

In her bedroom, she turned down the quilt and sat on the edge of the bed with her father's Bible open in her lap. She had meant to look for more of his notes. She had meant to search the margins for anything about this house, about November of 1996, about what he might have been afraid of all those nights he sat outside her door.

Instead she found herself reading the Psalms again, slowly, the words swimming in and out of focus.

I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about.

Psalm 3. A star in the margin.

It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

Psalm 127. Her father had underlined only the last four words. *He giveth his beloved sleep.* And beside them, in the cramped, slanting hand, he had written a single word.

Someday.

Maris looked at it for a long time. Then she laid her hand flat over the page, the way you might lay your hand over someone's heart to feel it beating.

"Lord," she whispered. "I don't know what's happening in this house. I don't know if it's Garrick or something worse. I don't know anything anymore." Her voice cracked. "But I'm so tired. Please. Just for tonight. Let us sleep."

She did not remember lying down.

She did not remember turning toward the wall, or pulling the quilt up, or her father's Bible sliding off the bed onto the rug. She only remembered the lamp burning gold on the nightstand beside the order of protection, and the radiator ticking softly under the window, and then a great soft darkness rising up around her like warm water, and sleep, at last, at long last, deep and heavy and dreamless.

* * *

The scream tore her out of it.

For one disoriented second she did not know where she was. The ceiling was wrong. The light was wrong. Then the scream came again, raw and high and cracking at the top, and every nerve in her body knew it before her mind did.

Keaton.

She was out of bed and in the hallway before she was fully awake, her bare feet slapping the cold floorboards. Boaz was already there, at the far end of the hall, outside Keaton's door, barking in short, frantic bursts and clawing at the wood.

The door was locked.

"Keaton!" She grabbed the knob and twisted. "Keaton, open the door! Keaton!"

Inside the room, the screaming had stopped. In its place came something worse: a low, broken, choking sound, the sound of someone trying to breathe through terror.

She threw her shoulder against the door. It held. Her father had built things to last. She threw herself against it again, and this time she heard the lock click, and the door swung open so suddenly that she nearly fell into the room.

Keaton was sitting bolt upright in the narrow iron bed with his back pressed flat against the headboard and his knees drawn up to his chest, the blankets twisted around his legs. His eyes were wide open. His face was gray. He was staring past her at the far corner of the room, by the window, and his whole body was shaking so hard that the bedframe rattled against the wall.

He had unlocked the door. She would wonder about that later. How he had gotten from the bed to the door and back again without ever seeming to move.

"Keaton. Keaton, look at me. Baby, look at me."

She was on the bed beside him, her hands on his face, turning it toward her. His skin was clammy and ice cold. It took him a long moment to find her eyes. When he did, he blinked, and something came back into his face, and he grabbed her wrist so hard it hurt.

"Is he gone?" he whispered.

"Who? Keaton, who?"

"Is he *gone*?"

Maris turned and looked at the corner.

There was nothing there. The window. The yellow curtain with the white flowers. The old wooden chair with Keaton's jeans thrown over the back. The shelf above the bed with the books and the burned-out plastic moon. The room was small and ordinary and empty.

But it was cold. Much colder than the hallway. Cold enough that her breath clouded faintly in the lamplight.

And Boaz, who had followed her to the doorway, would not come in. He stood on the threshold with his hackles raised and his lips drawn back from his teeth, growling low in his throat at the empty corner by the window.

"There's no one here," Maris said. "Keaton. There's no one here. It's just us."

She glanced at the alarm clock on his nightstand. She already knew what it would say.
3:17.
* * *

> *In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up. — Job 4:13–15*

It took a long time for him to be able to tell her.
She wrapped him in the comforter and then in her own arms, the way she had not held him since he was nine or ten, and he let her. He was too frightened to be embarrassed. He sat pressed against her side with his face turned away from the corner by the window, shaking in long, hard waves that slowly, slowly grew farther apart.
She turned on every light in the room. The overhead light. The desk lamp. The flashlight from her nightstand, set on its end on the floor so that it shone up at the ceiling. Still the corner by the window seemed darker than the rest of the room, though when she looked straight at it there was nothing there but yellow wallpaper and a curtain.
Boaz finally came in. He did it slowly, belly low, one step and then another, and when he reached the bed he climbed up onto it, all seventy pounds of him, something he had never once been allowed to do, and lay across Keaton's feet. He kept his eyes on the corner.
Maris did not tell him to get down.
"I thought I woke up," Keaton said at last.
His voice was hoarse from screaming. Maris held him and waited.
"I was lying here. And I thought I woke up, and I was really thirsty, so I got up to go get some water. Except I didn't go to the door. I went to the window." He swallowed. "I don't know why. I just did. Like something wanted me to look."
"What did you see?"
"There was a man in the yard."
Maris felt the hair rise on her arms.
"He was just standing there. In the middle of the yard. Where the tape is. Right exactly where the footprints stopped." Keaton's fingers tightened on the comforter. "He was looking up at my window. At me."
"What did he look like?"
"Tall. Really tall. Taller than anybody. Taller than Sheriff Kincaid." He shook his head slowly. "He was wearing black. All black. A long coat, like the kind people wear in old pictures. And a hat. Like an old-time hat with a brim. And black shoes. I could see them on the frost, they were so black. Shiny. Like church shoes."
Leather sole, Kincaid had murmured, crouched beside the first print. *Old style. My granddad wore shoes like that to church.*
Maris had not told Keaton that. He had been standing at the door with the dog. He could not have heard.
"Could you see his face?"
"No." Keaton's voice dropped to a whisper. "That's the thing. The porch light was on. It should've been shining right on him. But it was like—like the light didn't want to touch him. Like there was a shadow where his face should be, and the shadow didn't come from anything."
The radiator under the window ticked once, and both of them jumped.
"Then I blinked," Keaton said, "and he wasn't in the yard anymore."
He turned his head, very slightly, toward the corner by the window. Then he turned it quickly back.
"He was there."
Maris made herself look. Nothing. Wallpaper. Curtain. The old chair.

"He was standing right there in the corner," Keaton whispered. "And I was back in bed. And I couldn't move. I couldn't move anything, Mom. Not my arms, not my legs, not even my eyes, almost. I was just lying there, and he was standing there, and he didn't do anything. He didn't come closer. He didn't say anything. He just stood there and looked at me. For a long time. Like he was—" He searched for the word. "Waiting."
"Waiting for what?"
"I don't know."
He was quiet for a while. When he spoke again, his voice was so soft she could barely hear it.
"Then he knocked."
Maris went cold all the way through.
"Not on the door," Keaton said. "On the wall. Right there." He pointed with his chin, not wanting to take his hand out from under the comforter, at the faded yellow wallpaper directly above the head of his bed. "Three times. Slow. Like on the front door. And he was still standing in the corner when he did it. He didn't move. He was all the way over there, and the knocks were right here, right over my head. And that's when I could finally scream."
Maris looked up at the wall above the bed.
The wallpaper she had chosen at eleven. The little sprigs of white flowers. The plastic moon on the shelf.
She thought, for no reason she could name, of her father asleep in the hallway outside this door with his Bible open on his knee.
Your old man worries, that's all.
"It was a dream," she heard herself say. "Keaton, it was a nightmare. You've been through so much. We both have. Your mind is trying to make sense of it. That's all it was."
Keaton turned and looked at her. There was something very old in his face, something that did not belong in the face of a fifteen-year-old boy.
"Then why is it so cold in here?" he asked. "And why won't Boaz stop looking at the corner?"
She had no answer.
* * *
She went to the window. She had to make herself do it.
The yard was empty. The frost lay smooth and silver all the way down to the road, unbroken except for the tracks the deputies had left the night before, now frozen hard. The yellow tape stirred faintly in some breath of wind she could not feel. At the bottom of the lane, Hollister's cruiser sat exactly where it had sat all night, its exhaust rising straight up into the still air.
She called him anyway.
He picked up on the first ring, wide awake. No, ma'am. Nobody had come up the lane. Nobody had come down it. Not a car, not a deer, not a living thing. He'd been watching the whole time. Did she want him to come up and walk the yard?
She almost said yes. Then she thought of the way the young man at the doorbell company had sounded.
With respect, ma'am, I don't think anyone knocked.
"No," she said. "No, thank you. My son had a bad dream. That's all."
She hung up and stood at the window with her forehead against the cold glass.
Then, because she did not know what else to do, she prayed. Not the careful, orderly prayers she had learned to pray in public at Grace Fellowship, with Garrick's arm heavy across her shoulders.
Something smaller and more desperate. Something closer to the prayers she had prayed as a little girl in this very room, kneeling on this very floor, with her father's moon glowing on the shelf.
The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.
Psalm 34. She did not remember where she had learned it. She only knew that it was there, the way her own phone number was there, and she said it out loud into the cold glass, and then she said it again.

Encampeth round about. She pictured it: a ring of something bright and steady around her father's house, around the yard and the porch and the window with the yellow curtains, standing between this room and whatever stood out there in the dark.

She wanted very badly to believe it was there.

* * *

Keaton fell asleep again a little after five, curled on his side with his back against the wall and Boaz still sprawled across his feet. Maris sat in the old wooden chair, the one in the corner, because if anything was going to stand in that corner tonight it was going to have to stand on her.

She was nearly asleep herself when he began to talk.

It was only mumbling at first. Sleep sounds. Fragments. She leaned closer, the way she used to lean over his crib to make sure he was breathing.

"…nine…" he murmured. "…nine of them…"

Maris went still.

Keaton's face twitched. His brow furrowed. His lips moved again, and this time the words came out clearly, slow and deliberate and strangely formal, in a voice that was almost but not quite his own.

"What is given must be answered."

The radiator ticked.

"It isn't paid," Keaton whispered. "The ninth one. It isn't paid."

Then he sighed, turned his face into the pillow, and was quiet.

Maris sat frozen in the chair until the window turned gray. She did not know what the words meant. She had never heard them before in her life. She was certain Keaton had never heard them either.

But she wrote them down. On the back of a receipt from her purse, in shaking letters, so that she would not convince herself later that she had dreamed them.

Nine of them. What is given must be answered. The ninth one. It isn't paid.

* * *

> *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. — 2 Timothy 1:7*

At seven-thirty, Hollister knocked twice on the front door, said good morning through it, and drove away. Ordinary knocks. Quick and friendly. She still flinched at both of them.

Keaton was still asleep. Maris left Boaz with him and went down the hall to her own bathroom, because she had been wearing the same flannel pajamas for two days and she thought that if she did not stand under hot water for ten minutes she might simply fall down and not get up.

The bathroom was the coldest room in the house. It always had been. Her father had meant to insulate the outside wall for twenty years and had never gotten around to it. Maris turned the shower on as hot as it would go and stood shivering on the bath mat while the old pipes groaned and clanked and finally delivered.

Steam rose and rolled. Within a minute it had filled the little room, soft and white, beading on the tile and fogging the window and clouding the big mirror over the sink from edge to edge.

She stepped into the shower and stood with her eyes closed and her face turned up into the water, and for five minutes, for five whole minutes, she did not think about anything at all.

When she finally shut the water off and pulled back the curtain, the room was so full of steam she could barely see the door.

She reached for her towel.

Then she stopped.

Something was wrong with the mirror.

The whole glass was fogged, a soft, even gray. Except that it was not even. There were lines in it. Dark lines, clear lines, where the fog had not settled, as if someone had drawn on the glass with a fingertip, and the steam had gathered everywhere except where that finger had gone.

Letters.

Tall, narrow, careful capital letters, running from one side of the mirror to the other, each one as long as her hand.

She stood dripping on the bath mat, the towel clutched against her chest, and read them.

THE ORDER DOES NOT COVER ME.

For a moment, the words did not mean anything. They were only shapes. Then they arranged themselves into sense, all at once, and the floor seemed to drop out from under her feet.

The order.

Her eyes went, without her meaning them to, to the bottom left corner of the mirror, where yesterday afternoon she had taped Pastor Corbin's index card.

It was gone.

She found it in the sink. It lay face down in the white porcelain bowl, soaked through, the tape still stuck to one corner. When she picked it up with trembling fingers and turned it over, the blue ink of Corbin's blocky printing had run and blurred until she could barely read it.

…not given us the spirit of fear…

The last words were gone entirely. Washed into a pale blue stain.

She did not scream. Later, she would wonder at that. She had screamed at a dropped pan in the old days, screamed at a slammed cabinet. But now, standing in the steam with the water running off her and the words hanging on the glass in front of her, she found that she could not make a sound at all. She could only stand there with the ruined card in her hand, shaking so hard her teeth chattered.

No one had been in this bathroom.

She had been in it last night before bed. She had read the card. She had touched it. The mirror had been clean. Then she had slept in the room next door, ten feet away, with the door open and the lamp on, and she had woken to Keaton screaming and run down the hall, and she had spent the rest of the night in his room. The house had been locked. There had been a deputy at the end of the lane. The dog had been at the top of the stairs and then on Keaton's bed.

No one could have been in here.

And yet the words had not been there when she stepped into the shower. She was sure of that. She had looked straight into this mirror as she undressed. It had been clear glass.

Which meant they had been written while she stood behind the curtain with her eyes closed. Five feet away. While the water ran.

Or it meant that they had been written on the glass long before, in the night, invisible, waiting, and the steam had only found them. The way frost finds a footprint.

She did not know which was worse.

The steam was beginning to thin. Already the edges of the letters were softening as the fog crept back into them. She understood, with a sudden sharp clarity, that in another minute or two they would be gone, and then there would be nothing. No proof. Only her word. The word of a fragile, anxious woman who saw threats where none existed.

Not this time.

She dropped the towel, snatched her phone from the edge of the sink, and photographed the mirror. Once. Twice. Five times. From straight on and from the side, close up and far away, the flash blazing white against the glass. She photographed the card in the sink. She photographed the tape on the mirror where the card had been.

Then she sat down on the closed lid of the toilet, wrapped in a towel, with her wet hair dripping down her back, and watched the words fade.

THE ORDER DOES NOT COVER ME.

THE ORDER DOES NOT—

THE ORD—

Then only fog, and then not even fog. Only a mirror. Only her own face looking back at her, white and hollow-eyed and very frightened.

The order. Whoever had written those words knew about the order. Knew that it sat on her nightstand. Knew that she had read it every night, touched it every morning, carried it from room to room like a talisman.

Does not cover me.

Not *you can't stop me.* Not *I'll get you anyway.* Not anything Garrick would say. Garrick would have written her name. Garrick would have written something cruel and personal, something about her weight or her mother or her failures. Garrick would have wanted her to know it was him.

This was different. This was calm. Almost patient. As if someone were explaining something simple to a child. As if the writer were drawing a careful line between himself and the man named on that order.

It does not cover me.

Me. Whoever me was.

With fingers that would barely work, she opened her contacts. She scrolled past Kincaid. Past Hollister. Past the 911 she had already called once and could not bear to call again to report words on a mirror that were no longer there.

She stopped on a name and pressed it.

It rang twice.

"Maris?" Pastor Corbin's voice was rough with early morning, but awake. "Is everything all right?"

For a moment she could not speak at all.

Then everything she had not told him two days ago, everything she had been too ashamed and too frightened to say, came pouring out of her in a broken flood.

"Corbin," she said. "I need you to come. Please. I think there's something in my house."

* * *

> *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. — 1 John 4:4*

Corbin was there in twenty-two minutes. Maris knew, because she watched the clock on the kitchen stove the entire time.

He came alone, in a flannel shirt with the collar crooked and his gray hair uncombed, as if he had stood up from the breakfast table and walked straight out to his car. He did not knock. He called her name from the porch, and she opened the door before he finished saying it.

She told him everything.

She told it at the kitchen table, in her father's chair, with a cup of coffee going cold between her hands. The first knocks, the night she came home from court. The doorbell camera that saw nothing. The second night, and the 911 call, and the deputies, and the footprints in the frost that came up out of the road and stopped halfway across the lawn. Boaz at the top of the stairs. Keaton screaming at 3:17, and the tall man in black with no face, and the three knocks on the wall above his bed. The mirror.

She told him she had lied to him two days ago, when he asked how the first night had gone.

"I was afraid you wouldn't believe me," she said. "I was afraid you'd look at me the way the judge looked at Garrick's lawyer. Like I was exactly what he said I was."

Corbin had not interrupted once. He had sat across from her with his big hands folded on the table and his eyes on her face, listening the way he always listened, with his whole body. Now he reached across and laid one of those hands over hers.

"Maris," he said. "Look at me."

She looked.

"I have never once thought you were what he said you were. Not the first night in the back pew. Not in the emergency room. Not now." His voice was very gentle. "And I'm sorry you've spent so many years around people who taught you to expect anything else."

She had to look away.

She showed him the photographs. He scrolled through them slowly, one at a time, enlarging them with two thick fingers. In the harsh white of the flash the letters stood out sharp and clear against the fog.

THE ORDER DOES NOT COVER ME.
He looked at them for a long time. Then he stood up.
"Show me."
They went up together. Corbin stood in the bathroom doorway and looked at the mirror, clean and ordinary now in the gray morning light, with the little torn square of tape still stuck to the lower corner. He looked at the sink, where the ruined index card lay drying on a folded washcloth. He looked at the window, painted shut. He looked at the outside wall. He looked at the floor.
Then he leaned in, turned on the hot water tap at the sink, and let it run.
Steam rose slowly from the basin. Corbin put his hand flat over the drain, cupping the warmth so that the steam rolled upward against the glass. A faint fog crept across the lower half of the mirror.
And there, ghostly and pale, the letters began to show again.
Not clearly. Not the sharp, bold shapes of the photographs. Only faint traces, like the memory of writing, as the fog gathered everywhere except on those thin lines. But they were there. THE ORDER —
Corbin turned off the water.
"Somebody drew this with a finger," he said quietly. "That's what you're seeing. The oil from the skin. It keeps the fog from settling. It'll stay on the glass until someone scrubs it off. Same as a child drawing on a car window in winter."
Maris stared at him. "So it's a person."
"I don't know." Corbin studied the fading letters. "It could be. That's the first thing I'd want Kincaid to know, and you need to call him and send him those pictures this morning, before anyone cleans this glass. Let him take fingerprints if he wants. The law matters, Maris. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise, me included."
He was silent a moment.
"But I've been a pastor for thirty-one years," he said. "And I've learned there are two mistakes people make about things like this. The first is to see the devil behind every bush. To blame every bad dream and every bump in the night on something spiritual, and go running after it with holy water and a lot of shouting. That kind of thing does a great deal of harm."
"And the second?"
Corbin looked at her.
"The second is to believe there's nothing there at all," he said. "That the Bible is just a book of nice stories, and every time it talks about the enemy, it's only being poetic. That we live in a world with nothing in it but people and things." He shook his head slowly. "I don't believe that. I've never been able to believe it. Not since I was a young man."
* * *
Keaton came down while they were in the kitchen. He stood in the doorway in his sweatshirt with his arms folded and his face closed, Boaz at his side, and looked at Corbin warily, as if he had been expecting him.
"Mom told you," he said.
"She did."
"So what do you think it was? The guy in my room?" Keaton's chin came up. "Are you going to say it was a demon? Or are you going to say I'm crazy?"
"Neither one, yet," Corbin said calmly. "I'm going to say I don't know. And I'm going to say I believe you saw what you saw."
Keaton blinked. It was clearly not the answer he had prepared for.
He came in slowly and sat down at the far end of the table, as far from Corbin as he could get without leaving the room. For a while, nobody said anything. Boaz lay down under the table with a groan.
"Can I ask you something?" Keaton said finally.
"Anything."

"If God's real." Keaton's jaw tightened. "If He's real, and He's so powerful, and He's supposed to protect people. Why didn't He ever stop my dad?"

Maris drew in a breath. Corbin glanced at her, just briefly, and then turned his whole attention back to the boy.

"That's a fair question," he said. "Probably the fairest question there is. I'm not going to insult you with an easy answer." He leaned forward, his forearms on the table. "Here's what I know. God does not approve of everything people choose to do. Your father made choices. Those were his choices, and they were evil, and God grieved every one of them. Human evil is still human evil, Keaton. God doesn't pretend it isn't, and He doesn't ask you to pretend either."

Keaton stared at the table.

"But what someone did to you," Corbin said quietly, "doesn't get the final word over your life. Not your father. Not whatever was standing in that corner last night. Not anybody."

Keaton didn't answer. But he didn't get up and leave, either.

After a while, Maris slid the crumpled receipt across the table toward Corbin. The words she had written in the gray dawn, while her son talked in his sleep.

Nine of them. What is given must be answered. The ninth one. It isn't paid.

"He said these," she said. "Last night. After he went back to sleep. In a voice that didn't sound like him."

Keaton looked up sharply. "I said that?"

"You don't remember?"

He shook his head slowly. The color was leaving his face.

Corbin picked up the receipt and read it. Then he read it again.

Maris watched something change in his expression. It was very small. If she had not spent sixteen years learning to read every flicker in a man's face, she would have missed it entirely. A kind of stillness came over him. The stillness of a man who has just heard a sound in the dark that he once heard long ago, and had hoped never to hear again.

"Maris," he said carefully, without looking up from the paper. "I need to ask you something, and I want you to know I'm not accusing anyone. Was anyone in your family ever involved in anything… unusual? Spiritually, I mean. Séances. Ouija boards. Fortune tellers. Anything like that. Even as a game."

"No." The word came out sharper than she meant it to. "No. Absolutely not. My parents were Methodists. My father read his Bible every single morning of his life."

Corbin nodded slowly. He folded the receipt and held it a moment longer before he handed it back.

"All right," he said.

But he did not look as if it were all right. He looked like a man who had just read a word in a language he had not seen in thirty years and found, to his dismay, that he still remembered what it meant.

* * *

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

Before he left, Corbin prayed in every room of the house.

He did not make a show of it. There was no shouting, no oil, nothing Maris had seen on late-night television. He simply walked slowly from room to room with his worn Bible open in one hand, and in each room he stopped and read a verse aloud and bowed his head for a moment.

In the kitchen he read Psalm 34. In the front parlor, Psalm 91. At the top of the stairs, where Boaz had kept his watch three nights running, he read from Isaiah: *No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper.* In the bathroom, standing before the mirror, he read the same verse that had been on the ruined index card, and then took a fresh card from his shirt pocket, wrote it out again in his blocky printing, and taped it to the glass himself.

In Keaton's room, he stood for a long time in the corner by the window.

Keaton watched from the doorway with his arms folded. He did not come in. But he did not leave.
"Lord Jesus," Corbin said quietly, "You disarmed the powers of darkness. You made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Whatever stood in this room last night, it stood here without permission. This boy belongs to You, whether he knows it yet or not. And this house is under Your authority, not the authority of fear. In Your name we pray."
He did not look at Keaton when he said it. Maris thought that was deliberate.
At the front door, Corbin took her hand in both of his.
"Call Kincaid," he said. "Right now, as soon as I'm gone. Send him the pictures. Let him do his job."
He hesitated. "And Maris. I want you to listen to me. Fear is going to tell you that you're alone in this. That nobody believes you. That you're losing your mind. That's always the first thing it tells. Don't listen. You're not alone, and you're not crazy. You're under attack. Those are very different things."
"Attacked by who?" she whispered.
Corbin did not answer right away.
"I don't know yet," he said. "But I intend to find out."
* * *
Kincaid sent Deputy Alvarado out within the hour. She dusted the mirror and the sink and the doorframe and the windowsill, frowning in concentration, and lifted half a dozen smudges onto clear tape.
"Mostly yours, probably," she said. "And they're smeared. The steam wrecks everything." She looked at the mirror for a long time after she finished. Then she looked at Maris. "For what it's worth, Mrs. Bellamy, I've seen those footprints and I've seen those pictures. I don't think you're making anything up."
It was a small thing. Maris held onto it all day.
* * *
That night, Corbin Thorne sat alone in his study at the back of the parsonage on Mill Road, with the desk lamp on and Diane asleep upstairs, and did not open the sermon notes in front of him.
He was thinking about a mailbox.
He had driven past that house on Copper Creek Road a hundred times. He had said so to Maris. And every time, he must have seen the name painted on the side of the mailbox in neat, careful letters, the way you see a thousand things without seeing them.
WHITLOCK.
He had not thought about that name in nearly thirty years.
He had been twenty-eight that November. A brand-new associate pastor, two years out of seminary, still learning which farmers liked to be visited and which ones liked to be left alone. The senior pastor he served under had sent him to a funeral at First Methodist downtown, the courteous thing to do when a prominent man in the community died suddenly. A schoolteacher. A deacon. Ambrose something. Heart attack, everyone said. Found at home, they said.
Corbin had sat near the back. He remembered that the casket was closed. He remembered that the church was very full and very quiet, and that the quiet had a strange quality to it, a held-breath quality, as though everyone in the room knew something that no one was willing to say.
And he remembered the man in the back pew across the aisle.
Gray-faced. Unshaven. Gripping a small green pocket Testament so hard that his knuckles were white. The man had not sung the hymns. He had not bowed his head for the prayers. He had sat staring at the closed casket with an expression Corbin had never forgotten, though he had never been able to name it. Not grief. Something closer to dread.
He had left before the benediction.
On the church steps afterward, an elderly woman in a black hat had leaned close to her companion and murmured, not quite quietly enough, "That's Dan Whitlock. They say he was one of them. That Thursday-night bunch that went out to the old Hollis place."

"One of who?" the companion had asked.
And the old woman had looked over her shoulder and lowered her voice even further.
"Nine of them went out there that night," she said. "Only eight came home."
Young Corbin had dismissed it as small-town gossip. He had been embarrassed, even, to have overheard it. He had gone back to his little church and his little office and his sermon on the prodigal son, and within a month the story had faded from his mind like a dream on waking.
Now he sat in the lamplight with Maris's words in his ears.
Nine of them. What is given must be answered. The ninth one. It isn't paid.
He opened his Bible to Ephesians 6 and read the twelfth verse slowly, once, and then again. *Not against flesh and blood.* He had preached it a hundred times. He had believed every word. But he had always preached it, he realized now, the way a man describes a country he has only seen on a map.
The court had done its work. Judge Ames had signed her name. The order sat on Maris Bellamy's nightstand and said, in heavy black letters, exactly what Garrick Bellamy could not do.
But Garrick Bellamy wore a size eleven.
And whatever had walked up that frozen lawn in church shoes and stood beneath a fifteen-year-old boy's window, whatever had knocked three times on the wall above his bed, whatever had written five careful words on a fogged mirror while his mother stood five feet away, had wanted her to understand one thing very clearly.
The order did not cover it.
Corbin closed his Bible and sat for a long time with his hand resting on the cover.
Then he bowed his head over his desk, alone in the quiet house, and began to pray as he had not prayed in many years. Not for wisdom. Not for words. For protection.
For himself. For Maris. And most of all, for the boy.
Outside the study window, the frost was forming again on the glass.

Chapter 4: The Adversary

> *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist stedfast in the faith. — 1 Peter 5:8–9*

The dream came back on the fifth night.
For two nights there had been nothing. No knocks. No screams. Hollister and then Alvarado had kept their long watches at the bottom of the lane, and the frost had lain smooth and white on the lawn every morning, and the new index card had stayed taped to the bathroom mirror, its blue ink crisp and dry.
Maris had slept in snatches, three hours, four. Keaton had gone back to school.
She had almost begun to hope.
Then, on Thursday morning, she came down at six-thirty and found her son already sitting at the kitchen table in the dark.
He had not turned on the overhead light. Only the small bulb over the stove was burning, the way her father used to leave it when he sat here before dawn with his Bible. Keaton was not reading anything. He was sitting very straight in his grandfather's chair with both hands flat on the table, staring at the black window over the sink.
Boaz lay across his feet.
"Keaton?"
He did not startle. He only turned his head, slowly, and looked at her, and she saw that he had been crying and had stopped some time ago.
"He talked to me," Keaton said.
Maris pulled out the chair across from him and sat down. Her legs did not seem to want to hold her.

"Tell me."

* * *

It had begun the same way, he said. He thought he had woken up. He thought he had gotten out of bed and gone to the window. And the man was there in the yard again, standing at the place where the footprints stopped, in his long black coat and his brimmed hat and his shining black shoes, looking up.

"Except this time I wasn't scared at first," Keaton said. "That's the weird part. It was like I'd been expecting him. Like he was somebody I knew."

Then he had blinked, and the man was in the corner of the room. And Keaton was back in bed, unable to move.

"But this time he came closer."

Maris's hands tightened around each other in her lap.

"Not fast. Just—one step. And then he was at the end of the bed. And then he was beside it. Right there." Keaton's voice thinned. "Standing over me. And I still couldn't see his face. There was just—dark where it should have been. But I could feel him looking at me. And it was cold. Like when you open a freezer."

"Did he touch you?"

"No." Keaton shook his head. "He just bent down. Slow. Like an old man. Until his face was right next to my ear. And then he talked."

"What did he sound like?"

Keaton thought about it for a long time.

"Nice," he said at last, and his mouth twisted as if the word tasted bad. "That's what was so awful. He didn't sound mean. He didn't sound like a monster. He sounded like—like a really nice old man. Like somebody's grandpa. Like he liked me."

Maris felt her skin crawl.

"I asked him who he was," Keaton said. "I couldn't move my mouth, but I asked him in my head, and he heard me. I know he heard me. He kind of laughed. Just a little. And he said, *Names are for things that are called. I don't need to be called anymore. I already have the door.*"

"The door," Maris repeated.

"He said stuff about doors a lot. I can't remember all of it. Something about how they open both ways. I don't know. It didn't make sense." Keaton rubbed his face hard with both hands. "And then he said the thing. The thing he wanted me to tell you."

He lowered his hands and looked straight at her.

"He said, *Tell your mother the Adversary remembers.*"

The kitchen was very quiet. Outside, the first gray light was beginning to show at the edges of the trees. Mr. Purcell's rooster had not crowed yet.

"The Adversary," Maris whispered.

"That's what he said. Capital A. I could hear the capital." Keaton's voice cracked. "Mom, what does that mean? Remembers what? What does it remember about you?"

"I don't know."

"You have to know something. He knew you. He talked about you like—" Keaton stopped. Swallowed. "Like he'd known you since you were little."

Maris could not speak.

She thought of the yellow wallpaper in Keaton's room. The plastic moon on the shelf. Her father asleep in the hallway outside her door, his Bible open on his knee. The date in the margin beside Psalm 91. *11/22/96.*

She had been eleven years old.

"What else?" she managed. "Did he say anything else?"

Keaton hesitated.

"Keaton."

"He said one more thing." He looked down at the table. "Right before he went away. He put his hand on the wall over my bed. Right where he knocked last time. And he said, *This was her room first.*"
The furnace kicked on. Somewhere in the walls, the pipes began to tick.
"Then I could move again," Keaton said. "And I didn't scream this time. I just got up and came down here and turned on the light over the stove. Because that's what Grandpa used to do, right? You said. He'd sit down here in the morning with the little light on and read." He gave a short, shaky laugh. "I don't even know why I did it. It just seemed like the safest place in the house."
Maris reached across the table and took both of his hands in hers. They were ice cold.
She wanted to tell him it was only a dream. She had told him that before. The words would not come this time. She found she could not lie to him with his hands this cold in hers.
So instead, she said the only true thing she had.
"I'm going to call Pastor Corbin," she said.
* * *

> *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure… think on these things. — Philippians 4:8*

Pastor Corbin's office at New Hope Chapel was a converted Sunday-school room at the back of the building, with a window that looked out on the gravel parking lot and a radiator that clanked like someone hammering on a pipe. Books covered every wall and most of the floor. A coffee maker older than Keaton gurgled on a filing cabinet. On the corner of the desk sat a framed photograph of Diane at about twenty-five, laughing on a beach.
Maris had sat in this room more times than she could count over the past year. She had cried in this room. She had told the truth in this room, for the first time, about the refrigerator and the turtlenecks and the forty-one text messages.
She had never been as frightened in it as she was now.
"The Adversary," she said. "That's what he called himself. Not a name. A title." She was holding a paper cup of coffee she had not touched. "Corbin, I looked it up last night. I sat up with Daddy's Bible and the concordance and I looked it up. It means Satan. That's what the word *Satan* means. *Adversary.*"
"Yes," Corbin said quietly. "It does."
"So it's—he's saying—" She could not finish the sentence. "Something knows me. Something has known me since I was a little girl. Something has been in my house, in my *son's room,* and it's the devil, and it remembers me, and I don't even know why." Her voice rose and cracked. "And Garrick is out there somewhere, and maybe it's Garrick, maybe he's doing all of this somehow, maybe he's found some way to get past the cameras and into Keaton's head, I don't know, I don't know anything, I don't know what's real anymore—"
"Maris."
She stopped. She was breathing too fast. Her coffee had slopped over the rim of the cup and onto her jeans, and she had not noticed.
Corbin took the cup gently out of her hand and set it on the desk. Then he sat back down across from her and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, so that his face was level with hers.
"I want you to listen to me very carefully," he said. "Not because I have all the answers. I don't. But because I've watched you do something for eleven months, and I'm watching you do it again right now, and I love you too much as a sister in Christ not to say something."
She waited.
"You're letting fear decide what you believe."
She opened her mouth to protest. He held up one hand.
"Hear me out. Five minutes ago you were sure it was the devil. Thirty seconds later you were sure it was Garrick. Then you were sure you couldn't trust your own mind. Three completely different stories,

and you believed every one of them completely, one right after another. Do you know what they all had in common?"
Maris shook her head.
"Each one was the most frightening thing you could think of in that moment." Corbin's voice was very gentle. "That's what fear does, Maris. It doesn't care what's true. It only cares what's terrifying. It reaches for the worst possible explanation every time, and it hands it to you and says, *This is real. Believe this.* And then, when you've swallowed that one, it hands you another."
The radiator clanked. Out in the parking lot, a car door slammed.
"Garrick taught you to live that way," Corbin said. "For sixteen years, he trained you to expect the worst, because the worst usually came. That kept you alive. I'm not blaming you for it. But it means that right now, when something truly frightening is happening, your mind is already running on rails he laid down. And whatever is behind this—whoever or whatever it is—I think it knows that."
Maris stared at him.
"Think about it," he said. "Three knocks at 3:17. Footprints that stop. Words on a mirror. A man with no face who whispers to a child. None of it has touched you, Maris. Not once. It hasn't broken a window or hurt Keaton or taken a single thing from your house. What it's done is frighten you. Night after night. Exactly, precisely, as much as it possibly can." He paused. "Garrick used fear to control you. I don't know yet who's doing this, but it's using the very same weapon."
She found her eyes were stinging.
"Then what do I do?" she whispered. "I can't just stop being afraid."
"No. Nobody can, just by deciding to." Corbin reached over to the desk and picked up his Bible, worn soft as an old glove. He did not open it. He knew the words. "But Paul tells us something. *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure… think on these things.* Notice he didn't say, *Whatsoever things are frightening.* He didn't say, *Whatsoever things might be true.* He said true. So we start there. With what we actually know."
"And what do we actually know?"
"We know someone, or something, wants you afraid. We know it knows things about your family. We know it's choosing its words very carefully." He tapped the cover of the Bible. "And we know one more thing. The Bible calls Satan a great many names. Accuser. Deceiver. Father of lies. And yes, Adversary. *Your adversary the devil walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.* But Peter doesn't stop there, Maris. Read the next verse."
She did not need to read it. She remembered it from the margin of her father's Bible, where it had been underlined so hard the pencil nearly tore the page.
"*Whom resist stedfast in the faith,*" she said.
"Resist," Corbin said. "Not run from. Not cower before. Not figure out first. Resist. Stedfast." He set the Bible down. "If it is the enemy—and I'm not saying yet that it is—then he's a liar by nature. Jesus said so. *When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own.* So when he tells your son that he *remembers* you, that he has some claim on you, that he has a door into your house—Maris, consider the source. Fear says believe it. Faith says, *Who told you that? And why would you believe anything he says?*"
Maris was quiet for a long time.
"Fear tells you whatever is most frightening," she said slowly. "Faith decides who to trust."
"That's it." Corbin smiled, and it was a tired smile, but a real one. "That's the whole thing. Right there."
She looked out the window at the gravel lot, the leaning steeple's shadow stretched across it in the thin winter sun.
"Corbin," she said. "Do you think it's real? The Adversary?"
He did not answer right away. When he did, he chose his words carefully.
"I think the devil is real," he said. "I've believed that all my life. Whether the devil is the one standing in Keaton's room, I don't know yet. I want to be honest with you about that. There are people who

could be doing some of this. There may be things that have a perfectly ordinary explanation we haven't found yet." He hesitated. "And there may be things that don't."

He seemed about to say something more. Maris saw it. Something moved behind his eyes, a door half opening, and then he closed it again.

"I'm looking into something," he said. "I don't want to say what yet, because I might be wrong, and I'm not going to add one more frightening story to the pile until I know it's true. Will you trust me on that?"

Maris looked at him for a long moment. This rumpled, patient man who had sat beside her in an emergency room at two in the morning. Who had never once looked at her the way Garrick's lawyer had.

"Yes," she said.

"Good." He stood and held out his hands, and she took them. "Then let's pray. And then go home, and when the fear starts talking tonight, you make it answer one question before you believe a word it says."

"What question?"

"*Is it true?*"

* * *

> *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? — Jeremiah 17:9*

Interview Room Two at the county sheriff's office was eight feet by ten, painted the color of weak tea, and furnished with a metal table, three plastic chairs, and a camera in the upper corner with a small red light. Bramwell Kincaid had conducted perhaps a thousand interviews in it. He had learned that most people told on themselves within the first ten minutes if you simply let them talk.

Garrick Bellamy had been talking for twelve minutes, and he had not told on himself once.

He sat with one ankle crossed over his knee, just as he had in the courtroom, in a pressed gray quarter-zip pullover and pressed khakis. His attorney, Whitfield, sat beside him clicking his gold pen. Garrick had come in voluntarily. He had called the department himself, the morning after Unit Four knocked on his apartment door, and asked when it would be convenient for him to come down and "clear this up." Kincaid had not liked that. Innocent men were usually angry. Guilty men were usually nervous. Garrick Bellamy was neither. He was helpful.

"I want to be as cooperative as I possibly can, Sheriff," he said now, spreading his hands. "I understand how this looks. A man's wife gets a protection order, and then strange things start happening at her house. Naturally you'd look at me first. I'd look at me first." He gave a small, rueful smile. "But I haven't been anywhere near that house. I haven't called her. I haven't texted her. I haven't asked anybody to contact her on my behalf. I've done everything that order told me to do, and I'll keep doing it."

"You understand you're not under arrest," Kincaid said.

"Of course."

"And you came in on your own."

"Because I have nothing to hide." Garrick glanced at Whitfield, who nodded slightly. "In fact, I brought a few things that might save you some time."

Whitfield opened a leather folio and slid three items across the table, one after another, as neatly as a man dealing cards.

The first was a printed letter from the property manager of the Lakeview Apartments on Second Street. The building had a security camera in the stairwell and one over the rear lot, the letter stated, and management would be happy to provide the sheriff's department with footage from any date and time requested. A sticky note in Whitfield's handwriting listed the four nights in question.

The second was a signed consent form allowing the department to obtain location data from Garrick's cell phone provider for the same four nights.

The third was a sheet of paper on which Garrick had written, in neat block capitals, the make, model, and license plate of his truck, the name of his insurance company, and a note: *Vehicle has factory GPS. Happy to authorize release of records.*

Kincaid looked at the three pieces of paper for a long moment without touching them.

"That's very thorough," he said.

"I'm a very thorough man." Garrick smiled. "Ask anyone at the plant. Ask anyone at Grace Fellowship." The smile faded into something that looked very much like sorrow. "Sheriff, I'll be honest with you. I'm worried about my wife."

"Are you."

"I've been worried about her for years. That's what nobody wanted to hear in that courtroom." Garrick leaned forward. His voice dropped, became confiding, man to man. "Maris has always been—fragile. Anxious. She hears things. She sees things. When Keaton was a baby, she used to wake me up three, four times a night swearing someone was in the house. There never was. Never once." He shook his head slowly. "And now she's back in her father's house, alone, under all this stress. And suddenly there are knocks no camera records? Footprints that disappear? Writing that vanishes before anyone else can see it?" He spread his hands again. "I'm not a doctor. But I know my wife."

Kincaid said nothing. He had heard this speech before, in various forms, from various men. He had heard it from Garrick himself, in Judge Ames's courtroom.

But he had also stood in the frost and seen those footprints with his own eyes.

"Your son heard the knocks too," he said mildly. "And my deputies saw the footprints. I saw them. I photographed them."

For just an instant, something flickered across Garrick's face. Kincaid caught it. It was gone almost before it appeared, but he had been watching for it. It was not guilt. It was something closer to surprise.

"Then I suppose someone is doing it," Garrick said slowly. "But it isn't me."

"What size shoe do you wear, Mr. Bellamy?"

"Eleven." No hesitation. He uncrossed his legs, lifted one foot, and set it on the edge of Kincaid's table, a polished brown loafer. "Eleven and a half in boots. You're welcome to check my closet. I'll give you the key."

Whitfield cleared his throat. Garrick took his foot down.

"The deputy who came to your door," Kincaid said, "says you made a comment. That your wife's father's house had always been strange."

"Did I?" Garrick looked faintly amused. "I suppose I did. I was half asleep."

"What did you mean by it?"

Garrick was quiet for a moment. When he spoke, the amusement had gone out of his voice.

"I meant her father was a strange man," he said. "Dan Whitlock. You didn't know him?"

"Before my time."

"He never liked me. That's fine. Plenty of fathers don't like the men their daughters marry." Garrick shrugged. "But he was odd. Didn't sleep. Maris used to say he'd sit up all night in that upstairs hallway. Wouldn't let anybody go down in his cellar, not even her mother. Kept a padlock on it." He tapped one finger on the table. "First time Maris ever brought me home to meet him, he looked at me across the supper table for about five minutes without saying a word. Then he asked me if I'd ever been out to the old Hollis place."

Kincaid kept his face still. "The Hollis place."

"Abandoned farm out past Ridley Bottoms. Falling down. Kids used to dare each other to go in it." Garrick shook his head. "I said no, and he just nodded, like I'd passed some kind of test. Never mentioned it again. That's the kind of man he was." He leaned back. "So yes, Sheriff. I think that house has always been a little strange. And I think the strangeness might run in the family."

Whitfield clicked his pen. "If we're finished here, Sheriff, my client has to get back to work."

Kincaid looked at Garrick Bellamy for a long moment. At the pressed clothes and the steady hands and the patient, sorrowful eyes of a good man worried about his fragile wife.

The heart is deceitful above all things. His mother had liked that one too.

"We're finished for now," he said. "Thank you for coming in."

Garrick stood and buttoned nothing, because there was nothing to button. He offered his hand across the table. Kincaid shook it. The grip was firm and dry and perfectly calm.

At the door, Garrick paused.

"Sheriff," he said, without turning around. "Those footprints. The ones that stopped." A beat. "Which way were they facing?"

Kincaid did not answer.

Garrick nodded slowly, as though silence were an answer, and went out.

* * *

> *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. — Proverbs 3:5*

It took Kincaid three days to gather everything Garrick Bellamy had handed him. When he had it all, he spread it across the conference table in the back of the sheriff's office and looked at it for a long time with his arms folded.

The Lakeview Apartments stairwell camera showed Garrick climbing the stairs to his second-floor unit at 9:52 p.m. on the night of the first knocks, carrying a bag of takeout. It showed no one coming down again until 6:41 the next morning, when Garrick descended in a jacket and tie on his way to work. The rear-lot camera showed his pickup parked in the same space all night, frost slowly whitening its windshield in the gray infrared.

The second night was the same. In at 9:38. Out at 6:45. The truck never moved.

The third night, the night of Keaton's first dream, the same. The fourth night. The fifth.

The phone records matched. Every ping from Garrick's cell between ten at night and six in the morning had come from the same tower, the one on top of the grain elevator three blocks from his apartment, and all of them were consistent with a phone lying still on a nightstand. The truck's GPS log showed the vehicle switched off and stationary through every one of the hours in question.

Kincaid had a deputy drive the route from the Lakeview to Copper Creek Road at three in the morning, obeying the speed limit. It took twenty-two minutes each way.

There was no back door out of the Lakeview's second floor. The windows of Garrick's unit faced Second Street, twenty feet above the sidewalk, under a streetlight, across from an all-night gas station with its own cameras. Kincaid checked those too.

Nothing.

The man had not left his apartment. Not once. Not on any of the five nights.

Then there were the prints.

Alvarado had lifted seven usable partial fingerprints from the bathroom mirror and the sink. Four were Maris's. Two were Keaton's. Garrick, without being asked, had come in on his own and provided a full set of elimination prints, rolling each finger across the scanner with a patient, faintly pained expression, as if submitting to an indignity for the sake of his poor wife.

None of the prints were his.

The seventh print was a thumb. It had been found on the mirror's lower left corner, half overlapping the torn square of tape where Corbin's index card had been. It was faint, smudged by steam, but it had enough ridge detail to run.

It did not belong to Maris. It did not belong to Keaton. It did not belong to Pastor Corbin, or Diane Thorne, or Earl Gifford, or Lyle Purcell, or any of the four deputies who had been inside the house. Kincaid had them all printed for elimination, which annoyed Hollister considerably.

It did not belong to Garrick Bellamy.

Kincaid ran it through the state system. Then the federal one. He waited two days.

No match.

Someone had touched that mirror. Someone whose prints had never once, in their whole life, been entered into any database in the United States.

Kincaid sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

He was not a man who believed in ghosts. He had been raised in the Baptist church by a mother who quoted Proverbs at him over the breakfast table, and he had walked away from all of it at nineteen and never really walked back. He believed in evidence. He believed in motive and opportunity and the long, patient grind of checking things. In twenty-three years, every strange thing he had ever investigated had come down, in the end, to a person. Somebody's jealous brother-in-law. Somebody's teenage son with a grudge and a ladder. Somebody's neighbor with a key.

That thumbprint was a person. He was sure of that.

But it was not Garrick Bellamy, and Garrick Bellamy had not left his apartment.

Almost as an afterthought, before he went home that night, Kincaid sat down at the old records terminal in the corner and typed *Hollis* into the search field.

The department's archive had been digitized in 2004, and anything earlier was spotty at best. He expected nothing.

One entry came back.

11/22/1996. 0418 hrs. Caller reports multiple vehicles parked at abandoned Hollis property, Ridley Bottoms Rd. Unit dispatched. Unit reports property vacant on arrival, no vehicles present. No further action.

No name for the caller. No name for the responding deputy. No report attached.

Kincaid read it three times. Then he printed it, folded it, and put it in his shirt pocket, and he could not have said why.

* * *

He drove out to Copper Creek Road to tell Maris himself.

It was dusk when he got there. She met him on the porch in her father's barn coat, with Boaz pressed against her legs, and he could see in her face that she already knew what he was going to say.

He told her anyway. The cameras. The phone. The truck. The prints.

"It wasn't him," she said slowly. "Any of it."

"Not with his own hands. Not on those nights." Kincaid kept his voice level. "I'm not ruling out that he's involved somehow. A man that thorough about his alibi makes me wonder why he thought he'd need one. But I can't put him on this porch, Mrs. Bellamy. And I can't put him in your house."

Maris looked out at the lawn, where the little square of yellow tape had finally torn loose and lay tangled in the grass.

"Then who?"

"There's a thumbprint on your mirror that doesn't belong to anybody we know. Doesn't belong to anybody in any system in the country." He hesitated. "So it's somebody. Somebody real. Somebody with a thumb."

She was quiet for a long time.

"A week ago," she said, "if you'd told me Garrick wasn't behind this, I'd have been relieved. Now it's the most frightening thing you could have said."

"I know."

"Because if it was Garrick, at least I'd know what it was."

Kincaid did not answer that. He found that he understood it perfectly.

She looked at him. "Pastor Corbin told me not to let fear decide what I believe. He told me to ask one question first. *Is it true?*" Her mouth twisted. "So tell me what's true, Sheriff. Just the true things."

Kincaid thought about it.

"What's true," he said, "is that someone wants you scared. That your husband has an alibi so good it's almost too good. That there's a stranger's thumb on your bathroom mirror. And that I don't know how any of this was done." He paused. "And that I'm not going to stop until I do."
She nodded slowly.
He almost told her about the paper in his shirt pocket. A call from a stranger, at 4:18 in the morning, nearly thirty years ago, reporting cars at an abandoned farm her father had once asked about at a supper table.
He did not. It was nothing. It was coincidence. It was an old, thin line in an old, thin file.
But driving home in the dark, he found himself touching that pocket again and again, the way a man touches a sore tooth with his tongue.
* * *

> *The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion. — Proverbs 28:1*

Garrick Bellamy did not sleep well anymore.
He would never have admitted it. Not to Whitfield, not to the men at the plant, not to his mother, who called every Sunday afternoon to tell him that Maris had always been unstable and that he was well rid of her. Certainly not to the sheriff.
But it was true.
The apartment over the dry cleaner's was small and clean and quiet, and it smelled faintly of pressing steam that rose through the floorboards in the daytime. He kept it immaculate. Bed made with square corners. Dishes washed and put away. Shoes lined up in pairs on the closet floor, toes even, the way his father had taught him with a belt. A framed print of praying hands hung over the couch. A Bible lay on the coffee table, squared to its edge, the gold-edged one Grace Fellowship had given him when he was ordained a deacon. He had not opened it since he moved in.
On the night after his interview with Kincaid, he sat on the edge of the bed in the dark with his elbows on his knees and a glass of bourbon in his hand, and he thought about footprints.
Which way were they facing?
Kincaid had not answered. Kincaid had not needed to.
Garrick drank. He set the glass on the nightstand, precisely on its coaster. Then, after a long moment, he opened the nightstand drawer, reached beneath a stack of folded handkerchiefs, and took out a second phone.
It was cheap. Prepaid. Bought with cash at a truck stop two counties over, three days after Maris walked out with the boy. He turned it over in his hands, looking at the dark screen.
He had not used it in a week. Not since the hearing. He had been careful. He was always careful.
He had not knocked on any door at 3:17 in the morning. He had not walked across any frozen lawn in a pair of thirteen-inch church shoes. He had not written anything on any mirror, and he had certainly not whispered anything to his son in the dark. He did not know who had done those things.
And that was what kept him awake.
Because a week ago, he had known exactly what was happening in that house on Copper Creek Road. He had known because some of it had been him. And now, for the first time in sixteen years, things were happening to Maris that he had not planned, and did not understand, and could not control.
He did not like things he could not control.
He put the phone back under the handkerchiefs and closed the drawer.
* * *
He must have slept eventually. He did not remember lying down.
What he remembered was waking.
The apartment was black and silent. The streetlight outside the window threw a pale orange rectangle across the ceiling. The radiator was cold. The bourbon glass sat on its coaster on the nightstand, and beside it, the red numbers of his digital clock glowed in the dark.

3:16.
He lay still, not knowing why he was awake, his heart pounding as though he had been running.
The last digit changed.
3:17.
Knock.
Garrick sat bolt upright.
Knock.
It was his front door. Twelve feet away, across the little living room, at the end of the short hall. Slow. Heavy. Unhurried.
Knock.
Then silence.
He did not move for a long time. He sat in the bed with the sheet bunched in his fists and listened so hard his ears rang. No footsteps on the landing. No voices. No creak of the old stairs, and the stairs at the Lakeview always creaked; he had complained to the manager about it twice.
Nothing.
Finally, he made himself get up. He crossed the dark living room in his bare feet. Past the couch. Past the praying hands on the wall. Past the gold-edged Bible on the coffee table. He stood in front of his own door and put his eye to the peephole.
The landing was empty. The bare bulb over the stairwell burned yellow. The worn brown carpet ran away to the top of the stairs. No one was there.
He unlocked the deadbolt. He opened the door.
The cold that came in was not the cold of an unheated hallway. It was deeper than that. It smelled of frost and dead leaves and earth.
And on the worn brown carpet directly in front of his threshold, there was a footprint.
Just one. Long and narrow, the heel sharp, the toe slightly pointed, the sole perfectly smooth. It was outlined in frost, delicate white crystals rimming its edges on the carpet as if it had been pressed there out of the winter night itself.
It was pointed at his door.
As he stared at it, the frost began to melt. The white crystals softened and darkened and disappeared into the carpet, until all that was left was a faint damp shadow in the shape of a shoe. And then not even that.
Garrick Bellamy shut the door. He locked the deadbolt and the chain. He stood with his back against it, breathing hard, staring into the dark apartment.
Then, for the first time in many years, he did a thing that his wife would not have believed if she had seen it.
He turned on every light he owned.
He sat on the couch beneath the praying hands with the Bible he never opened lying squared on the table in front of him, and he did not touch it. He only looked at it. And he stayed there with the lights blazing, wide awake, until the sun came up over Second Street.
He told no one.
Not Whitfield. Not his mother. Certainly not the sheriff.
But somewhere in the long hours before dawn, the thought came to him, and once it came it would not leave.
He had spent sixteen years teaching Maris to be afraid of the dark.
It had never once occurred to him that something in the dark might have been teaching him the same lesson.
And that it might have been patient. Much more patient than he had ever been.

Chapter 5: The Burned Bible

> *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*
> *— Isaiah 40:8*

It was the smell that woke her.

Not the sharp, clean smell of woodsmoke from Mr. Purcell's chimney across the road, which drifted over most winter mornings and which she had loved since she was a girl. This was something else. Thick and acrid and sour, with a strange sweetness underneath it, like burned sugar or scorched hair. It was in her nose before she was awake. It was in her throat. It was in the quilt pulled up around her chin.

Maris opened her eyes.

The lamp was still on. The room was gray with early light. And the air itself had a faint haze in it, a thin brown veil hanging just beneath the ceiling, so faint she might not have seen it at all if the lamplight had not caught it.

Smoke.

She was out of bed so fast she tangled her feet in the quilt and nearly fell. *Fire.* The word went through her like a current. *Keaton.*

She ran down the hall. His door was shut. She flung it open. He was asleep on his side with the comforter over his head and Boaz curled against his back, and there was no smoke in his room, none at all. The air was clear and cold.

She stood in his doorway with her heart slamming, breathing hard.

The smoke was not coming from upstairs.

She turned and went down.

The smell grew stronger with every step. At the bottom of the staircase it was almost choking. The haze hung thicker in the front hall, drifting slowly in the gray light from the narrow window beside the door. But there was no roar. No crackle. No heat. No flickering orange glow anywhere. The house was utterly silent except for the ticking of her father's clock on the parlor mantel.

She followed the smell into the kitchen.

And stopped.

The kitchen table stood where it always stood, in the middle of the room, under the hanging lamp. Her mother's red-checked oilcloth was spread over it, the same cloth that had covered it for as long as Maris could remember, faded and soft and patched at one corner with tape. The sugar bowl sat in its place. The napkin holder. The salt and pepper shakers shaped like two little white churches that her mother had bought at a craft fair in 1992.

And in the very center of the table lay her Bible.

Not her father's. Hers. The black bonded-leather Bible that Pastor Corbin had given her eleven months ago, on the night she first walked into New Hope Chapel. Her name was stamped in gold on the cover, *Maris*, the first gift anyone had given her in years that Garrick had not chosen or approved. She had filled its margins with her own notes and questions and underlines. She had cried on its pages. She had carried it to the shelter in her purse and slept with it under her pillow there.

Last night she had left it on the kitchen table, beside her cold cup of tea, when she went up to bed.

It was burned.

Not singed. Not scorched at the edges. *Burned.* The cover had blackened and curled back on itself like a dead leaf. The pages had become a swollen, crumbling mass of black and gray, fused together at the spine. Fine white ash lay in a little drift around it, and a thin thread of smoke still rose from somewhere deep in its heart, twisting slowly up toward the light fixture.

Maris could not move.

She stood in the kitchen doorway in her bare feet and stared at it, and for a long moment she could not make sense of what she was seeing. Not the Bible. That she understood. Someone had burned it. Something had burned it. That was horrible, but it was simple.

It was everything else.

The oilcloth beneath the Bible was not burned.

She went closer. Slowly. The way you would approach a dog you were not sure of. She bent and looked.

The red-and-white checks ran right up to the blackened edge of the book and disappeared under it, bright and clean, exactly as they had been the night before. No scorch mark. No melted vinyl. No brown ring. Oilcloth melted at almost nothing; she had ruined a corner of it once at fifteen by setting down a hot casserole dish. But beneath a book that had burned until it was nearly gone, the cloth was untouched.

The napkin holder stood four inches away. The paper napkins in it were white and crisp. The little china churches stood six inches away. Her teacup sat beside the Bible, still half full of cold tea, a delicate brown film on its surface. Close enough that its saucer nearly touched the ash.

Nothing else was burned. Nothing at all. Not a napkin. Not a thread.

Only the Bible.

She reached out a trembling hand and held it over the blackened cover, not touching it. She expected heat. There was none. The book was cold. Cold as the table. Cold as if it had burned hours ago, or as if it had never been hot at all, and yet that thin thread of smoke went on rising from it, steady and slow.

How?

She found her hand moving on its own. She touched the corner of the cover with one fingertip. It crumbled into flakes of black. Underneath, the pages were a dense gray brick, the edges fused into a single seared mass.

Except for one place.

Near the back of the book, sticking out from the burned mass like a white tongue, was a small triangle of paper. A torn corner of a single page, no larger than her palm. It was yellowed at the edge, browned at the tip, but it was whole. Somehow, impossibly, the fire had gone all around it and left it alone.

Maris worked it free with two fingers. It came loose with a dry whisper.

There were only a few words left on it. Most of the page was gone. But in the middle of the scrap, in the small black type, one verse remained entire. And beneath it, in her own pencil, was the underline she had made one Sunday night months ago in the back pew at New Hope Chapel, with Corbin's voice reading aloud from the front.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

James 4:7.

She stood in the smoky kitchen holding the scrap of paper, and she began to shake.

She could not have said, then, whether it was terror or something else. Something she had no name for yet. Something that felt, very faintly, almost like hope.

* * *

> *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*

Keaton came down twenty minutes later, coughing, his eyes red, Boaz slinking behind him with his tail clamped between his legs.

By then Maris had opened every window on the first floor. Cold November air poured through the house, and the brown haze was thinning, drifting out over the porch and the frosted lawn. She was sitting at the kitchen table in her coat with the scrap of paper flat on the oilcloth in front of her, not touching the burned Bible, not looking at it.

Keaton stopped in the doorway and stared at the table for a long time.

"Your Bible," he said.

"Yes."

He came closer. He bent and looked at the clean oilcloth under the black edge of the book, the way she had. Then at the napkins. Then at the teacup.

"That's not possible," he said quietly.
"I know."
He straightened up. His face had gone pale beneath the sleep creases. He looked at her, and then he looked toward the front hall and the staircase, and something moved in his expression that she did not like.
"Mom," he said. "I heard somebody last night."
The cold air from the window lifted the edge of the scrap of paper. Maris laid her hand over it.
"What do you mean, you heard somebody?"
"In the hall. Upstairs." Keaton pulled out a chair and sat down hard, as if his legs had stopped working. "I woke up. I don't know what time. It was still dark. And somebody was walking in the hallway."
"It was probably me. I got up to check the—"
"It wasn't you." His voice was flat and certain. "You walk light. You always walk light, like you're trying not to wake anybody up. You've done it my whole life." He swallowed. "This was heavy. Slow. And it was shoes. Hard shoes. On the floorboards. Like, *clack.* And then a long time. And then *clack.*"
Maris felt the hair rise on the back of her neck.
Leather sole. Like a dress shoe. Old style.
"It came from your end of the hall," Keaton said. "From outside your room. And it walked down toward mine. Real slow. And it stopped right outside my door." He was gripping the edge of the table now. "It just stood there. For a long time. I could see the shadow under the door, Mom. Where the hall light comes in under it. There were two dark spots, like feet. Just standing there."
"Why didn't you call me?"
"Because you told me not to come out." His voice cracked. "You said if I heard anything, stay in my room and lock the door. So I did. I just lay there. And Boaz—" He looked down at the dog, who had pressed himself under the table against Maris's feet. "Boaz went under my bed. All the way under. He never goes under there; he doesn't even fit. He was shaking so hard I could feel it through the mattress."
"And then?"
"And then it walked away. Back down the hall. Toward the stairs. And it went down." Keaton closed his eyes. "I counted the steps. I don't know why. Fourteen. Every one. *Clack.* Pause. *Clack.* All the way to the bottom."
There were fourteen stairs. Maris had counted them herself as a girl, sitting on them in her nightgown on Christmas mornings, waiting for her father to say she could come down.
"And then I smelled the smoke," Keaton whispered.
* * *
Kincaid came at eight, in uniform this time, with Deputy Alvarado.
He stood over the kitchen table for a long time with his hands on his hips and his jaw working, saying nothing. Alvarado photographed the Bible from every angle. She photographed the oilcloth, the napkins, the teacup, the ash. She took a small sample of the ash in a glass vial and a swab from the oilcloth beneath the book.
"Smell that?" Kincaid said finally, to no one in particular.
Alvarado sniffed. "Smoke."
"Anything else? Gasoline? Lighter fluid? Kerosene?"
She bent over the Bible and breathed in carefully. Then she shook her head. "Just paper. And—I don't know. Something sweet."
Kincaid grunted. He crouched beside the table and examined the underside of the oilcloth where it hung over the edge. Then he stood up and went out into the front hall and looked up.
"Mrs. Bellamy," he said. "Your smoke detector."
Maris came to the doorway. The detector was mounted on the ceiling at the bottom of the stairs, a round white disk that had been there since her father's time. She had tested it the week they moved back. It had shrieked so loudly that Boaz had fled into the pantry.

"Did it go off?" Kincaid asked. "Last night? This morning?"
Maris opened her mouth. Closed it.
It had not. The house had been full of smoke, thick enough to wake her two floors away, thick enough to haze the air and burn her throat, and the detector had not made a sound.
Kincaid pulled a kitchen chair into the hall, stood on it, and twisted the detector off its mounting plate. He turned it over in his hands.
The battery compartment was open.
It was empty.
He held it up so she could see. "Did you take this out?"
"No." Her voice came out a whisper. "No. I tested it. I tested it two weeks ago. It worked."
Kincaid looked at the empty compartment for a long time. Then he climbed down off the chair. He went upstairs. She heard him in the upstairs hall, heard the scrape of another chair, then silence. When he came back down, he was carrying the second detector, the one from outside her bedroom door.
Its battery was gone too.
Kincaid set both detectors on the kitchen counter side by side and stood looking at them.
"Well," he said quietly. "That's a person."
Maris stared at him.
"Whatever burned that book," Kincaid said, "and however it did it, something in this house knew those detectors would go off. And somebody climbed up and took the batteries out so they wouldn't." He turned and looked at her, and his gray eyes were very hard. "Ghosts don't need to do that, Mrs. Bellamy. People do."
It should have frightened her more. Somehow, it frightened her less.
A person she could fight. A person left fingerprints and took batteries out of smoke detectors and had to climb up on a chair to do it.
For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested.
Then she thought of Keaton's voice. *Fourteen. Every one. Clack. Pause. Clack.* And of the clean red-and-white oilcloth beneath a book that had burned to ash.
And she was not sure of anything at all.
Alvarado dusted the detector covers and the battery compartments. Then the banister. Then the doorframe of the kitchen. She lifted three partial prints from the downstairs detector cover.
One of them, she told Kincaid in a low voice before they left, looked a great deal like a thumb.
* * *

> *When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. — Isaiah 43:2*

Pastor Corbin came in the early afternoon, when the house had aired out and the smell of smoke had faded to a faint sourness that clung to the curtains. He brought Diane's coffee cake in a tin and a cardboard box under his arm that he set on the counter without explaining.
He stood over the kitchen table a long time, as Kincaid had. He did not touch the Bible. He looked at the oilcloth, the napkins, the teacup. He bent close and breathed in, and his face changed slightly at the sweetness under the smoke, and he did not say why.
Then Maris laid the little scrap of paper in his palm.
He read it. He read it again. And then Corbin Thorne, who had been a pastor for thirty-one years and had sat beside a hundred deathbeds, put his hand over his eyes and stood very still.
"James 4:7," he said, when he could speak.
"It was the only thing left," Maris said. "Everything else burned. Every page. And that one verse didn't."
"I know which verse it is." He lowered his hand. His eyes were wet. "I preached on it the night you first came to us. Do you remember? You were in the back row with your coat buttoned up to your chin."
"I underlined it," Maris said. "That night."

They sat down at the table, the three of them. Corbin in her father's chair. Keaton at the far end, arms folded, watchful. Boaz under the table with his chin on Keaton's foot. The ruined Bible sat between them in the center of the oilcloth like an uninvited guest.

"I want to tell you a story," Corbin said. "It's in Jeremiah. Chapter thirty-six."

Keaton made a small sound that might have been a groan. Corbin ignored it.

"Jeremiah was a prophet," he said. "God gave him a message for the king of Judah. A hard message. A warning. Jeremiah couldn't go to the palace himself; they'd have arrested him. So he had his secretary, a man named Baruch, write every word of it down on a scroll. And Baruch took the scroll to the palace and read it aloud."

He folded his big hands on the table.

"The king's name was Jehoiakim. It was winter, like now. He was sitting in his winter house with a fire going in a brazier in front of him. And his servant began to read him the scroll. And every time the servant read three or four columns, the king would take out his penknife—" Corbin made a small slicing motion with his hand. "—and he'd cut off that piece of the scroll, and toss it in the fire. And watch it burn. And the servant would read the next part. And the king would cut that off too. Piece by piece. Until the whole scroll was gone."

Keaton had unfolded his arms.

"He thought that was the end of it," Corbin said. "Burn the words, and the words go away. That's what powerful people have always believed. If you can destroy the book, you can destroy what it says."

"So what happened?" Keaton asked. It seemed to come out before he could stop it.

Corbin smiled faintly.

"God told Jeremiah, *Take thee again another roll.* Get another scroll. Write it all again. Every word. So Jeremiah did. And the Bible says that this time, *there were added besides unto them many like words.*" He spread his hands. "The king burned it, and God wrote it again. Longer."

He reached over and touched the blackened cover of Maris's Bible very gently, the way you might touch the forehead of someone sleeping.

"This was paper," he said. "Precious paper. Your paper, with your notes and your tears on it. I'm sorry it's gone. Truly. But the Word of God isn't paper, Maris. It never was. *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.* You can burn every Bible in this county and you won't have touched one syllable of it."

He slid the cardboard box across the table to her.

She opened it. Inside, wrapped in tissue paper, was a new Bible. Black leather. Her name stamped in gold on the cover. *Maris.*

"Diane ordered it this morning, the minute you called," he said. "The bookstore in Ridley had one in stock. She drove over and had them stamp it while she waited."

Maris could not speak.

"Take thee again another roll," Corbin said softly.

* * *

Keaton was quiet for a long time after that. He sat at the end of the table with his hands flat on the oilcloth, looking at the burned book, and Maris could see the questions moving behind his face.

"Can I ask something?" he said finally.

"Always."

"Whatever did that." He nodded at the Bible. "Whatever walked down the hall last night and stood outside my door. If it can burn a Bible without burning the table—" He stopped. Started again. "If it can do that, what stops it from doing it to us? To the house? To me?"

The kitchen was very quiet. Even the radiators had stopped ticking.

Corbin did not answer quickly. Maris had noticed that about him. He never answered Keaton quickly. He seemed to understand that a fast answer, to a boy who had grown up with Garrick, sounded exactly like a lie.

"I don't know for sure what did that," he said at last. "Sheriff Kincaid found the smoke detector batteries gone. So somebody with hands was involved somehow. That's true and you should hold onto it." He paused. "But I'll tell you what I do know."

He opened his own worn Bible, the soft old one, and turned the pages without looking, the way a man finds his way around his own house in the dark.

"Isaiah 43. This is God speaking to His people. *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.*"

He set the Bible down open on the table, right beside Maris's burned one.

"Notice what He doesn't say," Corbin said. "He doesn't say *if* you walk through the fire. He says *when.* He doesn't promise there won't be any fire. That would be a lie, and God doesn't lie. He promises something better. He promises He'll be in it with you." He looked at Keaton. "There were three young men once who got thrown into a furnace so hot it killed the soldiers who threw them in. And when the king looked inside, he didn't see three men. He saw four. Walking around in the middle of the fire. Loose. Unhurt. And the fourth one, the king said, looked like the Son of God."

Keaton stared at the two Bibles side by side. The burned one and the whole one.

"The table didn't burn," he said slowly.

"No," said Corbin. "It didn't."

"The napkins didn't burn. The tea didn't even get warm." Keaton frowned at it, as if it were a math problem. "And that one verse didn't burn."

Corbin said nothing. He let the boy get there on his own.

"So maybe," Keaton said, very quietly, "whatever it was couldn't burn everything it wanted to."

No one answered him. No one needed to.

* * *

> *Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. — Ephesians 6:10–11*

"I'd like to pray with you," Corbin said. "Both of you. If you'll let me."

Maris nodded at once. Keaton did not answer. But he did not leave the table.

Corbin did not take their hands this time. He seemed to sense that Keaton would bolt if anyone touched him. Instead, he opened his worn Bible to Ephesians and turned it around so that it faced the two of them, and he laid it flat on the oilcloth between the burned Bible and the new one.

"I'm not going to pray some magic words over this house," he said. "There aren't any. People like to think there are. They want a formula, a ritual, something to sprinkle in the corners. That's not how it works. That's actually closer to what the other side does." He tapped the page. "What Paul gives us is armor. And armor isn't magic. It's just what a soldier puts on before he goes out to stand his ground. So I want to put it on with you. Piece by piece."

He read slowly, one phrase at a time, stopping after each.

"*Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth.*" He looked up. "The belt of truth. Everything else hangs on it. So the first thing we do is refuse to believe lies. Not the enemy's lies about you. Not Garrick's lies. Not fear's lies." He glanced at Maris. "*Is it true?* Remember?"

She nodded.

"*And having on the breastplate of righteousness.*" He touched his own chest. "That's not your goodness. It's Christ's. It covers the heart. So when something whispers that you're dirty, or guilty, or that it has some claim on you because of something you did or something your family did—" He paused, and Maris saw that he chose the words carefully. "—the breastplate says no. Jesus already paid. Whatever was owed, He covered it."

Maris felt something tighten in her chest. *The ninth one. It isn't paid.*

"*And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.*" Corbin smiled slightly. "Shoes. So you can stand without slipping. Peace isn't the absence of a fight. It's having somewhere solid to plant your feet while it happens."
"*Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.*" He laid his hand flat beside the burned Bible. "Fiery darts. Paul knew about fire. *Quench all.* Not some. All."
Keaton was looking at the page now, not at Corbin. Reading along.
"*And take the helmet of salvation.*" Corbin touched his temple. "Protects the mind. That's where the battle's being fought in this house, mostly. In your heads. At three in the morning."
"*And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*" He paused over that one a long time. "Every other piece is for defense. This is the only one you swing. And notice what it is. Not a burned book on a table. The *word.* The thing that's in you. The thing you've read and believed and hidden in your heart. You can't burn that. Nobody can."
He closed the Bible.
"*Praying always,*" he said. "That's the last line. That's what holds it all on."
Then he bowed his head.
He prayed simply, in his rough, unhurried voice. He thanked God for the scrap of paper. He thanked Him for the new Bible and for Diane, who had driven to Ridley in the cold. He asked for truth to be uncovered, every hidden thing brought into the light, every hand that had touched those smoke detectors revealed. He asked for courage for Maris. He asked for sleep.
And then he prayed for Keaton.
He did not pray that Keaton would believe. He did not pray that Keaton would come to church or stop asking questions. He only prayed, "Lord, You know this boy. You knew him before he was born. You've seen everything he's seen, every single thing, and You haven't looked away. Stand outside his door at night. Be the one standing there. Not anything else. Only You."
Maris heard a small sound from the end of the table.
She opened her eyes just slightly. Keaton's head was bowed. His eyes were closed. His hands were pressed flat against the oilcloth on either side of Corbin's open Bible, and his shoulders were shaking, just a little, the way they used to shake when he was small and trying very hard not to let anyone see him cry.
She closed her eyes again quickly, so he would not know she had seen.
"Amen," Corbin said.
"Amen," Maris whispered.
There was a long pause.
"Amen," said Keaton, so softly she almost didn't hear it.
It was the first time in four years she had heard him say it.
* * *

> *And 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*

It was nearly dark when Corbin finally stood to go.
The November afternoon had slipped away while they talked. Diane's coffee cake was half gone. Keaton had stayed at the table the whole time, saying little, but listening. Once he had even laughed, at a story Corbin told about a goat that had wandered into a Christmas Eve service in 1998 and eaten part of the nativity scene. It had been a short, startled laugh, and he had looked embarrassed by it afterward. But Maris had held onto the sound.
Corbin pulled on his coat at the kitchen door and fished in his pocket for his keys. They slipped from his fingers and hit the linoleum with a jangle and skittered under the kitchen table.
"Getting old," he muttered.

He got down on one knee with a grunt, then on both, and reached under the table, patting the floor. His fingers found the keys near the center post. He started to back out.

Then he stopped.

Maris saw him go still. He was on his hands and knees half under the table, his head tilted, looking up at the underside of the tabletop. For a long moment he did not move at all.

"Corbin?"

"Maris," he said. His voice sounded strange, muffled by the oilcloth hanging down around him. "Do you have a flashlight?"

Keaton had his phone out before she could answer. He crouched beside Corbin and switched on the light and handed it to him. Corbin aimed it upward.

"Come look at this," he said quietly.

Maris got down on the cold floor beside them. The three of them knelt shoulder to shoulder under her mother's red-checked oilcloth, like children hiding in a fort, and looked up.

The underside of the table was raw, unfinished oak, dark with age and dust and the grime of decades. Cobwebs hung from the corners of the apron. A brittle wad of chewing gum clung near one edge, one of Maris's own sins from 1993, she thought dimly.

And in the center of the tabletop, directly beneath the place where the burned Bible lay, someone had carved a circle.

It was about the size of a saucer. The line had been cut deep into the wood with a knife, carefully, steadily, a single unbroken stroke that met itself perfectly at the end. It was not a child's doodle. It was not an accident. Whoever had made it had taken a long time.

Inside the circle were marks.

Short straight notches, each about an inch long, arranged around the inside edge of the ring like the hours on a clock face. Evenly spaced. Each one pointing toward the center.

Corbin moved the light slowly from one to the next. Maris counted under her breath.

Nine.

The whole kitchen seemed to go quiet around them. Under the table, Boaz whined softly and backed away until his hindquarters bumped the stove.

"Did you know this was here?" Corbin asked.

"No." Maris's voice came out as a whisper. "No. Never. I've never looked under this table in my life."

"How long has the table been in your family?"

"Always. Since we moved here. Since I was four." She stared up at the circle. "Daddy used to sit right here every morning with his Bible. Right over the top of it."

Corbin moved the light closer. Then he did something that made Maris's stomach turn over. He reached up and ran the tip of his finger, very lightly, along the notches. One. Two. Three. Slowly, all the way around the circle.

"Look at the wood," he said.

She looked.

The circle was old. The groove was dark and filled with grime, its edges worn smooth, the same color as the aged oak around it. Eight of the notches were the same. Dark. Grimy. Softened by time. Cut many years ago.

But the ninth was not.

The ninth notch was pale. Raw. The bright, clean yellow of freshly cut oak. Its edges were sharp as the day they were made. And caught in the bottom of the groove, so fine you could only see them when the light hit them, were a few tiny curls of sawdust.

Corbin held his fingertip beside it but did not touch it.

"That one's new," Keaton breathed.

"Yes," said Corbin.

"How new?"

Corbin did not answer. He did not have to. They all knew. Sawdust did not stay in a groove for long in a kitchen where a dog lay under the table and a woman swept every morning.

Days. Perhaps hours.

Last night, Maris thought. Last night, while Keaton lay counting footsteps on the stairs. Fourteen. *Clack.* Pause. *Clack.* And then someone had come into this kitchen in the dark, and knelt down here on this floor, where she was kneeling now, and taken out a knife and carved one more mark into her father's table. Right under the place where they had laid her Bible and set it on fire.

She felt sick.

Corbin took several photographs with Keaton's phone. Then they crawled out, one by one, and stood up in the kitchen, and none of them said anything for a long time. The burned Bible sat on the oilcloth between them. Beside it lay the new one. Beside that, the little scrap of paper. *Resist the devil.*

"You need to call Kincaid," Corbin said finally. "Tonight. Show him that."

"What does it mean?" Maris asked. "Corbin. Nine marks. Keaton said *nine of them* in his sleep. What does it mean?"

Corbin looked at her for a long moment. She could see him weighing something. A door half open behind his eyes, the way it had been in his office, and before that, in her kitchen with the receipt in his hand.

This time he did not close it all the way.

"When I was a young man," he said slowly, "just starting out in this county, I went to a funeral. A long time ago. Nearly thirty years. And on the church steps afterward I overheard an old woman say something that I've never been able to forget." He paused. "She said, *Nine of them went out there that night. Only eight came home.*"

Maris stared at him. "Out where?"

"I don't know yet." Corbin looked down at the table. At the place beneath it where the circle was carved, eight dark notches and one bright new one. "But I intend to find out. And Maris—" He hesitated. "I think your father knew."

Outside the kitchen window, the last gray light was going out of the sky. The frost was already beginning to form on the glass.

And somewhere in the house, in the walls or under the floor, an old pipe ticked once, twice, three times.

Then fell silent.

Chapter 6: The Photograph

> *The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. — Psalm 121:8*

The call came at 5:52 on Monday morning, while Corbin Thorne was still standing in his kitchen in his bathrobe, waiting for the coffee to finish.

He knew it was trouble before he picked up. Nobody called a pastor before six with good news. Babies came at all hours, but their fathers waited until breakfast to share the joy. It was death that couldn't wait. Death and fear.

"Pastor." Amos Greer's voice. Low and rough and not quite steady. "I'm sorry to wake you."

"You didn't. What's wrong, Amos?"

A long pause on the line. Corbin could hear an engine idling, the tick of a turn signal someone had forgotten to switch off.

"I'm sitting in the church parking lot," Amos said. "I been sitting here since about midnight. With the doors locked and the heater on." Another pause. "I need you to come down. There's something on the

pulpit with your name on it. And I need to tell you what I saw last night, because if I don't tell somebody I'm going to start thinking I'm losing my mind."

Corbin set down his mug.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

* * *

The sky over Mill Road was still black when he pulled into the gravel lot of New Hope Chapel. Frost lay thick on the grass and on the windshield of Amos's old blue Chevrolet, which sat alone in the far corner under the single light pole, its exhaust rising white into the dark. The steeple stood above it all, leaning its familiar quarter-inch to the east, a dark shape against darker sky.

Amos got out of his truck when he saw Corbin's headlights. He was a small, wiry man of seventy-one, a retired railroad brakeman who had buried his wife Edna six years ago and had been New Hope's custodian for nineteen. In all that time, Corbin had never seen him rattled. Not when the baptistry flooded the basement during a Christmas cantata. Not when lightning struck the steeple in 2015 and set the bell rope on fire. Amos Greer was the kind of man who handled things.

He did not look like he was handling anything now. His face was gray under the sodium light. His cap was in his hands, and he was turning it around and around by the bill.

"Tell me," Corbin said.

So Amos told him, standing in the cold beside the trucks.

He had stayed late after the Sunday evening service to wax the fellowship hall floor, he said. Finished a little before midnight. Put the buffer away, rinsed his mop, came up the back corridor to check the sanctuary doors on his way out, the way he did every night. Pushed open the swinging door by the platform.

"And there was somebody standing in the aisle."

Corbin felt the back of his neck go cold.

"Halfway down," Amos said. "Right in the middle of the center aisle. Facing the pulpit. Not moving. Just standing there in the dark, with the exit signs making everything red." He swallowed. "Tall, Pastor. Tall like nobody we've got. His head was up near the bottom of the light fixtures. He had on a long coat, down nearly to the floor. And a hat. Old-fashioned. With a brim."

A tall man dressed in black, Keaton had said. *A long coat, like the kind people wear in old pictures. And a hat.*

"He didn't turn around," Amos said. "He didn't look at me. I don't think he cared that I was there. He was just looking at the pulpit. Real patient. Like he was waiting for church to start."

"What did you do?"

"Hit the lights." Amos's mouth twisted. "All six fixtures at once. And there wasn't anybody there. Nobody in the aisle. Nobody in the pews. Doors all shut. I checked them after. Every one locked, front and back and side, just like I left them at nine." He shook his head slowly. "I didn't go down that aisle, Pastor. I'm ashamed to say it. I just stood there with my hand on the switch and said the Lord's Prayer out loud. Twice. Then I went to check the side door, and that's when I seen the envelope."

"On the pulpit."

"On the pulpit. Right in the middle, where you lay your Bible. It wasn't there when I dusted after the evening service. I'd swear to that on my mother's grave." Amos looked up at him. "It's got your name on it. I didn't touch it. I didn't want to touch it."

Corbin looked past him at the dark bulk of the church.

He had walked into that building perhaps fifteen thousand times in thirty-one years. He had walked into it at three in the morning to pray with a man whose son had been killed on Route 9. He had walked into it alone on the night after his own mother's funeral, to sit in the front pew and weep where no one could see. He had never once, in all those years, been afraid to walk into it.

He was afraid now. He was honest enough with himself to admit it.

The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in.

"Come on," he said to Amos. "We'll go in together."

* * *

The sanctuary was cold and gray and utterly still. Corbin turned on every light. Then he walked down the center aisle, slowly, all the way from the back doors to the front, and Amos walked behind him. There was nothing on the burgundy carpet. No footprint. No mark. Nothing at all to show that anyone had stood there in the night.

But the air felt wrong. Corbin could not have said how. It was not cold, exactly, though it was cold. It was something else. A kind of heaviness. As if the room had been holding its breath for hours and had not yet let it out.

He stopped at the foot of the platform and looked up at the pulpit.

The envelope lay exactly where Amos had said. Squarely in the center of the slanted oak, where Corbin's Bible lay every Sunday morning. An ordinary manila envelope, the kind you could buy in a box of fifty at any drugstore.

On the front, in black marker, someone had written two words in tall, narrow, careful capitals, every letter the same height, as if drawn against a ruler.

PASTOR THORNE.

Corbin knew that handwriting. He had seen it on the screen of Maris Bellamy's phone, stretched across a fogged bathroom mirror.

THE ORDER DOES NOT COVER ME.

He stood very still at the foot of his own pulpit and found that his lips were moving. Not in any prayer he had planned. Only a fragment that rose up from somewhere deep, something he had memorized as a boy.

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Then he went to the church kitchen, took a pair of Diane's yellow dishwashing gloves from under the sink, pulled them on, and climbed the three steps to the pulpit.

* * *

> *For he knoweth the secrets of the heart. — Psalm 44:21*

The flap was not sealed. Only tucked. Inside was a single photograph, and nothing else.

Corbin slid it out by its edges and laid it face up on the pulpit, in the place where his Bible should have been.

It was a snapshot, the kind every family in America once kept by the hundreds in shoeboxes and drawers. Four inches by six, on glossy paper gone slightly brittle with age. The colors had faded the way old drugstore prints always faded, the blues turned to ash and the reds to a dull rust, so that the whole picture had a warm, unwell look, like a scene glimpsed through weak tea.

It showed a farmhouse. And in front of the farmhouse, nine people.

The house was old even then. Two stories of gray clapboard, half its shutters gone, its porch roof sagging in the middle like a tired horse's back. The windows were dark and filmed. Behind it stood a row of bare, crooked fruit trees, black against a pale sky. Frost whitened the grass in the foreground. The shadows were long. Late afternoon, late autumn.

The nine stood in a loose line before the porch steps, the way people line up for a church directory photo. Five men and four women in good wool coats and scarves. Middle-aged, most of them. Ordinary. A heavyset man near the left had thrown back his head, laughing at something outside the frame. A small woman in white nurse's shoes held her hands clasped in front of her. A thin, dark-haired woman stood rigid, a rosary looped around her fingers. A man in a banker's overcoat and tie looked straight at the camera without smiling.

At the center of the line stood a bearded man in wire-rimmed glasses, his hands resting lightly on the shoulders of the people on either side of him, smiling with quiet satisfaction. The host. The one who had gathered them.

Corbin did not know him. Not at first.

Then, slowly, a memory surfaced. A framed portrait on an easel, beside a closed casket, in the front of First Methodist downtown. A November morning nearly thirty years ago. A brand-new associate pastor, twenty-eight years old, sent by his senior pastor to pay the courtesy of a visit to a stranger's funeral. The same beard. The same glasses. The same faintly self-satisfied smile.

Ambrose, Corbin thought. *Ambrose something. The schoolteacher.*

His eyes moved along the line.

And stopped.

The third man from the left stood a little apart from the others, his hands jammed in the pockets of a canvas work coat. He was not smiling. He was not looking at the camera. He was looking just past it, slightly to one side, with an expression Corbin had seen exactly once before in his life. On the face of a gray, unshaven man in the back pew of that same funeral, who had sat through the whole service gripping a small green pocket Testament so hard his knuckles went white, and who had left before the benediction.

And Corbin had seen that face again, much more recently. In a silver frame on the mantel of an old farmhouse on Copper Creek Road. Older, grayer, his arm around a girl in a high-school graduation gown. Squinting into the sun.

Daniel Whitlock.

Corbin put one gloved hand flat on the pulpit.

For a long moment he simply stood there in the empty, brightly lit sanctuary, with Amos silent at the foot of the platform, and let the floor stop moving beneath him.

Then he made himself look at the rest.

The ninth figure stood at the far right end of the line, slightly apart, like Daniel. A slender woman in a long gray scarf. But where her face should have been, there was nothing. Only a pale, bright smear. She must have turned her head at the very instant the shutter opened, and the camera had caught her in motion, so that her features had dissolved into a soft white blur, like breath on a windowpane.

And there was one thing more. Corbin almost missed it, because it was not a person.

It was a shadow.

Across the bottom of the picture, stretching over the frosted grass from the place where the photographer must have stood, lay a long dark shape. The low autumn sun had thrown it out toward the nine, so far that it almost touched their feet.

It was the shadow of whoever had taken the picture. And it was very tall. Far taller than any of the nine. On its head was the unmistakable outline of a hat with a brim.

Behind him, Corbin heard Amos draw a sharp breath. The old man had climbed the steps and was standing at his shoulder, looking down.

"Pastor," he whispered. "That's him. That's the shape of him. That's what I saw."

Corbin did not answer.

With the yellow rubber fingertips, very carefully, he turned the photograph over.

The back bore the faded blue logo of a photo lab, RIDLEY DRUG · ONE-HOUR PHOTO, and a stamped date: OCT 28 1996. Beneath that, someone had written in old blue ballpoint, in a tidy, looping cursive that had faded almost to nothing:

The Nine. Hollis place. Oct. '96.

And across the bottom of the card, in fresh black marker, in the same tall, narrow capitals as the envelope, as the mirror, were five more words.

THE NINTH PROMISE HAS NOT BEEN PAID.

The furnace rumbled on beneath the floor. The third pew from the back gave its familiar groan as the old wood warmed. Outside, a truck passed on Mill Road, and the stained-glass Good Shepherd rattled softly in his frame above the baptistry.

Corbin read the words three times.

He heard Keaton Bellamy's voice in his memory, sleep-slurred and strange, as Maris had written it on the back of a receipt. *The ninth one. It isn't paid.*

He photographed both sides of the picture with his phone. Then he sent the images to Bramwell Kincaid with a single line.

Left on my pulpit last night. Church locked. Custodian saw someone.

The answer came in under two minutes.

Don't handle it. Bring it in.

Then, a moment later:

Pastor. Third from left. Is that Maris Bellamy's father?

Corbin looked at the young, unsmiling face in the canvas coat.

Yes, he typed. *I'll bring it to you this afternoon. There's someone I need to show it to first.*

The pause was long enough that he could picture Kincaid frowning at his screen.

Don't go playing detective, Pastor.

Corbin slid the photograph back into its envelope. He looked out over the empty sanctuary, at the long burgundy aisle where something had stood in the dark and waited for a sermon.

Too late, he thought.

* * *

> *It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter. — Proverbs 25:2*

He sent Amos home to sleep. The old man did not argue.

Then Corbin sat alone in his office at the back of the church, with the envelope on the desk in front of him and the radiator clanking, and did not know what to do.

The obvious thing was to call Maris. She had a right to know. It was her father in that photograph. Her son who was whispering about the ninth one in his sleep. Her house where something walked the halls at night in hard-soled shoes.

He picked up his phone. He found her name. His thumb hovered over it.

And he could not do it.

He knew exactly what would happen. He would say *I've found a photograph of your father,* and she would ask *What photograph?* and he would have to tell her. Nine people. An abandoned farmhouse. A shadow in a hat. THE NINTH PROMISE HAS NOT BEEN PAID. And then she would ask what it meant, and he would have to say *I don't know.*

And he had watched Maris Bellamy live for sixteen years inside *I don't know.* He had watched what it did to her. Garrick had kept her there deliberately, in a fog of half-truths and maybes and doubts, because a woman who could never be sure of anything could never stand up to him. She had fought her way out of that fog one inch at a time over the last eleven months. He was not going to hand her a fresh one at seven-thirty on a Monday morning.

Not until he knew something true.

He set down the phone and opened his Bible instead. It fell open, as it often did, to Proverbs. And his eyes landed on a verse he had preached on once, years ago, at a funeral for a county judge.

It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.

Corbin read it twice. Then he bowed his head.

"Lord," he said quietly, "I don't know what this is. I don't know who left it or what they want. But You know. Nothing is hidden from You. Not that farmhouse, not those nine, not whatever happened there. So I'm asking You to show me. Not everything. Just the next step." He paused. "And keep that boy safe while I figure out what it is."

He sat in the silence afterward for a long time.

And slowly, the way a face comes up out of dark water, a memory surfaced.

The church steps at First Methodist. That November morning in 1996. The cold, gray air, the mourners coming down the steps in their dark coats, and an old woman in a black hat whispering to her

companion. *Nine of them went out there that night. Only eight came home.* He had told Maris that story four days ago, kneeling under her kitchen table, with the carved circle above their heads.

But there had been someone else on those steps. He had forgotten until this moment.

A small, sharp-faced woman of about sixty, in a brown tweed coat, standing a little apart from the others at the bottom of the steps. Not grieving. Watching. She had held a little notebook in one gloved hand, and as the mourners filed past her she had been writing in it. Writing down, Corbin had realized even then, with a faint shock of distaste, who had come.

He had seen her at a hundred funerals since. Always at the back. Always with the notebook.

Elowen Pryce.

* * *

Everyone in the county knew Dr. Elowen Pryce, the way everyone knew the courthouse clock or the bend in the river below the old mill. She had taught American history at the state college in Harmon for thirty-four years. She had written four books about the county that no one outside it had ever read. She had founded the county historical society in 1979 and had been its president, secretary, treasurer, and only archivist for most of the decades since. She kept the old deed books. She kept the old church records. She kept, people said, the county's memory, in boxes, in a tall narrow house on Chestnut Street, and woe to anyone who tried to borrow any of it.

She was somewhere well past eighty-five. No one knew how far.

The house on Chestnut Street had been painted blue a very long time ago. The porch sagged. The gingerbread trim had lost a tooth here and there. Every window on the ground floor was filled to the top sash with stacked cardboard boxes, so that the house seemed to be looking out at the street through half-closed eyes.

Corbin rang the bell and waited. He rang again.

The door opened four inches, on a brass chain. A pair of very pale, very bright blue eyes regarded him from somewhere around the second button of his coat.

"Pastor Thorne," said Elowen Pryce. "New Hope Chapel, Mill Road. You buried Harlan Pike's widow in April. You read from Ecclesiastes and said *chapter three, verse two* when you meant verse one."

Corbin opened his mouth. Closed it again.

"No one else noticed," she said. "I notice. What do you want?"

Corbin held up the manila envelope.

"I need you to look at a photograph," he said. "I think it's from 1996. I think you might know what it is."

The pale eyes went to the envelope. They stayed there a long moment.

Something happened to Elowen Pryce's face. It was very small. A tightening at the corners of her mouth, as if a drawstring had been pulled. Then it was gone.

The door shut. The chain rattled. The door opened wide.

"Wipe your feet," she said. "And mind the boxes. If you knock over the Lutherans, I will never forgive you."

* * *

The inside of the house was an archive with a kitchen attached. Bookshelves climbed every wall to the ceiling, double-stacked, their spines faded to a single brownish gray. Banker's boxes lined the hallway in leaning towers, each labeled in small, precise black capitals. LUTHERAN — ST. PAUL'S — BAPTISMS 1870–1930. COUNTY FAIR 1946–1988. RIDLEY BOTTOMS — DEEDS. A narrow path wound between them toward the back of the house. The air smelled of old paper, Earl Grey, and dust.

The kitchen at the end was the only room with a clear table. A gray cat with one torn ear lay on top of the refrigerator and opened one yellow eye as they came in.

"Sit," said Elowen.

Corbin sat. She did not. She put a kettle on the stove and stood beside it with both hands folded on the silver head of a black cane, her back to him.

"You said 1996," she said, without turning.
"Yes."
"What's in the photograph?"
"Nine people," Corbin said. "Standing in front of an old farmhouse."
Elowen Pryce did not move. Did not speak. But Corbin, watching her back, saw her small, spotted knuckles go white on the head of the cane.
The kettle began, very faintly, to tick.
She turned around slowly. She looked at him for a long moment with those startling eyes, and he had the uncomfortable sense of being read, catalogued, cross-referenced, and filed.
"Pastor Thorne," she said. "Before you open that envelope, I'm going to ask you a question. And I want an honest answer, not a sermon."
"All right."
"Do you believe in the devil?"
Corbin did not hesitate.
"Yes."
"Not a symbol. Not a metaphor for the darkness in the human heart. Not a story to frighten children into behaving."
"No," said Corbin. "An enemy. A real one. With a will of his own."
Elowen studied him a moment longer. Then she nodded, once, as if he had answered a question on an examination correctly.
"Good," she said. "That will save us both a great deal of time."
She pulled out the chair across from him and lowered herself into it, and laid the cane across her knees.
"Show me."
* * *

> *Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement… your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand. — Isaiah 28:15, 18*

Corbin laid the photograph on the table between them, face up.
Elowen Pryce did not pick it up. She did not lean forward. She only lowered her eyes to it.
And she knew.
Corbin saw it happen, and he would remember it for the rest of his life. There was no gasp. No cry. Nothing so dramatic. The color simply left her face all at once, the way light leaves a room when a cloud crosses the sun. Her lips parted slightly. Her hands, folded on the cane across her knees, began very faintly to shake.
She did not suspect. She did not wonder. She recognized it, instantly and completely, the way you recognize the handwriting of someone you have loved, or the voice of someone you have feared.
Behind her, the kettle began to shriek.
Neither of them moved.
It went on and on, rising, filling the narrow kitchen, until at last Corbin got up and turned off the burner. In the sudden silence, as the whistle died away, he heard the old woman speak. So softly he almost did not catch it.
"You found it. After all this time. You found it."
Corbin sat down again slowly. "Found what?"
She did not seem to hear him. She reached out one thin finger and held it just above the faded print, not touching, and moved it to the center of the line. To the bearded man in the wire-rimmed glasses, with his hands on his neighbors' shoulders.
"Ambrose Lark," she said. "You buried his memory once, Pastor, whether you know it or not. You were at his funeral. I saw you there. Young, in a bad brown suit, sitting in the back."
"I remember," Corbin said quietly. "I remember you, too. With your notebook."

The ghost of a smile touched her mouth and was gone.
Her finger moved two places to the left. To the man in the canvas coat, standing apart, not smiling.
"And Daniel Whitlock." Her voice changed very slightly on the name. Softened. "Machinist. Quiet. A decent man, I always thought. Much too decent for the company he was keeping that year." She lifted her eyes to Corbin's. "It's his daughter, isn't it. The one with the restraining order. The whole county's talking about it."
"Yes."
Elowen nodded slowly, as if he had confirmed the date on an old document. Her finger moved to the far right end of the line. To the slender woman in the long gray scarf, with nothing where her face should be but a soft white blur.
It stayed there for a long time.
"Celia Marsh," she said at last.
That was all. She did not explain. She drew her hand back into her lap as though the photograph had grown hot.
"Dr. Pryce," Corbin said. "Who were they?"
She looked up at him, and in that moment she looked every one of her years.
"They called themselves the Circle of Nine," she said.
The words seemed to settle into the room like dust.
"Nine respectable people. A teacher, a banker, a nurse, a church organist, two shopkeepers, a feed merchant, a machinist, and Celia. Deacons and Sunday-school teachers and pillars of the community. The kind of people who chair the hospital auxiliary and bake for the bazaar." She shook her head. "No one ever suspected them of anything. That was what Ambrose loved most about it, I think. That no one would ever suspect."
"Suspect them of what?"
She did not answer directly. Instead she touched the photograph for the first time, with the very tip of one fingernail. Not on any of the nine. On the long dark shadow stretched across the frost in the bottom of the frame, with its tall shoulders and its brimmed hat.
"Tell me something, Pastor," she said. "Who took this picture?"
"A friend. A husband or a wife. Somebody with a camera."
"No." Her voice was flat and certain. "Nobody else ever went out there. That was the one rule Ambrose never bent. Nine. Never eight, never ten. No spouses. No friends. Lorene Dobbins's own sister never knew where Lorene went on Thursday nights." She tapped the shadow once. "All nine of them are standing in front of that porch. So who was holding the camera?"
The kitchen was very still. On top of the refrigerator, the gray cat had stopped washing itself. It was staring at the photograph with its ears laid flat.
"A timer," Corbin said. His mouth was dry. "Cameras had self-timers. You set it on a fence post and ran."
"They did," Elowen agreed quietly. "And a fence post doesn't cast a shadow wearing a hat."
Corbin had no answer to that.
She turned the photograph over with her fingernail. She looked for a long time at the faded blue cursive. *The Nine. Hollis place. Oct. '96.*
"Ambrose's hand," she said. "I have forty years of his letters. I'd know it in the dark."
Then her eyes moved down to the fresh black capitals along the bottom.
THE NINTH PROMISE HAS NOT BEEN PAID.
She read it once. Then she closed her eyes.
"I've never seen those words before," she said. "Never. Not in any letter, not in any record, not in thirty years of looking." She opened her eyes again, and they were wet. "But I know exactly what they mean, Pastor Thorne. God help me, I know exactly what they mean."
Corbin waited.

"In the last letter Ambrose ever wrote me," she said, "he told me what they were going to do on their final night. He said that whatever they had been talking to wanted more than conversation now. It wanted a covenant. Nine chairs. Nine candles. Nine names. And from each of the nine, a promise." Her thin hands tightened on the cane. "A covenant with nine parties has nine promises. If someone is writing, thirty years later, that the ninth was never paid—"

"Then someone believes a debt is still owed," Corbin said slowly.

"And they've written it on a photograph of Daniel Whitlock," said Elowen, "and left it on the pulpit of the pastor who is helping Daniel Whitlock's daughter." She looked at him steadily. "They're not asking a question. They're presenting a bill."

The words went through Corbin like cold water.

We have made a covenant with death, he thought, from nowhere. Isaiah. The drunken rulers of Jerusalem, so proud of the deal they had struck. *And with hell are we at agreement.*

And the verses that came after. The ones he had always loved. *Your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand.*

He held onto that one. He held onto it hard.

* * *

Elowen rose stiffly. She crossed to a tall, narrow cupboard beside the pantry, took a small brass key from a chain around her neck, and unlocked it. From the top shelf she lifted down a single banker's box and carried it back to the table. Two words were written on the lid in her small, precise hand.

THE NINE.

She opened it. She began to lift things out and lay them on the table in a careful row, the way a surgeon lays out instruments. A bundle of letters tied with string. A spiral notebook with a soft, worn cover. A folder of newspaper clippings in yellowed plastic sleeves. A photocopied form with an official seal.

Then she stopped, with her hand resting on the notebook.

She stood looking down at it all for a long time. And then, to Corbin's astonishment, she began to put it back.

"Dr. Pryce—"

"Not you," she said. "Not first."

She laid the letters back in the box. The clippings. The notebook. She did it slowly and carefully, as if they were fragile.

"I have kept this to myself for nearly thirty years," she said. "I've never shown it to a living soul. Not the sheriff. Not my own pastor. Because no one ever asked. And because I was afraid that if I ever told it, someone might finally believe me." She set the lid on the box and pressed it down with both hands. "Well. Someone believes me now. And it's not going to be told secondhand, over a cold kitchen table, to a man who'll have to carry it to her and get half of it wrong."

She looked at him.

"Daniel's daughter has a right to hear what her father did," said Elowen Pryce. "In full. From the one person who watched it happen. With her own ears. And if that boy of hers is the one hearing voices in the night, he has a right to hear it too."

Corbin opened his mouth to argue. Then he closed it again.

She was right. He knew she was right. It was the very thing he had decided at his own desk three hours ago, with his thumb hovering over Maris's name.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock," Elowen agreed. "I'll have tea."

She walked him to the door herself, threading the narrow path between the boxes with her cane. On the porch, in the thin gray light, she caught his sleeve.

"Pastor," she said. "One more thing. That photograph. There was only ever one print. Ambrose told me so himself, a week before he died. He said he'd keep it somewhere no one would ever find it." Her pale

eyes searched his face. "I've been looking for it since 1997. In every estate sale and attic and junk shop in this county."

She let go of his sleeve.

"Whoever left it on your pulpit," she said quietly, "found something I could not find in twenty-eight years. Think about what that means."

Then she went back inside, and he heard the chain slide home behind her.

* * *

> *For thou wilt light my candle: the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness. — Psalm 18:28*

He spent the rest of the day doing what pastors do, because the work did not stop for fear.

He sat with Lettie Cobb at County General while they set her broken hip, and held her hand, and listened to her talk about her late husband's tomatoes. He met with the Hendersons about their son's wedding. He returned eleven phone calls. He ate half a sandwich standing up in the church kitchen. Every hour or so, he found his hand straying to his coat pocket, to the place where the envelope had been.

He had dropped it at the sheriff's office just after noon, sealed in a plastic evidence bag that Deputy Alvarado brought out to his car. Kincaid was out on a call. Corbin had been grateful. He had not known yet how to say what Elowen had told him. He was not sure he knew now.

They're not asking a question. They're presenting a bill.

It was full dark by six. By nine, he had run out of reasons to stay at the church.

He meant to drive home. He truly did. But at the light on Main Street his hands turned the wheel left instead of right, and he found himself heading south, out of town, onto Ridley Bottoms Road.

He told himself he only wanted to see it. That was all. Just to see the place with his own eyes, so that tomorrow, in Elowen's kitchen, it would be a real house on a real road and not a faded image in a dead man's snapshot.

The road ran along the river flats, two narrow lanes of cracked blacktop between bare fields and black ranks of sycamores. Corbin had driven it a hundred times. Christmas baskets. Hospital visits. Burials at the little cemetery at Ridley Crossroads. He had never once looked down the gravel lane that turned off it about four miles out, beside a leaning, rusted mailbox with no name on it.

Tonight he slowed and stopped on the shoulder, and looked.

The lane ran away into the darkness between two rows of dead trees. He could just make out their shapes against the faint gray of the sky, crooked and black, their branches knotted together overhead like hands. At the far end, a quarter mile off, a darker darkness rose up. Square. Two stories. A sagging roofline.

The Hollis place.

It looked exactly as it had in the photograph. As if nothing had touched it in thirty years. As if time itself had walked down that lane once, in 1996, and decided not to come back.

Corbin sat with the engine running and his foot on the brake.

And as he watched, a light appeared in one of the windows.

It was very small. A warm amber pinpoint, low in a ground-floor window, trembling slightly. Not the harsh white of a flashlight. Not the blue glow of a phone. Something softer and older.

A candle.

Corbin's hands tightened on the wheel.

The light moved. It drifted slowly from one window to the next, as though someone were carrying it through the empty house, room by room. It paused. It moved on. Then it came to rest in what must have been, from the shape of the house, the front parlor.

And beside it, a second light bloomed.

Then a third.

He found himself counting under his breath, the way he had heard Keaton say he counted footsteps on the stairs. Four. Five. Six. Small amber flames appearing one after another in the black window, side by side, as if someone were lighting each new candle from the one before.

Seven.

Eight.

He waited for the ninth.

It did not come.

The eight lights burned in the dark window of the Hollis place, perfectly steady, perfectly patient. Waiting.

Corbin did not get out of the car. He was a fool sometimes, Diane told him so often enough, but he was not that kind of fool. Whatever stood at the end of that lane tonight was not a thing to walk toward alone with a flashlight and a pocket Testament. He sat behind the wheel with his heart pounding against his ribs, and he prayed. Not eloquently. Not the kind of prayer he would have prayed from a pulpit.

Lord. You see that. You see that window. Nothing is dark to You. Light my candle. Enlighten my darkness. And keep them safe tonight. Keep that boy safe.

Then he put the car in gear and drove away, and he did not let himself look in the mirror until the lights of town were around him.

At the first stop sign, he called Kincaid's cell and got his voicemail.

"Sheriff, it's Corbin Thorne. Somebody's out at the old Hollis place on Ridley Bottoms Road. Right now. There are candles burning in the front window." He hesitated. "Eight of them. I counted."

He hung up. He sat at the stop sign with no one behind him and stared at the phone in his hand.

It buzzed.

Not Kincaid. Maris.

He pulled over beside a dark storefront and read it under the dome light. It was three lines long. He could tell from the missing punctuation and the single misspelled word that her hands had been shaking when she typed it.

Keaton just woke up screaming

He says the man told him to ask you something

He wants to know if you found the picture of the nine yet

Corbin did not move for a long time.

He had not told anyone. Not Maris. Not Diane. He had told Kincaid in a text and Elowen in her kitchen, and no one else on the face of the earth knew that a photograph of nine people had been laid on his pulpit in the night.

No one living.

He bowed his head over the steering wheel. *The light shineth in darkness,* he prayed, *and the darkness comprehended it not.* He said it again. And again. Until his hands were steady enough to hold the wheel.

Then he turned the car around and drove toward Copper Creek Road.

Chapter 7: The Circle of Nine

> *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. — Psalm 46:1*

It was after ten when Corbin's headlights came up the lane.

Maris was waiting on the porch in her father's barn coat with every light in the house blazing behind her. She had not been able to stay inside. The house felt too small, too full of listening corners. Out here, at least, she could see the dark coming.

Corbin came up the steps slowly. He looked older than he had that afternoon. His collar was crooked, and there was something in his face she had never seen there before, something drawn and careful, like a man carrying a full cup across a crowded room.
"How is he?" Corbin asked.
"Asleep. Finally." Maris wrapped her arms around herself. "He wouldn't stay in his room. He's on the couch with Boaz and every lamp on. He made me promise to wake him if you came." She hesitated. "I didn't promise very hard."
"Let him sleep."
They went into the kitchen. Maris put coffee on without asking. Corbin sat at the table, in her father's chair, and laid his hands flat on the new oilcloth Diane had brought to replace the old one, which Kincaid had taken away in a bag.
Beneath it, Maris knew, was the circle. Eight dark notches and one pale one. She had not been able to make herself look at it again.
"He said the man told him to ask you," she said. "About the picture. The picture of the nine." She set a mug in front of him and did not sit down. "Corbin. What picture?"
Corbin looked up at her for a long moment.
"Sit down, Maris," he said gently.
She sat.
He took out his phone, found something on it, and turned it around on the table so she could see.
It was a photograph of a photograph. A faded snapshot of nine people standing in front of a sagging farmhouse, the colors gone the warm, sick brown of old prints. Bare trees. Frost on the grass. Good wool coats.
She saw him at once.
She would not have believed, before that moment, that a person could recognize a face so fast. Before she had taken in the house or the trees or the frost or the other eight. Before she had even fully understood what she was looking at. Her eyes went straight to the third figure from the left as if pulled by a string, and her whole body knew him before her mind caught up.
The canvas work coat. The dark hair, before it went gray. The way he stood a little apart, hands in his pockets, not smiling. The way he was looking not at the camera but just past it.
"Daddy," she whispered.
Corbin said nothing. He let her look.
She picked up the phone with both hands and held it close to her face. She spread her fingers on the screen and made the image larger, and larger, until her father's face filled it, blurred and grainy and unmistakable. He looked so young. Younger than she was now. Only a few years older than the father she remembered from childhood, the one who sat at this very table every morning before dawn with his Bible and the little light over the stove.
"When was this taken?"
"October 1996."
11/22/96. The date in the margin beside Psalm 91.
"Where?"
"A farm out on Ridley Bottoms Road. The old Hollis place."
She looked up sharply. "Garrick said—Kincaid told me Garrick said Daddy once asked him if he'd ever been out to the Hollis place."
"I know."
"Who are these people?" She shrank the image back down and looked at the others. The laughing red-faced man. The nurse with her hands clasped. The man with the beard in the center. The woman at the end with no face. "Corbin, who are they? Why is my father standing with them? What is this?"
Corbin reached across the table and laid his big hand over both of hers, over the phone and the faded faces.

"I could tell you what I've been told," he said. "But I'd be telling it secondhand, and I'd get things wrong, and it isn't mine to tell. There's someone who knows. Who has known for a long time and kept it to herself." He paused. "I think you need to hear it from her. In her own words. With your own ears. Tomorrow, in daylight."

Maris stared at him. "You're not going to tell me."

"Not tonight. Not like this." His voice was very soft. "Maris, I have watched you spend a year learning to trust what you know. I'm not going to take that away from you now by putting someone else's story in your head at eleven o'clock at night when you're exhausted and frightened. You'll hear it from the source. Then you'll decide for yourself what's true."

She wanted to argue. She wanted to shout at him. She opened her mouth to do it.

Then she looked back down at the phone, at her father's young face, and found that what she actually wanted, more than anything, was to put her head down on her mother's table and cry.

So she did.

Corbin did not say anything. He did not tell her it would be all right. He only kept his hand over hers and let her cry, and after a while she heard him praying very quietly under his breath. Not to her. Not for show. Just talking to God in a low, steady voice, the way her father used to talk to God at this table when he thought no one was awake to hear.

God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble.

When she finally lifted her head, the coffee had gone cold and the clock on the parlor mantel said a quarter to midnight.

"Her name is Elowen Pryce," Corbin said. "Ten o'clock tomorrow. I'll drive you." He stood and picked up his coat. "Bring the boy if he wants to come. He's part of this now, whether we like it or not."

At the door, he turned back.

"And Maris. Whatever you hear tomorrow, about your father, about any of it—remember what you saw on that table this week." He nodded toward the kitchen. "Remember which verse didn't burn."

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

She nodded. She could not speak.

She stood at the narrow window beside the door and watched his taillights go down the lane until they disappeared into the trees. Then she went into the front parlor and sat in her father's recliner across from her sleeping son, with the photograph of a photograph still glowing in her hand. She looked at it until the screen went dark.

She did not sleep. But for the first time in many nights, it was not fear that kept her awake.

It was grief.

* * *

> *There shall not be found among you any one… that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD. — Deuteronomy 18:10–12*

Keaton came.

Maris had expected him to refuse. Instead he had been dressed and waiting at the kitchen table at eight-thirty, in a clean shirt, with his hair combed and his jaw set. "He told me to ask," he said, when she started to object. "He told *me*. I'm not staying here by myself while you go find out what he meant."

So the three of them sat now around the small, clear table in Elowen Pryce's kitchen, surrounded by the leaning towers of her boxes, while a gray cat with one torn ear watched them from the top of the refrigerator and the old woman poured tea into four mismatched cups.

She had looked at Maris for a long time at the door. Not unkindly. The way you might look at a house you had driven past for thirty years and never been invited into.

"You have his eyes," she had said finally. "Your father's. Come in."

Now she sat down across from Maris, laid her silver-headed cane across her knees, and folded her small, spotted hands on top of it.
The box marked THE NINE sat on the table between them, its lid closed.
"I'm going to tell you what I know," Elowen said. "And I'm going to tell you how I know it, so you can judge it for yourself. I'm a historian, Mrs. Bellamy. I don't deal in rumor. Where I'm guessing, I'll say I'm guessing. Where I'm certain, I'll show you why." Her pale eyes moved to Keaton. "Some of it isn't fit for a boy's ears."
"I'm fifteen," Keaton said.
"I know how old you are. I was there when your grandmother's obituary ran. I clipped it." She held his gaze. "Some of it isn't fit for a grown woman's ears, either. But I don't suppose that's going to stop either of you."
Keaton did not look away. After a moment, something like approval flickered across the old woman's face.
"All right," she said. "Then we start with Agnes Hollis."
* * *
The Hollis farm, she told them, had been built in 1888 by a man named Jacob Hollis who raised apples and hogs and seven children and was by all accounts a dull and decent man. It passed to his son, and then to his son's widow, a woman named Agnes, who lived there alone from 1924 until she died in 1971, at the age of ninety-one.
"Agnes Hollis was what they used to call a sensitive," Elowen said. "Today you'd say a medium. A spiritualist. In the twenties and thirties, that sort of thing was fashionable, the way yoga is fashionable now. After the Great War and the influenza, a great many people had lost someone, and a great many people wanted very badly to talk to them again." She sipped her tea. "Agnes obliged."
People came from three counties, she said. Farm wives who had lost sons in France. Widowers. Bereaved parents. They sat around Agnes Hollis's parlor table on Thursday nights, holding hands in the dark, while the old woman went into her trances and the table tipped and rapped and the dead, so it was said, spoke.
"The Methodist preacher denounced her from the pulpit in 1931," Elowen said. "Quoted Deuteronomy at her. *There shall not be found among you any one that useth divination, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a necromancer.* She went right on. By the forties, the fashion had passed and the visitors stopped coming. By the fifties she was just a strange old woman alone on a dying farm, and the children dared each other to touch her porch." She set down her cup. "When she died, the house was left empty. No heirs anyone could find. It's been empty ever since."
"So what does that have to do with my father?" Maris asked.
"Nothing, in itself. A strange old woman. A strange old house. Every county has one." Elowen's mouth tightened. "But Agnes Hollis kept diaries. Fifty years of them. Every Thursday night, every sitting, every name, every word the table supposedly spelled out. And in 1993, a box of those diaries turned up at an estate sale in Harmon, in the effects of a man who had once been her neighbor's hired hand."
She looked at Corbin, then back at Maris.
"Ambrose Lark bought them," she said. "For four dollars."
* * *
Ambrose had been her friend, she told them. Or something like a friend. They had taught history in the same county for thirty years, he at the high school and she at the college in Harmon, and they had argued by letter and over tea and at historical society meetings about everything from Reconstruction to the proper way to brew Earl Grey. He was brilliant. He was charming. He was the most curious man she had ever known.
"And he was proud," Elowen said. "That was the trouble. Ambrose believed there was nothing in the world a sufficiently intelligent man could not understand, if only he studied it closely enough. He thought faith was a kind of laziness. He went to church every Sunday, mind you, and served as a

deacon, and passed the plate, and sang the hymns. But he went the way you go to a museum. To admire the old things. Not to bow down."

The diaries had fascinated him. At first he treated them as a historical curiosity. He brought them to her, page by page, delighted. The folk beliefs. The names of the old families who had come to Agnes's table. The strange, rambling messages the table had spelled out in the dark.

"He wanted to write a paper about it," she said. "A respectable scholarly paper about rural spiritualism in the Depression era. That's how it started. That's honestly how it started." She shook her head slowly. "He began asking around. Talking to old people who remembered Agnes. And he found that he wasn't the only one who was curious."

By the autumn of 1994, Ambrose had gathered a small group of friends who met on Thursday evenings to talk about the diaries. They met in living rooms at first. Respectable living rooms, over coffee and pound cake. They discussed ghost stories and near-death experiences and the history of spiritualism in America. They read books Ambrose ordered by mail. They called it, with a kind of joking self-importance, the Thursday Society.

"It was a book club," Elowen said. "That's all anyone would have seen. A book club for bored, educated, middle-aged people who were a little tired of their own lives." She looked at Maris. "Your father was one of the first to join."

Maris's hands tightened around her teacup.

"Why?" she whispered. "He was—Daddy wasn't like that. He didn't read books about ghosts. He fixed engines. He went to church."

Elowen's face softened, very slightly.

"Your mother had been sick that year," she said. "Do you remember?"

Maris stared at her. Then, slowly, she nodded. A long winter. A cough that would not go away. Her mother in bed for weeks, gray-faced. Her father sitting up late at the kitchen table, not reading, just sitting. She had been nine or ten.

"And the tool-and-die plant was laying men off," Elowen said. "Half the shop floor, by the end of '95. Your father was frightened, Mrs. Bellamy. He had a sick wife and a little girl and no idea whether he'd have a job by Christmas. And here was a man he respected, a deacon, a teacher, telling him there might be a way to know what was coming." She paused. "That's all he wanted, I think. Not power. Not riches. Just to know. Just to know whether his family would be all right."

Maris looked down at her tea and could not see it.

* * *

> *And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. — 2 Corinthians 11:14*

"What began as curiosity," Elowen said, "became obsession. I watched it happen. I didn't understand what I was watching until it was far too late."

She opened the box at last.

She took the items out one at a time and laid them on the table in a careful row, the way Corbin had seen her do the day before. A bundle of letters in Ambrose Lark's faded blue cursive, tied with string. A spiral notebook, its cover soft with handling. A manila folder of newspaper clippings in plastic sleeves.

"In the beginning, they only talked," she said. "Then they started to experiment."

The diaries, she explained, were full of instructions. Not spells, exactly. Agnes Hollis had been a farm woman, not a sorceress. But over fifty years she had written down everything that happened at her table, and what seemed to make the voices come, and what seemed to make them go away. Ambrose read them the way a scientist reads the notes of an earlier experiment. And he began, very carefully, to try to reproduce the results.

"Just to see," Elowen said bitterly. "That's what he told me. *Just to see, Elowen. Purely as an experiment. If nothing happens, I'll have my paper, and if something happens—well. Wouldn't that be worth knowing?*"

She untied the string on the letters and drew out a single sheet, and slid it across the table to Maris. The handwriting was the same faded cursive that had been on the back of the photograph. *The Nine. Hollis place. Oct. '96.* The letter was dated March 1995.

E—

Something answered last night. I know how that sounds. I know exactly what you'll say. But I was there, and I am not a credulous man, and I tell you plainly: something answered. It spelled Harlan's mother's maiden name, which none of the rest of us knew. It told Ruth where to find her grandmother's ring, and this morning she found it, exactly where it said. I have not slept.

Agnes was right. It will only speak properly to nine. Nine is the number in every one of her diaries. We are eight now. I want you to be the ninth. Think of what we could learn.

—A.

Maris set the letter down very carefully, as if it might burn her.

"That's when he came here and asked me," Elowen said. "Sat in that chair. I said no. I said worse than no. I told him he was playing with something he didn't understand and that he would get people hurt." She looked at Corbin. "I was a Presbyterian. Not a very good one. But I had read my Bible. *And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God?*"

"Isaiah eight," Corbin murmured.

"He laughed at me. He said I lacked imagination." Her hands tightened on the cane. "By the summer, they had their nine anyway. Celia Marsh said yes where I had said no. And they had stopped meeting in living rooms."

"They went to the farm," Keaton said quietly.

Elowen looked at him with something like respect. "They went to the farm. To Agnes's parlor. To her table, which was still there under a sheet, with fifty years of dust on it. Every Thursday night."

* * *

She opened the folder of clippings and laid them out.

A small notice in the county paper from March of 1997: *Farmers and Merchants Bank Passes State Examination With Highest Marks in Its History.* A photograph of Harlan Pike, smiling, shaking hands with a man in a suit.

An obituary from the spring of 1997: *Mildred Ellery, 81, passed peacefully in her sleep on Tuesday at County General Hospital, where her daughter Ruth has served as night nurse for many years.*

A brief item from the business page: *Dobbins Hardware Expands Into Former Woolworth Building.* Walt and Lorene, beaming, holding giant scissors in front of a ribbon.

Some from before the end, some from the months after it. One after another. Small things. Ordinary things. A bank that passed an inspection. An old woman who died without pain. A store that grew.

"People started to say the Nine were lucky," Elowen said. "Not that anyone called them that. Nobody knew there was a nine. But people noticed. Orson Vale bought the farm next to his. Harlan Pike made president of the bank. Ambrose was named teacher of the year. Little blessings, one after another, for a little group of friends." She touched the obituary with one fingertip. "Ruth Ellery told her coworkers at the hospital that she had known for months exactly when her mother would go. She said it as a comfort. It didn't comfort them."

"And my father?" Maris whispered.

Elowen hesitated.

"Your father kept his job," she said. "When half the men on the floor at the tool-and-die plant were let go in the fall of '95, Daniel Whitlock was kept on. Nobody could understand why. He wasn't the most senior. He wasn't the foreman's friend." She paused. "And your mother got better."

The kitchen was silent. The gray cat on top of the refrigerator stretched and resettled itself with its back to them.

"That's how it works," Corbin said quietly. They all looked at him. He was staring at the clippings. "It never starts with horns and pitchforks. Nobody would come back if it did. It starts with gifts. With answers. With a ring found in the right drawer. Paul says Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. He doesn't show up looking like the thing that will destroy you. He shows up looking like the thing you need most."

"So was it real?" Keaton asked. His voice was very low. "The thing that answered them. Was it actually real? Or were they just—" He gestured at the clippings. "Lucky?"

Elowen Pryce looked at him for a long time.

"I'm a historian, young man," she said. "I don't know what was in that house. I wasn't there. I can tell you what I can document." She laid her hand flat on the notebook. "And I can document what it did to them."

She opened the notebook to a page near the back and turned it around.

It was a list, in her small, precise hand. Dates and names. Notes. Things she had observed, over the course of 1996, as she watched from a distance. Ambrose losing weight. Ambrose missing classes. Ruth Ellery seen at the pharmacy buying sleeping pills three times in one month. Bernadette Kell no longer playing the organ at Sunday Mass, sitting instead in the back pew, white-faced, clutching her rosary. Walt Dobbins in a shouting match with a customer over nothing. Lorene Dobbins weeping in her car in the church parking lot.

"By the autumn of 1996," Elowen said, "they looked like people who hadn't slept in a year. Every one of them. Except one."

She did not say who. She did not have to. Her eyes went, for just an instant, to the photograph on Corbin's phone. To the faceless woman at the end of the line.

"What began as curiosity became obsession," she said again, softly. "What began as experiment became ritual. And Ambrose wrote me one last letter."

She drew it from the bundle. It was dated November 14, 1996. It was very short. The handwriting was not the neat schoolteacher's cursive of the earlier letters. It slanted and jerked across the page as if the hand that wrote it had been shaking.

E—

It wants more than conversation now. It says the time for questions is ending. It wants a covenant. Nine chairs, nine candles, nine names, and a promise from each. Then, it says, the door will open properly. We will not need the table anymore.

The 21st. A Thursday.

I am afraid, Elowen. I have never been afraid of anything in my life. Pray for me, if you still do that.

—A.

* * *

> *There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. — Proverbs 14:12*

"I didn't pray for him," Elowen said. "I want you to know that. I wish I could tell you I did. I was angry. I thought he'd made his bed."

She folded the last letter and laid it carefully on top of the others.

"But I went out there," she said. "On the twenty-first. I couldn't stay home."

She had driven out Ridley Bottoms Road a little before midnight, she told them, in the old Buick she drove in those days, and parked on the shoulder a quarter mile past the lane with her lights off. She did not go down the lane. She did not dare. She sat in the cold car with her coat buttoned to her chin and watched the farmhouse through the dead orchard.

"I could see the light in the parlor window," she said. "Candles. Many of them, close together. That was all. I couldn't see people. I couldn't hear anything. I just sat there and watched that light, hour after hour, and told myself I was a foolish old woman." A faint, dry smile. "I was sixty then. That seemed old."

The light had burned steadily for a long time. Midnight. One o'clock. Two. Three.

And then, a little after three, it went out.

"All at once," Elowen said. "Not one candle and then another. Not flickering. One instant the window was gold, and the next it was black. As if someone had thrown a blanket over the whole house."

No one in the kitchen moved.

"I looked at my watch," she said. "I don't know why. Habit. Historians like to know exactly when things happen."

"What time was it?" Keaton asked. But his face said he already knew.

Elowen looked at him.

"Seventeen minutes past three," she said.

Maris closed her eyes.

* * *

Nothing else happened for a long time, Elowen said. The house stayed dark. She sat in the car shaking, not from cold. She thought about driving down the lane. She thought about driving home. She did neither.

Then, near four o'clock, a pair of headlights came on in the orchard.

And then another. And another. One by one, the cars came down the lane and turned onto Ridley Bottoms Road and drove away toward town, slowly, without hurrying, as if their drivers were going home from an ordinary evening. She ducked down in her seat as they passed. She counted them.

"Seven," she said. "Seven cars. One pickup stayed behind a while longer. Then it left too."

"Eight," Corbin said quietly.

"Eight. And Celia Marsh had walked, I learned later. She always walked the last part. So none of that tells you anything." Elowen's hands tightened on her cane. "Except one thing. Ambrose's car was a dark green Buick, a good deal newer than mine. And when the last pickup drove away, the Buick was still sitting in that orchard."

She had driven to the all-night filling station at Ridley Crossroads, she said, and called the sheriff's department from the pay phone. She did not give her name. She told them there were cars at the old Hollis place and they should send someone. Then she drove home and sat in her kitchen, in this kitchen, until the sun came up.

"I learned years later that they did send a deputy," she said. "He wrote down that there was nothing there. No vehicles. The house empty."

Corbin looked at her. "The Buick?"

"Gone."

She reached into the box and took out a single sheet of paper in a plastic sleeve. A photocopy of an official form, the type faded and slightly crooked. COUNTY OF — CERTIFICATE OF DEATH. She slid it across to Maris.

Name of Deceased: Ambrose Theodore Lark. Date of Death: November 22, 1996. Place of Death: Residence, 114 Linden Street. Immediate Cause: Cardiac arrest. Autopsy Performed: No. Certifying Physician: H. L. Whitcomb, M.D., County Medical Examiner.

"Found dead in his bed at home on Linden Street," Elowen said. "By Ruth Ellery, who had stopped by early that morning, she said, to bring him some soup because he'd been feeling poorly." She tapped the form. "Henry Whitcomb was the county medical examiner for twenty-six years. He was also Harlan Pike's brother-in-law. He signed that certificate before noon. There was no autopsy. There was no inquest. The funeral was held three days later. Closed casket."

Maris stared at the form.

"But his car," she said slowly. "His car was at the farm at four in the morning. You saw it."

"I did."

"Then how did he die in his own bed?"

Elowen Pryce did not answer. She did not have to.

* * *

"After the funeral," Elowen said, "they never met again. Not once. Not as a group. I watched. For years, I watched."

She had gone to each of them, she told them. Quietly, one at a time, over the year that followed. A historian with a notebook, asking polite questions about Ambrose's last days. Each of them had looked at her with the same expression. Not anger. Terror. And each of them had shut the door.

Ruth Ellery had told her, white-lipped, that Ambrose died in his sleep and that was all anyone needed to know. Harlan Pike had threatened to sue her. Walt Dobbins had simply stood in the doorway of the hardware store and shaken his head, slowly, over and over, until she went away. Bernadette Kell's sister wrote to say that Bernadette had entered a cloistered order in Kentucky and would receive no visitors and no letters, ever.

"They had made a promise," Elowen said. "That much was obvious. A vow of silence. Every one of them kept it until the day they died."

She looked at Maris.

"Your father was the last one I went to see," she said. "He came to the door himself. He looked at me for a long time without saying anything. And then he said one thing to me, very quietly, and shut the door, and I never spoke to him again."

"What did he say?" Maris's voice was barely a whisper.

Elowen's pale eyes did not waver.

"He said, *Don't you ever go out to that house, Dr. Pryce. Not ever. Some doors you don't knock on.*"

* * *

> *The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. — Ezekiel 18:20*

Maris got up from the table.

She did not know where she was going. She only knew she could not sit there any longer, in that warm, cluttered kitchen, with her father's young face glowing on Corbin's phone and his words hanging in the air. *Some doors you don't knock on.* She walked to the window over the sink and stood with her back to them, looking out at Elowen's narrow backyard, at a birdbath full of dead leaves and a crooked wooden fence.

No one spoke.

"He lied to me," she said finally. Her voice came out strange and flat. "My whole life. Every morning at that table with his Bible. Every night sitting outside my door. I thought he was—I thought he was the one good man I'd ever known." She pressed her hand against her mouth. "And he was out there. With them. Doing that. While Mama was sick and I was asleep with the night-light on. He sat in that parlor and asked that *thing* for favors."

"Maris—" Corbin began.

"He kept his job." She turned around. Her eyes were blazing and wet. "Did you hear her? Half the men on the floor were laid off and he kept his job. Mama got well. And now Keaton—" Her voice broke completely. "Now there's something standing in my son's room at night. Something that knows my name. Something that says it *remembers.* Because of what he did. Because he went out there and made some kind of—" She could not finish.

"Mom."

Keaton had stood up. He was looking at her across the kitchen with an expression she had never seen on his face before. Not frightened. Not angry. Something steadier than either.

"He sat outside your door," Keaton said quietly. "Every night. You said."

Maris stared at him.

"If he was on their side," Keaton said, "why would he do that?"

The cat on top of the refrigerator lifted its head.

Corbin rose and crossed the kitchen to her slowly, the way you would approach someone standing on a ledge. He did not touch her. He stood beside her at the window.

"I'm not going to tell you your father didn't do wrong," he said. "He did. Grievous wrong. He went where God had told him plainly not to go, and he did it because he was afraid, and fear is a terrible counselor. That's true, and you don't have to pretend it isn't."

She was shaking.

"But listen to me, Maris. Two things. The first is what your son just said. Something happened to your father in that house. Something that made him come home and sit outside your door every night for years, with a Bible open on his knee. That's not the behavior of a man who belonged to that thing. That's the behavior of a man standing guard."

Maris pressed her hand harder against her mouth.

"And the second," Corbin said, "is this. Whatever's been whispering to Keaton wants you to believe that you belong to what your father did. That his debt is your debt. That it gets passed down like a farm or a family Bible." He shook his head slowly. "God says otherwise. Ezekiel eighteen. *The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.* Every soul stands before God on its own. Your father's choices were your father's. Not yours. Not Keaton's."

"Then why is it here?" she whispered. "If it has no claim on us, why is it in my house?"

Corbin was quiet for a long moment.

"I don't know yet," he said. "But I know this. A liar doesn't need a real claim to make one. He only needs you to believe it."

* * *

When Maris finally sat back down, Elowen poured her fresh tea without a word. Then she closed the notebook and laid both hands on top of it.

"There's more," she said. "Not much. But you should have all of it."

They waited.

"Of the nine," Elowen said, "seven are dead. Ambrose in 1996. Bernadette in 2002. Ruth in 2009. Walt and Lorene in 2011, two months apart. Harlan in 2014." She paused. "And your father, Mrs. Bellamy. In the autumn of 2014."

"That's six," Keaton said. "Plus Grandpa is seven."

"Seven," Elowen agreed. "Celia Marsh died in 1999. A house fire, in her little rented place on Sycamore Street, in the middle of the night. It burned to the foundation. The coroner identified her from what was left. It wasn't much."

Corbin's head came up slightly. Maris saw it. She did not know what it meant.

"So that's eight," Keaton said.

"That's eight," said Elowen. "Which leaves one." She looked at the photograph on Corbin's phone, at the heavyset, red-faced man near the left end of the line, his head thrown back in laughter. "Orson Vale is eighty-three years old. He lives alone on what's left of his farm out on Pike Creek Road. He hasn't been to church since 1996. He hasn't spoken to me since 1997, when he set his dog on me." Her mouth tightened. "As far as anyone knows, he is the last living member of the Circle of Nine."

The radiator ticked.

"One more thing," Elowen said. "And then I'm done."

She looked at Maris for a long moment, as if deciding something.

"Your father came to see me once," she said. "In September of 2014. Seventeen years after he shut his door in my face. I opened my own door one evening and there he was on my porch. He was very thin. I knew at once he was ill."

Maris's breath caught. Her father had died that October. Pancreatic cancer. Six weeks from diagnosis.

"He wouldn't come in," Elowen said. "He stood on the porch with his hat in his hands, and he asked me one question. He said, *You're the one who keeps the deed books, Dr. Pryce. Has anybody ever bought the Hollis place?*"

"What did you tell him?"
"I told him the truth. No one had. No one had even tried. The county had held it for back taxes since 1971, and no one wanted it." Elowen's voice softened. "He looked so relieved. He closed his eyes and stood there on my porch and I believe he was praying. And then he said, *If anyone ever does, Dr. Pryce, you go and tell my daughter. You tell her to get her family as far from this county as she can.*"
No one moved.
"Then he put on his hat and walked down my steps, and I never saw him again." Elowen folded her hands on her cane. "I've checked the county deed records every year since. Every January. Faithfully. For eleven years." She shook her head slowly. "No one has ever bought the Hollis place."
"Then who lit the candles?" Corbin said quietly. "Last night. Eight of them. I saw them from the road."
Elowen Pryce turned and looked at him, and for the first time that day, her composure cracked. Something raw and frightened looked out of those pale blue eyes.
"Eight," she whispered. "Not nine?"
"Eight."
The old woman looked down at the photograph. At the nine faces, warm and faded. At the long dark shadow with its brimmed hat, stretched across the frost toward their feet.
At the slender woman at the end of the line, in her long gray scarf, with nothing where her face should be.
"Then someone," Elowen said, "is still keeping count."
Outside the kitchen window, a cloud passed over the sun, and the light in the room went gray.
It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, Maris found herself thinking, out of nowhere, out of some deep place her father had put it long ago. *Because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning.*
She held onto it. It was all she had.
It would have to be enough.

Chapter 8: The Last Survivor

> *He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him. — Proverbs 18:17*

Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid had a rule about stories. He had learned it in his first year on the job from an old detective named Lyle Haskins, who chewed unlit cigars and had never once in thirty years raised his voice.
Everybody's story makes sense to them, Haskins used to say. *Your job isn't to decide if it makes sense. Your job is to find the one piece of it you can put your hand on.*
Kincaid had spent twenty-three years looking for the piece he could put his hand on.
On Wednesday morning, he sat behind his desk at the sheriff's office with his reading glasses pushed up on his forehead and listened to Pastor Corbin Thorne tell him the strangest story he had ever heard.
Corbin told it carefully. Kincaid gave him that. He did not embellish. He did not lean on the scary parts. He laid it out the way a good witness lays out an accident, one fact after another, in order, saying *she told me* and *I saw* and *I don't know* exactly where each belonged. Agnes Hollis and her Thursday-night table. Ambrose Lark and the four-dollar diaries. The Thursday Society. Nine respectable people driving out to an abandoned farmhouse every week for a year and a half. A letter about a covenant. Every candle going out at once at seventeen minutes past three. A dead man found in his own bed in town while his car sat in an orchard four miles away. A death certificate signed before noon by the banker's brother-in-law.
When it was done, Kincaid sat for a long time without speaking.

Then he opened his desk drawer and took out a folded sheet of paper, soft at the creases from being carried in a shirt pocket for a week. He unfolded it and slid it across the desk.

11/22/1996. 0418 hrs. Caller reports multiple vehicles parked at abandoned Hollis property, Ridley Bottoms Rd. Unit dispatched. Unit reports property vacant on arrival, no vehicles present. No further action.

Corbin read it. He looked up.

"Elowen made that call," he said quietly. "From the pay phone at Ridley Crossroads. She told Maris yesterday."

"I figured." Kincaid took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. "That's my piece. That's the one thing in this whole mess I can put my hand on. A phone call at 4:18 in the morning, logged by a dispatcher, answered by a deputy who wrote down that there was nothing there." He set down the glasses. "I found it a week ago. I've been carrying it around ever since like a fool, not knowing what it meant."

"And now?"

"Now I've got a ninety-year-old historian who says she was sitting in a car a quarter mile from that house watching the lights go out." He shook his head slowly. "And I've got something else."

He turned his computer monitor so Corbin could see it. A report, filed at 11:52 Monday night by Deputy Wade Hollister.

Responded to call from Rev. C. Thorne re: lights at abandoned Hollis property, Ridley Bottoms Rd. Arrived 2318 hrs. Residence dark on arrival. No vehicles. No persons located. Front door unsecured. Entered and cleared structure.

Front parlor: observed eight (8) puddles of candle wax on floor in semicircle, approx. 18 in. apart. Wax was soft to touch. Faint smell of smoke.

Observed fresh tire impressions on lane near road. Photographed. Unable to determine make.

No further action.

Corbin read it twice.

"Soft to the touch," he said.

"Hollister says he got there forty minutes after you called. Somebody had been in that room. Somebody lit eight candles and blew them out and drove away before he got there." Kincaid leaned back in his chair. "Somebody. With a car. With tires that leave tracks. With a thumb that leaves prints on a mirror and a smoke detector."

He looked at Corbin across the desk.

"I want you to understand where I stand, Pastor," he said. "I'm not doing this because of ghosts. I don't believe in ghosts. I'm doing this because there's a real person out there with a real thumb who has been inside Maris Bellamy's house at least twice, who left a photograph on your pulpit inside a locked church, and who is lighting candles in an abandoned farmhouse where a man died under questionable circumstances twenty-nine years ago." He tapped the folded dispatch log. "That's a crime. Maybe several. That's my job."

"I understand."

"Good." Kincaid stood and reached for his hat. "Then let's go talk to the last man alive who was in that room."

Corbin blinked. "Orson Vale."

"Elowen Pryce says he's the only one left. Orson Vale, eighty-three, Pike Creek Road." Kincaid settled the hat on his head. "I ran him this morning. No record. Not so much as a speeding ticket since 1974. Lives alone. Hasn't renewed his driver's license since 2019. Gets his groceries delivered from the IGA every Friday by a high-school kid who leaves them on the porch and doesn't knock." He paused. "And he called this office eleven times between 1997 and 2003 to report trespassers on his property at night. Every single one at around three in the morning. Deputies never found anyone."

Corbin felt the skin on his arms prickle.

"Why are you taking me?" he asked.
Kincaid hesitated in the doorway. For a moment he looked almost embarrassed.
"Because old men who won't talk to sheriffs," he said, "sometimes will talk to preachers." He opened the door. "And because I'd like somebody with me who might know what to say if he starts talking about things I don't have a box on the form for."
He paused once more.
"Bring the photograph," he said. "The original. It's in the evidence locker. I'll sign it out."
* * *
They took Kincaid's gray Ford. Neither of them said much on the drive out of town.
At one point, at a long red light on Route 9, Kincaid spoke without looking over.
"My mother had a verse," he said. "Proverbs. Something about how the first man to tell his story always sounds right, until somebody else comes and asks him questions."
"*He that is first in his own cause seemeth just,*" said Corbin, "*but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.*"
"That's the one." Kincaid's mouth twitched. "She said it was the whole job of a lawman in one sentence. Took me twenty years to figure out she was right." The light turned green. He eased the truck forward. "Garrick Bellamy told me his story first. Calm and reasonable and full of alibis. And everything he said checked out." He was quiet a moment. "Now I'm going to go search out somebody's neighbor."
Corbin looked at him. The sheriff's jaw was set, his eyes on the road.
He did not say anything. But he bowed his head slightly and prayed, silently, for the man beside him. For the old man at the end of the road. For whatever was waiting there.
* * *
> *Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. — Psalm 127:1*

Pike Creek Road was gravel for its last three miles, washboarded and potholed, winding up out of the river bottoms into a fold of steep, wooded hills where the farms had always been poor and were mostly gone now. Kincaid drove slowly. The truck bucked and rattled. Bare oaks crowded the road on both sides, and here and there, through gaps in the trees, Corbin glimpsed collapsed barns and empty silos and fields gone back to cedar and broom sedge.
The Vale place was the last one before the road dead-ended at the creek.
They saw the signs before they saw the house. The first was nailed to a fence post at the mouth of the drive, hand-painted in red on a sheet of plywood that had weathered gray. NO TRESPASSING. Then, twenty feet farther, another. PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT. Then another. And another. GO AWAY. TURN BACK. YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE. They lined both sides of the long dirt drive like a gauntlet, dozens of them, some fresh, some so old the paint had faded to pink ghosts.
The last one, just before the house came into view, was different. It was small and neat, lettered in black on a square of white-painted tin, and it said only:
NOT AFTER DARK.
Kincaid glanced at Corbin. Neither of them spoke.
The drive opened into a bare yard. The farmhouse stood at the back of it, a long, low, tin-roofed house with a deep front porch, set against a steep wooded hill. It had been a good house once. Corbin could see that. Someone had built it with care. But it had been let go for a long time, and now its white paint had peeled to bare gray wood, and the porch roof sagged, and one chimney had lost half its bricks.
And it was covered.
That was the only word for it. Covered.
Horseshoes had been nailed above every door and every window, points up, rusted brown, three and four to a frame. Strings of small brass bells hung from the porch eaves, dozens of them, stirring and tinkling faintly in the cold wind. Crosses were nailed everywhere, crosses of every kind: wooden crosses and tin crosses and crosses made of two sticks bound with wire; a plastic crucifix from a dime

store, its painted Christ faded white; a heavy iron cross that might have come off a grave. Small round mirrors, the kind sold for bathroom cabinets, had been screwed to the porch posts at eye height, all of them turned to face outward, toward the yard, toward the road, toward whoever might come.

And on the front door, behind a sheet of yellowed plastic stapled at the edges, a Bible had been nailed open. Its pages had swollen and rippled with years of damp until they were a single gray lump, the print long since washed to nothing.

Kincaid turned off the engine. In the sudden quiet, the brass bells chimed on and on in the wind.

"Well," he said softly. "That's something."

Corbin did not answer. He was looking at the Bible on the door.

He had seen this kind of thing before. Not this much of it. Not so many years of it, piled up layer on layer like sediment. But he had seen it. In the houses of the dying, sometimes, and the grieving, and the very frightened. A crucifix hung over a bed by someone who had not prayed in fifty years. A Bible propped open on a nightstand to a page no one read. Holy things used like locks and bolts and burglar alarms.

It was not faith. It looked like faith from a distance, but it was faith's opposite. It was fear dressed up in faith's clothes. Every horseshoe and bell and mirror on that porch was a man saying, over and over, for thirty years, *I am alone and I am afraid and I do not know who else to trust.*

Except the LORD keep the city, Corbin thought, *the watchman waketh but in vain.*

A dog began to bark somewhere behind the house. A deep, hoarse, old dog's bark.

Then the front door opened.

* * *

The man who came out onto the porch was enormous, or had been once. Corbin could see the frame of him still, the great width of the shoulders, the barrel chest. But it had all collapsed inward, the way the porch roof had, the way the chimney had. He moved slowly, heavily, leaning on the door frame. He wore faded bib overalls over a flannel shirt buttoned to the throat, and his white hair stood up from his scalp in thin wild tufts. His face, which in the photograph had been red and round and thrown back in laughter, had gone slack and gray, mottled with broken veins, the skin hanging loose beneath the jaw.

He was carrying a shotgun. He did not point it at them. He held it across his body in both hands, the barrel angled at the porch floor.

An ancient bluetick hound limped out behind him and stood at his knee, still barking.

"Hush, Jubal," the man said, and the dog hushed.

Kincaid got out of the truck slowly, keeping his hands where they could be seen. Corbin got out on the other side.

"Mr. Vale," Kincaid called. "Orson Vale?"

The old man looked at him for a long moment. His eyes were small and pale and red-rimmed, sunk deep in the folds of his face. They took in the sheriff's jacket, the badge, the hat. Then they slid past Kincaid to Corbin, and took in the rumpled tweed jacket, and the worn black Bible in Corbin's hand.

Something moved in his face. Something old and bitter.

"Sheriff," said Orson Vale. His voice was deep and rough, a voice that had once been loud and had not been used much in a long time. "And a preacher." He spat over the porch rail into the frozen dirt. "Well. Took you long enough."

* * *

> *For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. — Matthew 10:26*

"Long enough for what?" Kincaid asked.

Orson Vale did not answer. He stood at the top of the porch steps with the shotgun across his chest and the brass bells chiming over his head, and looked down at them with an expression Corbin could not read.

"Mr. Vale," Kincaid said evenly, "I'm Sheriff Kincaid. This is Pastor Corbin Thorne, from New Hope Chapel on Mill Road. We'd like a few minutes of your time."

"I know who you are."

"Then you know I'm not here to cause you trouble."

"Everybody who comes up that drive is trouble." Orson's pale eyes moved from Kincaid's face to the sky behind him, as though measuring the light. It was not yet two in the afternoon. "Say what you came to say and get off my land."

"I'd like to ask you about Ambrose Lark."

The name landed like a stone dropped into a well. Corbin watched it go down. Orson's face did not change, not exactly. But his hands shifted on the shotgun, and the old hound at his knee lifted its head and whined.

"Don't know any Ambrose Lark."

"He taught history at the high school. Died in November of 1996."

"Lot of people died in 1996."

"I'd also like to ask you about the old Hollis place on Ridley Bottoms Road," Kincaid went on, in the same level voice. "Somebody's been out there lately. Lighting candles in the front parlor. Monday night my deputy found eight puddles of wax on the floor, still soft."

That landed too. Corbin saw it. Something flickered deep in the old man's eyes, quick as a fish turning in dark water.

"Never been out there," Orson said.

"Mr. Vale—"

"I said I never been out there." His voice rose, rough and cracked. "I don't know any Lark and I don't know any Hollis and I don't know what you're talking about. I got nothing to say to the law. Never had. Never will." He turned his head and looked at Corbin, and his lip curled. "And I sure got nothing to say to a preacher."

Corbin met his gaze calmly. "Why not?"

"Because I sat in your kind's pews for fifty-one years, Reverend." Orson spat again over the rail. "First Methodist. Every Sunday of my life. Taught the men's class. Tithed on every sack of feed I ever sold. And when the time came that I needed God to show up—" He stopped. His jaw worked. "Well. He didn't. Or if He did, He didn't bother to knock."

The bells chimed. The wind moved in the bare oaks on the hill.

"Now you two get on back down that drive," Orson said, more quietly. "I mean it. Get on home. It's November. Gets dark early." His eyes went once more to the sky. "You don't want to be on this road after dark."

He turned to go inside.

"Mr. Vale," Corbin said.

Orson did not stop. His hand was on the door, beside the swollen gray Bible behind its plastic.

"Somebody left this on my pulpit," Corbin said. "Sunday night. Inside a locked church. My custodian saw someone standing in the aisle at midnight. A very tall man in a long coat and a hat."

Orson Vale went still.

He did not turn around. He stood with his back to them and his hand on the door, and for a long moment the only sound in the yard was the wind and the bells.

Corbin reached into his coat and drew out a clear plastic evidence sleeve, sealed and labeled with Kincaid's signature. Inside it lay the photograph. He held it up.

"I think you'll want to see this," he said.

Slowly, very slowly, Orson Vale turned around.

His eyes found the photograph. And Corbin watched the last of the color drain out of that slack gray face until it was the color of old candle wax.

The shotgun sagged in his hands. The barrel dropped until it pointed at the porch boards between his feet. He did not seem to notice. He took one step toward the stairs. Then another. He came down off the porch, one stiff step at a time, gripping the rail, and crossed the frozen yard until he stood directly in front of Corbin, so close that Corbin could smell woodsmoke and bourbon and something else, something sour and old, like fear sweated out over many years.

He did not reach for the photograph. His hands were shaking too badly.

He only looked at it. At the farmhouse. At the dead orchard. At the frost on the grass. At the nine of them standing in their good wool coats in front of the porch steps, so young, so pleased with themselves.

At the long dark shadow stretched toward their feet.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Orson Vale. "Oh, Lord, Lord."

It was not a prayer. Not quite. It was the sound a man makes when he steps on a stair that isn't there.

His eyes moved along the line. They stopped for a moment on his own face, thrown back in laughter. Something twisted in his expression, a terrible, private grief. They stopped on Ambrose, in the center, smiling. Then they moved on.

And came to rest on the third man from the left. The one in the canvas work coat, standing a little apart, not smiling, looking just past the camera.

Orson lifted one thick, trembling finger. He did not touch the plastic. He only pointed.

"Danny Whitlock," he said hoarsely.

"Yes," said Corbin.

The old man stood there pointing for a long time. When he finally spoke again, his voice had dropped to barely more than a breath.

"Danny had a girl," he said. "A little girl. With a night-light shaped like the moon."

Corbin's heart lurched. Beside him, he heard Kincaid's breath catch.

"Yes," Corbin said. "Her name is Maris."

Orson did not seem to hear the name. His eyes were fixed on Daniel Whitlock's young, unsmiling face, and something in them had gone far away, back down a long, dark road to a parlor full of candles.

Then he looked up at Corbin.

"Does his daughter have a son?"

* * *

> *…visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. — Exodus 20:5–6*

Corbin did not answer at once.

He felt Kincaid go very still beside him. He felt the cold wind on the back of his neck and heard the brass bells chiming along the porch eaves and the old hound whining softly at the foot of the steps. And he understood, with a clarity that frightened him, that whatever he said next could not be taken back.

He thought of lying. For one moment, he truly considered it.

Then he thought of Keaton sitting at the far end of Elowen Pryce's kitchen table, jaw set, refusing to be left behind. *He told me to ask. He told* me.

"Yes," Corbin said. "She has a son."

Orson Vale closed his eyes.

He stood that way for a long time in the frozen yard, swaying slightly, his great collapsed body rocking on its heels like a tree in the wind. The shotgun hung forgotten from one hand. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Then he opened his eyes, and they were wet.

"Then it has begun," he whispered.

The words seemed to hang in the cold air between them. Corbin felt them settle on his skin like frost.

"What has begun?" Kincaid asked quietly.

Orson did not look at him. He was still staring at the photograph, at Daniel Whitlock's young, grave face.
"How old is he?" he asked. "The boy."
"Fifteen."
The old man flinched as if struck. "Fifteen," he repeated. "Fifteen. Lord have mercy." He passed a trembling hand over his face. "Has he heard it? The knocking?"
Kincaid and Corbin exchanged a glance.
"Yes," said Corbin.
"Three times. At night. Seventeen minutes after three."
It was not a question. Corbin answered it anyway. "Yes."
"And has he seen him?" Orson's voice dropped even lower. "The tall one. In the hat."
Corbin hesitated. Then he nodded.
"Has he talked to the boy?"
"Yes."
Orson made a low sound in his throat, a sound of pure animal misery. He turned half away from them and stood looking up at his own house, at the horseshoes and the crosses and the mirrors and the nailed-up Bible gone to pulp behind its yellowed plastic. All of it. Thirty years of it.
"I did everything," he said. He did not seem to be talking to them. "Everything I could think of. Every door. Every window. Every night." He laughed, a short, terrible sound with no humor in it at all. "And it never came for me. Not once. Twenty-nine years I sat up waiting. Knocking on my walls and my windows and my door, sure, plenty of nights. Just to let me know it remembered. But it never came in." He shook his head slowly. "Because I wasn't the one. I was never the one it wanted."
"Who was?" Corbin asked.
Orson turned back to him. His small, red-rimmed eyes were full of something Corbin had seen in a great many faces over thirty-one years. Hospital rooms. Gravesides. The back pew on a Wednesday night. It was guilt. The old, deep, rotted kind that a man carries so long he forgets it is not part of his body.
"Not today," Orson said.
"Mr. Vale, that boy—"
"I said not today." His voice cracked. "You don't understand what you're asking me. I ain't said one word about that night to a living soul in twenty-nine years. Not to my wife before she died. Not to my doctor. Not to God." He gripped the porch rail with his free hand, so hard the knuckles went white. "We swore. All of us. You don't—you can't just—"
He stopped. He seemed to struggle with himself.
"Is there a mark?" he said suddenly. "In the house. Danny's house. Did anybody find a mark?"
Corbin's breath stopped in his chest.
"A circle," he said slowly. "Carved under the kitchen table. With nine notches inside it."
"How many of them old?"
Corbin stared at him. "How did you—"
"*How many of them old?*"
"Eight," Corbin said. "Eight are old. The ninth is new. There was still sawdust in it."
Orson Vale shut his eyes again. When he opened them, he looked older than Corbin had ever seen a living man look.
"Then somebody's keeping the books," he said. "And the account's come due."
He turned and began to climb the porch steps, slowly, heavily, one hand on the rail. The old hound limped after him.
"Mr. Vale," Kincaid called. His voice was not quite steady. "I need you to tell me what you know. A woman and her son are in danger. If you have information—"
"Tomorrow."

Orson stopped at the top of the steps and turned around. In the shadow of the porch roof, with the mirrors flashing on the posts and the bells moving in the wind and the crosses nailed up everywhere around him like a fence, he looked like a man standing inside a cage he had built himself.
"Come back tomorrow," he said. "Early. In the daylight. The two of you and nobody else. I'll tell you what I can." His mouth trembled. "I need tonight. I need to—I need one more night to make my peace with breaking my word."
"And the boy?" said Corbin.
Orson looked at him for a long time.
"Get him out of that house," he said. "Tonight. Him and his mama both. I don't care where. A motel. Your house, preacher. Anywhere but Danny Whitlock's house." He swallowed hard. "That's where it was always going to come back to. That's where the door is."
Then he went inside, and they heard the bolt shoot home, and then another, and another, and another, until Corbin lost count.
* * *

> *If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. — Psalm 130:3–4*

Kincaid did not start the truck right away.
He sat behind the wheel with both hands on it, looking through the windshield at the house. At the horseshoes and the bells and the mirrors flashing in the thin afternoon light. At the closed door with its ruined Bible.
"A night-light shaped like the moon," he said finally.
Corbin did not answer.
"Maris told me about that. The second night, when I was in her kitchen looking at the cameras. She said she couldn't sleep without a light on. Never could, since she was a little girl. Said her daddy kept a moon-shaped night-light burning in her room every night for years." Kincaid turned his head and looked at Corbin. "How does that old man know that?"
"Daniel could have told him. Back then. They were friends."
"Could have." Kincaid's jaw worked. "Could have."
He started the engine. The brass bells went on chiming behind them as they drove away, down the long drive between the faded signs. NOT AFTER DARK. TURN BACK. GO AWAY. Kincaid did not speak again until they had reached the blacktop.
"Pastor," he said. "I've been doing this twenty-three years. I've talked to murderers. I've talked to men who beat their kids and men who set their own houses on fire for the insurance. I know what a liar looks like." He kept his eyes on the road. "That man wasn't lying. He was scared out of his mind. And whatever he's scared of, he's been scared of it for thirty years."
"I know."
"I don't have a box on the form for that." Kincaid's knuckles were white on the wheel. "I've got a box for breaking and entering. I've got a box for criminal trespass and harassment and violation of a protective order. I don't have a box for *the account's come due.*"
Corbin was quiet for a while. Then he said, "Can I tell you something my grandmother used to say?"
"Your grandmother quoted verses at you too?"
"Every grandmother in this county quoted verses at somebody." Corbin almost smiled. "She used to say people only remember the first half of that verse in Exodus. The one about the iniquity of the fathers visited on the children to the third and fourth generation. That's the half that scares them. That's the half that gets repeated." He looked out the window at the bare trees going by. "But the verse doesn't stop there. It goes on. *And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me.* Three or four generations of consequences. Thousands of generations of mercy." He paused. "She said if you're going to be afraid of God's arithmetic, at least learn all of it."

Kincaid didn't answer. But after a mile or so, he reached over and turned off the radio, which had been murmuring the farm report, and they drove the rest of the way in silence.

* * *

Corbin called Maris from the sheriff's parking lot.

He told her as little as he could. He told her they had found Orson Vale, and that Orson had agreed to talk to them in the morning. And he told her that he and Diane wanted her and Keaton to spend the night at the parsonage.

There was a long silence on the line.

"He told you to get us out of the house," Maris said quietly. "Didn't he."

Corbin closed his eyes. He had promised himself he would never lie to her.

"Yes," he said.

Another silence. Then: "We'll be there by six."

* * *

Orson Vale did not go to bed that night.

He sat at his kitchen table with the shotgun across his knees and the old hound asleep against his feet, and the overhead bulb burning, and every lamp in the house burning, and the radio on low to a country station out of Nashville. He sat the way he had sat a great many nights over twenty-nine years. Waiting.

At about ten, he got up. He went to the cupboard over the refrigerator, the one he never opened, and took down a cardboard shoebox furred with dust. He set it on the table and sat looking at it for a long time before he lifted the lid.

Inside lay a Bible. Not the one on the door. His own. The black leather one with ORSON T. VALE stamped on the cover in faded gold, the one his mother had given him the day he was baptized at First Methodist in 1953. He had not touched it since the morning of Ambrose Lark's funeral.

A folded program from that funeral was still tucked inside the front cover. *A Service of Witness to the Resurrection. Ambrose Theodore Lark. 1939–1996.*

Orson did not open the Bible. He only laid his big, trembling hand flat on the cover, the way you might lay your hand on the shoulder of a friend you have wronged and not seen in a very long time.

Then he got up and went to the old wall phone beside the back door. The one with the rotary dial. He lifted the receiver and dialed a number from memory, slowly, his thick finger shaking in the holes. A number he had not dialed since 1997.

The line clicked. Then a recorded voice, flat and female. *We're sorry. The number you have reached is not in service.*

Orson stood with the receiver against his ear and listened to the message repeat three times. Then he hung up very gently and went back to his chair.

* * *

At 3:17 in the morning, the telephone rang.

Orson did not jump. He had been expecting it, perhaps, without knowing he was. He sat in his chair at the kitchen table with the shotgun across his knees and looked at the old black phone on the wall, and it rang.

And rang.

At his feet, the hound woke and lifted its head and began, very softly, to whine.

Orson counted the rings. He could not stop himself.

Four. Five. Six.

He did not get up.

Seven. Eight.

Nine.

Then silence. The phone did not ring a tenth time. In the stillness afterward, Orson could hear the radio murmuring, and the hound's whimpering, and his own heart pounding slow and hard against his ribs.

He looked down at the shoebox on the table. At his mother's Bible.

And Orson Vale, eighty-three years old, who had sat in the pews of First Methodist every Sunday for fifty-one years and taught the men's class and tithed on every sack of feed and had not spoken one honest word to God since November of 1996, set the shotgun on the floor, and slid off his chair, and got down on his knees on the cold linoleum.

It took him a long time. His knees were bad. When he got there, he did not know what to do with his hands. He folded them, finally, on the seat of the chair, the way his mother had taught him to fold them beside his bed when he was five.

"I don't know if You still take calls from the likes of me," he whispered. His voice cracked. "I wouldn't blame You if You didn't."

The radio played on. The hound came and pressed its gray muzzle against his arm.

"But that boy didn't do anything," Orson said. "He wasn't there. He wasn't even born. He's just Danny's grandson." His shoulders began to shake. "So if You're going to mark it against somebody, Lord, mark it against me. Not him. Please. Not him."

He stayed on his knees on the kitchen floor until the windows went gray.

He did not hear anything answer him. But for the first time in twenty-nine years, he found that he was not entirely sure he was alone.

Chapter 9: What They Invited

> *When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet. — Proverbs 3:24*

The parsonage on Mill Road was a square brick house with green shutters and a porch swing that squeaked, and it smelled of cinnamon and floor polish and old books. Diane Thorne met them at the door at five minutes to six with her reading glasses on her head and her sleeves pushed up, and she did not ask a single question.

She took Maris's overnight bag in one hand and Keaton's backpack in the other and marched them both upstairs to two small bedrooms under the eaves that she had already made up with clean sheets and folded towels and, on each pillow, a wrapped peppermint.

"The bathroom's at the end of the hall," she said. "The hot water takes a minute. The third stair from the top squeaks, so don't bother trying to sneak down for a snack at midnight, I'll hear you, and you'll have to share." She looked at Keaton over the top of her glasses. "Pot roast in half an hour. Do you eat carrots?"

"Um," said Keaton. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good boy."

Boaz had come too. Diane had insisted. He walked through the front door of the parsonage, sniffed the hall runner, sniffed Diane's slippers, sniffed the radiator, and then lay down on the kitchen floor with a long, groaning sigh and fell asleep. Just like that. In the middle of the floor. With his legs stuck straight out and his jowls flopping.

Keaton stared at him.

"He hasn't slept like that in weeks," he said quietly.

Maris looked at the dog. Then she looked out the kitchen window, at the dark yard and the bulk of New Hope Chapel next door with its leaning steeple, and she felt something in her chest she did not have a name for.

* * *

Corbin came home at seven, gray-faced and quiet, and sat down at the head of the table. He said grace. He asked Keaton about his chemistry test. He told a long, rambling story about a church softball game in 1994 that ended with the organist in the emergency room. He did not say one word about Orson Vale.

But after supper, while Diane washed and Keaton dried, he caught Maris's eye in the doorway and gave one small shake of his head. *Not tonight.*

She nodded. She found, to her own surprise, that she did not mind.

Keaton stayed up late. Long after Maris had gone upstairs, she could hear his voice faintly through the floor, and Diane's. They were in the kitchen. She crept to the top of the stairs, avoiding the third step, and listened.

"But how do you know He hears it?" Keaton was saying. "When you pray. How do you know it's not just—talking to the ceiling?"

A clatter of dishes. Diane's voice, brisk and matter-of-fact. "I don't, always. Not the way you know the stove is hot."

"Then how—"

"I know the way you know your mother loves you. Not because she says it every five minutes. Because of all the times she was there." A pause. "I've been praying for forty-one years, Keaton. I've had a great many prayers answered no. I've had a great many answered *wait.* But I've never once had the feeling that I was talking to an empty room. Not once." Another pause. "Not even the year we lost our baby."

The kitchen went quiet.

"I didn't know that," Keaton said.

"Not many people do. Corbin doesn't talk about it. It was a long time ago." The sound of a dish being set down. "The point is, honey, I'm not going to tell you it's easy. Or that you'll get every answer you want. But you asked how I know He hears." Her voice softened. "I know because He's the only one who stayed in the room with me that whole year. Even when I screamed at Him. Especially then."

Maris went back to her room very quietly, and lay down on the narrow bed under the eaves, and cried a little into the pillow with the peppermint still on it. Not from fear. For once, not from fear.

* * *

She woke at 3:16.

She did not know what woke her. Nothing had. That was the thing. There had been no sound. She simply opened her eyes in the dark, the way she had opened them every night for weeks, with her heart already pounding and her body already braced, waiting.

The little room was dark except for the streetlight through the curtain. Down the hall, Keaton's door was half open. She could hear his breathing, slow and heavy and even. Downstairs, faintly, Boaz was snoring.

She watched the clock on the nightstand.

3:16.

She held her breath.

3:17.

Nothing.

No knock. No footstep. No cold. No whimper from the dog. The radiator under the window ticked once, softly, the way radiators do. Outside on Mill Road, a car went by, its headlights sliding across the ceiling and away. The parsonage creaked faintly as it settled. Ordinary sounds. Living-house sounds.

3:18.

3:19.

Maris lay in the narrow bed and watched the minutes change, one after another, all the way to 3:30.

And nothing came. Nothing at all.

She turned her face into the pillow and wept, silently, for a long time.

She thought of Orson Vale's words, as Corbin had reported them on the phone that afternoon. *Anywhere but Danny Whitlock's house. That's where the door is.*

It was not her. It was not her son. It had never been in them.

It was the house.

The thought should have been a comfort. And it was. But underneath the comfort, as she drifted back toward sleep at last, another thought followed it, slow and cold, like water seeping under a door.
It was my father's house.
And it's mine now.
When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid. She fell asleep before she could finish the verse. And for the first time in weeks, she slept until the sun was full in the window.
* * *
> *And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits… should not a people seek unto their God? — Isaiah 8:19*
Orson Vale was waiting for them on the porch when Kincaid's truck came up the drive at eight o'clock the next morning.
He was sitting in a straight-backed kitchen chair beside the door, under the chiming bells, with the old hound at his feet and a thermos on the porch boards beside him. He did not have the shotgun. That was the first thing Corbin noticed. The second was that the old man had shaved, badly, and nicked himself in two places, and had put on a clean white shirt buttoned to the throat, the way men of his generation dressed for church or for court.
Or for confession.
He did not get up as they climbed the steps. He only looked at them, and his small red-rimmed eyes were sunk even deeper than the day before, as if he had not slept at all.
"You came," he said.
"We said we would," said Corbin.
"Folks say a lot of things." Orson picked up the thermos and set it on his knee. "Coffee's on the stove if you want it. I don't take visitors much. Haven't got proper cups. You'll have to drink out of jelly jars."
"Jelly jars are fine," said Kincaid.
Orson nodded slowly. Then he put his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet, grunting, and opened the front door with its rotted Bible, and held it for them.
"Come in, then," he said. "Before I lose my nerve."
* * *
The kitchen was clean and bare and very cold. A wood stove in the corner put out a little heat. The table was covered in yellowed oilcloth, and in the center of it, squared neatly to the edge, sat an old black leather Bible with ORSON T. VALE stamped on the cover in faded gold.
Corbin's eyes went to it at once. Orson saw him look.
"Got it down last night," the old man said gruffly. "Haven't opened it. Don't know as I will. But I wanted it on the table while I said this." He lowered himself into his chair with a grimace. "Seemed like the thing to do."
Kincaid set a small digital recorder on the table and looked at Orson. "Mind if I—"
"Do what you want. I'm eighty-three. Ain't nobody going to put me in prison for what I'm about to say." Orson poured coffee from the thermos into three jelly jars with hands that shook. "And if they do, I reckon I've earned it."
Kincaid pressed the button. A small red light came on.
For a long while, Orson said nothing at all. He sat with his big, ruined hands wrapped around his jelly jar and looked down into the coffee. The wood stove ticked. The bells chimed faintly outside.
"You've been talking to Elowen Pryce," he said finally.
It was not a question. Corbin nodded.
"Figured. She's the only one who ever kept poking." Something that might once have been a smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "Set my dog on her in '97. Old Duke. Jubal's granddaddy. He just licked her hand." The almost-smile faded. "What'd she tell you?"
"That you were a group. The Circle of Nine. That you met at the Hollis place on Thursday nights for over a year. That it started as a kind of—study. Of the supernatural. Of Agnes Hollis's diaries."

Orson snorted.
"Study," he said. "That's Ambrose's word. That's the word he used on the deacons and the school board and his own sister." He shook his head slowly. "Investigating. Studying. Researching. Like we were a bunch of college professors poking at bugs."
He set down the jelly jar.
"We weren't investigating anything, Preacher," he said. "We knew good and well what we were doing. Every one of us. We weren't trying to *find out* if there was something out there." He looked up, and his pale eyes were hard and very tired. "We were trying to *talk* to it."
The recorder's red light glowed steadily on the oilcloth.
"Ambrose found it first," Orson said. "In them diaries. Agnes Hollis had been talking to something for fifty years. Not her dead husband. Not anybody's dead boy from the war. That's what she told the folks who came and paid her a dollar a sitting. But in her diaries, in her own hand, she wrote down the truth. There was one voice. Always the same one. It just pretended to be whoever she wanted it to be." He took a long breath. "Ambrose read all that and he didn't get scared. He got excited. He said if she could talk to it with nothing but a kitchen table and a farm wife's education, imagine what nine educated, serious people could do."
"What did you want from it?" Corbin asked quietly.
Orson looked at him for a long moment.
"Everything," he said.
He held up one thick finger.
"Knowledge. That was Ambrose. He wanted to *know.* Everything. History. The future. How the world really worked behind the curtain. What God was hiding from us and why."
A second finger.
"Power. That was Harlan, mostly. And Celia." He paused on the name, just slightly. "Harlan wanted the bank. Wanted to be president. Wanted to know which farms would fail so he could buy the paper cheap. Celia—" He stopped. "Celia wanted something else. I never did know exactly what. But it was power. You could see it in her eyes."
A third finger.
"Protection. That was Ruth and Bernadette and Lorene. They were scared. Ruth's mama was dying slow and ugly. Lorene had a boy in the Navy. Bernadette—Bernadette was scared of everything. Of hell, mostly. She thought if she could talk to it, she could bargain with it. Keep it off of her." His mouth twisted. "Poor girl."
A fourth finger.
"And the future," he said. "That was me. And Walt. And Danny."
He lowered his hand and wrapped it back around the jelly jar.
"My feed store was going under," he said simply. "Big farm supply chains were coming in from Harmon, selling for half what I could. My wife was sick. Her lungs. Doctors couldn't say how long. And I'd been sitting in First Methodist every Sunday for forty years, praying for God to tell me what to do. What was coming." His voice roughened. "And He never said a word. Not one word. Not ever." He looked across the table at Corbin. "And then Ambrose came to me and said, *Orson, I know somebody who'll answer.*"
The kitchen was very quiet.
Should not a people seek unto their God? Corbin thought. Isaiah. The old, plain question. He did not say it out loud. He did not need to. He could see in Orson's face that the old man had asked himself the very same thing, every night, for twenty-nine years.
"So you went," Kincaid said.
"So I went." Orson closed his eyes. "God help me. So we all went."
* * *

> *He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. — John 8:44*

"It didn't come right away," Orson said. "That's the first thing you ought to know. It took months."
He was looking at the wall now, past Corbin's shoulder, at nothing.
"All that summer of '95 we went out there every Thursday and sat around Agnes Hollis's old table with the candles lit and did what the diaries said, and nothing happened. Nothing. Walt wanted to quit. Bernadette cried every week on the drive home. Harlan said we were a bunch of fools and he'd lost three good poker nights over it." Orson shook his head. "But Ambrose wouldn't quit. Ambrose said it was testing us. Seeing if we were serious."
"And then?" said Kincaid.
"And then one night in September the table moved."
The wood stove ticked. Outside, the bells stirred.
"Not much," Orson said. "Just a little. Like somebody bumped it. We all had our hands flat on top, like the diaries said, and it shifted under our fingers. Maybe an inch. Bernadette screamed. Walt jumped up and knocked his chair over. And Ambrose—" He laughed shortly. "Ambrose just sat there with tears running down his face and said, *There you are.* Like he was talking to an old friend."
After that, he said, it came every week. First through the table, rapping out letters the way the diaries described, slow and clumsy. Then, by Christmas, without the table at all.
"It talked," Orson said. "Out loud. Out of nowhere. Out of the room. You'd be sitting there in the candlelight and it'd just—be there. Behind you. All around. Like it was standing just at your shoulder, every one of us at once."
"What did it sound like?" Corbin asked quietly.
Orson was silent for a long moment.
"Kind," he said at last. And his voice broke on the word. "That's the God's truth. It sounded kind. Like your granddaddy. Like the best preacher you ever heard. Like somebody who loved you and had been waiting your whole life for you to finally come home." He wiped his eyes roughly with the back of his hand. "You want to know why we kept going back? That's why. Not the answers. Not the money. It was that it sounded like it *loved* us. More than anybody in our own houses ever did. More than God ever did, it seemed like."
Corbin closed his eyes for a moment. *Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.*
"And it knew things," Orson went on. "Lord, the things it knew. It knew where Ruth's granny had hid her wedding ring in 1938. It knew Harlan's mama's maiden name, which none of us had ever heard. It told Walt where his brother had buried their daddy's money, out behind the smokehouse in a coffee can, and Walt went and dug it up the next morning. Eleven hundred dollars in silver certificates."
"And you?" Kincaid asked. "What did it tell you?"
Orson didn't answer at once. He picked up his jelly jar and found it empty and set it down again.
"I asked it about my store," he said. "And it told me not to worry. It said the big new farm supply in Harmon would be gone by the spring. And in March of '96, that building burned to the ground. Electrical fire, they said. Nobody hurt. They never rebuilt." He stared at the oilcloth. "My business doubled that year. I bought the Pruitt farm next door with the profits."
Kincaid and Corbin exchanged a glance.
"And I asked it about Martha," Orson said, more quietly. "My wife. Her lungs. I asked it how long I'd have her." His jaw worked. "It said, *She will see the new century, Orson.*"
The kitchen was very still.
"And I went home that night and cried like a baby. Because that was four more years. Four more years when the doctors were saying months." He laughed, a terrible broken sound. "I thanked it. You understand me? I went back the next Thursday and I thanked it."
Corbin knew what was coming. He could see it in the old man's face. He waited.

"Martha died on the second day of January, in the year 2000," Orson said. "Two days into the new century. Just like it promised." He looked up, and his eyes were full of something that was not quite rage and not quite grief. "It kept its word, Preacher. That's what I want you to understand. It never lied to us once. Not in the words. It kept every promise it ever made. To the letter."

He leaned forward across the table.

"It just never told you what the letter meant."

* * *

No one said anything for a while.

Kincaid reached out and adjusted the recorder slightly, although it did not need adjusting. Corbin understood. A man needed something to do with his hands.

"The farm supply in Harmon," Kincaid said finally. "The fire. March 1996. I could pull that report."

"Pull it," said Orson. "Won't tell you nothing. Wiring. Act of God, the insurance man called it." His mouth twisted bitterly. "Act of God. That's a good one."

"Mr. Vale," Corbin said gently. "Did any of you ever ask what it wanted? In return?"

Orson looked at him.

"Danny did," he said.

Corbin felt the hair rise on his arms.

"Danny was the only one who ever asked. Nobody else wanted to know. We were all too busy getting." Orson rubbed his face slowly with both hands. "Danny never asked it for much of anything, you understand. Not like the rest of us. He came because he was scared for his family. His wife. His little girl. He asked it twice in all them months. Once if his wife would get well, and once if he'd keep his job." He paused. "And then one night, maybe in the summer of '96, right out of nowhere, Danny asked it: *What do you want from us?*"

"What did it say?"

Orson was quiet for so long that Corbin thought he would not answer.

"It said, *Only what you promise me, Daniel. Nothing more.*" The old man's voice dropped to a whisper. "*And nothing less.*"

Outside, a gust of wind came down off the hill, and every bell on the porch rang at once, a thin, shivering chorus. The hound at Orson's feet lifted its head and whined.

He is a liar, and the father of it, Corbin thought. *When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own.*

But it had not lied. Not in the words. That was the horror of it. It had kept every promise, to the letter. It had given them exactly what they asked for. And it had waited, patient and kind, for them to give it what they promised in return.

The truth, twisted. The truth, used as a hook. That was a worse kind of lie than any falsehood. Corbin had preached on it once, years ago, and had not truly understood his own sermon until this moment, in this cold kitchen, with this broken old man.

* * *

> *Neither give place to the devil. — Ephesians 4:27*

"Tell me about the last night," Kincaid said. "November 21, 1996."

Orson flinched at the date, as if someone had touched a bruise.

He got up from the table. He did it slowly, with a grunt of pain, and went to the stove and lifted the lid of the coffeepot and looked into it and set the lid back down. He stood there with his back to them, his big hands braced on the edge of the stove.

"By that fall," he said, "it wasn't enough anymore. For it, I mean. Talking. Answering. It started saying things like *the time for questions is ending.* It said it wanted to come to us properly. Not just a voice in the dark. It said we'd been knocking long enough." He paused. "It said if we wanted it to stay, we'd have to make room for it."

"Make room," Corbin repeated softly.

"A covenant. That's what Ambrose called it. Nine of us, nine chairs, nine candles, nine names. Each of us would put something of our own in a box, and each of us would make it a promise. And then it would come through, all the way, and be ours." Orson's laugh was low and ugly. "*Ours*. That's what Ambrose said. Like it was a dog we were adopting."

He turned around. His face was gray.

"I'm not going to tell you what we promised," he said. "So don't ask. Not mine. Not anybody's. Some things I'll carry to the grave, and that's one of them."

Kincaid opened his mouth. Corbin touched his arm lightly, and the sheriff closed it again.

"Tell us what you can," Corbin said.

Orson came back to the table and lowered himself into his chair. He sat with his hands flat on either side of his mother's Bible, not touching it.

"We met a little before midnight," he said. "Same as always. Cars in the orchard. Ambrose had the parlor all fixed. Chairs in a circle. Candles on the floor. Our names painted on the boards in white. The box in the middle." He swallowed. "Ambrose locked the door. Put the key in his pocket. Said nothing comes in and nothing goes out till we're finished. Then he read."

"Read what?"

"I don't know. Something from Agnes's diaries. Something he'd copied out. It wasn't English. It wasn't any language I ever heard. It hurt to listen to." His fingers tightened on the oilcloth. "And the room got cold. Colder than this kitchen. Colder than outside. Cold like a grave. And all the candle flames leaned in. Toward the box. Like something in the middle was breathing in."

The wood stove ticked.

"And then we heard it walking," Orson said.

Corbin went very still.

"Out in the hall. On the other side of that locked door. All nine of us were sitting in that circle, and we heard somebody walk down that hallway. Slow. Heavy. Hard shoes on the boards." Orson closed his eyes. "And it stopped right outside the door. And then it talked."

"What did it say?"

"It said, *You called.*" His voice dropped to a whisper. "And then it asked us for the promises. One at a time. Around the circle."

He stopped. For a long time he did not go on. His lips were moving silently, and his eyes were fixed on something far away, something in a parlor full of candlelight twenty-nine years gone.

"And then every candle went out," he said. "All nine. At once. Like a hand closed over them."

Kincaid's voice was very quiet. "At 3:17."

Orson opened his eyes and looked at him.

"At 3:17," he said.

* * *

"What happened in the dark?" Corbin asked.

Orson Vale did not answer for a long time.

When he finally spoke, his voice had changed. It was flat and careful, the voice of a man walking across a frozen pond, testing every step.

"Something came into the room," he said.

"The voice?"

"No." Orson shook his head slowly. "No. Not the voice. The voice had always been there. This was—something else. Something that came through after the voice. Something that had been waiting behind it."

"What was it?"

The old man looked at Corbin, and there was something in his eyes that Corbin would remember for the rest of his life. It was not fear, exactly. Fear was too small a word. It was the look of a man who has seen the bottom of something that has no bottom.

"I won't tell you that," Orson said. "Don't ask me. I seen it. Once. For maybe one second, when Danny got his lighter going." His voice cracked. "I seen it standing in the middle of the circle. And that one second has been enough for twenty-nine years. That's enough for any man's whole life. I won't put it in your head, Preacher. I won't do that to you."

No one spoke.

"And when the light came," Orson said, more quietly, "Ambrose was on the floor."

"Dead?" said Kincaid.

Orson looked down at his hands.

"I'm done talking about Ambrose," he said.

Kincaid started to speak. Corbin's hand on his arm stopped him again.

The kitchen was silent except for the stove and the bells and the old dog breathing. Outside the window, the sun had come out from behind a cloud, and pale winter light lay across the oilcloth, across the Bible, across Orson's ruined hands.

The old man stared at that light for a long time.

"You want to know what we did, Preacher?" he said at last. "You want to know the worst of it? It's not the promises. It's not even what come into the room." He looked up. "It's that we didn't understand what we were doing. Not even Ambrose. Not one of us."

He leaned forward across the table, and his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper.

"We thought we were calling something into the room," said Orson Vale. "We didn't understand that we were opening a door."

The words hung in the cold air.

"You call a thing, it comes," Orson said. "You talk to it. You send it home. That's what we thought. Like ringing a bell for a servant." He shook his head slowly. "But a door's different. A door stays open. A door don't care who you meant to let through. It don't care which side you're standing on, either. Once it's open, it's open. Things come in." His voice dropped even lower. "And things go out."

Corbin felt the cold settle into his bones.

Neither give place to the devil. Paul's warning to the Ephesians. Corbin had always read it as advice. Don't give the enemy a foothold. Don't leave the gate unlatched.

He understood now that it was not advice. It was a warning about a door. About what happens when you hand the enemy a key and tell him he's welcome.

And about how very hard it is to get that key back.

* * *

> *These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth. — Revelation 3:7*

"Can it be shut?"

Orson asked it so quietly that at first Corbin was not sure he had heard. The old man was not looking at him. He was looking at the Bible on the table, at his own name stamped in faded gold on the cover.

"The door," Orson said. "Can it be shut? After all this time?"

Corbin did not answer quickly. He had learned that from sitting with Keaton. Some questions deserved silence before they deserved words.

"Not by you," he said at last. "Not by any of you. Not with candles or chairs or a box in the floor. Not with horseshoes over the door, or bells, or mirrors on the porch posts." He said it gently, but he did not soften it. "Mr. Vale, you've spent twenty-nine years trying to lock that door from your side. Every horseshoe on this house is you trying to hold it shut with your own two hands. And it's never worked. Has it?"

Orson's jaw trembled. He shook his head.

"It can't," said Corbin. "Because you were never the one who could shut it. None of us are." He reached across the table and laid his hand, very lightly, on the cover of Orson's Bible. "But there's One who can."

He did not open the Bible. He did not need to. The words were already in him.

"In the book of Revelation, Jesus says this about Himself. *I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.*" Corbin paused. "The keys, Mr. Vale. Not the devil. Not Ambrose Lark. Not Agnes Hollis or her diaries. Christ holds the keys. And a little later in the same book, He says He's the one *that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.*"

Orson was staring at Corbin's hand on the Bible.

"Whatever you opened in that parlor," Corbin said, "you didn't open it on your own authority. You don't have any. None of us do. You opened it the way a thief opens a door, by breaking the lock. And what a thief breaks, the owner of the house can close."

"Not for a man like me," Orson whispered. "You don't know what I promised it. You don't know what I did."

"No," Corbin agreed. "I don't. But He does. And there was a man once, hanging on a cross next to Jesus, who'd done things a good deal worse than sitting around a table in the dark." He leaned closer. "That man asked Jesus to remember him. That was all. Just, *Lord, remember me.* And Jesus said, *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*" He let the words settle. "Not after twenty-nine years of horseshoes. Today."

The old man's shoulders began to shake.

He put both his big, ruined hands over his face and bent forward over the table until his forehead nearly touched the Bible with his name on it, and he wept. Not the way he had wept the night before, alone on the kitchen floor. Openly. Brokenly. The way a child weeps, before it learns to be ashamed.

Kincaid reached out and, very quietly, turned off the recorder.

Corbin did not say anything more. He did not pray out loud. He only left his hand where it was, resting on the worn black leather beside the old man's bowed head, and let him cry.

Outside, the bells rang and rang in the wind.

* * *

It was a long time before Orson could talk again. When he did, his voice was raw.

"I'll think on it," he said. "What you said. I will. I don't know if I can—I'll think on it."

"That's all anybody can do at first," said Corbin.

Kincaid cleared his throat. "Mr. Vale. One more question, and then we'll leave you be." He leaned forward. "Somebody has been inside Maris Bellamy's house. Somebody left that photograph on Pastor Thorne's pulpit. Somebody lit eight candles at the Hollis place on Monday night. That's a person. With a car and a thumb. Who is it?"

Orson wiped his face with a red bandanna from his overalls pocket. He looked at Kincaid for a long moment.

"Somebody who never wanted it shut," he said.

"That's not a name."

"No. It ain't." The old man folded the bandanna slowly. "There were nine of us, Sheriff. Eight are in the ground or near enough. And—" He stopped. Something moved behind his eyes, quick and dark, and was gone. "And I've said all I'm going to say today. I'm tired. I'm eighty-three years old and I haven't slept in two nights and I just told two strangers more than I told my own wife in forty years of marriage." He pushed himself to his feet. "Come back another time. Maybe I'll have more. Maybe I won't."

He walked them to the door. On the porch, under the chiming bells and the rusted horseshoes, he caught Corbin's sleeve.

"Preacher," he said, low enough that Kincaid, already halfway down the steps, could not hear. "There's one more thing. About Danny."

Corbin waited.

"I went to see him in 2014," Orson said. "In the hospital in Harmon. Near the end. First time I'd spoken to him in seventeen years." He swallowed. "He was mostly gone by then. Yellow. Couldn't eat. But he knew me. And he took hold of my hand and he said, *Orson, I wrote it down. All of it. Everything we did out there.*"

Corbin felt the cold air on the back of his neck.

"I asked him why. Why in the world would he write it down, after we swore." Orson's grip tightened on Corbin's sleeve. "He said, *So my girl will know. If it ever comes back. So she'll know what she's fighting.*" His voice dropped to a whisper. "I asked him where he put it. And he smiled. First time I seen Danny Whitlock smile since 1996. And he said, *Where the Book will keep it.*"

He let go of Corbin's sleeve.

"That's all he said. Then the nurse came in. And he died two days later."

Orson Vale went back inside his armored house and shut the door with the rotted Bible on it. Corbin heard the bolts slide home. One. Two. Three. Then, after a long pause, a fourth.

Then silence.

* * *

Corbin told Kincaid in the truck.

The sheriff drove for a full mile without speaking. Then he said, "Where the Book will keep it."

"His Bible," said Corbin.

"Mrs. Bellamy's been reading her daddy's Bible every night for three weeks. You told me. Big black King James on her nightstand." Kincaid glanced over at him. "Wouldn't she have found something?"

Corbin frowned. He thought of Maris turning the soft, thumbed pages of the Psalms. The stars in the margins. The underlines. The date beside Psalm 91. *11/22/96.*

She had found notes. Small ones. Single words. Nothing like a confession.

"Unless," said Kincaid slowly, "he had more than one."

Corbin went very still.

He thought of a gray-faced man in the back pew of a funeral, nearly thirty years ago. A man who had sat through the whole service without singing a hymn or bowing his head, gripping something small and green so hard his knuckles had gone white.

A pocket Testament.

"Sheriff," he said. "How fast can this truck get to Copper Creek Road?"

Chapter 10: The Confession

> *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. — Psalm 119:105*

Maris was already in the attic when Corbin called.

She had driven back out to Copper Creek Road at nine that morning, alone, over Diane's gentle objections, because Keaton needed clean clothes and his chemistry book and Boaz needed his food, and because she could not stand to be a guest in someone else's house one more hour while her own sat empty on its hill with the doors locked and the lamps off. In daylight it had looked almost ordinary. The red door. The green rocking chairs. Frost melting off the porch roof in long glittering drips.

She had gathered what she came for in ten minutes. Then she had stood at the bottom of the narrow attic stairs at the end of the upstairs hall for a long time, looking up at the square of darkness at the top. She did not know why. She had not been up there since the week after her father's funeral, when she and Garrick had carried the last of his things up in boxes and Garrick had complained the whole time about the heat and the dust and the waste of keeping a dead man's junk. She had not thought about those boxes in eleven years.

But last night, lying awake in the little room under the eaves at the parsonage, after 3:17 had come and gone in silence, she had thought about them. About her father's canvas coat in the photograph. About the man who sat outside her door every night with his Bible on his knee.

About what else he might have carried up those stairs and never brought down.

So she climbed them.

The attic ran the whole length of the house, steep-roofed and cold, lit by a single bare bulb on a pull chain and a small round window at the gable end. It smelled of dust and old wood and mothballs and, faintly, of her mother's lavender sachets. Broken furniture leaned against the rafters. A dressmaker's dummy stood in the corner with a sheet over its shoulders like a ghost. Christmas decorations. Her own outgrown dollhouse. Her mother's sewing machine in its black case.

And along the far wall, under the round window, a row of cardboard boxes, their flaps folded shut, labeled in her mother's neat, rounded hand.

DANIEL — CLOTHES.

DANIEL — BOOKS.

DANIEL — PLANT.

DANIEL — PERSONAL.

Her mother had labeled them. Not Maris. Her mother, who had outlived her father by only fourteen months, had sat up here and folded his life into boxes and written his name on every one in the careful penmanship she had learned in a one-room schoolhouse in Kentucky. Maris had forgotten that. She stood looking at the familiar rounded letters for a long moment with her throat closed.

Then her phone rang.

"Maris." Corbin's voice. He sounded strange. Breathless. She could hear an engine roaring behind him. "Where are you?"

"At the house. In the attic." She hesitated. "I'm looking at Daddy's boxes."

There was a pause on the line so long she thought the call had dropped.

"Don't open anything," Corbin said. "Wait for us. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Corbin, what—"

"Your father had a Bible," he said. "A small one. A New Testament. Green. Pocket-sized. Do you remember it?"

Maris stood very still in the cold attic.

She did remember it. She had not thought of it in thirty years, but the moment he said it, it came back whole. A little green book with a cracked spine and soft, curling corners. Her father had carried it in the inside pocket of his work coat. Every day. She remembered the shape of it pressing against her cheek when he hugged her. She remembered him taking it out at the kitchen table in the gray mornings and reading it under the little light over the stove, holding it close to his face because he would not admit he needed glasses.

She had never seen it after he died. She had never wondered where it went.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Wait for us," Corbin said again. "Please."

* * *

She waited.

She sat on an old steamer trunk under the round window with her coat wrapped around her and her eyes on the box marked *DANIEL — PERSONAL*, and she waited, and the attic was so quiet she could hear the house breathing beneath her. The tick of the radiators two floors down. The groan of a joist. The wind sighing around the chimney.

And then, just once, very faintly, a sound she could not place.

It came from the far end of the attic, from the shadows beyond the dressmaker's dummy, where the light from the bare bulb did not reach. A soft, dry scrape. Like a shoe moving on old floorboards.

Maris did not move.

She sat on the trunk with her heart slamming against her ribs and looked into the darkness at the far end of the attic, and she made herself breathe, and she made herself think.

Is it true?

She did not know. She could not see anything. The sound did not come again. It might have been a mouse. A settling beam. The wind.

She found that her lips were moving.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

It was a verse her mother had taught her when she was afraid of the dark. When she was very small, before the moon night-light. Before everything. Her mother had said it like a little song, sitting on the edge of her bed, stroking her hair. *Thy word is a lamp. Thy word is a light.*

Maris said it out loud, softly, into the cold attic.

Then she said it again, louder.

Nothing answered. Nothing moved. The dressmaker's dummy stood in its sheet. The shadows lay quiet at the end of the long room.

At 10:22, she heard Kincaid's truck in the lane. She did not get up off the trunk until she heard Corbin's voice calling her name from the bottom of the stairs.

* * *

> *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*

Corbin came up the attic stairs first, ducking his head under the low beam. Kincaid came behind him, carrying a small black case and pulling on a pair of blue nitrile gloves.

They told her in a few short sentences. Orson Vale. The hospital in Harmon in 2014. *I wrote it down. All of it. So my girl will know.* And *where the Book will keep it.*

Maris listened without a word. When they were done she sat on the steamer trunk with her hands pressed together between her knees, and for a long moment she could not speak.

"He wrote it for me," she said finally.

"That's what Orson says."

"And he never told me. He was dying, and he knew what was in this house, and he never—" Her voice broke off. She looked at the box with her mother's handwriting on it. "He just hid it. And hoped."

"Maybe he hoped you'd never need it," Corbin said gently.

Kincaid had crouched beside the row of boxes. He was not looking at the labels. He was looking at the tape.

"Mrs. Bellamy," he said. "When was the last time anybody opened these?"

"The week after Daddy's funeral. My mother packed them. Garrick and I carried them up." She frowned. "Why?"

Kincaid pointed with one gloved finger. The box marked *DANIEL — PERSONAL* had been sealed with the old brown paper tape that people used to buy in rolls at the hardware store, the kind you wet with a sponge. It had gone brittle and pale with age. And down the center of it, cutting cleanly through the old tape from one end to the other, ran a straight slit. Someone had sliced it open with a blade. And then, over the slit, someone had laid a fresh strip of clear plastic packing tape, shiny and new and perfectly smooth.

The other three boxes were untouched.

The attic seemed to grow colder.

"Somebody's been up here," Kincaid said quietly.

Maris thought of the soft, dry scrape she had heard at the far end of the attic. She did not say anything. But she looked toward the shadows beyond the dressmaker's dummy, and so, after a moment, did Kincaid.

He photographed the tape from several angles. Then he took a small folding knife from his pocket and cut the new tape and lifted the flaps.

* * *

The first thing Maris saw was the coat.

It lay folded on top, a heavy canvas work coat, brown, faded nearly to tan at the elbows and shoulders, the corduroy collar worn shiny. She knew it instantly, the way she had known her father's face in the photograph. It was the coat he wore in the picture. The coat he had worn every winter of her childhood. She could see him in it, standing in the kitchen doorway at six in the morning with frost on his shoulders and his lunch pail in his hand, leaning down to kiss her mother goodbye.

She reached out before she could stop herself and laid her hand on it.

It still smelled faintly of him. Machine oil and pipe tobacco and cold air. Eleven years in a box in an attic, and it still smelled like her father.

She did not cry. She would think about that later and be surprised. She only knelt there on the dusty floorboards with her hand flat on the old canvas, the way you might rest your hand on someone's back while they slept.

Kincaid lifted the coat out gently and laid it across the trunk. Beneath it were other things. A plastic ID badge from the tool-and-die plant, with a photograph of Daniel Whitlock at fifty, gray-haired and squinting. A pair of drugstore reading glasses, the very ones he had refused to admit he needed. A framed school picture of Maris at nine, missing a front tooth. A Father's Day card she had made him in crayon. His wedding ring, threaded on a shoelace.

And a brass watch chain. Just the chain. Coiled in a small cardboard box, with nothing on the end of it.

Corbin picked it up and looked at it for a long time without saying anything.

"That was Granddaddy Whitlock's," Maris said. "His pocket watch. Daddy always said he lost the watch somewhere. Years ago. Before I was grown." She frowned. "He never would say where."

Corbin set the chain back in its box very carefully.

There was no Bible in the box.

Kincaid lifted out every item, one by one, and set it on the trunk. He checked the corners. He felt along the bottom. There was nothing else.

"It's not here," Maris whispered. "Someone took it. Whoever opened this box—"

"Wait." Corbin was looking at the coat.

He lifted it from the trunk and held it up by the shoulders. It hung heavy and stiff from his hands. And there, on the inside of the left breast, was a deep patch pocket, the kind workingmen used to keep their glasses or their pencils or their cigarettes.

Corbin slid his hand inside.

When he drew it out, he was holding a small green book.

It was about the size of a deck of cards, bound in cloth that had once been bright green and was now faded to the color of old moss. The spine was cracked nearly in two. The corners were rounded and soft from years of being carried against a man's heart. On the cover, in letters worn almost smooth, were the words THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Maris took it from him with both hands.

It was so light. She had forgotten how small it was. When she was little it had seemed to her like a big, important book, the book her father held close to his face in the early mornings under the little light. Now it fit in her palm.

She opened the front cover. On the flyleaf, in faded blue ink, in a woman's careful handwriting she did not know, was an inscription.

To Danny. You'll want it someday. Maybe not soon. But someday. — Mother, June 1977.

Her grandmother. Who had died before Maris was born.

She turned the pages slowly. They were soft and thin as tissue, and almost every one of them was marked. Underlines in pencil. Stars in the margins. Brackets. Small dates written in her father's cramped, slanting hand. Some of the dates went back to the 1990s. Most of them came after.

"Mrs. Bellamy," said Kincaid quietly. "Look at the back."

She turned the little book over and opened the back cover.

The heavy paper glued to the inside of the cover, the endpaper, was not flat. It bulged very slightly in the center, as if something had been slipped behind it. And along the bottom edge, where the endpaper met the cover board, a slit had been cut, a long, careful, straight slit. Then the slit had been sewn shut again with tiny, painstaking stitches in heavy black thread.

Machinist's stitches. Small and even and perfectly spaced. The stitches of a man who was used to working with his hands.

The black thread was intact. Whoever had opened the box had not found this. Or had not thought to look.

Maris held the little book in her trembling hands and looked at her father's stitches for a long time. Then she held it out to Kincaid.

"Will you do it?" she whispered. "I can't."

Kincaid took out his folding knife. He worked carefully, cutting one stitch at a time, the way a surgeon removes sutures. When the last stitch was cut, he slid two gloved fingers gently into the opening and drew out what was inside.

Several sheets of thin, onionskin paper, the kind people once used for airmail letters, folded small, many times, into a tight square.

He unfolded them slowly on the lid of the steamer trunk, beside the canvas coat.

Five pages. Covered on both sides, edge to edge, in tiny, cramped, slanting handwriting. Her father's handwriting.

Across the top of the first page, in the same hand, was a date.

September 3, 2014.

And beneath it, three words.

For my Maris.

* * *

> *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*

She read it sitting on the steamer trunk under the round attic window, with her father's coat across her knees and the pale November light falling over her shoulder onto the thin pages. Corbin and Kincaid stood a little way off and did not speak. She read it slowly, because the handwriting was small and cramped and in places shaky, the hand of a sick man near the end. And she read it twice.

* * *

For my Maris.

If you are reading this, then I was wrong, and it came back. I am so sorry. I prayed every night for eighteen years that you would never need these pages. I hope I am writing them for nobody. I hope they stay sewn up in this little book until the cloth rots. But I am dying, honey, and I cannot leave you with nothing.

So here is the truth. All of it that I can stand to put on paper.

In the fall of 1994, when you were nine years old, I joined a group of people who met on Thursday nights to try to talk to something that was not God.

I want to say that plain, right at the start, so you do not have to read between any lines. I knew what we were doing. Maybe not at first. At first Ambrose Lark called it a study group and I let myself believe him. But by the spring of 1995 I knew. And I kept going.

There were nine of us. I will not write all their names. Most of them are dead now, and the ones who aren't have their own consciences to answer to. We called ourselves the Circle of Nine. We met at the old Hollis place out on Ridley Bottoms Road.

You will want to know why. I have asked myself that every day for twenty years.

Your mother was sick that winter. Her lungs. You won't remember how bad it was. The doctors talked to me in hallways in low voices. And the plant was laying men off, a dozen at a time, and I didn't know from one Friday to the next if I'd have a paycheck. And you were nine, and you had nightmares, and you would come into our room in the night and climb in between us, and I would lie there in the dark with you breathing against my arm and think, I don't know how to keep her safe. I don't know what is coming.

I had prayed. I want you to know that. I sat in that pew at First Methodist every Sunday and I begged God to tell me what was coming. And He didn't answer me the way I wanted. And Ambrose came to me one day at the plant gate and said, Danny, I know someone who will.

I told myself I could go along without it touching me. That I could sit at that table and listen and ask my two little questions and come home and still be a churchgoing man. I thought my heart was mine to keep. I thought I could go into that house and come out again the same.

I was wrong.

I will tell you about the last night, because you need to know what it was, and because I have never told a living soul.

November 21, 1996. A Thursday. There were nine chairs in a circle in Agnes Hollis's front parlor. Nine white candles on the floor. Nine names painted on the boards inside the circle, and mine was one of them. Your daddy's name, painted on a floor in that house. In the middle was a wooden box, and each of us put something of our own inside it. I put in my daddy's pocket watch. I never got it back.

Ambrose locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then he read something none of us could understand, and the room went cold.

Then there was a voice.

Maris, I have tried for eighteen years to describe it and I can't. It did not come from anybody in that room. It did not come from the hallway or the windows or the floor. It came from nowhere and everywhere. It came from right behind your shoulder, close enough that you felt it. And it was kind.

That is the thing I most need you to understand. It was kind and soft and patient, and it sounded like it loved us better than anybody ever had.

That is how you will know it, if it ever comes to you. Not by how frightening it is. By how much it sounds like love.

It knew things. It knew your name. It knew about your night-light shaped like the moon. It said you were afraid of the dark, and then it said, clever girl.

I will not write down what it asked of us at the end, or what was answered. Some words should not be put on paper where a child might someday find them. I will only tell you that it asked, and that every one of us was asked, and that I have been on my knees about it every night since.

Then every candle in the room went out at the same instant. It was 3:17 in the morning.

A man died that night. I won't tell you how. I swore I'd never tell, and I'm too near the end to start breaking promises now. I'll answer for it soon enough.

I drove home before dawn and came up the stairs and you were asleep in your bed with the moon light on. And I knelt down beside you and tried to pray, and all I could say was, Not her. Please, not her.

And then, just before dawn, I heard something in your room that I will not write down. Not even here. Not even for you.

That is why I sat in the hall, honey. All those years. That is why I never let your light go out. I was not a worried old man. I was standing guard. I didn't know what else to do. I could not undo what I had done. I could not close what I had opened. All I could do was sit outside your door with this little book open on my knee and read it out loud in a whisper until the sun came up.

And I want you to know this too, because it is the most important thing I will ever tell you. It never came through your door. Not once. Not in eighteen years. It knocked. It walked the hall some nights. But it never came in.
I have thought about why. I believe it was because of this book. Not the paper. Not the cloth. What is written in it. I came back to the Lord on my knees in that hallway, Maris. Not the Sunday kind of coming back. The real kind. I told Him everything. I asked Him to forgive me, and I believe He did, though I have never felt I deserved it. And I asked Him to stand in your doorway where I couldn't. He did.
If it comes back after I am gone, do not do what I did. Do not try to bargain with it. Do not try to make it go away with tricks. Do not go to that house. Not ever. Go to a preacher, a real one, one who believes in the devil and is not afraid to say so out loud. Open your Bible and read it in every room of the house. And when it talks to you, do not answer it. Answer God instead.
Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. I did not believe that when I walked into that parlor. I believe it now. I have staked my life and yours on it.
I love you more than I ever knew how to say. I was a coward and a fool, and I was your daddy, and I am sorry.
—Daddy
P.S. I have tried for eighteen years to understand what we did out there. I think, in the end, it comes down to one thing.
We thought we were opening a door we could close whenever we wanted.
* * *

> *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*

Maris did not see it the first time through.
She was crying too hard by the end. She read the last line through a blur, *We thought we were opening a door we could close whenever we wanted,* and folded the onionskin against her chest and bent over her father's coat and wept, finally, the way she had not wept at his funeral. Corbin came and sat beside her on the trunk and put his arm around her shoulders and did not say a word.
It was Kincaid who saw it.
He had picked up the last page from where it had slipped onto the coat. He was holding it carefully by the edges, in his gloved fingers, turned toward the light from the round window. And Maris, lifting her head at last, saw his face change.
"Mrs. Bellamy," he said quietly. "There's something else on this page."
She wiped her eyes. "What?"
He held it out to her, still by the edges.
Beneath her father's last line, beneath *whenever we wanted,* there was a space of perhaps an inch of blank onionskin. And below that space, at the very bottom of the page, someone had written four more words.
Not in her father's hand.
Not in his cramped, slanting, shaky print. Not in the tall, narrow, ruler-straight capitals of the mirror and the envelope, either. This was something else. A small, flowing, elegant script, all loops and long tails, the kind of handwriting taught with copybooks and steel pens in country schools a hundred years ago. The ink was black. Not faded. Not the soft blue of her father's ballpoint. Black and crisp and sharp-edged, as if it had been written that morning.
Doors work both ways.
The attic was utterly silent.
Maris stared at the words. Then she looked up at Kincaid. Then at the little green Testament lying on the trunk with its back cover open, and the neat black stitches Kincaid had cut one by one, every one of them whole when he started.

"Sheriff," she said. Her voice was very small. "Those stitches."
"I know."
"They weren't cut. Nobody opened it. You cut them yourself. Just now."
"I know," Kincaid said again.
He was holding the page very still. Maris saw that his gloved hands were not quite steady.
"Could your father have written that?" Corbin asked her gently. "In a different hand? Disguised?"
Maris shook her head slowly. "Daddy couldn't write cursive. He printed everything. He used to say they quit teaching him penmanship in the third grade because his was so bad."
Kincaid looked at the four black words for a long time. Then he slid the page into a clear plastic sleeve, sealed it, and wrote the date and time on the label in block capitals. His hand was steady again by the time he finished. Maris thought he had made it steady by force.
He did not say anything about it at all. Not in the attic. Not on the stairs. Not in the yard. Maris noticed that. She thought that Bramwell Kincaid, who had a box on his form for everything, had just found something he did not have a box for, and did not yet know what to do with it.
* * *
She showed Keaton that evening.
She had argued with herself about it all afternoon. He was fifteen. It was his grandfather's confession. Some of it was not fit for a boy.
But it was his grandfather. And it was his room that something had been standing in. And Corbin, when she asked him, had only said quietly, "He's going to need to know what he's fighting, Maris. Your father thought so."
So after supper at the parsonage, when Diane had gone up to bed and the dishes were done and the house was quiet, Maris sat down across from her son at the Thornes' kitchen table, with Corbin in the chair at the end, and slid the photocopies across to him. Kincaid had kept the originals.
"This is from Grandpa," she said. "He wrote it before he died. For me. But I think it's for you, too."
Keaton looked at her for a long moment. Then he bent his head and read.
He read slowly. Maris watched his face. She watched it go still at *a group of people who met on Thursday nights to try to talk to something that was not God.* She watched his jaw tighten at *it sounded like it loved us better than anybody ever had.* She watched him stop, for a long time, at *That is why I sat in the hall, honey.* His eyes were wet when he turned the page.
She watched him come to the end. *We thought we were opening a door we could close whenever we wanted.*
And then she watched him read the line beneath it.
Keaton went white.
Not pale. White. All the blood went out of his face at once, the way it had the night he sat bolt upright in bed screaming. His hand came up off the table and stopped in midair, trembling. He was staring at the four words at the bottom of the photocopy as if they might rise up off the page.
"Keaton?"
"That's what he says," Keaton whispered.
The kitchen clock ticked.
"The man in my room," Keaton said. "The tall one. That's what he says. *Doors work both ways.*" His voice cracked. "I told you he said stuff about doors. I told you I couldn't remember all of it. But that's it. That's exactly it. Those exact words."
Maris reached for his hand. It was ice cold.
"He says it every time," Keaton said. "Every single time. Right at the end. Right before he goes. He puts his hand flat on the wall over my bed, where he knocks. And he leans down. And he says it real soft, right in my ear. Like he's telling me a secret. Like it's a joke only the two of us know." He swallowed hard. "*Doors work both ways, Keaton.*"
No one moved.

"How did it get in Grandpa's book?" Keaton whispered. "If it was sewn up. If nobody opened it. How did it get there?"
Maris had no answer. She looked at Corbin.
Corbin was quiet for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was low and steady.
"I don't know, son," he said. "I'm not going to pretend I do." He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "But I'll tell you what I do know. That thing wants you to believe the door your grandfather opened is still open. That it can come and go as it pleases. That it has a right to stand in your room." He tapped the photocopy. "And it's telling you a half-truth. Doors do work both ways. That's true. Things can come in through an open door."
He slid his own worn Bible across the table and opened it near the very back.
"But you know what else works both ways? A door can be shut. From the inside. By whoever owns the house." He turned the Bible toward Keaton and laid one finger on a verse. "And there's Someone else who stands at doors and knocks, Keaton. Jesus says it right here. *Behold, I stand at the door, and knock.*"
Keaton looked down at the page.
"Notice the difference," Corbin said softly. "That thing in your room knocks on the wall, and then it comes in whether you want it or not. It doesn't ask. It doesn't wait. It just takes." He paused. "Jesus knocks, and then He waits. *If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in.* He doesn't break in. He never has. He never will. He waits for you to open it."
Keaton stared at the verse for a long time.
He did not say anything. He did not close his eyes or bow his head. But when Maris went up to bed an hour later, she passed the half-open door of the little room under the eaves and saw him sitting on the edge of the bed in the lamplight, with Corbin's Bible open on his knees, reading.
The way his grandfather used to sit.
* * *

> *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. — 1 John 4:4*

Maris could not sleep.
She lay in the narrow bed under the eaves at the parsonage with the lamp on and her father's little green Testament on the quilt beside her. Kincaid had kept the onionskin pages, sealed in their plastic sleeves, but he had let her keep the book. He had held it out to her in the yard that afternoon without being asked, and something in his face had told her he understood what it meant.
She picked it up now and held it in both hands.
It was so small. It weighed almost nothing. And her father had carried it against his heart every day for eighteen years, in the inside pocket of a canvas coat, the way another man might carry a pistol.
She thought about him sitting in the upstairs hallway on Copper Creek Road in the dark, with his back against the wall outside her door and this little book open on his knee, whispering the words aloud until the sun came up. Night after night. Year after year. While she slept inside with her moon light burning, never knowing. Never once wondering why.
I was not a worried old man. I was standing guard.
She had been so angry at him in Elowen Pryce's kitchen. She could still feel the shape of that anger in her chest, like a bruise. *He lied to me. My whole life.* And it was true. He had. He had gone where God told him not to go, and he had done it with his eyes open, and he had brought something home with him that had followed her for thirty years and was standing now in her son's room.
All that was true.
And it was also true that he had sat in that hallway.
Maris turned the thin pages slowly. Matthew. Mark. Luke. John. Underlines everywhere. Stars. Brackets. Small dates in the margins in his cramped, slanting hand. Some of them she could read. *3/4/97. 12/24/01. 6/18/09.* Next to the parable of the prodigal son, a single word: *Me.* Next to the

woman caught in adultery, *Go, and sin no more,* underlined three times. Next to the thief on the cross, *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,* he had written *Please.*

She turned past Acts. Romans. The letters. And near the very back, in the first letter of John, the little book fell open in her hands by itself, the way her father's big King James always fell open to the Psalms. The spine was creased there more deeply than anywhere else. The page was soft and gray from his thumb.

First John, chapter four.

One verse had been underlined so hard and so many times, over so many years, that the pencil had worn the paper thin and nearly through.

Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

And in the margin beside it, two dates.

The first was old and faded, in a hurried hand, as if written in a moving truck or by a dim light.

11/22/96.

The night of the last gathering. The night every candle went out at 3:17. The night a man died on the parlor floor of the Hollis place.

He had come home that night, she understood, and opened this little book, and found this verse. Or it had found him.

The second date was newer. Shakier. Written in the thin, careful hand of a dying man.

9/3/14.

The same day he had written the confession and sewn it inside the back cover. And beside that second date, he had written one more word.

Still.

Maris sat with the little book open in her hands for a long time.

Greater is he that is in you. Eighteen years after the worst night of his life, dying of cancer in a hospital bed in Harmon, her father had opened his Bible to the same verse he had clung to on that first terrible morning. And he had written in the margin that it was still true.

Still.

She found that she was crying again. Quietly, this time. Not the hard, shaking grief of the attic. Something gentler and deeper. Something that felt, very faintly, like the first rain after a long drought.

She slid off the bed and knelt on the braided rug beside it, the way she had knelt as a child, the way her father had knelt by her bed that first night in 1996.

"Lord," she whispered. "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to forgive him. I don't even know if I'm supposed to." She pressed the little book against her chest. "But You forgave him. He says so. He says he told You everything, and You took him back. And if You could do that—" Her voice broke. "Then help me do it too. Please. I don't want to carry this. I've carried enough."

She stayed on her knees for a long time.

She did not hear any answer. But when she finally climbed back into bed and turned off the lamp, she found that the anger in her chest had gone quiet. Not gone. But quiet. Like a dog that has finally stopped barking at a door.

She fell asleep with her father's Testament in her hand.

At 3:17, she did not wake.

* * *

But eleven miles away, on Copper Creek Road, Lyle Purcell did.

The old man was sitting in the dark in his front room across the road, as he had sat most nights for weeks, with his bad hip propped on a footstool and a cold cup of coffee at his elbow and the radio murmuring low. He had promised Maris he would watch. He was a man who kept his promises.

And at seventeen minutes past three in the morning, he saw the porch light of the Whitlock house come on.

No car in the drive. No one on the lane. The house had been dark and empty since the sheriff's truck left that afternoon. Lyle had watched it all evening. He had watched it at midnight and at one and at two. The porch light burned yellow in the frosty dark.

Then, one by one, as he watched, the other lights came on. The front hall. The parlor. The kitchen. The window at the top of the stairs. And last of all, the small window at the far end of the second floor, the one with the yellow curtains. The little bedroom that had been Maris's when she was a girl.

Lyle Purcell stood up slowly from his chair, leaning on his cane, and went to his own front window and stood there with his heart pounding.

Across the road, every light in Daniel Whitlock's house was burning.

And faint and far away, carried across the frozen yard on the still night air, so faint he would never afterward be sure he had truly heard it, came a sound.

Three slow knocks.

Not on the front door.

From somewhere deep inside the empty house.

Chapter 11: Restraining Order Against the Devil

> *For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds. — 2 Corinthians 10:4*

Lyle Purcell called the sheriff's office at 3:24 in the morning. The dispatcher, a sleepy young man named Travis who had only been on the overnight shift for six weeks, wrote it down exactly as the old man said it.

Caller reports all lights on at 4410 Copper Creek Rd. Residence unoccupied. Caller states he heard knocking inside. Caller states "Tell the sheriff it's that house again."

Hollister was there in nineteen minutes. Kincaid was there in thirty, still buttoning his shirt.

Every light in the house was burning. Porch, hall, parlor, kitchen, stairs, every bedroom upstairs, even the bare bulb in the attic. The house blazed on its hill in the black November night like a ship lit up for a party, and not a soul was in it.

The doors were locked. Front, back, cellar. All three of the new deadbolts Earl Gifford's men had installed, thrown and secure. No windows broken. No windows open. Kincaid walked every room with his flashlight and his sidearm unsnapped and found nothing. Not a footprint. Not a cupboard door ajar. Not a dish out of place.

Nothing, except two things.

The first was in the attic. The canvas coat Maris had left folded across the steamer trunk that afternoon was no longer on the trunk. Kincaid found it downstairs. It was hanging on the hook beside the kitchen door, the hook where, Maris would tell him the next day, her father had always hung it when he came home from the plant. Its collar had been turned up, the way a man turns up his collar against the cold.

The second was in the little bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall. Keaton's room. Maris's room, once. On the shelf above the narrow iron bed, behind the stack of Keaton's paperbacks, the cheap plastic night-light shaped like a crescent moon was glowing.

It had been burned out for twenty years. Maris had told Kincaid so herself, the very first night, standing in this doorway. *It hasn't worked since I was in high school. I could never throw it away.*

Kincaid stood in the doorway and looked at it for a long time. It gave off a soft, warm, yellow-white light, faint and steady. The kind of light a child falls asleep to.

He reached over and unplugged it from the wall.

It went on glowing.

He stood holding the plug in his hand and watched the little plastic moon burn on the shelf with no electricity going into it at all, and he felt something cold move slowly up the back of his neck.

Then, as he watched, it went dark.

Not flickering. Not fading. It simply went out, all at once, the way a candle goes out when someone closes their hand over it. And in the sudden darkness of the little room, lit now only by the hall light behind him, Kincaid heard Hollister call up the stairs.

"Sheriff? Everything all right up there?"

Kincaid did not answer right away. He was looking at the clock on the nightstand.

3:17.

No. That was impossible. Purcell had called at 3:24. It was nearly four o'clock now. He looked at his watch. 3:58.

He looked back at the clock on the nightstand.

3:17. Its red digits steady, unblinking. Stopped.

"Sheriff?"

"I'm fine," Kincaid called. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. "Come up here and bag this lamp, Wade. And the clock."

* * *

The lab results came back that afternoon.

Kincaid had called in a favor with a friend at the state crime lab in the capital, a forensic document examiner named Patricia Okafor who owed him for a missing-persons case in 2019. He had driven the onionskin page up himself at six that morning, three hours each way, and stood in her office while she looked at the four words under a stereo microscope.

Her report was waiting in his email when he got back.

He read it at his desk with the door closed.

The questioned entry ("Doors work both ways") is written in an iron-gall ink. Iron-gall inks were in common use for writing with steel dip pens through the early twentieth century but have been almost entirely supplanted by synthetic inks since approximately the 1930s. The ink is consistent with commercial formulations of the period 1890–1925.

Despite the age-consistent composition, the ink shows no evidence of the oxidation, browning, haloing, or substrate degradation that typically appear in iron-gall inks within months of application. In my professional opinion, the entry was made very recently. I am unable to reconcile these two findings.

The handwriting style is a form of American business script consistent with copybook instruction circa 1880–1920.

The ink of the preceding entries (blue ballpoint, consistent with the stated date of September 2014) was applied first. The questioned entry overlies the paper surface undisturbed. There is no indication that the questioned entry was made on a separate occasion when the document was accessible.

And beneath that, a personal note, not part of the official report.

Bram—I've been doing this for twenty-six years. I don't know what you've got here. I don't think I want to know. Please don't send me any more of it. —P.

Kincaid read it three times.

Then he pulled up the fingerprint report from the smoke detectors in Maris Bellamy's front hall. The partial thumbprint Alvarado had lifted from the cover of the downstairs detector the morning of the burned Bible.

It matched the thumbprint from the bathroom mirror.

Same thumb. Same person. No match in any database in the country.

Kincaid sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

A person had been in that house. A person with a thumb had climbed up and taken the batteries out of two smoke detectors, and touched a fogged mirror, and cut the tape on a box in the attic. That was real. That was evidence. That was a crime.

And a little plastic moon had glowed for five minutes with its plug in his hand. And four words had appeared in hundred-year-old ink inside a book that had been sewn shut for eleven years.

He had two cases. And they would not stay separate. Every time he tried to pull them apart, they wound back together, like two ropes braided into one.

He was tired. He had not slept more than four hours a night in two weeks. The county commission had already called twice asking why the sheriff's department was running overtime patrols on Copper Creek Road. Garrick Bellamy's lawyer had sent a letter accusing the department of harassment. And the district attorney, a smooth young man named Prescott with political ambitions, had stopped him in the courthouse hallway that morning and asked, with a perfectly straight face, whether it was true that the sheriff was investigating a haunted house.

Kincaid got up, put on his hat, and walked out of the office without telling anyone where he was going. He was going to have it out with the preacher.

* * *

> *Why standest thou afar off, O LORD? why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble? — Psalm 10:1*

Bramwell Kincaid had not prayed since he was nineteen years old.

He did not think about it often. It was not a wound he picked at. It was more like a bone that had been broken once and set crooked and healed that way, so long ago that he had stopped noticing the limp. But he thought about it now, driving across town toward Mill Road with his jaw clenched and the lab report folded in his shirt pocket, because the preacher was going to bring it up. Preachers always did, sooner or later. They looked at a man like Kincaid and saw a lost sheep, and they could not help themselves.

His father had been an usher at Calvary Baptist.

That was the first thing people in Henley County had known about Royce Kincaid, back in the seventies and eighties. That he stood at the back of Calvary Baptist every Sunday morning in a brown suit with a carnation in the lapel and handed out bulletins and shook hands and called every widow *ma'am.* People liked him. He was quick with a joke. He was generous at the offering plate. When old Mrs. Tibbs's porch roof fell in, it was Royce Kincaid who organized the men's group to fix it.

The second thing people knew about Royce Kincaid, they did not say out loud. They saw the sunglasses his wife wore in December. They saw the long sleeves in July. They heard the shouting from the little white house on Poplar Street on Saturday nights, and they turned up their own televisions, and on Sunday mornings they shook Royce Kincaid's hand at the back of Calvary Baptist and called him brother.

Bramwell's mother had prayed every night of her life. He could still see her, kneeling beside her bed in a faded flannel nightgown, her lips moving, a little red New Testament with a broken spine clasped against her chest the way a Catholic woman might hold her rosary. She prayed for her husband. She prayed that God would change him. She prayed that God would soften his heart and take away the drinking and the rage. She prayed for twenty-two years.

She quoted Proverbs at her son at the breakfast table, after the bad nights, with her split lip. *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart. The name of the LORD is a strong tower. He that is first in his own cause seemeth just.* She believed every word.

When Bramwell was nineteen, home from his first semester at the community college for Christmas, his mother fell down the cellar stairs of the little white house on Poplar Street and broke her neck.

That was what the county sheriff wrote in his report. *Fell.* The sheriff was a deacon at Calvary Baptist. He had known Royce Kincaid for thirty years. He did not ask many questions. Royce wept at the funeral. Half the congregation wept with him.

Bramwell stood at the graveside in his only suit and looked at his father weeping and knew. He had always known. He just could not prove it.

That night, in his mother's empty bedroom, he picked up the little red New Testament from her nightstand and looked at it for a long time. Then he put it in a drawer and never opened it again.

He did not decide not to believe in God. It was not that clean. He simply looked at twenty-two years of his mother on her knees, praying for a man to change who never changed, praying for protection that never came, and he could not find a single place where God had shown up. Not one. Not on any of those Saturday nights. Not at the top of those cellar stairs.

Why standest thou afar off, O LORD? The psalmist had asked it three thousand years ago. Bramwell Kincaid had asked it once, at nineteen, alone in his dead mother's bedroom. And when no answer came, he stopped asking.

Two years later he entered the police academy.

He did not tell anyone why. He did not need to. He had decided, the way a young man decides things, that if God would not stand between frightened women and the men who hurt them, then somebody had to. Somebody with a badge and a gun and a law that did not care who ushered at what church. Somebody who would ask the questions.

That was what the law was for. That was what he had given his life to. Not prayer. Paper. Evidence. Warrants and handcuffs and protective orders with a judge's name at the bottom. Things that worked. And for twenty-three years, mostly, they had.

Royce Kincaid had died in 2011, of liver failure, in a nursing home in Harmon. His son had not visited him once. The man had never been charged with anything.

* * *

The first time Kincaid met Garrick Bellamy, in Judge Ames's courtroom, he had felt a jolt of recognition so strong it had nearly made him sick. The calm, sorrowful face. The deacon's suit. The voice explaining, reasonably, patiently, how *fragile* his poor wife was.

He had seen that face before. He had seen it weeping at a graveside.

He had sworn, standing in that courthouse hallway, that this time somebody was going to put a stop to it. This time the paper would work. This time the law would stand between the woman and the man. And it had. Garrick Bellamy had not been near that house. Kincaid had checked every inch of his alibi and it held.

But the woman was still afraid. The boy was still screaming in the night. Something was still walking those halls in hard-soled shoes, and putting coats back on hooks, and lighting plastic moons that had no power, and writing in hundred-year-old ink inside books sewn shut.

And Kincaid's paper could not touch it. Not one word of it.

He pulled into the gravel lot of New Hope Chapel too fast and stopped too hard, and gravel sprayed against the side of the church. He sat for a moment with his hands on the wheel, breathing.

He knew what he was feeling. He had felt it once before, at nineteen, standing at a grave.

It was the feeling of watching something you believed in fail.

* * *

> *Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. — Ephesians 6:13*

Corbin was at his desk working on Sunday's sermon when the office door opened without a knock. He looked up. Bramwell Kincaid stood in the doorway in his brown department jacket, his hat in his hand, his face gray and drawn and set like concrete. He did not say hello. He crossed the cluttered room in three strides, took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket, and dropped it on the desk on top of the sermon notes.

"Read that," he said.

Corbin read it. The iron-gall ink. *Consistent with commercial formulations of the period 1890–1925. In my professional opinion, the entry was made very recently. I am unable to reconcile these two findings.* And the handwritten note at the bottom. *Please don't send me any more of it.*

He set the paper down slowly.

"Last night," Kincaid said, "every light in Maris Bellamy's house came on by itself. All of them. Doors locked, nobody inside. Her daddy's coat walked downstairs from the attic and hung itself on the hook

by the kitchen door. And a night-light that's been dead for twenty years lit up on the shelf over the boy's bed and kept burning after I pulled the plug out of the wall with my own hand." His voice was flat and very controlled. "Then it went out. And the clock on the nightstand stopped at 3:17. And it's still stopped. Hollister checked the batteries. They're fine."

Corbin said nothing.

"I've also got a thumbprint," Kincaid went on. "From the smoke detector and the mirror. Same thumb. A real person. Somebody who's been in that house at least twice, who doesn't exist in any database in America. And I've got a county commissioner asking why I'm burning overtime on Copper Creek Road, and Garrick Bellamy's lawyer threatening to sue me for harassment, and the district attorney of this county asking me in the courthouse hallway, in front of two clerks and a bailiff, whether I'm investigating a haunted house."

He put both hands flat on the desk and leaned over it.

"So tell me, Pastor," he said. "Tell me what's going on in that house. Because I'm out of boxes."

Corbin looked up at him for a long moment.

Then he took off his reading glasses, folded them, and set them on the desk.

"I think," he said carefully, "that you've got two things going on at once. I think you've got a human being, flesh and blood, who's been in and out of that house. Someone who knows about the Circle of Nine, who found that photograph, who's lighting candles at the Hollis place. That's your thumbprint. That's your crime. And I think you should keep chasing that person with everything you've got."

"And the other thing?"

"And the other thing," said Corbin, "is not flesh and blood."

Kincaid straightened up. His face did not change, but something behind it did.

"Paul writes about it in Ephesians," Corbin said. "*We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.* I've preached on that verse for thirty-one years, Sheriff. I'll be honest with you. I'm not sure I ever really believed it until this month." He paused. "Twenty-nine years ago, nine people in this county opened a door to something. Something that's been patient. Something that remembers. And now it's using whatever it can find, including a living person with a living thumb, to frighten that woman and that boy until they give it what it wants."

"Which is what?"

"I don't know yet. The ninth promise. Whatever that means."

Kincaid stared at him.

"And what's your plan?" he said. "For the part that isn't flesh and blood?"

"Prayer," Corbin said simply. "Scripture. Standing firm. Refusing to give it any more ground. Helping Maris and Keaton stop living by fear and start living by faith. The same thing Christians have done against the enemy for two thousand years."

The radiator clanked in the silence.

Then Kincaid laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. It was short and harsh and had nothing in it but exhaustion.

"Prayer," he said.

"Yes."

"You want me to tell the county commission that the sheriff's department is fighting this with *prayer*."

He turned away and paced to the window and back, his hat crushed in one fist. "My mother prayed, Pastor. Did you know that? Every night for twenty-two years. On her knees. With her little red Bible. She prayed for God to protect her from a man who went to church every Sunday and put her in the hospital every other Saturday." His voice was rising now. "And you know where it got her? At the bottom of the cellar stairs with her neck broken. And him crying at the funeral with half of Calvary Baptist patting him on the back."

Corbin went very still.

"That's what prayer did," Kincaid said. "Nothing. That's why I wear this." He jabbed a finger at the badge on his chest. "Because somebody has to actually *do* something. Somebody has to stand between people like Maris Bellamy and the things that want to hurt them. With a law. With a judge. With a piece of paper that says *stay away* and a man with a gun to back it up."

He stopped in front of the desk, breathing hard.

"And I did it," he said. "I did my job. I got her the order. I checked every inch of that husband's alibi. I put a car at the end of her road every night for two weeks. I did everything the law lets me do, and it doesn't *matter.*" His voice cracked. "Because whatever's in that house doesn't care about the law. It doesn't read court orders. It wrote her a message on the bathroom mirror telling her so. *The order does not cover me.*"

He threw his hat down on the desk.

"So what do you want me to do, Pastor?" he said. "Get a judge to sign a restraining order against the devil?"

The words rang in the little office.

Corbin did not answer right away. He looked up at the tall, gray, exhausted man standing over his desk, and he saw past the badge and the jacket and the anger to the nineteen-year-old boy standing alone at a grave. And something in his chest broke a little.

He stood up. He came around the desk, slowly, so that there was nothing between them.

"No," he said quietly. "You don't take the devil to court."

Kincaid stared at him. His jaw worked.

"Then what do you do?"

Corbin held his gaze.

"You take your stand in Christ."

* * *

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

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Kincaid stood with his fists at his sides and his chest rising and falling, staring at Corbin as though the older man had spoken in a foreign language. The radiator ticked. Outside the window, the bare maple in the church parking lot moved in the wind.

"That's it?" he said finally. His voice was hoarse. "That's the answer? *Take your stand in Christ?* It sounds like something off a bumper sticker."

"It does," Corbin agreed. "Most true things do, if you say them fast enough."

He did not go back behind the desk. He leaned against the front of it instead, close to Kincaid, his arms folded.

"Let me tell you what it means," he said. "And then you can decide whether it's a bumper sticker."

Kincaid did not answer. But he did not leave.

"You've spent your whole life," Corbin said slowly, "trying to stand between people and the things that want to hurt them. You're good at it. God knows this county needs men like you. And I want to say something very plainly, because I think somebody should have said it to you a long time ago." He held Kincaid's gaze. "The law matters. That badge matters. That order Judge Ames signed matters. Paul says the man who bears the sword of justice is *the minister of God to thee for good.* That's in Romans. You're not God's enemy, Sheriff. Whether you pray or not, you've been doing a piece of His work for twenty-three years."

Kincaid's jaw tightened.

"But the law was made to deal with flesh and blood," Corbin went on. "It can stop Garrick Bellamy. It can arrest whoever owns that thumb. It can't touch the other thing. Not because the law is weak. Because it was never meant to. You can't serve a warrant on a spirit. You can't put the devil in handcuffs." He shook his head. "And when you try, when you keep throwing paper and patrols and

overtime at something that isn't flesh and blood, it wears you down until there's nothing left. Look at yourself. You haven't slept in two weeks."

Kincaid said nothing. He did not need to.

"So what do you do?" Corbin said. "You don't take the devil to court, because he doesn't answer to any court you or I can convene. He answers to only one Judge. And that Judge already ruled on him. Two thousand years ago, on a hill outside Jerusalem. Paul says Christ *spoiled principalities and powers, and made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.* The verdict is already in, Sheriff. The case is closed. The enemy just hasn't stopped acting like it's still open."

He unfolded his arms and picked up the worn Bible from the desk.

"Ephesians six," he said. "Paul spends ten verses telling the church how to fight the devil. And do you know what he tells them to do? Not attack. Not chase. Not bargain or perform rituals or nail horseshoes over the door." He opened it without looking. "*Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore.*"

He closed the book.

"Stand," he said. "Four times in four verses. That's the whole strategy. You don't run. You don't hide. You don't try to make a deal. You plant your feet on what Christ already did, and you refuse to move. And James tells us what happens then. *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*" He paused. "Not *might* flee. *Will.* That's a promise. That's the one restraining order the devil has to obey."

Kincaid looked at him for a long time.

"My mother stood," he said at last. His voice was very low. "Twenty-two years. She stood. And it didn't save her."

Corbin did not answer quickly.

"I'm not going to pretend I understand why God let your mother die," he said finally. "I don't. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Bram." It was the first time he had called the sheriff by his first name. "But I'll tell you two things I believe, and you can take them or leave them."

Kincaid waited.

"The first is that what your father did was your father's choice. Not God's. God never approved of one blow. He grieved every one. Human evil is still human evil. Your mother wasn't failed by God. She was failed by a man who chose evil, and by a sheriff who looked away, and by a church full of people who turned up their televisions on Saturday night." His voice softened. "She wasn't wrong to pray. They were wrong not to act."

Kincaid's eyes were bright. He looked away, toward the window.

"And the second thing," Corbin said, more quietly still, "is that I've been watching you for three weeks. Watching you stand between Maris Bellamy and the man who hurt her. Watching you sit up all night at the end of her road. Watching you refuse to call her crazy when everybody else would have." He paused. "Twenty-two years your mother prayed for somebody to stand between the women of this county and the men who hurt them. Have you ever stopped to think that maybe, in the end, God answered her?"

The office was utterly silent.

Kincaid did not move. He stood by the window with his back half turned, looking out at the gray parking lot, and his shoulders were very rigid. For a long moment, Corbin thought he might walk out. Instead, very slowly, he reached up and wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand.

Then he picked up his hat from the desk.

He turned it in his fingers for a long time. When he spoke, he did not look at Corbin.

"Where is that?" he said gruffly. "In the Bible. The part about standing."

Corbin reached into his shirt pocket and took out one of his white index cards. He uncapped a pen and wrote on it in his blocky printing, and handed it over.

Ephesians 6:10–18. James 4:7. Colossians 2:15.

Kincaid looked at the card. Then he put it in his shirt pocket, behind the folded lab report, and buttoned the pocket shut.
"I'm still going to find that thumb," he said.
"I'd be disappointed if you didn't."
Kincaid nodded once, and settled his hat on his head, and went out. Corbin listened to his boots go down the hall and the outer door open and close and the truck start in the gravel lot.
Then he sat down heavily in his chair and put his face in his hands.
"Lord," he whispered. "I hope I said that right."
* * *

> *Choose you this day whom ye will serve… but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. — Joshua 24:15*

Corbin told Maris that night, at the parsonage kitchen table, after supper, while Diane washed and Keaton dried.
He did not tell her everything. Not about Kincaid's mother. That was not his to tell. But he told her about the lights and the coat and the little plastic moon burning with its plug pulled from the wall. He told her about the ink. And he told her, word for word, what the sheriff had asked him, and what he had answered.
What do you want me to do, Pastor? Get a judge to sign a restraining order against the devil?
No. You don't take the devil to court.
Then what do you do?
You take your stand in Christ.
Maris sat very still when he had finished. She had her father's green Testament on the table in front of her, under her hand, the way some women keep a hand on a purse in a crowded room.
At the sink, Keaton had stopped drying. He stood with a plate in one hand and the dish towel in the other, listening.
"A restraining order against the devil," Maris said slowly.
"That's what he said."
She looked down at her hand on the little green book.
She thought about the other order. The real one. Judge Ames's signature at the bottom, the words *SHALL NOT* running down the page like fence posts. She had carried it everywhere for a month. In her purse. On her nightstand. In the glove box of her car. She had read it every night before she slept and every morning when she woke, the way her father had read this little book. She had believed it would keep her safe.
And it had. From Garrick. It had done exactly what it was supposed to do. It had kept a violent man five hundred feet from her door.
But she had been trying to make it do something else. Something it was never meant to do. She had been trying to make a piece of paper stand guard against the dark.
And all this time, the real fight had been somewhere else entirely.
"I've been running," she said.
Corbin looked at her.
"That's what I've been doing," Maris said. "This whole month. Ever since the first knock. Before that, even. My whole life." Her voice was quiet and steady. "I ran from Garrick into a shelter. I ran from the shelter into Daddy's house. I ran from Daddy's house into yours. I've been waiting for somebody to make it stop. A judge. A sheriff. You." She looked up at him. "I've been waiting for somebody to sign an order that makes it go away. And nobody can."
"No," Corbin agreed softly. "Nobody can."
"Daddy didn't run." She laid her fingers on the cracked green cover. "He made a terrible mistake. But after that, he didn't run. He sat in that hallway every night for eighteen years with this book on his knee.

He stood his ground. In his own house." She drew a long breath. "And it never came through my door. Not once."

The kitchen was very quiet. Diane had turned off the water.

"I'm going home," Maris said.

Corbin did not argue. Maris noticed that. She had expected him to. Instead he sat back in his chair and looked at her with an expression she had never seen on his face before. It took her a moment to recognize it.

It was pride.

"Tomorrow," she said. "In the daylight. I'm going back to my father's house, and I'm going to open every door and every window and read the Bible out loud in every room, the way he told me to. And I'm going to sleep in my own bed. And if something knocks at 3:17—" She stopped. Her voice wavered for the first time. Then it steadied. "I'm not going to answer it. I'm going to answer God instead."

There was a clatter at the sink. Keaton had set down the plate.

"I'm coming," he said.

Maris turned. "Keaton—"

"It's my room, Mom. He's been standing in *my* room." His jaw was set, the way it had been in Elowen Pryce's kitchen. "I'm not going to let you go back there by yourself. And I'm not going to hide at Pastor Corbin's forever while some guy in a hat walks around my house like he owns it." He swallowed. "Grandpa didn't hide. You said so."

Maris looked at her son for a long time.

Then she held out her hand, and he came and took it.

"I'll come in the morning," Corbin said. "Diane too, if she wants. We'll go through the house together. Every room."

"I'll bring a casserole," said Diane from the sink.

And for the first time in a month, all four of them laughed.

As for me and my house, Maris thought, as the laughter faded. Her mother's verse. The one stitched on a sampler that used to hang over the kitchen door on Copper Creek Road, before Garrick made her take it down. *As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

She would hang it back up tomorrow.

* * *

At eleven o'clock that night, Bramwell Kincaid pulled his gray Ford off Copper Creek Road and backed it in at the foot of the Whitlock lane, nose toward the house, and shut off the headlights.

No one had asked him to. There was no deputy scheduled. The county commission would have had something to say about it if they knew. He was not on duty. He was not entirely sure why he was there. He sat in the dark with the engine running and the heater on and looked up the lane at the house. It stood dark and quiet on its hill. Hollister had turned off all the lights before they left that morning. None had come back on.

On the seat beside him lay a small red New Testament with a broken spine.

He had stood in his bedroom for a long time that evening, in front of the dresser, before he opened the bottom drawer. He had not opened it in twenty-five years. It was full of things he did not look at. His mother's reading glasses. Her wedding ring. A curl of his own baby hair in an envelope, in her handwriting. And underneath all of it, the little red book.

Now he picked it up and turned on the dome light.

He took the index card from his shirt pocket and propped it against the steering wheel. *Ephesians 6:10–18.* It took him a while to find it. He had forgotten the order of the books. He had to start at Matthew and turn forward, page by page, his big fingers clumsy on the thin paper.

When he found it, he stopped.

The passage was already marked. Underlined in pencil, every verse, from ten all the way to eighteen. His mother's careful underlining. And in the margin, beside the thirteenth verse, in her small, round, schoolgirl hand, she had written something.

For Bram.

He sat in the truck with the dome light on and looked at those two words for a very long time.

Then, slowly, his lips moving, he began to read.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

He read it all the way through. Then he read it again. The second time, he read it out loud, his voice low and rough in the quiet cab.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

He did not pray. Not yet. He was not ready for that. But when he had finished reading, he did not close the little red book. He left it open on his knee.

And at 3:17 in the morning, when he looked up the dark lane at the house on the hill, every window stayed dark.

And for the first time in twenty-five years, Bramwell Kincaid wondered whether that was a coincidence.

Chapter 12: The Stronghold of Fear

> *Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. — 2 Corinthians 10:5*

Kincaid's gray Ford was still parked at the foot of the lane when they pulled in at nine the next morning.

He was asleep behind the wheel with his hat tipped down over his eyes and his arms folded across his chest. When Maris's Honda crunched to a stop beside him on the gravel, he jerked awake and straightened his hat and rolled down his window, and for a moment he looked almost embarrassed, like a man caught doing something he had not meant anyone to see.

"Quiet night," he said gruffly, before she could ask. "Nothing came on. Nothing moved."

"You stayed all night?"

He shrugged. "Couldn't sleep anyway."

Maris noticed a small red book lying open, face down, on the passenger seat beside him. She did not say anything about it. She only looked at him, and he looked back at her, and something passed between them that neither of them had words for.

"Thank you, Sheriff," she said quietly.

He nodded once. Then he started his truck and drove away toward town, and Maris watched him go until the gray Ford disappeared around the bend by Copper Creek.

Corbin's car pulled in behind her a minute later, with Diane in the passenger seat and a covered casserole dish on her lap.

* * *

They did not go inside right away.

Maris stood at the foot of the porch steps with her keys in her hand and looked up at her father's house. The red door. The green rocking chairs. The window at the far end of the second floor, with the yellow curtains. In the bright, cold morning light it looked exactly like what it was. An old farmhouse that needed paint. A house where a man had once sat up every night in the hallway with a little green book on his knee.

She could not make herself climb the steps.
Keaton stood beside her with Boaz on a leash. Boaz had stopped at the bottom step too. He was not whining. He was not growling. He was simply standing, looking up at the door, his tail low.
"Mom?"
"I know." Her voice was thin. "I know. Give me a minute."
Corbin came and stood on her other side. He did not hurry her. He looked up at the house with her for a while in silence, his hands in the pockets of his old tweed coat.
"Tell me what you're feeling," he said finally.
She almost laughed. "Afraid."
"Afraid of what?"
"Of what's in there. Of what's going to happen tonight. Of the man in the hat." She swallowed. "Of being wrong. Of coming back here and finding out I can't do it. That I'm going to break. That I'm going to end up exactly what Garrick told the judge I was."
"That's a lot of fears for one set of porch steps."
"It's not even half of them."
"I know," Corbin said gently. "That's what I want to talk to you about."
He sat down on the bottom step, right there in the cold, and patted the board beside him. After a moment, Maris sat down too. Keaton hesitated, then sat on the step above them with Boaz at his knee. Diane stayed by the car with her casserole, watching, saying nothing.
"Paul talks about strongholds," Corbin said. "In Second Corinthians. *The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds.* Most people think a stronghold is something out there. A fortress. A castle. Something the enemy builds outside you." He shook his head. "But read the next verse. *Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought.*" He tapped his temple. "The stronghold Paul is talking about is in here, Maris. In your thoughts. It's a place in your mind where something other than God has built walls and moved in and taken up residence. And it's been living there so long you've stopped noticing it's not supposed to be there."
Maris looked down at her hands.
"Fear has been living in you for a very long time," Corbin said quietly. "Longer than this month. Longer than Garrick, even, though he made it worse. Since you were a little girl who couldn't sleep without a night-light. It's built a fortress in your head. And every single thing you've just told me you're afraid of, it's a brick in that fortress."
"Garrick," Maris said. Her voice cracked.
"Garrick laid a lot of those bricks. Yes." Corbin's face hardened slightly. "Sixteen years of them. He taught you to be afraid of his footsteps on the stairs. Of his truck in the driveway. Of the look on his face when supper was late. He taught you to be afraid of your own memory. Of your own judgment. Of being alone. Of leaving. Of staying. He taught you that the safest thing you could ever do was be afraid, because fear would keep you watching, and watching would keep you alive." He paused. "And he was right, in a way. It did keep you alive. But it also kept you his."
The wind moved in the bare maples along the lane. Somewhere across the road, Mr. Purcell's rooster crowed.
"That's what fear does," Corbin said. "It controls. That's what it's for. Garrick used it to control you for sixteen years. He didn't need chains. He didn't need locks. He just needed you to be afraid."
He looked up at the house.
"And now something else is trying to do the very same thing," he said. "With the very same weapon. Knocks at 3:17. Footprints that stop. Words on a mirror. Every one of them designed to make you afraid. Not to hurt you. To frighten you. Because whatever it is, it knows exactly what Garrick knew."
"What?" Maris whispered.
Corbin turned and looked at her.

"The enemy doesn't need to own your house," he said, "if he can occupy your thoughts."
Maris sat very still on the cold step.
She thought about the last month. Every night she had lain awake watching the clock. Every morning she had checked the locks before she checked on her son. Every minute she had spent rehearsing what she would say if someone didn't believe her. She had not been living in this house. She had been living in the fortress Corbin was describing. Inside her own head. With fear standing guard at every door.
"How do I get it out?" she said.
"You don't fight fear with courage," Corbin said. "Courage runs out. I've seen it run out in braver people than either of us. You fight fear with truth. Every time it tells you something, you bring that thought captive and make it answer to what God has actually said." He stood up and held out his hand to her. "And you start by walking into your own house. Not because you're not afraid. But because you've decided whom you're going to trust."
Maris looked at his hand for a long moment.
Then she took it, and stood, and climbed the steps, and unlocked her father's front door.
* * *

> *Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross. — Colossians 2:14*

The house was cold and smelled of dust and old radiators. Every curtain was drawn. Every room was gray.
Maris stood in the front hall with the door open behind her and the November wind blowing in around her ankles, and she did the first thing her father had told her to do.
She opened the windows.
All of them. The narrow pane beside the front door. The big double windows in the parlor. The kitchen window over the sink. The dining room. The little window on the landing. She went from one to the next, pulling back curtains and throwing up sashes, some of them stuck with old paint so that she had to brace herself and heave. Keaton helped with the hard ones. Corbin opened the windows upstairs. Diane, without being asked, went into the kitchen and put on the kettle.
Cold, bright air poured through the house. It stirred the dust on the stair rail and lifted the edges of the old rag rugs and blew the stale smell of fear out through the back door and away across the frosted yard. Sunlight came in after it, pale and thin, but sunlight. It lay across the floorboards in long gold bars.
Maris stood in the middle of the parlor and breathed it in.
Then she took her Bible out of her bag. The new one, with her name stamped in gold on the cover. Diane's gift. And her father's little green Testament, which she slipped into the inside pocket of his canvas coat, the way he used to carry it. The coat had still been hanging on the hook by the kitchen door when she walked in. She had taken it down and put it on without a second thought. It hung nearly to her knees and the sleeves came past her fingertips, and she did not care.
"Where do you want to start?" Corbin asked.
Maris looked around the parlor. Her father's recliner. Her mother's afghan. The mantel clock that had kept perfect time for forty years.
"Here," she said.
* * *
She had thought Corbin would read. He had done it before, after the mirror, going from room to room with his worn Bible. But when she looked at him, he only shook his head slightly and stepped back.
"It's your house," he said. "Your voice."
So Maris read.
She was not good at it. She stumbled over words. Her voice was too quiet at first, almost a whisper, and then too loud, and then it cracked in the middle of a verse and she had to stop and start again. But she read.

In the parlor, standing beside her father's chair, she read Psalm 91. *He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.*
In the dining room, at her mother's table, she read Psalm 27. *The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*
In the front hall, at the foot of the stairs, where Boaz had stood rigid and silent on the first night, staring at the door, she read Psalm 121. *The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.*
At the top of the stairs, in the long hallway where her father had sat night after night with his back against the wall, she stopped for a long time. She could not read at first. She only stood in the place where he must have sat, outside her old bedroom door, and put her hand flat against the faded wallpaper.
Then she opened the little green Testament and read the verse he had underlined until the page wore thin.
Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.
She read it three times. The third time, her voice did not crack at all.
* * *
Keaton went into his room alone.
Maris had offered to go with him. He had shaken his head. "I want to do this one," he said. "It's mine."
So she stood in the hallway with Corbin and Diane and listened. The door was half open. She could see him standing in the middle of the little room with the yellow wallpaper, facing the corner by the window, where the man in the hat had stood. His shoulders were very stiff. Corbin's old Bible, the one he had given Keaton at the parsonage, was open in his hands.
For a long time he did not say anything.
Then, in a low, rough voice, he read.
"*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him.*"
He stopped. He looked at the corner. Then he turned around and looked at the wall above his bed, where the knocks had come, and he said, in a voice that was not quite steady but did not break: "You're not the one I'm opening it for."
Maris had to turn away and press her hand over her mouth. Diane put an arm around her.
* * *
They went to the kitchen last.
Kincaid had taken the old red-checked oilcloth as evidence, and the replacement Diane had brought was still on the table, a plain blue one. Maris pulled it off and folded it and laid it on a chair. Then she got down on her knees on the cold linoleum and crawled under her mother's table, the way she had done four days ago with Corbin and Keaton and a flashlight.
The circle was still there. Eight dark notches and one pale one, pointing inward like the hours on a clock.
She looked at it for a long time in the gray light.
She thought about what Corbin had said, kneeling in this same spot. *Someone's keeping count.* And Orson Vale, on his porch. *Somebody's keeping the books. And the account's come due.*
A ledger. A list of what was owed. Carved into her father's table.
And from somewhere in her memory, from a Sunday morning at New Hope Chapel last spring, she heard Corbin's voice reading a verse she had not understood at the time.
She crawled back out, picked up her new Bible, and found it. Then she got back down under the table, and lay on her back on the cold linoleum, and held the Bible open above her face, right beneath the carved circle, and read it out loud.

"*And you, being dead in your sins… hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.*"

She lowered the Bible and looked up at the nine marks.

"Whatever this is," she said quietly, "whatever anybody thinks is written here against us, it's been paid. All of it. Not by me. Not by Daddy. By Him." She drew a long breath. "So you can keep your count. It doesn't mean anything anymore."

She lay there a moment longer. Then she crawled out from under the table and stood up and brushed off her knees.

Corbin was watching her from the doorway. He did not say anything. He did not have to.

* * *

The last thing she did that morning was climb to the attic.

She found it where she knew it would be, in a cardboard box marked *KITCHEN — MISC.* in her mother's rounded hand, under a stack of old pot holders. A small wooden frame, its glass cloudy, and behind the glass a square of linen cross-stitched in faded blue thread. Her mother had made it the year Maris was born. It had hung over the kitchen door for twenty-three years, until Maris married Garrick and brought him home for Christmas, and he had looked at it and laughed and said it was the tackiest thing he had ever seen, and her mother had quietly taken it down the next morning and never put it back.

Maris carried it downstairs, and wiped the glass clean with the hem of her father's coat, and stood on a kitchen chair, and hung it back on the nail over the door, where it belonged.

As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

She climbed down and looked at it for a long time.

"There," she said.

* * *

> *And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? — Nehemiah 6:3*

The first message came at 2:40 that afternoon.

They were sitting at the kitchen table over the remains of Diane's chicken casserole, with the windows still open and the cold air drifting in and Boaz asleep in a patch of sun on the floor. For the first time in a month, the house felt like a house. Keaton was telling Diane about a chemistry teacher who wore the same green sweater every day. Corbin was on his second cup of coffee. Maris had just laughed at something, she would never afterward remember what.

Then her phone buzzed on the table.

She glanced at it. A number she did not recognize. A local area code.

She almost did not open it. Then she did.

YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE COME BACK.

The laughter died in her throat.

The letters were all capitals. She could not have said why that made it worse, but it did. She stared at the screen, and the old familiar cold rose up from the pit of her stomach, the cold that used to come when she heard Garrick's truck in the driveway.

The phone buzzed again.

A photograph. It loaded slowly, a gray square sharpening into an image.

It was her. Standing at the foot of the porch steps that morning, in her father's canvas coat, her keys in her hand, looking up at the house. Keaton beside her with Boaz. Corbin sitting on the bottom step. The picture had been taken from a distance, zoomed in, slightly blurred. From the angle, it could only have been taken from the tree line along the creek, at the bottom of the back field.

Someone had been standing in those trees, watching them. Four hours ago.

The phone buzzed again.
THE NINTH IS STILL OWED.
And again.
ASK YOUR FATHER WHAT HE PROMISED.
Maris could not breathe. She was aware of the kitchen going quiet around her, of Corbin setting down his cup, of Diane's hand coming to rest on her arm. But it all seemed very far away.
She was already typing.
She did not decide to. Her thumbs simply moved, the way they had moved for sixteen years whenever a message came from Garrick. *Answer it. Answer it fast. Don't make him wait. Explain. Apologize. Find out what he wants. Make it stop.* The words were spilling out onto the screen before she knew what they were.
Who is this? What do you want from us? Please just tell me what you want and I'll
"Maris."
Corbin's voice. Quiet. Very steady.
She looked up. Her thumbs were trembling over the keyboard.
"Don't," he said.
"But I have to—they're—someone was *watching* us, Corbin, they were in the trees, I have to find out—"
"I know." He did not reach for the phone. He only held her eyes. "I know you feel like you have to. That's exactly what it wants you to feel. Look at your hands."
She looked. They were shaking so hard the phone was rattling against the table.
"Sixteen years," Corbin said gently. "Every time he sent you a message, you answered. Fast. Because if you didn't, something worse would happen. That's a groove in you, Maris. A deep one. And whoever sent that knows it's there."
Then Keaton's phone buzzed.
He pulled it out of his pocket. His face went white.
THIS WAS HER ROOM FIRST.
* * *
Corbin told them about Nehemiah.
He did it right there at the kitchen table, with both phones lying face up between the casserole dish and the coffee cups, and Maris's half-typed message still glowing on her screen.
"Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem," he said. "After the exile. The city had been in ruins for a hundred and forty years, and he came back and started putting it back together, stone by stone. And there were men who didn't want that wall built. Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem. Enemies."
Keaton was listening, despite himself. His face was still pale.
"They couldn't stop him by force," Corbin said. "So they tried something else. They sent him messages. *Come down and meet with us. We need to talk.* Four times they sent the same message. And four times Nehemiah sent back the same answer." He did not open his Bible. He knew it. "*I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?*"
He let that sit.
"Then they sent a fifth letter," Corbin said. "An open letter. Full of accusations. Threats. Lies about him. Things designed to make him afraid." He paused. "And Nehemiah writes this, about all of it. *For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done.*"
He tapped the table beside Maris's phone.
"That's what these are," he said. "Every one. Not information. Not questions. They're letters from Sanballat. They're designed to get you to stop what you're doing, come down off the wall, and go out and meet the enemy on its ground. To start answering. Explaining. Negotiating. Being afraid." He

looked at her. "You spent this morning rebuilding your wall, Maris. Room by room. And this is what the enemy does when the wall starts going up."
Maris looked down at the half-written message on her phone.
Please just tell me what you want and I'll
I'll what? I'll do anything. I'll give you whatever you want. Just please stop. The same words she had typed to Garrick a thousand times, in a thousand different ways.
"What did Nehemiah do?" Keaton asked quietly. "After the fifth letter?"
Corbin smiled faintly.
"He wrote back one more time," he said. "He said, *There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.* In other words, you're making it up. And then he did the only thing that matters." He turned to the passage at last, and read the next line aloud. "*Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.*"
He closed the Bible.
"And then he went back to work," Corbin said. "And the wall was finished in fifty-two days."
* * *
Maris held her thumb on the backspace key and watched her half-finished message disappear, one letter at a time, until the box was empty.
Then she took a screenshot of each message. The photograph. The four lines in capitals. She sent them to Kincaid with one line of her own: *These just came. Someone was in the trees behind the house this morning.* Because the law mattered. Because there was a real person holding that phone, standing in those trees, and that person was Kincaid's to find.
Then she blocked the number.
Keaton watched her do it. Then he looked down at his own phone. At *THIS WAS HER ROOM FIRST.* His thumb hovered over it for a long moment.
Then he screenshotted it, sent it to his mother, and blocked it too.
Kincaid called back within ten minutes. The number was a prepaid phone, activated three weeks ago, paid for in cash. Its last signal had come from a cell tower near Ridley Bottoms.
"I'll have Hollister walk the tree line," he said. "And Mrs. Bellamy—good." He hesitated. "That you didn't answer. That's good."
Three more messages came that afternoon, from three different numbers. Maris did not open any of them. She saw the first few words in the notification banner, *YOU CANNOT* and *HE WILL* and *ASK HIM*, and she screenshotted each one without reading further, and sent it to Kincaid, and blocked it, and set the phone face down on the table.
Each time her hands shook a little less.
Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him, her mother used to say, from Psalm 37. *Fret not thyself.*
By the fourth message, Maris found that she was almost not afraid.
* * *
> *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 139:12*

Hollister walked the tree line along the creek at four o'clock, while the light was going. He called Kincaid, and Kincaid called Maris.
"He found where they stood," the sheriff said. "A patch of leaves trampled flat behind a sycamore, right at the edge of the trees. Clear line of sight to your porch. Somebody stood there a long while. There's a couple of boot prints in the mud by the creek bank."
"Size thirteen?" Maris asked. She could not keep her voice steady.
"No." A pause. "That's the thing. They're small. Seven, maybe. Seven and a half. Hiking boot. Hollister thinks a woman's. Or a boy's."
Maris stood in the kitchen with the phone against her ear and looked out the window at the darkening field, at the black line of trees along the creek.

"A woman," she said slowly.
"Or a boy. Or a small man. I'm not jumping to anything." Kincaid's voice was careful. "But it isn't Garrick. And it isn't whatever made those church-shoe prints in your front yard. It's somebody else." Another pause. "I'll be at the end of your lane tonight. Same as last night."
"You don't have to—"
"I know I don't."
He hung up before she could argue.
* * *
Corbin and Diane left at eight. Diane hugged Maris on the porch, hard, the way her own mother used to, and pressed a foil-wrapped plate of brownies into Keaton's hands. Corbin stood at the bottom of the steps for a long moment, looking up at the house, at the lights in the windows and the sampler visible over the kitchen door.
"Call me," he said. "Any hour. I mean it."
"I know."
"And Maris." He hesitated. "If something happens tonight—and it may—remember what you did today. You didn't do it because you weren't afraid. You did it because you'd decided whom to trust. That doesn't change at three in the morning. It only gets harder to remember."
She nodded.
Then they were gone, their taillights sliding away down the lane. At the bottom, where the lane met Copper Creek Road, Maris saw the dark shape of a gray pickup pull in and back around and settle, its headlights going out.
She went inside and locked the door. Then she did something she had not done once in the month since she came home from court.
She did not check the locks again.
* * *
She and Keaton sat in the front parlor with the brownies between them on the coffee table and the fire Corbin had built in the grate burning down to coals. Keaton was in his grandfather's recliner with his feet up. Maris was on the couch with her mother's afghan over her knees and her father's coat folded beside her. Boaz lay on the hearth rug, stretched out full length, snoring.
She read aloud from her new Bible. Not anything in particular. The Gospel of Mark, from the beginning, because it was short and moved fast, and because she remembered her father saying once that Mark was the one to read when you were tired. Keaton listened with his eyes half closed. At one point she thought he was asleep. But when she stopped at the end of the fourth chapter, at Jesus asleep in the boat in the storm and the disciples waking Him, terrified, he opened his eyes.
"Read that part again," he said. "About the wind."
So she read it again.
And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?
Keaton was quiet for a long time.
"He was asleep," he said finally. "In the middle of the storm. While everybody else was freaking out." He frowned at the fire. "How do you sleep in a storm?"
"I think," Maris said slowly, "you have to know who's in the boat with you."
Keaton looked at her. Then he looked back at the fire and did not say anything more. But she saw him turn the words over, the way he used to turn over a hard problem in his math homework when he was small.
At ten o'clock, she prayed. Out loud, sitting on the couch, with her eyes closed and her son across the room. It was not a long prayer, or an eloquent one. She thanked God for the house. For the day. For Corbin and Diane and Kincaid at the end of the lane. She asked Him to stand in every doorway. She asked Him to give them sleep.

When she said amen, there was a pause.
Then, from the recliner, very softly: "Amen."
* * *
She went up at eleven.
Her parents' old bedroom at the front of the house was cold, but she had left the window open a crack all day, and the room smelled clean, like frost and pine. She changed into her flannel nightgown and brushed her hair and sat down on the edge of the bed.
The order of protection lay on the nightstand where it had lain for a month, squared neatly beside the lamp. ORDER OF PROTECTION. Judge Ames's signature. *SHALL NOT.*
She looked at it for a long time.
Then she picked it up, and folded it once, and put it in the drawer of the nightstand. Not because it did not matter. It did. It had done its job. It had kept Garrick away from her door for a month, and it would go on doing that, and she was grateful.
But it was not what stood guard over this house. It had never been.
She laid her father's little green Testament on the nightstand in its place.
Then she reached over and put her hand on the lamp switch.
She sat that way for a long moment, her fingers on the little brass knob. She could feel her heart beating. Thirty years. She had not slept in a dark room in thirty years. Not since she was a little girl with a crescent moon on her shelf, and before that, a mother sitting on the edge of her bed singing *Thy word is a lamp.*
The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.
She turned the switch.
The room went black.
For a moment she could not breathe. The dark pressed against her eyes, total and enormous. Every old fear rose up at once, every brick in the fortress, all of them shouting. *Turn it back on. Turn it back on. Something is in the room. Something is in the hall. Something is standing at the foot of the bed.*
Is it true?
She lay down slowly. She pulled the quilt up to her chin. She lay on her back in the dark with her eyes open and her hand resting on her father's Testament on the nightstand.
Nothing was in the room. She knew it was true because she had decided to believe it.
Gradually her eyes adjusted. The window became a pale gray square. The shapes of the dresser and the chair came slowly out of the black. Somewhere downstairs, Boaz shifted on the hearth rug and sighed.
I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety.
She fell asleep in the dark for the first time in thirty years.
She slept for four hours.
* * *
> *Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day. — Psalm 91:5*

It began at 3:17.
She would never know whether she woke a second before it or whether it was the thing that woke her. One moment she was asleep, deep and dreamless in the dark. The next she was sitting bolt upright in bed with the quilt clutched against her chest, and the whole house was screaming.
Not screaming. Pounding.
Every window in the house was being struck at once.
Not knocked. Not tapped. *Struck.* Hammered. Beaten, with a violence that shook the frames in their sashes and rattled the glass in its old putty and sent a deep, juddering boom through the walls and floor and into her bones. Her own bedroom window, the one she had left open a crack, was shuddering in its frame as if a dozen fists were slamming against it from outside. And beyond her door she could hear the others. The windows across the hall. The window at the top of the stairs. Downstairs, the big double

windows in the parlor, the kitchen window over the sink, the narrow pane beside the front door. All of them at once. All of them in the same rhythm.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Like a hundred hands. Like a mob. Like the whole house was surrounded, every side, every floor, by something that wanted in.

Downstairs, Boaz was barking. Not his deep warning bark. A high, hysterical, desperate shrieking, almost a scream, over and over.

And under it all, from the end of the hall: "*MOM!*"

Maris was out of bed. She did not remember deciding to move. Her hand found the lamp and turned it on, and in the sudden yellow light she saw her window, and it was bowing. The old glass was flexing inward with every blow, rippling like water, the reflection of the lamp swimming across it. Any second it would shatter.

There was nothing outside it.

She could see that clearly in the lamplight. The window looked out on the front yard, two stories up, onto empty black air and the dark shapes of the maples along the lane. There was no ladder. No branch close enough to touch. Nothing. Nobody. Just empty night, and the glass bowing inward, again and again and again, as if invisible fists were pounding on it from nothing.

She ran.

She ran for the hallway, for Keaton, for the stairs, for the car keys on the hook by the kitchen door. Every cell in her body was screaming one word, and the word was *out.* Get out. Get Keaton and get out of this house and drive and never stop driving and never, ever come back.

She met Keaton in the middle of the hall. He was white to the lips, in a T-shirt and sweatpants, his eyes enormous. He grabbed her arm.

"Mom, what is it, what *is* it—"

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

The window at the top of the stairs. The one on the landing. The glass in that one was older than the rest. She saw a thin bright crack shoot across it from corner to corner.

"Come on," she gasped. "Come on, we're going, we have to go—"

She dragged him toward the stairs.

And stopped.

She did not know why. Her body stopped. Her feet stopped, right there in the middle of the long upstairs hallway, outside the door of her old childhood room. In the exact place. On the exact boards. Where her father used to sit.

It never came through your door. Not once. Not in eighteen years.

She stood there with her son's arm in her hand and the whole house booming around her like a drum, and she understood, in a single cold flash, what she was about to do.

She was about to run.

Again. The way she had run from Garrick. The way she had run from the shelter, from this house, from everything, her whole life. Out into the night, into the car, into the dark. Exactly where it wanted her. Down off the wall.

Come down, Sanballat had written to Nehemiah. *Come down and meet with us.*

The enemy doesn't need to own your house if he can occupy your thoughts.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

"Mom!" Keaton was pulling at her now. "Mom, come on, you said—"

"No," Maris said.

She did not say it loudly. She was not sure he heard. She was not sure she had said it out loud at all. She said it again.

"No."

Keaton stared at her.

Maris turned around. She put her back against the wall of the hallway, exactly where her father had put his, outside the door of the little room with the yellow wallpaper. She pulled Keaton against her side. Her whole body was shaking so hard her teeth chattered.

She had snatched her father's canvas coat off the bedpost as she ran, without knowing why, and it hung on her now over her nightgown. She reached into the inside pocket with a hand that would barely obey her, and drew out the little green Testament.

"We're not running," she said to her son. Her voice cracked in half. "Keaton. We're not running. This is our house."

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. Somewhere downstairs, glass cracked with a sound like a gunshot. Boaz howled.

Maris opened the little book. She did not need to look for the place. It fell open in her hands to the thin, worn page in First John, the way it had fallen open in her father's hands ten thousand times.

She did not read it. She could not see the words. Her eyes were full of tears.

She said it from memory.

"*Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them,*" she said, into the booming dark. "*Because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*"

BOOM. BOOM.

Louder.

"*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night!*" Her voice was rising now, raw and cracking, half a sob. "*Nor for the arrow that flieth by day!*"

Beside her, Keaton had gone still. He was staring at his mother. Then, slowly, his lips began to move too. She could not hear him over the noise. But she could see what he was saying, because she was saying it with him.

"*Submit yourselves therefore to God,*" Maris shouted. "*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you!*"

The pounding went on. Louder. Wilder. The whole house shuddered on its foundations. Plaster dust sifted down from the ceiling of the hallway. The bulb in the hall light swung on its chain. Through her bedroom doorway she could see the window flexing, flexing, white cracks spreading across the glass like frost.

Maris pressed her back against the wall where her father had sat for eighteen years, and held her son, and lifted the little green book in her shaking hand.

She had never done anything like this in her life. She did not know if she was doing it right. She did not know if there was a right way to do it. She only knew, with a certainty that went all the way down to the bottom of her, that she was not going to run anymore.

"*In the name of Jesus Christ,*" said Maris Bellamy, "*this is my house. And you are not welcome in it.*"

The pounding stopped.

All at once. Every window. In the middle of a blow.

The silence was so sudden and so complete that it rang in her ears. The hall light swung slowly to a stop on its chain. Downstairs, Boaz's howl broke off into a whimper and then into nothing. Somewhere, a last thin fragment of glass tinkled to the floor.

Then nothing.

Maris stood with her back against the wall and the little book raised in her hand and could not move. She could hear Keaton breathing beside her, fast and ragged. She could hear her own heart. Outside, very far off, a truck door slammed, and running boots pounded up the gravel lane, and Bramwell Kincaid's voice shouted her name.

She did not answer him yet. She was looking through the open door of her bedroom, at the window. The glass was cracked in a dozen places. But it had held.

And on the outside of the glass, two stories above the frozen ground, in the frost that had formed across every pane, there were handprints.

Dozens of them. Large and small. Overlapping. Pressed into the white rime from the outside, the fingers spread wide, as if a crowd had stood in the empty air beyond her window and beaten on it with open palms.

As she watched, they began, very slowly, to melt.

Maris lowered the little green Testament.

She was still shaking. She thought she would probably be shaking for an hour. Her legs felt like water. Her face was wet.

But she was standing.

For the first time in her life, she had stood her ground in the dark and had not run.

And the house was quiet.

Chapter 13: The Shadow Beside the Bed

> *And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. — Mark 9:24*

Keaton Bellamy had a theory about the night before, and he did not like it.

He sat on the front porch steps at seven in the morning with his hands jammed in the pocket of his hoodie and his breath smoking in the cold, and he turned the theory over and over the way he turned over a bad grade, looking for the place where it was wrong.

The theory went like this. Something had been beating on every window in the house. Something that wasn't there. Something that left handprints in the frost two stories up in the air. And it had kept beating, harder and harder, while his mother screamed Bible verses at it with her back against the wall. And then she had said the name. *In the name of Jesus Christ.* And it had stopped. In the middle of a blow.

That was the theory. That the name had stopped it.

And Keaton did not like it, because if the theory was true, then a lot of other things were true too. Things he had spent four years deciding were not.

Behind him, the front door opened and closed. Boots on the porch boards. Sheriff Kincaid came down the steps and sat beside him without asking, a few feet away, with a paper cup of coffee in each hand. He held one out.

"Your mom said you drink it black."

"I don't drink it at all."

"Neither did I, at fifteen." Kincaid kept holding it out. "Take it anyway. It's warm."

Keaton took it. He wrapped his hands around it and did not drink.

They sat in silence for a while. Down the lane, Deputy Alvarado was walking slowly along the front of the house with a camera, photographing the windows one by one. Every pane on the north and west sides was cracked. Two in the parlor had broken clean through. Hollister was on a ladder at the second floor, peering at the glass outside Keaton's mother's room, where the handprints had been. They had melted by the time the sun came up. But Kincaid had photographed them first, at four in the morning, with a flashlight, before they went. Keaton had seen the pictures. Dozens of hands. Big and small. Pressed flat.

"So what was it?" Keaton said finally.

Kincaid took a long drink of his coffee.

"I don't know," he said.

Keaton looked at him sideways. "You're the sheriff."

"I'm aware."

"You're supposed to know."

"I'm supposed to find out." Kincaid stared down the lane. "There's a difference. Most days, I manage the second one. Some days I don't." He was quiet a moment. "I've been doing this twenty-three years, Keaton. I've never once written *I don't know* on a report. I'm going to have to write it on this one."
Keaton almost smiled. Almost.
"My mom thinks it was the devil," he said.
"I know she does."
"Do you?"
Kincaid did not answer right away. Keaton watched him. The big gray-haired man was looking down into his coffee cup as if the answer might be floating in it.
"A month ago," Kincaid said slowly, "I'd have told you no. Flat out. I'd have told you there's always a person behind it. Somebody with a ladder and a grudge and a key. And I'd have been ninety-nine percent right, because that's how it almost always is." He turned the cup in his hands. "There's a person behind some of this, too. I know that. I've got the thumbprint. I've got boot prints by the creek. I'm going to find them."
"But?"
"But no person on God's earth beat on a second-story window from thin air at three in the morning," Kincaid said. "I was standing in your yard with a flashlight when it stopped. There was nobody there. No ladder. No rope. Nothing." He shook his head. "And it stopped when your mom said what she said. I heard her from the lane. I heard every word. And it stopped like somebody threw a switch."
Keaton looked down at his coffee.
"Could be a coincidence," he said.
"Could be."
"It probably was."
Kincaid glanced at him. There was something in the sheriff's face Keaton couldn't read. Not quite a smile.
"You know what I've noticed about coincidences, son?" he said. "After you've had about five of them in a row, they start to look an awful lot like a pattern."
He stood up, joints cracking, and stood looking down at the boy for a moment.
"I'm not going to tell you what to believe," he said. "I'm the last man on earth who ought to be telling anybody that. I stopped praying when I was four years older than you. For what I thought were good reasons." He paused. "I'm just going to tell you I read a little red book in my truck last night. First time in twenty-five years. And I'm not sure anymore that my reasons were as good as I thought."
He went down the steps and across the frosted yard toward Alvarado.
Keaton sat alone on the porch with the cooling coffee in his hands.
He thought of something he'd read in Corbin's Bible, the night at the parsonage, sitting up late on the edge of the bed. A story in Mark. A father whose son was being torn apart by something. The father brought the boy to Jesus and said, *If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us.* And Jesus said, *If thou canst believe, all things are possible.*
And the father said the thing Keaton had not been able to stop thinking about since.
Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.
Both at once. Believing and not believing. In the same breath.
Keaton had not known you were allowed to say that to God.
He took a sip of the coffee. It was bitter and lukewarm and terrible. He drank the rest of it anyway.
* * *

> *For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. — James 1:20*

The trouble was, Keaton knew the Bible.
That was the part nobody understood. Not his mother, not Corbin, not Diane with her pot roast and her kind questions. They all treated him like he was some kid who had never been to church, who needed to have it all explained to him from the beginning, slowly, with simple words.

He had been to church every Sunday of his life until he was eleven. Twice on Sundays and once on Wednesdays. He had been in the front row at Grace Fellowship in a clip-on tie while his father read Scripture from the platform in a deep, strong, beautiful voice that made old ladies cry. He had won the Bible Bowl in fourth grade. He could recite the books of the Old Testament in under fifteen seconds. He knew the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes and the fruit of the Spirit and the whole of Psalm 23.

He knew them because his father made him learn them.

As punishment.

That was how it worked in the house on Larkspur Drive. If Keaton talked back, he had to memorize a verse about honoring your father and mother. If he forgot to take out the trash, a verse about the sluggard. If he cried, a verse about being strong and courageous. His father would write the reference on an index card in his neat, slanting hand and hand it to him and say, *Have it for me by supper.* And Keaton would sit at his desk with the Bible open, saying it over and over, while downstairs his father's voice rose and his mother's voice went quiet and something crashed against a wall.

Then at supper, his father would bow his head and pray over the meal. Long, beautiful prayers, full of thanksgiving and humility and love. *Lord, we are so grateful for this family You have given us.* And Keaton's mother would sit across the table with her eyes closed and her hands folded, and Keaton would stare at the bruise on her wrist where her sleeve had ridden up, and his father would say *Amen,* and they would eat.

Keaton had prayed, too. He wanted Corbin to understand that, if Corbin ever asked. He had prayed harder than anyone.

He had been eleven years old the night his father put his mother's head through the drywall in the upstairs hallway. He had been standing at the top of the stairs in his pajamas. He had heard the sound it made. And afterward, when his father had driven off and his mother was in the bathroom running water so he wouldn't hear her crying, Keaton had gone into his room and gotten down on his knees beside his bed, the way they taught you in Sunday school, and folded his hands, and prayed.

Please make him stop. Please. You can do anything. Please make him stop hurting her. I'll do anything. I'll memorize the whole book of Psalms. Please.

The next Sunday, his father read the Scripture from the platform at Grace Fellowship. Romans 8. *If God be for us, who can be against us?* And the whole congregation said *Amen,* and a woman behind Keaton dabbed her eyes with a tissue, and afterward three different men slapped his father on the back and told him what a blessing he was.

Nothing changed. Nothing changed for four more years.

So Keaton stopped praying. Not with a big announcement. He simply stopped bowing his head at supper. Stopped closing his eyes in church. Stopped memorizing the verses his father gave him, and took the beating that came for it instead, and found that the beating was almost easier than the verses. At least the beating was honest.

God, as far as Keaton could tell, was something adults talked about while they did whatever they wanted behind closed doors. A costume his father put on every Sunday. A thing you said grace to while your mother hid her wrists.

That was what he had believed. For four years. And it had made a kind of sense. It had kept him safe, in a way, the way a wall keeps you safe. Nothing could disappoint you if you didn't expect anything.

And now there was Corbin. Who never once asked him to memorize anything. Who said *I don't know* when he didn't know. Who had prayed for Keaton in that kitchen without asking him to close his eyes.

And there was Diane, who said she'd never once felt like she was talking to an empty room.

And there was his grandfather. Sitting in a hallway with a little green book on his knee every night for eighteen years.

And there was his mother last night, with her back against the wall and her voice cracking in half, saying the name. And the pounding stopping.

None of them were wearing a costume. Keaton could see that. He had spent his whole life watching for the costume, and he could not find it on any of them.

* * *

There was something else, too. Something he hadn't told anyone.

Three weeks before his mother finally left, a boy named Tyler Moss had said something in the locker room about Keaton's mother. Something about the sunglasses she wore to his basketball games in December. Something everybody laughed at.

Keaton did not remember deciding to hit him. He only remembered the moment after. Tyler on the floor with blood coming out of his nose. Keaton standing over him with his fist still clenched and his whole body shaking and a roaring in his ears like a train. And the way the other boys were looking at him. Backing away.

He had seen that look before. On his mother's face. When his father came home.

He had gone into the bathroom afterward and looked at himself in the mirror, at his own face, flushed and wild-eyed, his jaw set exactly the way his father's set when the shouting started. His father's dark hair. His father's jaw. His father's hands.

And he had thought: *That's him. That's what he looks like. That's what I look like.*

He had not told his mother. He had not told anyone. But since that day, a fear had been living in him, quiet and deep, underneath all the other fears. Not of the man in the hat. Not of the knocks in the night. A fear of himself.

That his father's anger was in him, like his father's jaw and his father's hands. That it was waiting. That someday, when he was grown, he would come home late to a house of his own and a woman would hear his truck in the driveway and start to shake.

For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. His father had made him memorize that one, too. At nine. For slamming a door.

Keaton had never once seen his father obey it.

* * *

> *The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. — Proverbs 18:10*

Corbin came out at three o'clock, while the glass man from Harmon was measuring the broken windows, and asked Keaton if he wanted to take a walk.

Keaton almost said no. Then he looked at the house, at the strangers on ladders and his mother on the phone with the insurance company and Boaz pacing the porch, and he said fine.

They went down through the back field, through the brittle, frosted broom sedge, to the line of sycamores along Copper Creek. The creek was running high and cold and brown from the fall rains, loud over the rocks. On the far bank, the bare woods climbed a steep hill. It was very quiet here, under the sound of the water. The house was out of sight behind the rise.

Corbin did not say anything for a long time. He found a flat stone on the gravel bar and skipped it across the creek. Four skips. He found another one and handed it to Keaton.

Keaton threw it. It sank on the first bounce.

"Wrist," said Corbin. "Not arm. Flick it."

Keaton found another stone and threw it again. Two skips.

"Better."

They skipped stones for a while without talking. The creek roared. A cardinal flashed red in the bare branches across the water and was gone.

"I hit a kid," Keaton said suddenly.

Corbin didn't stop. He found another stone, weighed it in his palm, threw it. Five skips.

"Before we left. In the locker room. Tyler Moss." Keaton was staring at the water. "He said something about my mom. And I just—" He made a fist and opened it. "I don't even remember doing it. I just

remember after. He was on the floor. He was bleeding. And everybody was looking at me like—" His voice snagged. "Like I was him."
"Your father."
Keaton nodded once, jaw tight.
"I looked in the mirror after," he said. "And it was his face. Not like. *His.* The way his jaw goes. The way his eyes get." He picked up a stone and gripped it so hard his knuckles went white. "Everybody says I look like him. I've got his hair. His hands. And I keep thinking—what if that's in there too? What if it's just—waiting? What if I grow up and one day I come home and—"
He couldn't finish. He threw the stone at the water as hard as he could. It didn't skip. It just plunged in with a hard, angry splash and was gone.
Corbin let the silence sit for a while.
"Can I tell you something about anger?" he said finally.
Keaton shrugged.
"Anger isn't a sin," Corbin said. "Paul says, *Be ye angry, and sin not.* Jesus got angry. He turned over tables in the temple. Anger's just a feeling, Keaton. It's what you do with it that matters. And what you let it become." He picked up another stone. "Your father let his anger become his master. He fed it. He gave in to it, over and over, for years, until there wasn't any room left in him for anything else. That was his choice. Every time."
"But what if I can't help it?"
"You helped it this morning," Corbin said quietly.
Keaton looked at him.
"Your mother told me," Corbin said. "Last night, when that thing was beating on every window in the house, you were scared out of your mind. Anybody would be. And you were angry, too. I'd bet money on it. Angry at whatever was doing it. Angry at your grandfather for letting it in. Angry at God, maybe." He tossed the stone lightly in his hand. "And you didn't punch a wall. You didn't run. You stood next to your mother in that hallway and said Scripture with her. Out loud. While the windows were breaking." He paused. "That isn't your father, son. Your father never stood beside anybody in his life."
Keaton's throat worked. He looked away, at the far bank.
"You're not doomed to be him," Corbin said. "I want you to hear me. That's a lie. It's one of the oldest lies there is. That you're stuck with whatever your father gave you. His face, sure. His hands. You can't help those. But not his choices. Not his heart. God says through Ezekiel, *the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.* And Paul says, *If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*" He skipped the stone. Six. "New, Keaton. Not your father with a new coat of paint. New."
* * *
They walked back slowly along the creek bank, the cold coming up off the water.
"Can I ask you something?" Keaton said. "About last night?"
"Always."
"My mom said a lot of stuff. Verses. And it didn't stop. It kept getting louder. And then she said *In the name of Jesus Christ,* and it stopped." He frowned at the ground. "Why that? Why did that work when the other stuff didn't? Is it like—a magic word or something?"
Corbin stopped walking.
"No," he said. "Not magic. I'm glad you asked that, because that's the most important thing I could ever tell you, and most people get it wrong."
He turned and faced the boy.
"A name isn't a word," he said. "Not really. A name is a person. When you say somebody's name, you're calling for them. When you were little and you woke up scared in the night, what did you do?"
Keaton hesitated. "Called for my mom."

"Right. You didn't say a magic word. You called her name. And she came." Corbin nodded slowly. "That's what your mother did last night. She wasn't casting a spell. She was calling for Someone. She was saying, *I belong to Jesus, and I'm calling on Him, and this house is under His authority, not yours.*" He paused. "And He came."

The creek roared beside them.

"The Bible says God gave Jesus *a name which is above every name,*" Corbin said. "*That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.* Every knee. Not just the ones that believe in Him. Every one. Including whatever's been standing in your room." He tapped Keaton lightly on the chest with one finger. "And Proverbs says *the name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.* A tower. You don't fight from out in the open field. You run into the tower."

Keaton was staring at him.

"I'm going to tell you one more thing," Corbin said. "And I want you to remember it. Write it down if you have to. Someday you might be somewhere where you can't do anything else. Where you can't remember a single verse. Where you can't pray. Where you're so scared you can't think." His voice was very quiet. "If that ever happens, you say His name. Just His name. That's all. You don't have to believe perfectly. You don't have to have it all figured out. You just call out to Him by name, like a little kid calling for his father in the dark."

He put a hand on Keaton's shoulder.

"A real Father," he said. "Not like the one you had. The kind that always comes."

* * *

> *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. — Philippians 2:9–10*

The glass man from Harmon couldn't get new panes until Monday. So that night half the windows in the house were covered with sheets of plywood that Hollister and Earl Gifford had screwed into the frames, and the house was darker than it had ever been, and the wind moaned in the gaps around the boards.

Keaton's window was one of the ones that had held. Cracked in a long diagonal line, top corner to bottom, but whole. He lay in the narrow iron bed under the yellow wallpaper and looked at that crack for a long time before he fell asleep. It caught the faint light from the hallway and glittered like a vein of silver.

He had not turned off his lamp. He was not ready for that. His mother could do it. He wasn't there yet. He fell asleep anyway, somewhere around midnight, with Corbin's Bible on the floor beside the bed and Boaz curled on the rug.

* * *

He woke and could not move.

He knew it at once, the way you know cold water before you understand you've fallen in. He was lying on his back, which he never did. His arms were at his sides. His eyes were open. And nothing else would obey him. Not his fingers. Not his legs. Not his mouth. He tried to turn his head and could not. He tried to call for his mother and nothing came out, not even breath.

The lamp was off.

He had left it on. He was sure. But the room was dark now, the deep, thick dark of a room where the light has been taken away rather than turned off, and the only light was the faint gray glow of the cracked window. The silver line of the crack. And the thin bar of yellow under the door from the hall.

Boaz was not on the rug.

And something was standing beside the bed.

Not in the corner. Not at the window. Not across the room where it had always stood before, in its long coat and its brimmed hat, patient and distant. This was close. So close that if Keaton could have moved his hand six inches, he would have touched it.

It was tall. Taller than the hat man had ever seemed. Its head was lost somewhere up near the ceiling, in the dark. And it was not wearing a coat. It was not wearing anything. It was not a shape at all, exactly. It was an absence. A place in the dark where the dark was darker. A tall, man-shaped hole cut out of the night, so black that the gray light from the window did not touch it but simply stopped at its edges, the way water stops at the edge of a drain.

Keaton could not scream. He could not breathe. His heart was slamming so hard against his ribs it hurt. The cold came off it in waves. Not the cold of a winter night. The cold of a meat locker, a cellar, a grave. It pressed against his face. His eyes watered with it. He could feel the frost forming on his eyelashes.

Then it bent down.

Slowly. The way the hat man had bent, the night it whispered *Tell your mother the Adversary remembers.* But this was not the hat man. Or it was the hat man with the hat and the coat and the kind old voice all taken away. The thing underneath. The thing that had been wearing them.

It bent until the darkness of its face was a foot from Keaton's own. He could feel it there. He could not see eyes. But he could feel it looking at him.

And it spoke.

The voice was not kind anymore. It was not a grandfather's voice. It was not anything human at all. It was low and dry and enormously old, and it did not seem to come through the air so much as up through the bed, through the floor, through the bones of the house and into the bones of Keaton's body.

Your father belonged to anger.

Keaton's whole body went rigid against the mattress.

Your grandfather belonged to us.

A pause. Long. Patient. Cold.

Eventually you will belong to something too.

The words sank into him like stones into a well. He felt them go down and down and down, into the deepest part of him, to the place where the fear lived. The locker room. Tyler Moss on the floor. His own face in the mirror, flushed and wild, his father's jaw. *That's him. That's what I look like.*

It knew. It knew all of it. It had been watching him for fifteen years. It knew exactly where the crack was.

Something too. Anger, like his father. Or *us,* like his grandfather. As if those were the only two doors in the world. As if he had to walk through one of them. As if he already belonged to something, and it was only a matter of time before he found out what.

The darkness leaned closer. He could feel its cold against his lips.

It is only a matter of choosing, Keaton, it said. *And you have so little time to choose.*

He tried to pray. He tried with everything he had. He reached for the verses his mother had shouted in the hallway. *Greater is he that is in you. Thou shalt not be afraid. Resist the devil.* He reached for them and they were gone. All of them. Every verse he had ever memorized at his father's desk with a Bible open and the shouting downstairs. Psalm 23. The Beatitudes. The fruit of the Spirit. The books of the Old Testament in fifteen seconds. Gone, as if someone had walked through his mind and turned off every light.

He could not remember a single word.

He could not move. He could not breathe. The cold was in his chest now, in his lungs, squeezing. The darkness filled his whole vision. The room was gone. The window was gone. The bar of light under the door was gone.

And from somewhere very far away, from a creek bank in the afternoon with the water roaring over the rocks, a voice.

Someday you might be somewhere where you can't do anything else. Where you can't remember a single verse. Where you can't pray.

If that ever happens, you say His name.

Just His name.

Keaton could not move his mouth.

He tried. He pushed against the paralysis with everything in him, the way you push against a door that someone is holding shut from the other side. Nothing. His lips would not part. His tongue would not move. The darkness pressed down and down.

Like a little kid calling for his father in the dark.

He pushed again.

A breath. Just a breath. Air moving through his lips, thin and shaking.

The darkness above him went very still.

He pushed again, harder, with everything he was, with fifteen years of fear and four years of silence and every unanswered prayer he had ever prayed on his knees beside his bed at eleven years old. And it came out of him. Not loud. Barely a whisper. Cracked in half. But it came out.

"*Jesus.*"

The darkness was gone.

Not faded. Not retreated. Gone. In less than an instant. As if it had never been there at all. As if the word had been a light switched on in a room, and the dark had simply ceased to exist.

The cold went with it. All at once, the room was only a room, chilly in the way November rooms are chilly. The lamp on the nightstand was burning, warm and yellow, exactly as he had left it. He could see the yellow wallpaper and the crack in the window and Corbin's Bible on the floor.

And he could move.

Keaton rolled onto his side and pulled his knees up to his chest and lay there shaking, gasping, his face wet, his heart pounding. He could hear his own breath, ragged and loud. He could hear the wind moaning around the plywood downstairs.

And then the click of claws on the hallway floor. The door nudged open. Boaz came in, tail low, ears back, and stood beside the bed for a moment looking at him. Then the old dog climbed up onto the mattress, all seventy pounds of him, and lay down against Keaton's back and pressed his warm, heavy body close, and sighed.

His phone on the nightstand, when he finally reached for it, said 3:18.

* * *

> *Then Jesus said unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. — John 6:67–68*

He did not sleep again.

He lay curled on his side with Boaz against his back and the lamp burning and his eyes open, looking at the place beside the bed where the darkness had stood. It was just floor now. Old pine boards and a braided rug and Corbin's Bible lying where he had left it. Nothing else. Nothing at all.

He kept saying the name.

Not out loud. He was afraid to say it out loud again, the way you are afraid to touch a wire that has just shocked you. Not because it had hurt. Because it had *worked.* Because something enormous and old and cold had been bending over him, and he had said one word, one cracked and broken whisper of a word, and it had been gone faster than a light goes out.

He said it in his head. Over and over. Not as a prayer, exactly. More like testing a step in the dark to see if it would hold.

Jesus.

It held.

Jesus.

It held.

Somewhere around four-thirty, lying in the lamplight, he did something he had not done since he was eleven years old.

He talked to God.

Not the way his father talked to God at the supper table, with long, beautiful sentences and a voice that made old ladies cry. Not the way he had prayed at eleven, on his knees, begging. He just lay there and talked, the way you would talk to someone sitting on the edge of your bed in the dark.

I don't know if I believe in You, he said, silently. *I want to be honest. I'm not going to pretend. I don't know.*

But I said Your name. And it left.

I don't understand that. I don't understand You. I don't understand why You didn't stop my dad. I still don't. I'm still mad about it. I think I'm going to be mad about it for a long time.

But I said Your name. And You came.

He lay there for a while. Boaz snored softly against his back.

That thing said I'm going to belong to something. Like my dad belonged to anger. Like Grandpa belonged to it.

I don't want to belong to anger.

I don't want to belong to it.

He swallowed.

I don't know if I can belong to You. I don't know how. I don't know if You'd even want me. I'm not like Mom or Pastor Corbin. I don't know any of the right words anymore. It took every single one of them away.

He was crying again, quietly, into the pillow.

Lord, I believe, he said. The words from Mark. The father with the tormented son. *Help my unbelief.*

It was the only prayer he had. He said it until the window turned gray.

* * *

Maris came down at a quarter to seven and found him at the kitchen table.

She stopped in the doorway.

The overhead light was off. The only light in the kitchen was the small bulb over the stove, the way her father used to leave it when he sat here before dawn. Keaton was sitting in his grandfather's chair, in his hoodie, with his hair sticking up on one side and Boaz asleep across his feet. Corbin's old Bible was open on the table in front of him. He was bent over it, reading, his lips moving slightly, his finger following the lines.

For one dizzying moment Maris could not breathe. She was nine years old again, standing in this doorway in her nightgown, and her father was sitting in that chair with his little green book and the stove light on, and he looked up and smiled at her and said *Hey, Sprout, couldn't sleep?*

Keaton looked up.

"Hey," he said.

His face was pale and his eyes were red and swollen. But there was something in them she had not seen there in four years. She could not have named it. It was not peace, exactly. It was not happiness. It was something quieter than either. Like a door that had been shut a long time, and had opened just a crack.

"Keaton?" She came into the kitchen. "What happened? Are you okay?"

He looked at her for a long moment.

"He came back," he said. "Last night. Except it wasn't really him. It was—the thing under him. Whatever he really is." He swallowed. "I couldn't move. I couldn't remember anything. Not one verse. It was standing right beside the bed, Mom. Right there. And it said—"

He stopped. He looked down at the Bible.

"It said Dad belonged to anger. And Grandpa belonged to it. And I was going to belong to something too."

Maris sat down hard in the chair across from him. She reached for his hand. He let her take it.

"And I couldn't do anything," Keaton said. "I couldn't pray. I couldn't move. And then I remembered what Pastor Corbin said. At the creek. That if I couldn't do anything else, I could just say His name."

His voice dropped to almost nothing. "So I did. I couldn't even open my mouth, but I made it come out. And it was gone. Like that." He snapped his fingers, weakly. "Just gone."
Maris could not speak. She held his hand in both of hers.
"I've been up since," Keaton said. "Pastor Corbin said once if I ever wanted to start reading it for real, I should start with John. So I did." He looked down at the open page. "I'm on chapter six."
"What does it say?" Maris whispered.
Keaton was quiet for a moment. Then he turned the Bible around so it faced her and put his finger on a verse.
"There's this part," he said. "Where a bunch of people stop following Jesus. Because what He says is too hard. They just leave. And Jesus turns around to His friends and says, *Will ye also go away?*"
He read the next line aloud, slowly, the way you read something you are still deciding about.
"*Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.*"
He looked up at her.
"I don't believe everything yet, Mom," he said. "I want you to know that. I've still got a lot of questions. I'm still mad about Dad. About why God didn't—" He stopped. "I'm not going to pretend I've got it all figured out."
"I know," Maris said. Her voice shook. "Nobody's asking you to."
"But that thing said I was going to belong to something." Keaton's jaw tightened. His father's jaw. But it was not his father's look in his eyes. Not at all. "And I keep thinking about what Peter said. *To whom shall we go?* Like, if not Him, then who? Anger? That?" He shook his head. "I said His name, and that thing ran. I'm not going to forget that. I can't."
He picked up a pencil from the table. It was a stubby yellow pencil, the kind that sat in the cup by the phone for making grocery lists. He looked at it for a moment. Then he bent over Corbin's Bible and, very carefully, the way his grandfather had done in the margins of a little green book for eighteen years, he wrote something small beside the verse.
Maris leaned over to see.
He had written the date. And beside it, one word.
Maybe.
It was not *Still.* It was not his grandfather's word, worn into the page by eighteen years of faithfulness. It was a boy's word. A beginning. A door open just a crack.
Maris looked at it and began, very quietly, to cry.
Keaton looked up at her, alarmed. "What? Is that—was that wrong? Am I not supposed to write in it?"
"No," Maris said, laughing and crying at once, wiping her face. "No, baby. It's not wrong. It's perfect."
She got up and came around the table and put her arms around her

Chapter 14: Not All of It

> *In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee. — Isaiah 54:14*

The papers came by certified mail on Tuesday afternoon, while the glass man from Harmon was installing the last of the new windows.
Maris signed for them on the porch. She knew what they were before she opened the envelope. She had learned to recognize the heavy cream stationery of Whitfield & Crane, Attorneys at Law, the way a rabbit learns to recognize the shadow of a hawk.
She sat down on the top step to read them, in her father's canvas coat, while the glass man whistled tunelessly behind her and Boaz snored in a patch of sun.
EMERGENCY MOTION TO MODIFY ORDER OF PROTECTION AND FOR TEMPORARY CUSTODY OF MINOR CHILD.

She read it once. Then she read it again, slowly, the way she had learned to read things in the last month. Asking, about every sentence: *Is it true?*

Respondent Garrick T. Bellamy respectfully moves this Court to modify the existing Order of Protection to permit contact with the parties' minor son, Keaton D. Bellamy, age fifteen, and further moves for temporary sole custody of said minor child, on the following grounds:

1. That Petitioner Maris W. Bellamy has, since the entry of the Order, exhibited a pattern of escalating instability, including repeated emergency calls to law enforcement reporting phenomena that responding officers were unable to verify.

2. That Petitioner has publicly asserted, to members of the community and to the minor child, that her residence is inhabited by supernatural entities.

3. That Petitioner has, upon information and belief, involved the minor child in religious rituals of an extreme and frightening nature, including the recitation of so-called exorcism prayers in the middle of the night.

4. That the minor child has, as a direct result, suffered night terrors, sleep disruption, and documented psychological distress.

5. That Respondent is a stable, employed, church-going member of the community who poses no danger to the minor child and is fully able to provide him a safe and rational home.

There was more. Pages of it. Affidavits from Garrick's mother and from two men at Grace Fellowship, swearing to his good character. A copy of a sheriff's department call log, listing every time she had dialed 911. And at the very end, a hearing date.

Friday. Nine a.m. Courtroom B. Judge Harriet Ames.

Three days.

Maris sat on the step with the papers in her lap and looked out at the frosted yard, and the old cold rose up through her, the way it always had.

Fragile. Anxious. Sees threats where none exist.

He had found a way. Of course he had. He always found a way. He could not come within five hundred feet of her house, so he had come in through the courthouse instead. Through paper. *Paper,* he had whispered against her ear a month ago, in that same courtroom. And now here was his paper, telling a judge she was crazy. Telling a judge he should have her son.

And the worst of it was that every fact in it was true. She had called 911. She had told people her house was haunted. Keaton had screamed in the night. She had stood in the hallway at three in the morning shouting Scripture at the dark.

Every fact was true. And every word of it was a lie.

* * *

She called Corbin. Then she called her attorney, a tired, kind woman named Gloria Esposito who worked out of a storefront office in Harmon for legal aid wages. Then she sat at the kitchen table under her mother's sampler and waited for the shaking to stop.

It did not stop. But it got smaller.

Corbin came at five. He read the motion standing up, in his coat, his reading glasses pushed down his nose. When he got to the third paragraph, the one about *exorcism prayers in the middle of the night,* his jaw tightened. When he finished, he set it down on the table very carefully, as if it might go off.

"Well," he said. "That's a nasty piece of work."

"Gloria says he's got a real chance." Maris's voice was thin. "She says judges don't like it when parents talk about demons. She says Whitfield is going to make me look exactly like what Garrick told them I was the first time. And this time he's got a call log to prove it."

Corbin pulled out a chair and sat down across from her.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to run," she said honestly. "I want to take Keaton and get in the car and drive to my cousin's in Tennessee and never come back."

"I know."
"But I'm not going to." She was surprised to hear herself say it. She was surprised how steady it sounded. "I'm going to go to that courtroom on Friday and sit at that table and look at him. And I'm going to tell the truth." Her hands were clenched together on the table. "Even if it costs me. Even if the judge thinks I'm crazy."
Corbin looked at her for a long moment.
"There's something else," Maris said. "Something I want to do. After."
"What's that?"
"I want to talk to him." She saw Corbin's face change and held up her hand. "Not alone. Not anywhere he could hurt me. In the courthouse, with Kincaid there. In the hallway, where there are deputies and cameras and people." She drew a breath. "I've never once in my life said anything to Garrick that I wasn't afraid to say. Not once. Not in sixteen years. Everything I ever said to him, I said to keep him calm. To keep him from getting angry. To keep him from—" She stopped. "I want to look him in the eye one time and say what's true. Without being afraid of what he'll do."
Corbin was quiet for a long time.
"You don't have to win that conversation, Maris," he said finally. "You know that, don't you? You're not going to get him to confess. You're not going to get him to apologize. That's not who he is."
"I know."
"Then why?"
She thought about it.
"Because he's the first brick," she said slowly. "In the fortress. The one you were talking about. Fear's been living in me since I was a little girl, but Garrick's the one who built the walls up so high I couldn't see over them." She looked down at her hands. "I took my stand in my own house. I took it against whatever was beating on those windows. But I've never once taken it in front of him."
She looked up.
"I need to," she said. "Not for him. For me."
Corbin reached across the table and laid his hand over hers.
"Then I'll be there," he said. "And so will Kincaid." He squeezed her hand once. "And Maris. Remember what Isaiah says. *In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear.*" He smiled faintly. "It doesn't say you won't be oppressed. It says you'll be far from it. You'll be standing somewhere it can't reach."
* * *

> *He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD. — Proverbs 17:15*

Courtroom B had not changed.
The same floor wax smell. The same overheated air and tall rain-streaked windows. The same oak railing and the same two tables, one on either side of the aisle. Maris walked in at ten minutes to nine on Friday morning and felt the whole month fall away, as if she had stepped back through a door into the day it all began.
Except that she had not come alone.
Gloria Esposito walked beside her, a small, gray-haired woman in a navy suit with a battered leather briefcase. Corbin and Diane sat in the front row of the gallery, directly behind the petitioner's table. Keaton sat beside them in a clean collared shirt, his hair combed flat, his jaw set. Elowen Pryce, of all people, sat at the end of the second row with her silver-headed cane across her knees and her small notebook open on her lap, and nodded once at Maris when she came in.
And Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid stood against the back wall in his brown uniform jacket, hat in hand, his gray eyes on the respondent's table.
Garrick was already there.

He sat beside Whitfield in a charcoal suit and a blue tie. The same tie. He did not turn around when she came in. He did not need to. She saw his shoulders shift, very slightly, beneath the charcoal wool.

Careful.

She sat down at the petitioner's table and folded her hands on the manila folder in front of her, and for the first time in her life, in the same room with Garrick Bellamy, she let them shake. She did not hide them under the table. She did not press them flat. She let them shake in plain sight, on top of the folder, and she kept her eyes on the bench, and she breathed.

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear.

The bailiff called the court to order. Judge Harriet Ames came in through the side door in her black robe, small and gray and sharp, and sat down and put on her reading glasses and looked out over the courtroom.

Her gaze paused on Maris. Then on Garrick. Then, for a long moment, on the sheriff against the back wall.

"Let's begin," she said.

* * *

Whitfield was very good.

He stood and buttoned his jacket and clicked his gold pen and spoke for twenty minutes in a calm, regretful voice, as though it pained him deeply to say any of it. He described a woman under enormous strain. A woman who had left her husband abruptly, taken their son to a shelter, then moved him into an isolated old farmhouse where her own father had died. A woman who had called 911 to report knocks no one else heard and footprints no one else could explain. A woman who now told anyone who would listen that her house was haunted.

"My client takes no pleasure in this, Your Honor," Whitfield said. "He loves his wife. He loves his son. But a fifteen-year-old boy is waking up screaming in the night. His mother is responding by standing in hallways at three in the morning shouting prayers at the walls." He shook his head sadly. "Whatever is happening in that house, it is not a healthy environment for a child."

He sat down.

The courtroom was very quiet.

Then Gloria Esposito stood up.

She did not button anything. She did not click a pen. She walked to the lectern with her battered briefcase and set it down and opened it and said, "Your Honor, I'd like to call Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid."

Whitfield half rose. "Objection, Your Honor. The sheriff is not—"

"Sit down, Mr. Whitfield," said Judge Ames, without looking at him. "Sheriff?"

Kincaid came down the aisle. He did not look at Garrick. He took the oath and sat down in the witness chair with his hat on his knee, and he answered Gloria's questions in the flat, unhurried voice of a man who had testified in that room a hundred times.

Yes, he had personally responded to the petitioner's residence on multiple occasions. Yes, he had personally observed footprints in the frost on her front lawn on the night of the second call. Yes, they had been photographed. Size thirteen. Smooth-soled. Not consistent with the respondent's shoe size. Yes, a smoke detector in the residence had been found with its battery removed, on the morning a book was burned on her kitchen table. Yes, a second detector, also. No, the petitioner had not removed them. How did he know?

"Because there's a thumbprint on the cover of one of them," said Kincaid. "Same thumbprint as on the bathroom mirror. It doesn't belong to Mrs. Bellamy. It doesn't belong to her son. It doesn't belong to anybody we've been able to identify."

A murmur went through the gallery. Whitfield's pen stopped clicking.

Yes, the windows. He had been there that night. He had been parked at the foot of the lane. He had heard it from four hundred yards away. Every window in the house being struck at once. Eleven panes broken or cracked. Photographs had been taken of the damage, inside and out.

"Sheriff," said Gloria quietly. "In your professional opinion, is Mrs. Bellamy imagining these events?"

Kincaid looked at the judge.

"No, ma'am," he said. "In my professional opinion, somebody has been inside that woman's house at least twice without her permission. Somebody stood in the trees behind her property last Saturday and photographed her and her son and sent the pictures to her phone. Somebody broke eleven of her windows." He paused. "I don't know yet who. But I know it's real. I've got the evidence in a locker in my office. And I know it isn't her."

The courtroom was silent.

* * *

At the end, Judge Ames asked to speak with Keaton in chambers.

They were gone for twenty minutes. Maris sat at the table with her hands shaking on the folder and could not breathe. Garrick sat across the aisle, motionless. Corbin's hand rested on the back of Maris's chair.

When the judge came back, she sat down, took off her glasses, and looked at Whitfield for a long moment.

"Mr. Whitfield," she said. "Your motion asserts that the petitioner has involved the minor child in religious rituals of an extreme and frightening nature." She folded the glasses. "I've just spent twenty minutes with that young man. I asked him about these rituals." She paused. "He told me his mother read the Bible out loud in every room of the house. He told me she prayed with him at night. He told me that when something was breaking the windows at three in the morning, she didn't run. She stood in the hallway with her back against the wall and held onto him and said Scripture until it stopped."

She looked across at Garrick.

"Your client is a deacon at Grace Fellowship, is he not?"

"He is, Your Honor."

"Then I'd suggest he be careful about calling prayer a ritual."

Someone in the gallery made a sound that might have been a laugh. The bailiff glared.

"The young man also told me something else," Judge Ames said. "He asked me to tell the court in his own words. So I will." She glanced at a note on her desk. "He said, *My mom is the bravest person I know. I'm not going anywhere with him.*"

Maris put her hand over her mouth.

"The motion is denied in its entirety," said Judge Ames. "The order of protection remains in full force and effect. And Mr. Whitfield—" She put her glasses back on. "If you bring another motion like this one before me, you had better bring better evidence than a call log from a woman who was right to call."

She stood. "We're adjourned."

* * *

> *Speaking the truth in love… — Ephesians 4:15*

The second-floor hallway of the county courthouse was long and high-ceilinged and lined with tall windows on one side and heavy oak doors on the other. Its floor was old black-and-white tile, scuffed gray by a century of feet. At the far end, past the clerk's office and the law library, a broad marble staircase went down to the lobby. A brass plaque on the wall commemorated the county's dead in the First World War. Rain streaked the windows. The radiators hissed.

Garrick came out of Courtroom B with Whitfield at his elbow and his overcoat over his arm. His face was perfectly calm. Only Maris, who had spent sixteen years reading it, could see the white line around his mouth.

She was waiting for him.

She stood in the middle of the hallway, twenty feet from the courtroom door, in her good gray coat with her father's green Testament in the pocket. Not close. Not blocking his way. But not moving, either. Kincaid stood by the window ten feet behind her, his hat in his hand. Corbin stood a little beyond him. At the far end of the hall, by the staircase, a uniformed bailiff leaned against the wall, watching.

Garrick saw her and stopped.

For a moment, something flickered across his face. Surprise. Then something older and harder. The look she had seen ten thousand times across a dinner table, across a bedroom, across the front seat of a car. The look that meant *How dare you.*

She did not look away.

"Mrs. Bellamy." Whitfield stepped smoothly between them, his gold pen in his hand. "My client is subject to an order of protection. He cannot have contact with you. Any attempt on your part to—"

"She's allowed to talk to him, counselor." Kincaid's voice, mild and flat, from behind her. "The order restricts him. Not her. He's allowed to stand there and listen." A pause. "He's not allowed to come one step closer than he is right now. And I'm standing right here to make sure he doesn't."

Whitfield looked at the sheriff. Then at Garrick.

Garrick did not look at either of them. He was looking at Maris.

"Say what you came to say," he said softly.

Maris took a breath.

She had rehearsed this. In the car. In the shower. On her knees beside her bed. She had imagined it a hundred ways. And now that she was here, standing on the black-and-white tile with the rain on the windows and the man she had been afraid of for sixteen years in front of her, every rehearsed word was gone.

So she said what was true.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," she said.

It came out quiet. Steadier than she expected.

Garrick's mouth twitched. Something that wanted to be a smile.

"I was afraid of you for sixteen years," Maris said. "Every day. Every time I heard your truck. Every time you came up the stairs. You taught me to be afraid of the dark and the quiet and my own memory. You taught our son to be afraid of you. You put your hand around my throat in our kitchen and held me against the refrigerator until I couldn't breathe." Her voice did not shake. She was amazed that it did not shake. "And then you stood in that courtroom and told a judge I was fragile."

"Maris—" Whitfield began.

"I'm not finished."

Whitfield closed his mouth.

"Then you couldn't come near my house anymore," Maris said. "So something else did. Someone knocked on my door at 3:17 in the morning. Twice. Someone walked across my yard in the frost and stood under our son's window. Someone came into my house and burned my Bible and took the batteries out of my smoke detectors and wrote on my bathroom mirror. *The order does not cover me.*"

She watched his face. "Someone stood in the trees behind my house last Saturday and took pictures of us and sent them to my phone. And somebody has been standing over our son's bed at night. Telling him he's going to grow up and belong to anger. Like his father."

She drew a breath.

"I want to know how much of that was you, Garrick."

The hallway was silent except for the rain.

And then Garrick laughed.

It was not his courtroom laugh. Not the rueful, gentle, long-suffering chuckle of a good man burdened with a fragile wife. It was the other one. The one she had heard through the bathroom door with the water running. Short and ugly and full of contempt.

"You've really lost it," he said. "Haven't you?"

Whitfield put a hand on his arm. Garrick shook it off.
"You think that was *me?*" His voice was rising now. The calm was cracking off him like old paint. "Knocking on your door at three in the morning? Walking around in the frost in my church shoes? You think I snuck into your daddy's house and *wrote on a mirror?*" He gave another short, harsh laugh. "I've been in my apartment every night since that hearing. The sheriff knows it. He's got the tapes. He's got my phone. He's got the GPS off my truck. I haven't been within five miles of Copper Creek Road."
"Garrick, that's enough," said Whitfield sharply.
"No. No, she wants to talk. Let's talk." Garrick took half a step forward, and Kincaid took a full step forward behind Maris, and Garrick stopped. His face was flushed now. His jaw had set, exactly the way Keaton had described it at the creek. "I didn't burn your Bible. I didn't touch your smoke detectors. I didn't break any windows. I never stood in any trees. And I have never in my life stood over that boy's bed and said one word about anger." He was breathing hard. "Whatever's going on in that house, it's yours, Maris. It's your crazy. It's your daddy's crazy. It's in the walls of that house and it's in your blood, and you are not going to pin it on me."
There it was. The voice. The real one. The one she had heard for sixteen years in the dark.
And Maris found, standing in the hallway with her hands in her coat pockets and her father's Testament under her fingers, that it did not reach her.
It did not reach her at all.
She could hear it. She could see his face, red and twisted and furious, the face that used to make her whole body go cold. But it was as if she were watching it through thick glass. As if she were standing somewhere it could not touch.
Thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear.
She looked at him calmly.
"All right," she said. "Then tell me the truth."
* * *

> *The wicked man travaileth with pain all his days… A dreadful sound is in his ears: in prosperity the destroyer shall come upon him. — Job 15:20–21*

Garrick opened his mouth.
Maris knew what was coming. She could see it forming in his face, the way she had always been able to see it. Something cutting. Something designed to find the softest place in her and press. *You want the truth? Here's the truth.* She waited for it. She was not afraid of it.
It never came.
Because Garrick's eyes moved.
They left her face and went past her. Over her left shoulder. Down the long hallway behind her, toward the far end, toward the marble staircase and the brass plaque and the tall rain-streaked windows.
And stopped there.
Maris saw it happen. She saw it the way she had once seen everything in that face, every flicker, every shift, every warning. The flush drained out of his cheeks. Not slowly. All at once, as if someone had opened a valve. The angry red went to pink, then to white, then to a gray she had never seen on Garrick Bellamy's face in sixteen years of marriage. His mouth stayed open, but nothing came out of it. His eyes went wide and fixed and glassy.
He was looking at something behind her.
And at that same moment, Maris felt the cold.
It came against her back like a draft from an open door. But there was no open door behind her. Only the long tiled hallway. It settled between her shoulder blades and spread, slow and deep, through the gray wool of her coat, into her spine.
And she heard it.
One footstep. On the old black-and-white tile, somewhere behind her. Not close. Not far. A hard heel coming down, slow and deliberate.

Clack.

The sound of a leather sole. An old-fashioned shoe. The kind a man would wear to church.

The hair rose on her arms.

Garrick took a step backward. Then another. His shoulder hit the oak frame of the courtroom door. His overcoat slid off his arm and fell to the floor at his feet, and he did not seem to notice. He was staring past her with an expression she had seen on exactly one face before in her life.

Keaton's. The night he sat bolt upright in bed screaming, staring at the corner by the window.

Maris turned around.

The hallway was empty.

The long black-and-white floor ran away toward the staircase. Rain light lay across it in pale bars from the tall windows. The radiators hissed. The bailiff at the far end was still leaning against the wall beside the brass plaque, idly looking at his phone. He had not moved. He did not look up. Corbin was staring at Garrick. Kincaid had turned too, one hand going instinctively to his belt, his gray eyes sweeping the length of the hall.

Nothing. No one.

But the cold was still there, against her back, even facing this way. Even facing the empty hall.

And there, on the floor, halfway down the corridor, just in front of the brass plaque for the county's war dead, there was something on the tile. Kincaid saw it at the same moment she did. She heard his breath catch.

A single shoe print.

Damp. Dark against the pale squares of tile. Long and narrow, with a pointed toe and a smooth, treadless sole. Pointed toward them. Toward Maris. Toward Garrick.

As they watched, it began to dry, the edges shrinking inward, the dark fading to gray, until there was nothing on the tile at all.

Maris turned back around.

Garrick had not moved. He was still pressed against the doorframe, his overcoat at his feet, staring down the hall at the place where the print had been. His lips were moving, but no sound came out.

Whitfield was looking at him with an expression of complete bewilderment.

"Garrick?" the lawyer said. "Garrick, what's the matter with you?"

Garrick didn't answer.

Maris took one step toward him. Just one. Kincaid moved with her.

"Garrick," she said quietly. "What did you see?"

He looked at her. It was the strangest moment of her life. Sixteen years of marriage, and she had never once seen Garrick Bellamy's eyes like this. Not angry. Not cold. Not calculating. Not cruel.

Afraid.

He was terrified. The way she had been terrified. For years.

"Garrick." She kept her voice low and steady. "I need you to tell me. Are you responsible for this? For what's been happening to us?"

He swallowed. His throat worked. He looked down the hall again, at the empty tile, and then back at her, and for one moment, the briefest moment, Maris saw something in his face she did not recognize at all.

Shame.

"Not all of it," he whispered.

The words hung in the cold air of the hallway.

Then Garrick bent, snatched up his overcoat, and pushed past Whitfield and walked fast, almost running, toward the back stairwell at the opposite end of the hall from the brass plaque. He did not look back. His heels rang on the tile, a quick, ordinary, frightened sound. The stairwell door banged shut behind him.

Whitfield stood alone in the hallway, staring after his client. Then he looked at Maris, and at Kincaid, and opened his mouth, and closed it again. He picked up his briefcase and followed, more slowly.
The hallway was quiet.
* * *
"Did you see his face?" Kincaid said.
He was standing beside her, looking at the stairwell door. His hand was still resting on his belt.
"Yes," Maris said.
"I've seen a lot of guilty men in this hallway." Kincaid's voice was low. "Guilty men get angry. Or they get smug. Or they get scared they're going to jail." He shook his head slowly. "That wasn't any of those. That man saw something."
Corbin came and stood on her other side.
"He's afraid," he said quietly.
Maris turned to look at him.
"Afraid of what?"
Corbin was looking down the long empty hallway, at the place in front of the brass plaque where the damp print had been.
"The same thing we are," he said. "Only he doesn't know what it is yet. And he doesn't have anything to stand on."
Not all of it.
Maris stood in the hallway with the words echoing in her head. Not all of it. Which meant some of it. Which meant Garrick had done something. Something he was ashamed of, or afraid of, or both.
And which meant that the rest of it, the knocks and the footprints and the voice and the darkness beside her son's bed, the thing that had walked down a courthouse hallway in broad daylight in a dead man's church shoes, belonged to something that Garrick Bellamy, for all his anger and all his cruelty and all his sixteen years of terror, was more afraid of than she had ever been of him.
She found that she was not glad.
She had imagined this moment for years. Garrick afraid. Garrick shaken. Garrick white-faced and running. She had imagined how it would feel. Triumph. Satisfaction. Justice.
It did not feel like any of those.
It felt like watching a man walk out onto ice.
* * *
> *Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. — Galatians 6:7*

Garrick Bellamy did not go back to work that afternoon.
He drove straight to the apartment over the dry cleaner's on Second Street and climbed the creaking stairs and locked the door behind him. The deadbolt. The chain. Then he went through the apartment and turned on every light, the way he had the night of the frost print on his landing, and pulled every blind.
Then he sat down on the edge of his bed and put his face in his hands.
He could still see it.
It had been standing at the far end of the courthouse hallway, in front of the brass plaque. Tall. So tall its hat brushed the bottom of the old light fixture. Long black coat. Hands hanging at its sides, long and pale. Standing on the black-and-white tile in a pair of polished black shoes, perfectly still, while the bailiff leaned against the wall three feet away scrolling through his phone, seeing nothing.
And it had been looking at him. Not at Maris. At him.
He had not been able to see its face. There had been no face. Just shadow under the brim of the hat, the way there was shadow under a bridge. But he had felt it looking. The way you feel a dog watching you from behind a fence.
And then it had smiled.

He did not know how he knew that, with no face to see it on. But it had. He had felt it smile at him. The way you smile at an old friend across a room.

Not all of it.

He had said that out loud. To Maris. In front of the sheriff.

Garrick got up from the bed and went to the dresser and opened the top drawer and took out a phone from under the handkerchiefs. Not the cheap truck-stop burner he had bought himself back in October, the one he had used for the late-night texts before the hearing. The other one, and sat back down and looked at it for a long time.

* * *

He had told himself it was nothing. That was the thing. He had told himself that every step of the way. It had started three weeks after Maris left with the boy. Before the hearing. Before any of this. He had gone down to the dry cleaner's one Saturday to pick up his shirts, and there had been a woman ahead of him at the counter.

An older woman. Sixty-five, maybe. Seventy. It was hard to tell. Slender, straight-backed, with long gray hair worn loose to her shoulders and a gray wool scarf wound around her throat. Not pretty, exactly, but striking. She had very bright eyes. When she turned around and saw him, she had smiled, as if she had been waiting for him specifically.

You're Garrick Bellamy, she had said. *Daniel Whitlock's son-in-law.*

He had said yes, warily.

I knew Daniel, she said. *A long time ago. I knew the whole family.* She had looked at him with something that looked like sympathy. *I heard what Maris has done. Taking your boy. I'm so sorry.* A pause. *It runs in that family, you know. The instability. Her father had it too. He saw things that weren't there. Toward the end.*

He should have walked away. He knew that now. But she had said exactly the thing he wanted to hear, in exactly the voice he wanted to hear it in. Gentle. Understanding. On his side.

They had gone across the street for coffee. Then, the next week, to a diner in Harmon. Then once more, the week of the hearing.

She had asked him questions. Ordinary questions, he had thought at the time. The kind a concerned old family friend might ask. Which room was the boy's, in Daniel's old house? Was it still the little one at the end of the hall, with the yellow wallpaper? Did Maris still sleep with a light on? She always had, as a girl, hadn't she? Was there still that funny little night-light, shaped like a moon?

He had answered. All of it. He had even laughed about the night-light.

She had asked whether he still had any keys to the property. He had said only one, to the old detached garage, which Maris had never bothered to rekey because the door stuck and nobody used it. She had asked if she might borrow it. Just to look for something of Daniel's she had lent him years ago and never gotten back. A small thing. Sentimental.

He had given it to her.

And she had given him a phone. This phone. A second prepaid one, so they could stay in touch without Maris's lawyer finding out. *In case I hear anything that might help you,* she said. *About the boy.*

At their last meeting, at the diner in Harmon, she had slid some papers across the table. A trust, she said. For Keaton. Something Daniel had always wanted to set up for his grandson and never gotten around to. She was an executor of sorts. She only needed Garrick's signature as the boy's father, and a copy of his driver's license, for the bank.

He had signed. He had handed over his license. She had photocopied it on the diner's old machine by the register, smiling.

And she had written her name and number on a paper napkin, in the most beautiful handwriting he had ever seen. Old-fashioned. Loops and long tails. The kind of script nobody learned anymore.

Mrs. A. Lark, the napkin said.

He had thrown it away. He had not thought of it again until today.

He had not known what any of it was for. He swore that to himself, sitting on the edge of his bed with the burner phone in his hands. He had not known about any knocks. Any footprints. Any mirrors or burned Bibles or broken windows. He had not known anything about some tall thing in a hat.

He had only wanted his son back. He had only wanted Maris to look crazy. He had only wanted to win.

Not all of it.

But some of it. The room. The night-light. The key. His name on a stack of papers he had never read. Some of it was his.

* * *

The burner phone buzzed in his hand.

Garrick flinched so hard he nearly dropped it.

A text. From the only number saved in it.

You did well, Garrick. You may stop now. We have everything we need.

He stared at it. His mouth had gone dry.

The phone buzzed again.

Don't speak to the sheriff. Remember what happened to Ambrose.

He did not know who Ambrose was. He had never heard the name in his life. But the way it sat on the screen, alone, in those plain gray letters, made the skin crawl on the back of his neck.

He set the phone down on the bed beside him very carefully, the way you set down something that might go off.

Then he reached into the pocket of his suit jacket, which was lying across the end of the bed, and took out a business card. He had picked it up off the clerk's counter in the courthouse lobby on his way out that morning, without knowing why. *Bramwell Kincaid, Sheriff.* A cell number written on the back in blue ink, the same card the sheriff gave to everyone.

Garrick held it in one hand and his own phone in the other. He looked at the number for a long time.

He dialed it.

He let it ring once.

Then he hung up.

He sat on the edge of his bed with the card in his hand and the lights blazing and the blinds drawn, and for the first time in his adult life, Garrick Bellamy did not know what to do.

Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. His mother had embroidered that on a pillow when he was a boy. It had sat on the couch in the front room of the house he grew up in for twenty years. He had never once thought it was about him.

On the bed beside him, the burner phone lit up again.

No text this time. A photograph.

It was a picture of his own apartment building. Taken from across Second Street, from the sidewalk in front of the gas station, sometime in the last few minutes. The dry cleaner's sign. The stairwell window. And above it, the windows of his apartment, every one of them glowing yellow behind drawn blinds. And in one of those windows, the one in the bedroom where he was sitting right now, the blind was pulled down crooked at one corner, and through the gap a man could be seen sitting on the edge of a bed with his head in his hands.

Garrick looked up slowly at the window.

The blind was crooked at the corner.

He sat very still, staring at that small dark triangle of glass, and did not move, and did not breathe, and did not get up to fix it.

He was too afraid of what he might see on the other side.

Chapter 15: The Wooden Box

> *When I saw among the spoils… then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent. — Joshua 7:21*

Orson Vale had asked for her by name.

Kincaid brought the message on Saturday morning, standing on Maris's porch with his hat in his hands. The old man had called the sheriff's office himself, which according to Hollister he had not done since 2003. He wanted to talk again. Not just to the sheriff and the preacher this time.

"He wants Danny's girl," Kincaid said. "His words. He says there's something you ought to hear from him and nobody else."

So on Saturday afternoon Maris rode out Pike Creek Road in the passenger seat of Kincaid's gray Ford, with Corbin in the back and her father's canvas coat buttoned to her chin, past the long gauntlet of faded plywood signs. NO TRESPASSING. GO AWAY. NOT AFTER DARK.

She saw the house come into view with its horseshoes and its crosses and its mirrors flashing on the porch posts, and she understood at once what Corbin had meant. It was not a house. It was a fortress. A man had been building it, one horseshoe at a time, for twenty-nine years.

She knew something about fortresses now.

Orson was waiting on the porch, in his chair, in a clean white shirt. When Maris came up the steps, he stood. He did it slowly, with a grunt of pain, gripping the porch rail. And then he did something she did not expect. He took off his old feed-store cap and held it against his chest.

He looked at her for a long time.

"You've got his eyes," he said hoarsely. "Danny's."

"Everybody says that," Maris said.

"Everybody's right." His voice cracked. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bellamy. I'm so sorry. For all of it. For what we did. For what we let your daddy do. For what's come down on you." He swallowed. "You don't have to forgive me. I wouldn't. But I needed to say it to your face."

Maris looked at the broken old man with his cap against his heart, standing in the shadow of all his useless horseshoes, and she found, to her own surprise, that she was not angry.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "Can we go inside?"

* * *

They sat at his kitchen table. His mother's Bible still lay at its center. Maris saw that it was open now. Somewhere in Luke. A page had been turned down at the corner.

Orson poured coffee into jelly jars. His hands shook worse than before.

"I told the preacher and the sheriff about the last night," he said. "Some of it. Not all. There was something I didn't tell them, and I been thinking on it since." He looked at Maris. "It's about your daddy's watch."

Maris's breath caught. She reached without thinking into the pocket of the canvas coat. Her fingers found the small cardboard box she had taken from the attic. The empty brass chain coiled inside.

She laid it on the table between them.

Orson stared at the chain for a long moment. Then he closed his eyes.

"That's it," he whispered. "That's the chain off it. Lord, Lord."

"Mr. Vale," Corbin said gently. "Tell her about the box."

Orson opened his eyes.

"There was a box," he said. "On the last night. In the middle of the circle, on the floor, inside all them painted names. Ambrose made it himself, or had it made. Black walnut. Iron on the corners. About this big." He measured with his hands, a foot and a half long, a foot wide. "Lined with red velvet. Lid on a hinge."

"What was it for?" Maris asked.

"It was for us." His voice dropped. "For a piece of each of us. Ambrose said a covenant needs something to bind it. Something real. Something you can hold. So we each had to bring something of our own, something that carried our name even if our name wasn't written on it, and put it in that box. Before the promises."

He began to count them off on his thick fingers, slowly, as if dredging each one up from deep water. "Ruth put in her granny's wedding ring. The one the thing told her where to find. Harlan put in his Masonic pin. Walt and Lorene, they put in a little silver spoon. Their first baby's spoon. The one that died." His voice faltered. "Bernadette put in her rosary. Broke the chain doing it. I remember she cried. I put in a brass key to my store." He swallowed. "Ambrose put in a lock of his mother's hair, tied with thread. And a photograph, face down. I never knew of what."

"And Celia?" Corbin asked quietly.

Orson's jaw tightened. "Celia put in a little square of paper. Folded up small. Many times. She never said what was on it, and nobody asked." He looked at the brass chain on the table. "And your daddy put in his daddy's pocket watch. Brass. Scratched up. Stopped years before at some hour nobody remembered." He looked up at Maris. "I watched him do it. He didn't want to let go of it. His fingers stayed on it a long time."

Maris could not speak. She laid her hand flat over the empty chain.

"What happened to the box?" Kincaid asked.

"We buried it." Orson rubbed his face with both hands. "After. When the candles were out and Ambrose was on the floor and we didn't know what in God's name to do. Walt said burn it. Burn the whole house. Celia said no. She said you don't burn a thing like that, you don't know what it'd let loose. She said it had to go in the ground. Under the house. Where it was made." He shook his head slowly. "So me and Walt carried it down into the cellar of the Hollis place. Packed dirt floor. Far corner, under the stairs. Dug a hole with a rusty spade off the wall and put it in and covered it over. Danny held the light. He wouldn't touch the box. He wouldn't even come close."

"And it's still there?" said Kincaid.

"Far as I know. Nobody's been in that cellar in twenty-nine years." Orson hesitated. "Nobody but—" He stopped.

"But who?"

"Nobody." He looked away.

Corbin leaned forward. "Mr. Vale. You told us on Wednesday that it came through. That something came into the room. Was the ritual finished? Was the covenant—whatever it was—was it completed?"

Orson was quiet for a very long time. Outside, the bells on the porch chimed faintly in the wind.

"No," he said at last.

The kitchen was still.

"It was never finished," the old man said. "That's the thing nobody understood. Not even Ambrose. It needed nine. Nine promises. Nine names. Nine pieces in the box. That was the whole thing. That was what it wanted. And something went wrong at the very end, right before the candles went out." He stared at the table. "It wasn't closed, you see. It was left open. Half done. Like a door somebody started to shut and then let go of."

"What went wrong?" Maris whispered.

Orson looked at her. And there was something in his face she could not read. Pity, maybe. Or fear. Or something very close to love.

"I can't tell you that," he said. "Not yet. I swore. And I'm a coward, Mrs. Bellamy. I've been a coward for twenty-nine years." He reached across the table, slowly, and laid his big ruined hand over hers, over the empty brass chain. "But I'll tell you this. Whatever your daddy did, out there, at the end, he did it for you. I want you to know that. He was the bravest one of us. The only brave one."

Maris stared at him.

"The box is down there," Orson said. "Under that house. With your granddaddy's watch inside it. With all our names on it. It's been in the ground twenty-nine years, like Achan's silver."

"Achan," Corbin murmured.

"I read it last night. First time in thirty years." Orson touched the Bible with its turned-down page. "Joshua. The man who took what was cursed and hid it in the ground under his tent. And thought nobody'd ever know." His voice cracked. "And the whole camp suffered for it. Every one of them. Till somebody dug it up and brought it out into the light."

* * *

> *For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. — Ecclesiastes 12:14*

Elowen Pryce called Corbin's cell phone at 6:40 that evening, and he knew from the first word that something was wrong.

He had never heard her voice like that. Not sharp. Not dry. It was thin and shaking, the voice of a very old woman who had just discovered she had made a terrible mistake.

"Pastor Thorne," she said. "I've done something unforgivable."

"Dr. Pryce, what—"

"I made him a promise. Daniel. On my porch, in 2014, with his hat in his hands and cancer in his bones. *If anyone ever buys the Hollis place, you go and tell my daughter.*" Her voice cracked. "And I checked. Every January. I've checked every January for eleven years."

Corbin went still in his kitchen. Diane looked up from the stove.

"I didn't check this year," Elowen said. "Not yet. It's December. I always check in January. I was going to check in January." A small, broken sound. "After that business at the courthouse yesterday, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about that poor man's face. Garrick. So tonight I got up and went to my computer and pulled up the county recorder's index. Just to be sure. Just to put my mind at rest."

She drew a long, shuddering breath.

"It was sold, Pastor. Three weeks ago. The county auctioned the Hollis place for back taxes in a lot with eleven other abandoned properties, and somebody bought it. The deed was recorded on November twenty-second." A pause. "Pastor, do you know what day that is?"

Corbin did. Twenty-nine years to the day after Ambrose Lark was found dead in his bed.

"Yes," he said.

"Who bought it?"

"Something called Nine Oaks Holdings. A limited liability company." A pause. "Fourteen thousand two hundred dollars. Cash."

Nine Oaks. Corbin closed his eyes.

"I'm calling the sheriff next," Elowen said. "But I wanted to tell you first. Because you'll have to be the one to tell her." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I promised him, Pastor. I promised I'd tell his daughter. And I was three weeks too late."

* * *

Kincaid had it by nine o'clock the next morning, which was a Sunday, which meant he had called in two favors and woken up a clerk in the state capital who was not happy about it.

He laid the printouts on Corbin's desk at New Hope Chapel after the second service, while the last of the congregation was still shaking hands on the steps outside.

The first was the deed. *County of Henley, Grantor. Nine Oaks Holdings, LLC, Grantee. Tract 14-07-B, Ridley Bottoms Road, approx. 22 acres with improvements. Consideration: $14,200.00.* Recorded November 22.

The second was the filing with the secretary of state. *Articles of Organization. Nine Oaks Holdings, LLC.* Filed November 18. The same week, Corbin noted, that Maris had walked into Judge Ames's courtroom and been granted her order.

Registered agent: a post office box in Harmon.

And under *Organizer and Sole Managing Member,* in neat black type:
Garrick T. Bellamy.
The Lakeview Apartments address on Second Street. A signature at the bottom that even Corbin, who had seen it only once, on the motion papers, recognized as Garrick's.
The third printout was from Farmers and Merchants Bank. A business checking account opened on November 19 in the name of Nine Oaks Holdings. Fourteen thousand five hundred dollars deposited in cash the same day. Fourteen thousand two hundred withdrawn by cashier's check on November 21, payable to the Henley County Treasurer.
Stapled to it was a photocopy of a driver's license.
Garrick's face. Garrick's name. Garrick's date of birth.
The copy was slightly crooked, as if it had been run through an old machine. And in the lower corner, faint, where the machine had picked up something lying on the glass beside it, there was a shadow. The edge of a coffee cup ring. And part of a printed logo: *—IE'S DINER · HARMON.*
"Farmers and Merchants," Corbin said slowly. "Harlan Pike's bank."
"Harlan's been dead eleven years," said Kincaid. "But yeah."
He sat down heavily in the chair across the desk.
"So there it is," he said. "Garrick Bellamy bought the Hollis place. Formed a company the same week his wife got a protective order, opened a bank account, put fourteen and a half thousand dollars cash in it, and bought the abandoned farm where her father's friends held their séances. Paper trail with his name on every page." He rubbed his eyes. "If I take that to Prescott at the DA's office, he'll have a warrant drawn up before lunch."
"But you're not going to," Corbin said.
Kincaid looked at him.
"Not yet." He tapped the photocopy of the license. "Because I saw that man's face in the courthouse hallway on Friday. And because a man smart enough to set up an alibi like his, cameras and phone records and GPS all lined up neat as a row of soldiers, is not dumb enough to buy a farm under his own name." He paused. "And because of this."
He pointed to the faint shadow in the corner of the copy.
"Garrick works in Henley. Lives in Henley. Banks in Henley. Eats at the Waffle House by the interstate every Tuesday, according to Hollister, who's been watching him for a month." Kincaid's mouth tightened. "So why was his driver's license photocopied on the old machine by the register at Bessie's Diner in Harmon?"
Corbin looked at the faint gray letters.
—IE'S DINER · HARMON.
"I'm going to ask him," Kincaid said. "Today. And this time he's going to tell me the truth, or I'm going to arrest him for it."
He stood and gathered the papers. At the door he paused.
"Pastor," he said. "How do I tell Mrs. Bellamy that somebody bought the place where her daddy—" He stopped. "Where all that happened. And that it's got her husband's name on the deed."
Corbin looked out the window at the gravel lot, where Diane was talking to Maris and Keaton beside the Honda. Keaton was laughing at something. A real laugh. He had come to church that morning on his own, without being asked, and sat in the back row with his arms folded, and stayed for the whole sermon.
"You let me tell her," Corbin said quietly. "I promised Elowen."
* * *

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

Garrick Bellamy came in on his own at four o'clock that Sunday afternoon.

Kincaid had expected to have to go get him. He had his hat on and his keys in his hand when the front desk called back to say Mr. Bellamy was in the lobby asking for him. Alone.

No Whitfield. No gold pen. No charcoal suit.

He was wearing jeans and a wrinkled flannel shirt and a canvas jacket that did not fit him right, and he had not shaved, and there were dark bruised circles under his eyes. When Kincaid came out to the lobby, Garrick stood up from the plastic chair too fast, and Kincaid saw his hands.

They were shaking.

"I called you," Garrick said. "Friday night. I hung up."

"I saw."

"I need to—" He stopped. Swallowed. "Can we go somewhere?"

Kincaid took him back to Interview Room Two. The same eight-by-ten room. The same tea-colored walls. The same camera with its small red light. Garrick sat down in the same chair he had sat in a month ago, with his ankle crossed over his knee and three neat pieces of paper on the table proving he had never left his apartment.

He did not cross his ankle now. He sat hunched forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped so tightly the knuckles had gone white.

Kincaid laid the deed on the table in front of him. Then the articles of organization. Then the bank record with the crooked photocopy of the driver's license stapled to it.

Garrick looked at them for a long time.

"I didn't buy that," he said finally. His voice was hoarse. "I swear to you. I didn't buy any farm. I never heard of any Nine Oaks anything. I've never had fourteen thousand dollars in cash in my life." He looked up. "Somebody used my name."

"It's your signature," said Kincaid.

"I know it's my signature." Garrick put his face in his hands. "I know. I signed it. I didn't know what it was."

Kincaid sat down across from him and waited.

And Garrick Bellamy, for the first time in Bramwell Kincaid's experience of him, told the truth.

* * *

It took a long time. He did not tell it well. He started in the middle and went back to the beginning and jumped ahead and went back again. But he told it.

The woman at the dry cleaner's. Sixty-five, seventy. Long gray hair loose to her shoulders. A gray wool scarf. Very bright eyes. *You're Daniel Whitlock's son-in-law.* The coffee across the street. The diner in Harmon. Bessie's. Three times.

The questions. Which room was the boy's. Whether Maris still slept with a light on. Whether there was still a night-light, shaped like a moon.

"I laughed about the night-light," Garrick said, staring at the table. "I told her all about it. How Maris couldn't sleep in the dark. How I used to—" He stopped. His jaw worked. "How I used to turn the lamp off on her. To win arguments."

Kincaid said nothing. His face did not change.

The key. The one to the old detached garage, the one Maris never rekeyed because the door stuck. *Just to look for something of Daniel's I lent him years ago.* He had handed it over without a second thought.

The papers. A trust for the boy, she said. Something Daniel had always meant to set up. She only needed his signature as the father. And a copy of his driver's license, for the bank. She had run it through the old copier by the register at Bessie's, smiling.

"Did you read them?" Kincaid asked.

"No." Garrick laughed, a short, terrible sound. "No. I signed where she pointed. She was—she made me feel like she was on my side. Like she understood. Like somebody finally understood what Maris had done to me." He shook his head slowly. "And I wanted that so bad I didn't read a single word."

Then the phone. A cheap prepaid one, so they could talk without the lawyers knowing. He reached into his jacket and laid it on the table. Then, after a long hesitation, he reached into his other pocket and laid a second one beside it.
"That one's mine," he said, nodding at the second. "I bought it myself. At a truck stop in Morrow County. Three days after she left me."
Kincaid looked at him.
"I used it to text her," Garrick said. His voice was very quiet. "Before the hearing. All those messages. The forty-one in one night. And I drove past the shelter. Sat out there with my lights off." He did not look up. "That was me. All of that. I'm telling you so you know I'm not lying about the rest."
Kincaid picked up the second phone and turned it over in his fingers.
"You understand that's harassment, Mr. Bellamy," he said. "Possibly stalking. Before the order, but it'll count. A prosecutor will want it."
"I know."
"You understand I'm going to have to give it to him."
"I know." Garrick finally looked up. His eyes were red. "I don't care anymore. Charge me. Put me in jail. I'd be safer in there." His voice cracked. "I saw it, Sheriff. In the courthouse. Standing right behind her. I saw it. And it looked at me like—like it knew me. Like we were old friends."
Kincaid was quiet for a long moment.
"What did she call herself?" he said. "This woman."
"Mrs. Lark. A. Lark. She wrote it on a napkin." Garrick wiped his face with the heel of his hand. "Fanciest handwriting I ever saw. All curlicues. I threw it away." He picked up the first phone and turned it on and held it out across the table, with the last two texts on the screen. "And then she sent me this. Friday. After the courthouse."
Kincaid read it.
You did well, Garrick. You may stop now. We have everything we need.
Don't speak to the sheriff. Remember what happened to Ambrose.
He read it twice. Then he set the phone down very carefully on the table.
"Mr. Bellamy," he said. "Do you know who Ambrose Lark was?"
Garrick shook his head. "Her husband, I figured. Lark. Mrs. Lark."
"Ambrose Lark was a high school history teacher in this county," Kincaid said. "He never married. He died on November 22, 1996, of what the death certificate calls a heart attack." He paused. "On the night of the last meeting of a group of nine people at an abandoned farmhouse on Ridley Bottoms Road. One of whom was your wife's father."
Garrick stared at him.
"And the farmhouse," Kincaid said, laying his finger on the deed, "is the one you just bought."
The color left Garrick Bellamy's face for the second time in three days. He sat back in the plastic chair and looked at the deed with his name on it, and Kincaid watched the understanding come into his eyes, slowly, like water seeping under a door.
He had not been a man getting help from a kind old friend of the family. He had been a tool. Picked up, used, and set back down.
And whoever had picked him up had just told him, very plainly, what happened to the last man who stopped being useful.
"What do I do?" Garrick whispered.
Kincaid looked at the frightened man across the table. The same man who had sat in that chair a month ago with his ankle crossed over his knee, so calm, so helpful, so sorrowful about his fragile wife.
He that covereth his sins shall not prosper. His mother again. *But whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.*
"You just started," Kincaid said. "Now you sign a consent to search that property. Since it's got your name on it."

He slid a form across the table.

Garrick signed it without reading it. Then he stopped, and pulled it back, and read every word. Then he signed it again, underneath, and initialed it.

Kincaid almost smiled.

* * *

> *Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us? — Isaiah 29:15*

They went out at nine o'clock Monday morning. Kincaid, Hollister, and Alvarado in two vehicles. And Corbin, in the passenger seat of the gray Ford, because Kincaid had asked him to come.

"I don't know what we're going to find," the sheriff had said on the phone the night before. "But if it's what I think it might be, I want somebody there who knows how to pray over it."

Corbin had not argued.

The lane off Ridley Bottoms Road ran between the two rows of dead apple trees exactly as it had in the photograph, exactly as it had the night Corbin sat at the end of it and watched eight candles light in the window. In daylight the trees were only trees. Gray, crooked, leafless, their branches knotted together overhead into a ragged tunnel. Frost lay in the ruts. The trucks bumped and rocked down the quarter mile toward the house.

And then there it was.

The Hollis place.

Corbin had seen it in the faded snapshot, with nine people standing in front of the porch. He had seen it as a black shape against a night sky. Now he saw it in the flat gray light of a December morning, and it was smaller than he had imagined, and sadder. Two stories of weathered clapboard gone silver with age. Half the shutters hanging by one hinge. A porch roof that sagged in the middle. Windows filmed with grime, some broken, some boarded. A chimney leaning slightly away from the house, as though trying to get free.

No one had painted it since before the Second World War. No one had loved it in fifty years.

Kincaid stopped the truck in the dead orchard, in the place where, twenty-nine years ago, seven cars had parked in the dark. He sat for a moment with his hands on the wheel, looking at the house.

"Fresh tire tracks," Alvarado called from beside her cruiser. She was crouched in the frozen mud near the porch. "Smaller vehicle. Not a truck. Couple of days old, maybe."

"Photograph them," said Kincaid.

He got out. Corbin got out after him. The cold was sharp and still. Somewhere off in the bottoms, a crow called, and another answered.

The porch steps groaned under their boots. The front door was closed but not locked. It swung inward when Kincaid pushed it, on hinges that did not squeal. Someone had oiled them.

* * *

The front hall was long and narrow and dark, and smelled of dust and mice and old wallpaper paste. And underneath that, faint, unmistakable, the smell of candle wax.

Kincaid swept his flashlight across the floor. There was a thick, gray skin of dust over the boards, years of it. And through the dust, a path. A narrow trail of footprints, coming and going, many times, from the front door down the hall to the doorway at the end.

Small prints. Hiking boots. A woman's size seven.

"Same as the creek bank," Alvarado said quietly, behind him.

They followed the path down the hall. It led into the front parlor.

Corbin stopped in the doorway.

He had imagined this room for a week. He had heard it described by Orson Vale and Elowen Pryce and Daniel Whitlock's own trembling hand. He had seen it in his mind a hundred times. And now that he was standing in it, it was only a room. A high-ceilinged front parlor with peeling floral wallpaper and a cold fireplace and two tall windows looking out on the dead orchard. Empty of furniture. Bare boards.

But on the boards, in the center of the room, there was a circle.
It was very faint. Old white paint, worn nearly away by twenty-nine years of dust and damp, so that you could only see it when the flashlight beam lay low across the floor. A ring perhaps eight feet across. And inside it, here and there, the ghosts of letters. Parts of names. An *A.* A curl that might have been an *R.* Almost nothing left.
And in a semicircle around the inside of the ring, eight round puddles of hardened white wax, each one about eighteen inches from the next. The ones Hollister had found the week before.
No ninth.
The space where the ninth candle should have been was bare. Dust and floorboard. Nothing more.
Corbin stood at the edge of the faded circle and did not step inside it. He found that his lips were moving.
Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD.
"Sheriff."
Hollister's voice, from the back of the house. Low and strange.
"Sheriff, you'd better come look at the cellar."
* * *
The cellar door was in the kitchen, at the back of the house. A narrow plank door with a rusted iron latch. It was standing open.
The stairs went down steep and narrow into the dark. Kincaid went first with his flashlight. Corbin came behind him, one hand on the cold stone wall. The air grew colder with every step. Damp. Earthy. It smelled like a grave.
At the bottom, the cellar opened out. Low ceiling, heavy beams, stone walls weeping with damp. The floor was packed dirt, hard as brick, the way Orson had said. Old shelves along one wall, empty except for a few rusted canning jar lids. A broken chair. A coil of rotted rope.
Kincaid swung his flashlight to the far corner. Under the stairs.
And stopped.
The hard-packed dirt floor in the corner beneath the stairs had been broken open.
A mound of fresh earth lay heaped against the stone wall, dark and loose and damp, nothing like the gray, compacted floor around it. Beside the mound lay an old spade with a rusted blade and a cracked wooden handle. Its blade was caked with fresh dirt.
And in front of the mound, there was a hole.
It was about three feet deep. About two feet across. Its sides were clean and sharp, the marks of the spade still crisp in the walls of it. Someone had dug it recently. Within days. The earth at the bottom was still dark with damp.
Kincaid stepped to the edge and shone his flashlight down into it.
The hole was empty.
No box. No walnut. No iron corners. No velvet. Nothing but the bare raw earth at the bottom, and the shape of something, faintly, pressed into it. A rectangle perhaps a foot and a half long and a foot wide, a shallow impression where something heavy had lain for a very long time and then been lifted out.
The ground beneath the farmhouse had been disturbed.
And whatever had been buried there for twenty-nine years was gone.
Nobody said anything for a long time.
Corbin stood at the edge of the hole in the cold, damp dark, and looked down at the empty shape in the earth, and thought of Orson Vale at his kitchen table. *It was never finished. It was left open. Half done. Like a door somebody started to shut and then let go of.*
Someone had come back to finish it.
* * *
> *My times are in thy hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me. — Psalm 31:15*

It was Alvarado who found it.

She had climbed down into the hole with a trowel and an evidence kit, at Kincaid's direction, to photograph the impression in the earth and take soil samples. She was crouched at the bottom, in the narrow cold space, her flashlight in her teeth, when she stopped moving.

"Sheriff," she said around the flashlight. Then she took it out of her mouth. "Sheriff. There's something down here."

Kincaid knelt at the edge. Corbin leaned over beside him.

In the corner of the hole, half buried in a slump of loose dirt that had fallen in from the side, something small and round caught the light. Alvarado brushed the earth away with her gloved fingertips. Gently. The way you would brush dust off something precious.

It was a pocket watch.

Brass. Old. Its case dented and scratched. Its crystal cracked in a long diagonal line, top to bottom, like the crack in Keaton's bedroom window. It lay face up in the dirt at the bottom of the empty hole, as if someone had set it there carefully, deliberately, after lifting out everything else.

Alvarado picked it up by the edges and held it up into the flashlight beam.

And in the silence of the cellar, all three of them heard it.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

The watch was running.

Corbin felt the cold go through him from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. A watch that Maris's grandfather had owned. That had stopped, Orson said, years before 1996 at some hour nobody remembered. That had been sealed in a walnut box under three feet of packed dirt in a damp cellar for twenty-nine years.

It was ticking.

Kincaid took it from Alvarado, in his own gloved hand, and turned it toward the light. The hands stood at 10:41. He looked at his own wristwatch.

10:41.

He turned the pocket watch over. On the back of the brass case, worn almost smooth, someone long ago had engraved two initials in a plain, old-fashioned script. *D. W.*

"David Whitlock," Corbin said quietly. "Her grandfather. Maris told me his name."

Kincaid nodded slowly. But he was not looking at the initials. He was looking below them.

Beneath the old engraving, scratched into the brass very recently, so fresh that the metal at the bottom of the lines was still bright and raw, there were three more words. They had been cut with the point of a knife or a nail. And even scratched into metal, the letters had loops and long tails. Copybook script. The kind of handwriting nobody learned anymore.

Not this. Something else.

* * *

They brought it to her that evening.

Maris was in the kitchen on Copper Creek Road, under her mother's sampler, making grilled cheese for Keaton. When Kincaid's truck came up the lane she went out on the porch, and saw Corbin's face as he climbed the steps, and knew before anyone said a word that it was something.

They told her at the kitchen table. The deed with Garrick's name on it. Garrick's confession in Interview Room Two. The woman with the gray hair and the bright eyes who called herself Mrs. Lark. The hole in the cellar floor of the Hollis place, and the empty shape at the bottom of it.

Then Kincaid took a small clear evidence bag from his coat pocket and laid it on the table in front of her.

Maris looked at it for a long time.

She had never seen it. Not once. It had gone into the box in 1996, when she was eleven years old and asleep in her bed with the moon light on. But she knew it. She knew it the way she had known her father's face in the photograph. The way she had known the canvas coat.

"Granddaddy's watch," she whispered.

"It's running," said Kincaid quietly. "It was running when we found it. It's been keeping perfect time all day."

Maris picked up the bag with both hands. Through the plastic she could feel it, very faintly, against her fingertips. The tiny, steady tick.

She turned it over and saw the engraving. *D. W.* And beneath it, scratched raw into the brass.

Not this. Something else.

She felt Keaton come to stand behind her chair. She heard him read it. She heard his breath stop.

"What does that mean?" he said. "Something else what?"

No one answered him.

Maris sat at her mother's table with her grandfather's watch ticking in her hands, and understood. Not all of it. But enough.

Nine pieces in a box. Nine people. Nine promises. A covenant that was never finished. And whoever had dug that box up out of the cellar floor had taken it all, every piece of it, except this one. Her family's piece. They had lifted it out and set it carefully in the dirt and scratched a message into it with a nail.

Not this.

The watch was not enough. Whatever her father had owed out there, whatever was missing from the ninth place in that circle, a dead man's watch would not pay it.

Something else.

She did not look at her son. She could not. But she reached back with one hand, without turning around, and found his hand on the back of her chair, and held it so hard he winced.

"Mom?"

"I'm here," she said. "I'm right here."

Corbin was watching her across the table. She saw in his face that he had understood it too. Kincaid's jaw was tight.

"Mrs. Bellamy," the sheriff said. "I'm putting a car at the end of your lane tonight. And every night. Overtime be hanged."

She nodded.

* * *

That night, after Keaton was asleep, Maris sat on the edge of her bed in the dark with her grandfather's watch in her hand. Kincaid had let her keep it. *I've got the photographs,* he had said. *It belongs to you.* She held it to her ear, the way her father used to hold his watch to her ear when she was very small, to make her laugh. *Hear that, Sprout? That's time going by.*

Tick. Tick. Tick.

She did not know whether to be afraid of it. Something had kept it running in the dark for twenty-nine years. Or something had started it running again, three days ago, and left it in a hole for her to find, with a message scratched into its back. She did not know which. She did not know if it mattered.

She thought about the verse that had come to her at the kitchen table, out of nowhere, while she held the watch. A verse she had not thought of in years. One of her father's. She had found it underlined twice in his big King James, the first week she came home.

My times are in thy hand.

Not in the watch. Not in the box. Not in the hand of whoever had dug it up out of the ground and scratched *Something else* into the brass.

In His.

"My times are in Your hand," Maris whispered into the dark. "Mine. Keaton's. All of them. Not theirs." Her voice shook. "Whatever they think they're owed. Whatever they want. My son's times are in Your hand."

She laid the watch on the nightstand beside her father's green Testament.

It went on ticking. Steady. Patient. Keeping perfect time.

And somewhere out in the dark of Henley County, in a place nobody had yet thought to look, a black walnut box with iron corners sat waiting, with eight pieces inside it and one empty place.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
The Ninth Promise

> *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

The envelope came to the house on Chestnut Street on Tuesday morning, by ordinary mail, in a stack with the electric bill and a seed catalog and a reminder from the county library about an overdue book on Reconstruction.

Elowen Pryce almost threw it away.

It was a plain white business envelope, slightly yellowed, addressed in a careful, shaky, old-fashioned hand to *Dr. Elowen Pryce, Chestnut Street, Henley.* No number on the house. No zip code. Somehow the postal service had brought it anyway. The return address in the corner was printed: *Monastery of St. Clare, Sisters of the Visitation, Nerinx, Kentucky.*

Inside the outer envelope was a short letter on monastery stationery, and a second envelope, smaller and much older. Sealed. Its flap was brittle and brown with age, and across the front, in faded blue ink, in a woman's small, cramped, anxious hand, someone had written:

To be given to Dr. Elowen Pryce of Henley County. But only if anyone ever asks about the Nine.

Elowen sat down very slowly at her kitchen table.

* * *

She had called the monastery twelve days ago. The day after Maris Bellamy sat in this kitchen and heard the whole story. It had been an old historian's habit, nothing more. Checking a source she had already checked. She had asked whether any of Sister Mary Bernadette's personal effects had been kept after her death in 2002. She had been told very politely that the sisters did not keep personal effects, and that Sister Bernadette had in any case possessed very few.

The letter from the monastery was from a Sister Agatha, the archivist.

Dear Dr. Pryce,

After your telephone call, I felt prompted to look through our archive once more, though I had already told you there was nothing. I do not know why. I have learned over fifty years in this house to obey such promptings.

In a box of correspondence belonging to our late Mother Superior, I found the enclosed. Sister Bernadette gave it into Mother's keeping shortly before her death in 2002, with instructions that it was to be sent to you only if someone came asking. Mother kept it faithfully for twenty-three years. No one came. Until you.

I have not opened it. I did not feel it was mine to open.

Sister Bernadette was a good woman, and a frightened one. She spent her years here in almost constant prayer. Toward the end she told Mother she had finally found peace, but that she had left one thing undone in the world, and that someday someone might need it.

I will be praying for whoever that is.

In Christ, Sister M. Agatha, O.V.M.

Elowen read the letter twice. Then she picked up the small brittle envelope and held it in her spotted hands for a long time.

She knew what it was. She had known the moment she saw the handwriting.

In 2003, a year after Bernadette Kell died in that monastery in Kentucky, her younger sister had brought Elowen a cardboard box. Bernadette's old things, from before. Before the convent. Before 1996. A few books. A crucifix. A small leather-bound journal that Bernadette had kept for most of her adult life, filled with prayers and recipes and choir schedules and the anxious, circling worries of a lonely woman.

Elowen had read every page of that journal. She had copied it out by hand. She had read it so many times over the years that she knew parts of it by heart.

And she knew that one page was missing.

It was the entry for November 22, 1996. The morning after. The journal skipped from November 20, a nervous little note about a choir rehearsal, straight to November 30, which said only: *I have spoken to Father Kevin about the convent. God forgive me.* Between them, where November 22 should have been, there was only a ragged stub of paper close to the binding. Someone had torn the page out. Carefully. Close to the spine.

Elowen had wondered for twenty-two years what was written on that page.

She slit the brittle envelope open with a butter knife.

Inside, folded in thirds, was a single sheet of lined journal paper. Its left edge was ragged where it had been torn from a binding. It was covered on both sides in the same small, cramped, anxious handwriting. The ink had faded to brown in places. In others, it had run and blurred, as if the paper had once been wet.

With tears, Elowen thought. Or with rain. Or both.

At the top of the page, underlined twice, were the words:

November 22, 1996. The morning after.

And halfway down the first side, Elowen's eyes caught on a phrase. Then caught on it again, a few lines further down. And again on the back.

The Ninth Promise.

She set the page down very gently on her kitchen table, and folded her hands in her lap to stop them shaking, and sat there for a long time without moving.

Then she picked up the telephone and called Pastor Corbin Thorne.

"Bring her," she said, when he answered. "Daniel's daughter. And bring the sheriff. I've found it."

"Found what?"

Elowen looked down at the faded brown words on the torn page.

"The Ninth Promise," she said. "What it was. What it was for." Her voice cracked. "And that one of them refused."

* * *

Lord, have mercy upon us.

— from the Kyrie, the oldest prayer of the Church

They gathered in Elowen's kitchen at two o'clock. Maris and Corbin in the two chairs by the window. Kincaid standing by the refrigerator in his uniform, his hat in his hands, the gray cat watching him

suspiciously from the top of it. Elowen at the head of the table with the torn page laid flat in front of her on a clean white dish towel, as if it were something that might bruise.

Keaton was at school. Maris had not told him where she was going. She did not know yet how she would tell him whatever this was.

"I'm going to read it aloud," Elowen said. "All of it. Exactly as she wrote it. She was a frightened woman and she did not write well, and some of it is hard to make out. But I'll read it as it is." She put on her reading glasses. Her hands were not quite steady. "Bernadette Kell was thirty-four years old when she wrote this. She had been awake all night. She wrote it at her kitchen table on Elm Street, about six hours after the last gathering at the Hollis place ended."

She drew a breath, and read.

* * *

November 22, 1996. The morning after.

I have not slept. I cannot stop shaking. I have to write this down because if I do not I will start to believe I dreamed it and I did not dream it.

Ambrose is dead.

I will not write how. I cannot. Ruth says it was his heart. Harlan says it was his heart. Harlan says that is what the certificate will say, and that is what we will all say, forever, to everyone. We all swore it. Standing in that parlor in the dark with him on the floor. I swore it too. God forgive me, I swore it.

But I have to write down the rest. Because it is not over. I know it is not over.

It asked us for promises. One by one. Around the circle. Ambrose first. It said a covenant has to be paid for, and that the price is a promise from each, and it would tell each of us what to promise. And it did. It leaned close to each of us, one at a time, the way it always does, so close we could feel it on our necks, and it told us what it wanted.

From me it wanted my prayers. That I would never pray again to anyone but it.

And I said yes.

God forgive me. Holy Mary pray for me. I said yes.

Eight of us said yes. Eight promises. And with every one, a candle turned blue. I watched them. One after another. Eight blue flames.

And then it came to the last chair. The ninth.

And it said, this is the Ninth Promise. It said the first eight open the door. The Ninth Promise holds it open. Forever. It said the first eight were each a piece of ourselves. But the ninth must be a piece of what comes after.

I did not understand at first. Then I did.

It wanted a child.

Not to hurt. It was very gentle when it said it. It is always so gentle. It wanted a claim. It said the Ninth Promise was the promise of the line. That whoever sat in the ninth chair would give it what came after them. Their children and their children's children. It would be welcome in them. It would never have to knock again.

That was the Ninth Promise. That was what Ambrose had been working toward for two years without ever telling us. That was what all of it was for.

The first eight of us were only the key. The ninth was the door.

And he would not do it.

I will not write his name. Not here. Not anywhere. He has a little girl. I have seen her at church, in a yellow dress, holding his hand. If that thing can read what I write, I will not help it find her. Let it look for her itself. Holy Mary, let it never find her.

He would not do it. It asked him, and he did not answer. It asked him again, and the whole room was waiting, and all the blue flames were leaning toward him. And he stood up out of his chair and he said No.

He said it twice. He said he would not promise it anything. He said he wanted his father's watch back. And he reached for the box.

And every candle went out.

I will not write about the dark. I cannot.

But I will write the last thing it said. I heard it. I was sitting next to him. It said it close to his ear, but I was close enough to hear it too, and it was not gentle anymore.

It said: Eight promises given. One owed. It is not forgotten. If not from you, from what comes after you.

And then it said a thing about doors that I do not understand.

The Ninth Promise was never paid. The circle was never closed. It is still open. I can feel it. Like a window left open in a cold house.

And one more thing. I have to write it. I have told no one and I never will.

When he got his lighter lit, after the candles went out, I saw all of their faces in that little flame. Ruth crying. Harlan white as paper. Walt praying out loud. Orson with his hands over his eyes.

And Celia.

Celia was not looking at the dark thing in the middle of the circle, the way all the rest of us were. She was looking at Ambrose. Down on the floor. And she was not afraid.

Later, while they were burying the box, she said to the man who refused, very quietly, so the others would not hear: You have ruined everything. But it is patient, and so am I. I will finish it if it takes the rest of my life.

I believe her.

I am going to talk to Father Kevin. I am going to go somewhere far away where I can pray every hour of every day for the rest of my life to the God I promised it I would never pray to again. Maybe He will still hear me. I do not know.

Lord have mercy on us. Christ have mercy on us.

Protect the little girl in the yellow dress.

And whatever comes after her.

* * *

Elowen set the page down.

No one in the kitchen said anything for a long time. Outside the window, a sparrow hopped along the rim of the birdbath and flew away. On top of the refrigerator, the gray cat had gone very still, its ears flat.

Maris was staring at the torn page on its white dish towel. She had not moved since Elowen read the words *yellow dress.*

She had had a yellow dress. When she was eleven. With white daisies on the collar. She had worn it to church every Sunday that whole autumn because she loved it so much, and her father used to call her Buttercup in it, and hold her hand on the walk from the parking lot to the door of First Methodist.

She remembered a thin, dark-haired woman in the back pew who used to look at her. A sad-looking woman with a rosary she kept turning in her fingers, even in a Methodist church.

She had not thought of that woman in thirty years.

* * *

> *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*
>
> — John 15:13

Corbin was the first to speak.

He did not mean to. The words simply came out of him, quiet, almost to himself, the way a man says something out loud when the last piece of a puzzle slides into place under his fingers.

"He wanted his father's watch back."

Maris turned and looked at him.

Corbin was staring at the torn page on its white dish towel. He was not seeing it. He was seeing other things. A dusty attic, and a brass chain coiled empty in a cardboard box. A cold cellar, and a watch lying face up in the bottom of a hole, ticking. An old man at a kitchen table on Pike Creek Road, saying *I watched him do it. He didn't want to let go of it. His fingers stayed on it a long time.*

"Bernadette doesn't name him," Corbin said slowly. "She was careful not to. But she tells us everything else." He looked up. "He had a little girl. In a yellow dress. He went to First Methodist. He refused the Ninth Promise, and stood up, and said he wanted his father's watch back, and reached for the box."

"Granddaddy's watch," Maris whispered.

"Your grandfather's watch," Corbin agreed. "The one Orson Vale watched your father put in that box. The one somebody dug up three days ago and left in the bottom of an empty hole with three words scratched into it." He drew a breath. "*Not this. Something else.*"

The kitchen was utterly silent.

"It was him," Corbin said. "Maris. It was your father. He was the ninth. He was the one who refused."

Maris did not move. She sat by the window in the thin December light with her hands folded on the table in front of her, and Corbin watched her face, and saw it happen. Not all at once. Piece by piece. The way it had happened to him.

The eight dark notches under her mother's kitchen table. Eight. Not nine. *How many of them old?* Orson had demanded, on his porch. And when Corbin said eight, the old man had closed his eyes. Eight promises given. Eight notches. Carved, perhaps, by her father's own hand, in the long nights after, as a record of what had been done in that parlor. And one place left empty. Until someone came in the night and cut the ninth.

Her father's confession. *I will not write down what it asked of us at the end, or what was answered. Some words should not be put on paper where a child might someday find them.* He had not been hiding his shame. He had been hiding her. He had not written that he refused, because to write it would have been to write what he had refused to give. And what he had refused to give was her.

Orson Vale, at his kitchen table, with his big ruined hand over hers. *Whatever your daddy did, out there, at the end, he did it for you. He was the bravest one of us. The only brave one.*

The date in the margin of his little green Testament, beside the verse worn almost through the page. *11/22/96. Greater is he that is in you.* He had come home from that parlor, and knelt beside her bed, and opened that little book, and found the one verse that told him he had not been alone in that room.

The hallway. Eighteen years of nights, sitting outside her door. *I was not a worried old man. I was standing guard.*

Against a debt he had refused to pay.

"He said no," Maris whispered.

Her voice broke on the word.

"Everybody else said yes. Eight people. Teachers and bankers and nurses and deacons. All of them. And he was the one—he was just a machinist. He wasn't smart like Ambrose. He wasn't rich like Harlan. He was the one who only came because he was scared." She pressed her hand against her mouth. "And he was the only one who said no."

"He said no for you," Elowen said quietly.

Maris looked at the old woman.

"Bernadette wrote that it wanted a child," Elowen said. "Not to hurt. A claim. *What comes after you.* That was what the Ninth Promise was. And he was the only one of the nine with a child at home that night. Ruth never married. Ambrose never married. Bernadette, Celia, Orson—none of them had children living. Walt and Lorene had lost their only one." Her pale eyes were bright with tears. "Harlan's boys were grown and gone. The ninth chair was always going to be your father's, Mrs. Bellamy. Ambrose must have planned it that way from the beginning. And your father didn't know. Not until the very last moment."

"And when he knew," Corbin said, "he stood up."

Maris bent forward over the table and put her face in her hands and wept.

Not for long. Not the way she had wept in the attic, or at the parsonage, or in this same kitchen a week ago when she first heard her father's name in Elowen's mouth. This was different. Corbin saw it in the shape of her shoulders. This was not grief. Or not only grief.

When she lifted her head, her face was wet, but her eyes were clear.

"I was so angry at him," she said. "Right here. At this table. I said he lied to me my whole life. I said he went out there and asked that thing for favors while I was asleep." She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "And he did. He did all that. That's true."

"It is," said Corbin gently.

"But that's not all that's true." She looked down at the torn page. "When it mattered. When it was me. He stood up in a room full of people who'd all said yes, with that thing leaning over him, and he said no. Twice. And then he came home and sat outside my door for eighteen years so it couldn't come in." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And he never told me. Never once. He let me think he was just a worried old man."

Nobody said anything.

Greater love hath no man than this, Corbin thought, *that a man lay down his life for his friends.* Daniel Whitlock had not died for his daughter. But he had laid down his life for her all the same. Every night. In a hallway. For eighteen years.

Against the window, Kincaid cleared his throat.

He had not said a word since Elowen began reading. He was standing with his hat crushed in both hands, his gray eyes on Maris, and his face had an expression Corbin had not seen on it before.

"Mrs. Bellamy," he said. His voice was rough. "For what it's worth. I've spent twenty-three years watching men fail the people they were supposed to protect." He paused. "Your daddy didn't."

* * *

> *But thus saith the LORD, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children.*
>
> — Isaiah 49:25

Elowen made coffee because somebody had to do something with their hands.

She moved slowly around the kitchen, the gray cat weaving between her ankles, and nobody offered to help her because everybody understood that she needed the work. The percolator ticked and muttered on the stove. Outside the window over the sink, the December light was already going thin and yellow over Chestnut Street, though it was barely past two in the afternoon.

Maris had not moved from the table. The torn page lay in front of her in its plastic sleeve, and she had both palms flat on the oilcloth on either side of it, as if she were afraid it might blow away.

"Can I ask the question nobody wants me to ask?" she said.

Corbin looked up. Kincaid shifted against the window frame.

"Why now?" Maris said. "If Daddy said no in 1996 — if that was the end of it — then why is any of this happening to me? Why is it in my house? Why did it go into my son's room?"

Elowen set the coffee cups down one at a time, very carefully, the way old women do when their hands no longer trust them. Then she sat.

"Read the last of it again, child," she said. "What the voice said."

Maris did not need to look at the page. She had read it so many times in the last hour that the words had worn a groove in her.

"*Eight promises given,*" she said quietly. "*One owed. It is not forgotten. If not from you, from what comes after you.*"

"From what comes after you," Elowen repeated. "That was not a threat to your father, Maris. That was a bill of sale. That thing does not think the way we think. It does not believe a no is the end of a matter. It believes a no is only a delay." She folded her spotted hands. "Your father refused it. But your father was a man, and men die. While he lived, he stood in the gap. He sat in that hallway every night of your childhood, and as long as he was sitting there, it could not reach past him."

"And then he died," said Corbin.

"Autumn of 2014," said Maris. Her voice had gone flat. "Keaton was three."

The percolator gave a last gasp and went quiet.

Corbin reached into his coat and drew out his notebook, the cheap spiral one he had been carrying since the night of the three knocks. He flipped back through it until he found what he was looking for, and laid it open on the table beside the torn page.

"The candles," he said. "In the photograph. There were nine holders and only eight burned down. The notches in Orson's doorframe. Eight. Your father's confession, going quiet every single time it came near the end." He tapped the notebook. "Everything about this has always come in eights with a hole where the ninth should be. I thought it was about how many people sat in that room. It wasn't. It was about what was still owed."

"And the watch," said Kincaid from the window.

They all looked at him.

The sheriff came forward and set his hat on the counter. "The box under the stairs at the Hollis place," he said. "We dug it up. The watch was lying in the hole, still ticking, and somebody had scratched four words into the case. *Not this. Something else.*" He looked at Maris. "I've been chewing on that for two weeks. Your granddaddy's watch went into the ground as a stand-in. A deposit. Something to hold the place of the ninth promise until the real one came due. And whoever scratched those words was telling us plain as day that a dead man's watch was never going to settle it."

"Something else," Maris whispered.

Nobody answered her. Nobody had to.

She was looking at the line at the bottom of the page — *Protect the little girl in the yellow dress. And whatever comes after her* — and Corbin watched the understanding arrive in her face the way weather arrives over a field. First the stillness. Then the dark.

"Keaton," she said.

Elowen closed her eyes. "It wanted a child," she said. "Bernadette wrote it. Not to hurt. A claim. The promise of the line. Your father would not give it you. So now it has come for what comes after you."

Maris's chair scraped back. She was on her feet, her phone already in her hand, and her thumbs were shaking so badly she had to type the message twice.

Where are you?

The reply came almost at once.

chem. why

She let out a breath that was half a sob. *Just checking on you. Love you.*

A longer pause. Then:

ok weird. love u too. is grandpa stuff ok?

She stared at that for a long time. *Grandpa stuff.* He had heard more than she knew, then. He always did.

We'll talk tonight, she typed. *Come straight home after school. Straight home.*

k

She set the phone face down on the table and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

"Mrs. Bellamy."

It was Corbin. He had not raised his voice. But he had leaned forward, and there was something in his face that made her lower her hands.

"I need you to hear something," he said, "and I need you to hear it before the fear finishes telling you its version. Will you let me?"

She nodded.

"That thing said a promise was owed," Corbin said. "It said it the way a liar says it — with total confidence. But it was lying. Your father never gave it a ninth promise. Bernadette wrote it down: he said no. Twice. You cannot owe on a contract that was refused. There is nothing to collect."

"It doesn't seem to care about that."

"No," said Corbin. "It doesn't. Because it has no standing, and it knows it, and the only thing it can do without standing is frighten people into handing over what it has no right to take." He turned the notebook toward her. Written across the top of the page, in his own blocky hand, were three references. He had copied them out two nights ago, without fully knowing why.

"Listen," he said, and read them to her.

"*Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.* Galatians three, thirteen. *Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.* Colossians two, fourteen. And this one. Ezekiel eighteen, twenty. *The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.*"

He set the notebook down.

"Whatever those eight people signed in that farmhouse," he said, "was written in the devil's handwriting. And every handwritten claim the enemy has ever held against a human soul was nailed to a cross two thousand years ago. Your father's yeses. His eight bargains. All of it. He confessed them. He repented of them. He knelt in my chapel and handed them to Jesus Christ." His voice softened. "The debt your father ran up is paid. And the one he refused was never his to give. It isn't yours to pay. And it is not, it will never be, Keaton's."

Kincaid grunted. "For what it's worth," he said, "no judge in this state would enforce it either. A contract the party never signed. A third party who wasn't even born. They'd laugh it out of the courtroom."

"There's a higher court," Corbin said.

"I figured you'd say that." But the corner of the sheriff's mouth had moved.

Maris looked from one man to the other. Then down at the page, and the careful, frightened handwriting of a woman who had loved her father enough to protect his name for nearly thirty years.

"Isaiah," said Elowen softly. "Read her Isaiah, Pastor."

Corbin did not need the notebook for that one.

"*Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away,*" he said, "*and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children.*" He let it settle. "Thy children, Maris. He didn't say He'd try. He said He would contend. That means God Himself takes the case."

For a moment the only sound in the kitchen was the cat's purr and the old clock above the stove.

Then Maris drew a long breath and sat down again. She picked up the cooling coffee Elowen had poured for her and wrapped both hands around it, and Corbin saw that the shaking had not stopped — but that she had stopped waiting for it to.

"*What time I am afraid,*" she said, half to herself, "*I will trust in thee.*" She looked up. "Daddy used to say that one. At night. I thought he was saying it to me." A faint, broken smile. "I think he was saying it to himself."

"Psalm fifty-six," said Elowen. "He was saying it to both of you."

Maris nodded slowly. Then she set the cup down with a small, decisive click.

"All right," she said. "It thinks it's owed something. It isn't. So what do we do?"

It was Corbin who answered, but it was Kincaid he was looking at.

"We find out who's been trying to collect," he said. "Because it isn't just the thing in the dark anymore. Somebody bought that farm on the anniversary. Somebody buried that watch. Somebody wrote *Not this. Something else.*" He laid his finger on the last lines of Bernadette's page — on the words Celia Marsh had spoken in the light of a dying flame. "*I will finish it if it takes the rest of my life.*"

Kincaid's jaw tightened.

"Celia Marsh died in 1999," Elowen said quietly.

"Did she?" said Corbin.

* * *

> *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

Kincaid did not wait for morning.

He left Chestnut Street at a quarter to four with his hat jammed down over his eyes and the look of a man who had just remembered something he should have checked a long time ago. He said only, "I'll call you," to Corbin on the porch, and then his cruiser was backing out into the street and gone.

Corbin drove Maris home. Neither of them said much. She sat with Bernadette's page in her lap — Elowen had insisted she take it, *it was always meant for you, child* — and watched the bare trees go by, and once, at the light on Second Street, she said, very quietly, "Buttercup," and then said nothing else. He walked her to her door and waited on the step until he heard the bus brakes hiss at the corner and saw Keaton come loping up the sidewalk, earbuds in, backpack slung off one shoulder, looking exactly like every fifteen-year-old boy in America.

Maris opened the door before he reached it and pulled him into a hug so fierce that he said, "Mom. *Mom.* Okay. What," into her shoulder.

Corbin went home.

Diane had left soup on the stove and a note on the counter — *Choir practice. Eat something. Love you. D.* — and he ate standing up, without tasting it, and then sat at the kitchen table with his Bible open and a photocopy of the torn page beside it, and read the last part again.

You have ruined everything. But it is patient, and so am I. I will finish it if it takes the rest of my life.

Celia Marsh had said those words in November of 1996, with a dead man on the floor and the candles still smoking.

Three years later, Celia Marsh had burned to death in her own house.

That was the story. That was what Elowen had told them in the first week, sitting in this very kitchen. A house fire out past the county line. Very little left. A closed casket and a small, cold funeral that almost no one attended. Corbin had written it in his notebook like all the rest of it, and underlined it, and moved on, because the dead were dead and the danger was in the living.

But the living had been leaving him things.

Gray hair under a gray scarf. Size-seven boots in the snow outside a hospital window. Copybook penmanship, the kind taught in a one-room schoolhouse sixty years ago, on a note that said *Doors work both ways*. A woman who called herself *Mrs. A. Lark* — a woman who had walked into Garrick's life with a name that belonged to a man who died on the floor of a farmhouse, and whose own sister had been the only other person ever to carry it.

And a deed to the Hollis farm, recorded on the twenty-second of November.

It is patient, and so am I.

At ten minutes past ten, his phone rang.

"You're up," said Kincaid.

"I'm up."

"I'm at the office." There was the sound of paper being turned, a lot of it. "I drove to the county records annex this afternoon and sweet-talked a clerk into opening the basement. Coroner's files, 1999. It took me four hours to find it, because it was misfiled." A pause. "Misfiled under *Lark*."

Corbin closed his eyes.

"Read it to me," he said.

"Fire reported at 3:17 a.m., March ninth, 1999," Kincaid said. "Residence on Quarry Road, owned by one Celia Ann Marsh. Called in by a long-haul driver who saw the glow from the highway. Volunteer department on scene in twenty-two minutes. By then the roof was already in." Paper rustled. "One set of remains recovered from the back bedroom. Adult female. Burned beyond visual identification."

"And they identified her how?"

"That's the part I wanted you to hear." The sheriff's voice went very level, the way it did, Corbin had learned, when he was most angry. "Circumstantial. The house was hers. Her car was in the drive. A gold ring was recovered from the left hand — inscribed *C. M.* The coroner signed off on it as Celia Marsh within thirty-six hours."

"No dental records?"

"Requested," said Kincaid. "From a dentist over in Harlow. There's a note in the file in the coroner's handwriting. *Records unavailable — practice reports file missing.* That's it. Nobody followed up. No next of kin pushed. The case was closed in a week." A long breath. "Pastor, I've been doing this a long time. Rings come off. Rings go on. A car in the drive doesn't tell you who was in the bed."

Corbin said nothing. Outside, a wind had come up, and it moved through the bare branches of the maple in the yard with a sound like someone whispering through their teeth.

"There's one more thing," Kincaid said. "I almost missed it. Somebody — some deputy, years ago, I can't even read the initials — clipped a teletype to the back of the folder. A missing-person bulletin. Same week as the fire. A woman walked out of a women's shelter down in Ashby County on March sixth and never came back. Late fifties. No family. No one ever claimed her." The paper stopped rustling. "She was never found."

The kitchen clock ticked. The furnace kicked on somewhere under the floor.

"So that wasn't Celia in the house," Corbin said slowly.

"I'm not saying that," said Kincaid. "I'm a sheriff. I can't say that. What I can say is that nobody ever proved it *was*." He was quiet a moment. "And I'll tell you what else. Her driver's license photo is in here. 1994. She was five foot four. Gray eyes. Wore her hair pinned up." Another pause. "Wouldn't be gray hair yet, in '94. It would be now."

"She said she'd finish it," Corbin said. "If it took the rest of her life."

"Then she's been working at it for thirty years," said Kincaid. "And the thing about patient people, Pastor, is they don't make mistakes on a schedule. They wait for you to get tired."

"We're not tired."

"No," said the sheriff. "Not yet." Then, gruffly: "I'm putting a car on Mrs. Bellamy's street tonight. Hollister. He'll sit the whole shift. I'll come by your place at seven and we'll go see her together. I don't want her hearing this on a phone."

"Seven," said Corbin.

He hung up and sat for a long while without moving.

Then he bowed his head over the open Bible and prayed — not eloquently, not the way he prayed from a pulpit, but the way a man prays when he has finally seen how large the dark is.

Lord, nothing is hid from You. Not a name on a deed. Not a ring on a dead woman's hand. Not a face under a gray scarf. You said what is done in secret will be shouted from the housetops. Then bring it into the light, Lord. Bring it all into the light. And whatever she is waiting for — let her wait in vain.

Keep the boy.

Please. Keep the boy.

He did not know, then, that across town the boy was still awake.

Keaton Bellamy was lying on his bed in the dark with his history book open on his chest and his phone held above his face, and he was not reading either one. He was thinking about the way his mother had held onto him on the front step, and about the way she had said *Straight home* twice, and about the word *Grandpa* — a man he could not remember at all, except as a smell of coffee and a scratchy canvas coat, and a voice that had once sung to him in a hallway.

The moon night-light glowed faintly by the door. Down the hall, his mother's light had finally gone out.

At 11:52, his phone buzzed in his hand.

Unknown number.

Do you want to know why your grandfather sat in the hallway every night?

Keaton went very still.

He read it three times. He looked toward his door, toward the thin line of dark beneath it. Then, slowly, his thumbs moved.

who is this

The answer came almost before he had finished sending.

Someone who was there. Someone who knew him before he was afraid.

And then, a moment later:

Your mother will never tell you the truth. I will.

Keaton did not answer.

But he did not delete it, either.

He lay a long time with the phone glowing on his chest, the screen lighting the ceiling a cold and quiet blue, and somewhere in the house — so faint he would later tell himself he had imagined it — an old clock he did not own began, very softly, to tick.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
The Boy Is Gone

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

— Psalm 121:4

The thunder woke her.

It came rolling up out of the south like a freight train in the dark, low and long, and the windows in Maris Bellamy's bedroom hummed in their frames as it passed. She lay still with her eyes open and listened to it fade, and then to the rain that came behind it — not a soft rain, not a December rain, but a hard, driving, sideways rain that hammered the siding like fists.

She turned her head and looked at the clock on her phone.

3:17.

Of course it was. Of course.

For a long moment she did not move. She lay in the dark and did what she had learned to do these last weeks, what Corbin had taught her at her own kitchen table: she did not reach for the fear first. She reached for the Word.

He that keepeth thee will not slumber, she thought. *Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.*

Then she lay and listened to the house.

It was cold. That was the first thing. Not the ordinary cold of a December night with the thermostat turned down, but a moving cold, a draft that came along the floor and under her door and found her bare feet when she swung them out of bed. Somewhere in the house, something was open.

The second thing was the sound.

Under the rain, under the wind, very faint, there was a rhythmic tapping. Soft. Irregular. Like a curtain cord knocking against a window frame. Or like a window frame knocking against itself.

Maris stood up.

The hallway was dark. The power must have gone out sometime after midnight; the little lamp she always left burning on the hall table was dead, and the only light came from the lightning, which lit the hall in white, flat, stuttering flashes and then dropped it back into blackness. She walked down it with one hand on the wall the way she had walked down another hallway a thousand times as a little girl, going to the bathroom in the night, stepping carefully past the dark shape of her father in his kitchen chair.

There was no one in this hallway. There was no one sitting guard.

Keaton's door was open.

She stopped.

He never left it open. Fifteen years old, he guarded that door like a border crossing. Every night for the last month — since the knocks, since the shadow beside his bed — she had stood outside it and listened for his breathing and then gone back to bed. Every night it had been shut.

Now it stood wide, and the cold was pouring out of it.

"Keaton?"

Nothing.

She stepped into the doorway, and the lightning came again, and she saw the room all at once, the way a photograph is seen.

The bed, empty, the covers thrown back. The moon night-light by the door, the one he pretended he had outgrown, dark. The window across the room standing wide open, the screen pushed out and gone, the curtains snapping inward on the wind like flags. Rain blowing in across the sill and the desk and the carpet, soaking everything.

And on the desk, nothing. No phone. No charger cord. The place where his phone had been charging when she said good night was empty.

"*Keaton!*"

She was across the room. She was at the window, rain in her face, screaming his name into the backyard, into the dark, into the roar of the storm. The yard was a black field of water. The back gate, the one that let out onto the gravel alley, was standing open and swinging on its hinges, banging against the fence post. That was the knocking she had heard. That was all it had been.

His sneakers were gone from under the bed. His jacket was gone from the hook on the back of the door.

She ran.

Down the hall, through the kitchen, out the front door into the rain, barefoot, in her nightgown, and the cold hit her like a wall. At the curb, exactly where he had been when she went to bed, sat Deputy Wade Hollister's cruiser, engine running, wipers going, dome light off. The deputy came out of it so fast he nearly fell.

"Mrs. Bellamy — "

"He's gone." She heard her own voice and did not recognize it. "My son. His window's open. He's gone. Did you see anything? Did you see *anything?*"

Hollister's face went white in the lightning. "Ma'am, nobody came in or out that door. I swear to God. I've been sitting here since ten. I didn't close my eyes once."

"Not the door. The back. The *back.*"

He was already keying his radio. She heard him say *Sheriff* and *the boy* and *now,* and she stood in the rain on her own front walk with her arms wrapped around herself, shaking so hard her teeth chattered, and that was when the phone in her hand buzzed.

She had not even known she was holding it.

She looked down.

The screen glowed in the dark. One new message.

From Keaton.

Her heart leapt so hard it hurt. She thumbed it open with numb, wet fingers, already crying, already saying *thank God, thank God —*

And then she read it.

COME TO THE HOUSE WHERE IT STARTED.

She stared at it. The rain ran down the glass and blurred the letters, and she wiped it clear with her thumb and read it again, and it said the same thing.

Not his words. Not his voice. Keaton had never typed in capital letters in his life. He barely used them at all.

She hit call.

It rang. And rang. And rang. Six times, seven, and then a click, and her son's voice — bored, fifteen, achingly ordinary — said, *Hey, it's Keaton, I probably saw this and didn't answer, so, text me,* and the beep.

"Keaton," she said. "Baby. It's Mom. Wherever you are — whoever you're with — " Her voice cracked in half. "I'm coming. You hear me? I'm coming."

She hung up and looked at the screen.

Underneath the message, the little gray word said *Delivered*. And then, as she watched, the three dots appeared. Someone on the other end was typing.

The dots pulsed for a long time.

Then they stopped. And nothing came.

* * *

> *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

Corbin Thorne answered on the first ring, because he had not been asleep either.

He had been lying in the dark beside Diane listening to the storm and praying for the boy, the way he had prayed at his kitchen table five hours before — *Keep the boy, Lord, please keep the boy* — when the phone lit up on the nightstand with Maris's name. He knew before he answered. He heard it in the ringing.

"He's gone," Maris said. Nothing else. Just that.

"I'm coming."

Diane was already sitting up. She did not ask him what had happened. Three decades of marriage to a preacher had taught her the sound of a call that came at three in the morning. She got out of bed and found his boots and his canvas coat and his car keys while he pulled on his clothes, and at the door she took his face in both her hands.

"Go," she said. "I'll pray. I won't stop until you call me."

"Diane — "

"*Go*, Corbin." And then, quietly, with her hands still on his face: "*The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.* You go get that boy."

The streets of Henley were black. The power was out from one end of town to the other; the traffic lights hung dead over the intersections and swung in the wind, and the only light came from the lightning and from Corbin's own headlights, cutting short white tunnels through the rain. Twice he had to swerve around tree limbs in the road. Once a transformer blew somewhere off to the east with a flash of green-blue light like a second, lower lightning, and in that flash he saw every house on Second Street stand out sharp and colorless and then disappear.

When he pulled up in front of Maris's house, there were already two cruisers at the curb, light bars throwing red and blue across the wet lawn.

Kincaid met him on the porch. He was in his uniform, but his shirt was buttoned wrong, and his hat was dripping, and Corbin could see in his face that he had come here at ninety miles an hour.

"She's inside," the sheriff said. "She won't sit down."

"What do we know?"

"Not enough." Kincaid wiped the rain off his face. "Window was opened from the inside. Screen pushed out, not pulled. No sign of a struggle in the room. Shoes and jacket gone. Phone gone." He looked at Corbin. "He walked out, Pastor."

"He didn't run away."

"I didn't say he ran away. I said he walked out." Kincaid jerked his head toward the side yard. "Come look at this."

They went around the house with a flashlight, through the rain, through the open back gate and into the gravel alley behind. The alley ran between the backyards of two blocks, unlit, rutted, full of standing water. Kincaid crouched down at the edge of it, where the gravel gave way to a strip of mud along the fence, and held the light low.

There were two sets of footprints in the mud. The rain was already softening their edges, but they were still clear.

One set was a boy's sneakers, a men's size nine or ten, the tread worn smooth at the heel.

The other set walked beside them. Smaller. Narrower. A woman's boot, with a low square heel.

Kincaid did not have to say the size. Corbin had seen that print before, in the snow outside a hospital window.

"Size seven," he said.

"Size seven." Kincaid stood up slowly. "They walked together to the end of the alley. Side by side. No dragging. No scuffle. Then they stop, there, where the alley meets Walnut. And there's tire tracks." He swung the flashlight. "Something heavy. A truck."

"Garrick's truck."

"I've got Alvarado on his apartment now." The sheriff's jaw was tight. "Mrs. Bellamy's restraining order says Garrick Bellamy can't come within five hundred feet of this house. Those tire

tracks are a hundred and ten feet from that boy's window." He turned off the flashlight. "But I'll tell you something, Pastor. Whoever walked that boy down this alley, it wasn't Garrick."

Inside, Maris was standing in the middle of Keaton's room in a sweatshirt and jeans someone had found for her, with a towel around her shoulders that she had not used. The window had been closed. Water stood in puddles on the carpet. She was holding Keaton's laptop open in her two hands, and when Corbin came into the doorway she turned it around to face him without a word.

"His messages," she said. "They sync. He doesn't know they sync."

Corbin took it from her.

The thread was from an unknown number. It started at 11:52 p.m.

Do you want to know why your grandfather sat in the hallway every night?

who is this

Someone who was there. Someone who knew him before he was afraid.

Your mother will never tell you the truth. I will.

Then nothing for more than an hour. Then, at 1:09 a.m.:

He did not sit there to keep something out, Keaton. He sat there because he was ashamed. He made a promise and broke it. Your family has been running from it for thirty years.

thats not true

Ask your mother what she found in the attic. Ask her about the watch. She won't tell you. She'll say it's grownup stuff. She'll say you're too young.

A long gap. Then, at 2:31:

how do you know about the watch

Because I was there when he buried it. I can show you where. I can show you his chair. You can see it with your own eyes and decide for yourself what kind of man he was.

why would i trust you

You don't have to trust me. Trust what you see.

And then, at 2:48, the last message from Keaton.

ok

Corbin closed the laptop very gently.

"She knew," Maris said. Her voice was perfectly flat. "She knew exactly what to say. She knew he'd heard me and Daddy's name and the word *watch* through the walls. She knew he was angry I wouldn't tell him." She pressed the back of her wrist against her mouth. "She knew he'd want to *know.* He's my son. He's always got to know."

"Maris."

"I should have told him. I should have sat him down tonight like I said I would, and I didn't, because he was tired and I was tired and I thought, tomorrow. I thought there'd be a tomorrow." She looked up at Corbin with eyes that had gone past tears. "I *thought there would be a tomorrow.*"

He did not tell her it wasn't her fault. It would not have helped, and she would not have heard it.

Instead he said, "Has anything else gone from the house?"

She stared at him. Then something in her face changed. She turned and walked out of the room, down the hall, into the kitchen, and Corbin followed her.

On the kitchen table, where it had been sitting since the day she brought it home from the attic, there should have been a small green New Testament. Its cover soft with age. Its pages full of her father's handwriting. *Given to Daniel by his mother, June 1977.*

The table was bare.

Maris put both hands flat on the place where it had been.

"He took it," she whispered. "He took Daddy's Testament."

Kincaid, in the doorway, frowned. "Why would that woman want — "

"She wouldn't," said Corbin.

They both looked at him.

"She didn't take it," Corbin said. "*He* did. He went out that window to go find out the truth about his grandfather. And somewhere between his bedroom and the back gate, he stopped and came in here and took the one thing his grandfather left behind that tells the truth." He looked at Maris. "Part of him didn't believe her, Maris. Part of him wanted to bring a witness."

* * *

> *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

"The house where it started," Kincaid said.

They were standing in the kitchen in the light of two battery lanterns Hollister had brought in from the cruiser. The rain was coming down harder. Somewhere out in the dark, a siren was wailing and then fading — another deputy, another call, a tree on a roof somewhere. The whole county was coming apart in the storm.

"It could mean anything," Kincaid went on. "Could mean the house Mrs. Bellamy grew up in. Could mean — "

"It doesn't," said Maris.

"Ma'am, I have to consider — "

"It doesn't mean my mother's house." She was holding her phone so tightly her knuckles were white. "Nothing started in my mother's house. My father brought it home to my mother's house. It started out there." She looked at Corbin. "It started in that parlor."

"The Hollis place," Corbin said.

Kincaid's radio crackled on his shoulder. Alvarado's voice, broken by static. — *Lakeview — Bellamy's truck isn't here, Sheriff. Space is empty. Apartment door's unlocked. Nobody home. There's a* — a burst of static, *— on the kitchen counter. Looks like the second burner phone. The one the old lady gave him. Screen's still on. Last text came in at one-forty. Says* — more static, *— your wife's coming tonight. Be there to meet her. Bring the chairs.*

The kitchen was very quiet.

"Bring the chairs," Kincaid repeated.

Nobody answered him.

The sheriff looked at the floor for a moment. Then he straightened his shoulders and keyed the radio. "Alvarado, get every unit you can spare and head for Ridley Bottoms Road. The old Hollis farm. Nobody goes in. Nobody goes near the house till I get there. Copy?"

Copy. Sheriff, Ridley Creek's coming up fast. They're saying the low-water bridge might go under.

"Then drive faster." He let go of the radio and turned to Maris. "Mrs. Bellamy. I need you to stay here. Hollister will stay with you. If that boy comes home — "

"No."

"Ma'am — "

"*No.*" She did not raise her voice. She did not need to. "You heard what Bernadette wrote. *If not from you, from what comes after you.* That thing has been waiting thirty years for the one thing my father wouldn't give it. And now it's got him out there in the dark, in that house, in that room, and it's telling him lies about his grandpa." She stepped close to the sheriff. "My father sat in a hallway for eighteen years so that thing couldn't get to me. He's not here to sit in the hallway now. *I am.*"

Kincaid looked at her for a long time.

Then he looked at Corbin.

"She rides with you," he said at last. "Behind me. You don't pass me, you don't get out of that car until I tell you, and if I tell you to go back, you go back. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Corbin.

Maris said nothing. Kincaid seemed to take that as the best he was going to get.

They went out into the storm.

In the front seat of Corbin's old car, with the heater roaring and the wipers going as fast as they could go and still not fast enough, Maris sat with her phone in her lap and stared at the last message on the screen. *COME TO THE HOUSE WHERE IT STARTED.* Ahead of them, Kincaid's taillights were two red smears in the rain.

Corbin dialed Orson Vale.

It rang ten times. No answer. He hung up and dialed again. Nothing. He thought of the old man alone on Pike Creek Road, in his house hung with horseshoes and bells and mirrors, with the creek rising behind it and his dog Jubal at his feet.

"He's not answering," Corbin said.

"Maybe his phone's out," said Maris. "Everything's out."

"Maybe."

He dialed Elowen. She picked up on the second ring and said, before he could speak, "I know. Diane called me. I'm on my knees, Pastor. So is half the prayer chain at New Hope. Diane woke them all up." A pause. "Let me speak to her."

Corbin handed the phone to Maris.

She held it to her ear and said nothing for a moment. Then: "Miss Elowen."

"Listen to me, child." The old historian's voice was thin and crackling through the static, but it was steady as stone. "I have been thinking about your father's hallway all night. Do you know what he did, sitting in that chair outside your door? Do you know what he was really doing?"

"Standing guard."

"Yes. But not by being strong. He wasn't strong. He told you himself, he was a frightened man." A crackle. "He was standing in the place between that thing and his child, and refusing to move. That's all. That's the whole of it. That's what a stand is." Another crackle, longer. "You are standing in that hallway now, Maris. It's not in a house anymore. It's on a road in the rain. But it's the same hallway. And you are not standing there alone. He was never alone either, though he didn't know it. *When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee.* Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Then go stand in the hallway," said Elowen Pryce. "And don't you move."

The line went dead.

* * *

> *And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.*
>
> — Mark 4:39

Ridley Bottoms Road ran down out of the hills in a long, slow curve and then flattened out into the river bottoms, where the land was black and level and the old farms sat far apart behind lines of bare sycamores. In the summer it was the prettiest road in the county. On a night like this, it was a trap.

The rain had become something else. It came in sheets, in walls, so that Corbin could not see Kincaid's taillights for seconds at a time, and the wind shoved the car sideways on the curves and made the whole frame groan. Lightning stood on the hills to the west in long, branching, purple-white trees, and the thunder came so close behind it that there was no space left between them at all.

And under the noise of the storm, Maris began to hear it.

She did not know when it started. She only knew that at some point, between one thunderclap and the next, she realized she had been hearing it for a while. A sound under the rain. A murmur. A voice, very low, very soft, almost tender, that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere — from the drumming on the roof, from the hiss of the tires, from the dark beyond the windshield.

He came on his own, you know.

She sat very still.

Nobody made him. He wanted to come. He wanted to know. He's tired of your secrets, Maris. Just like you were tired of your father's.

Her hands had begun to shake again.

He's just like you. Just like his grandfather. He'll say yes. They all say yes, in the end. You'll see.

"Do you hear it?" she whispered.

Corbin's hands were tight on the wheel. He did not take his eyes off the road. "I hear it."

Turn around. Go home. You'll only frighten him. He doesn't want you there. He told me so.

"It's lying," Maris said. Her voice came out cracked and small. "It's lying, isn't it? It's lying."

"It's the father of lies," said Corbin. "It doesn't know how to do anything else."

Ahead of them, Kincaid's taillights suddenly flared bright red and stopped.

Corbin braked hard. The car slewed on the wet road and came to a stop twenty feet behind the cruiser, and in their headlights they saw why.

The road dropped down ahead of them into a dip, and at the bottom of the dip was the low-water bridge over Ridley Creek. Or the place where the bridge should have been. There was no bridge now. There was only water — brown, churning, fast, carrying branches and foam and a whole uprooted cedar that turned slowly as it went by — pouring across the road from one side to the other in a sheet two hundred feet wide. The yellow depth marker on the near side, the post that showed how deep the water was, read two feet and climbing.

Kincaid got out of his cruiser and stood at the edge of the water in the rain with his flashlight. Then he came back to Corbin's window. Corbin rolled it down, and the storm came in.

"We can't cross that," the sheriff shouted over the roar. "Two feet of moving water'll float a cruiser. It'll sure as anything float that car of yours." He wiped the rain out of his eyes. "Alvarado's on the other side. He made it over twenty minutes ago, before it came up. He says there's a light in the farmhouse." He looked past Corbin at Maris. "Ma'am. I'm sorry. We have to wait for it to go down."

"How long?"

"Hours. Maybe till morning."

"*No.*"

Go home, said the voice in the rain. *Go home, Maris. You're too late. You were always going to be too late.*

Maris opened her door and got out.

"Mrs. Bellamy — "

She walked past the sheriff, through the headlights, to the edge of the water. The rain soaked her through in seconds. The roar of the creek was enormous here, a living thing, and the cold came up off it like breath. She stood at the very edge, where the brown water ran over the asphalt, and looked across at the far bank, at the black line of sycamores, and beyond them, faint, a single point of yellow light in the dark.

The house where it started.

Her son was in that house.

She did not shout. She did not do anything dramatic. She simply stood at the edge of the water with her hands at her sides and said, out loud, in a voice that shook but did not break:

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

The rain did not stop.

"Lord Jesus," she said. "You stood up in a boat in a storm worse than this one, and You told the wind to be quiet, and it was quiet. My father couldn't calm a storm. Neither can I. But You can." She drew a breath. "That's my son over there. He's not owed to anybody. He's not part of anybody's promise. He's *Yours*. And I'm asking You — not for me, for him — make a way."

She stood there.

And — later, none of them would agree on exactly what happened. Kincaid would say the rain had been due to slack off; storms did that, came in bands, and they'd simply hit the gap between two of them. Corbin would say nothing at all for a long time, and then only, *I know what I saw.* Maris would never try to explain it to anyone.

But the wind dropped.

Not slowly. All at once. As if a door had been closed somewhere. The rain went from a roar to a patter to a fine, soft drizzle in the space of a few breaths, and in the sudden quiet they could hear the creek clearly for the first time, and it was not as loud as it had been. And the voice in the rain was gone. Simply gone, as if it had never been.

In Kincaid's flashlight beam, the yellow depth marker read one foot. Then, as they watched, the brown water slid down the post another few inches and showed the black paint beneath.

Kincaid stared at it.

Then he turned and looked at Maris, standing at the water's edge with the drizzle running down her face, and he took off his hat.

"Get in the car," he said hoarsely. "Stay right behind me. Right in my tracks."

They crossed.

The water pushed at the cruiser and at Corbin's car, and the tires slipped once and caught, and the brown current boiled up against the doors. But it did not lift them. It did not overflow them. And on the far side, as they climbed up out of the dip onto the road again, Corbin looked in his rearview mirror and saw the creek closing behind them, rising, pouring back across the asphalt, deeper than before.

Whatever door had been opened for them had shut again.

There was no going back now. Only forward.

* * *

> *Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD, that thy children shall come again to their own border.*
>
> — Jeremiah 31:16–17

The Hollis farmhouse sat at the end of a long gravel lane, under four enormous oaks that had been old when the house was built. Corbin had seen it twice before, once by day and once by flashlight, the night they dug up the box. Both times it had been dark and dead and empty, a gray hulk of a building with its windows boarded and its porch roof sagging.

It was not dark tonight.

Every window on the ground floor was lit. Not with electric light — there had been no power out here in twenty years — but with candlelight, low and gold and wavering, so that the whole front of the house seemed to breathe in the drizzle. The boards had been taken down from the windows. Someone had done that recently. The nails still stood in the frames.

Garrick's truck was parked in the yard, slewed at an angle, its driver's door hanging open and its dome light glowing faintly yellow. Alvarado's cruiser sat at the head of the lane, light bar dark. The

deputy was standing beside it with his hand on his holster, and when Kincaid pulled in, he came running.

"Sheriff. Nobody's come out. Nobody's gone in since I got here." He was breathing hard. "But I've seen 'em in the windows. Two at least. Maybe three. And Sheriff — " He hesitated. "The truck was empty when I got here. And there's chairs."

"Chairs?"

"In the front room. You can see through the window. They're set up in a circle." Alvarado swallowed. "I counted 'em. Twice."

Nobody asked him how many.

Kincaid looked at the house for a long time. Then he turned to Corbin and Maris. "You stay at the car," he said quietly. "Both of you. That's not a request."

Maris was not listening. She was looking at the front porch.

In the light from the candles, something lay on the top step. Something small and dark and rectangular, its pages riffling gently in the wind.

She was walking before anyone could stop her. Across the yard, through the wet grass, past Garrick's empty truck, to the foot of the porch steps. She bent down and picked it up.

It was her father's green New Testament.

It was soaked. Its cover was dark with rain, and its pages were swollen, and someone — a boy, in a hurry, in the dark — had dropped it on the step and left it there, or set it there on purpose. It had fallen open. And the page it had fallen open to was the one worn almost through, the one with the date written in the margin in her father's hand.

11/22/96.

Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

Underneath her father's handwriting, in pencil, in a different hand — a hand Maris knew better than her own — someone had written a single word, small and crooked, pressed so hard the pencil had nearly torn the wet paper.

Maybe

Maris closed her eyes.

Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears, she thought. *For thy work shall be rewarded. And there is hope in thine end. Thy children shall come again to their own border.*

When she opened them again, Corbin was beside her on the steps, and Kincaid was behind him with his hand on his gun, and none of them said a word.

Inside the house, a clock was ticking.

They could hear it clearly now, through the walls, in the hush after the rain. Slow and steady and impossibly loud. Not a wall clock. Something smaller. Something that should have been lying in the bottom of a hole in a cellar, under the stairs.

And then, through the candlelit window beside the door, Maris saw him.

Just for a moment, in the gold light. The back of a dark head she would have known anywhere in the world. A boy sitting very still in a straight wooden chair, in a circle of straight wooden chairs, with his shoulders hunched the way they hunched when he was trying not to cry.

Beside him, one chair was empty.

Above the candles, the flames had begun, very slowly, to turn blue.

Maris put her father's Testament inside her shirt, against her heart. Then she climbed the last step and stood in front of the door.

Before she could reach for the handle, it knocked.

Three times.

From the inside.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
Nine Chairs

> *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

The third knock died away into the hush, and the door swung open by itself.

It did not creak. It did not stick on its swollen hinges the way a door on a dead farmhouse ought to. It simply drifted inward on the warm, still air of the house, slow and smooth, as if someone on the other side had drawn it open with one finger and stepped back to let them in.

There was no one on the other side.

Maris stood on the threshold with her father's wet Testament pressed flat against her heart and looked into a narrow front hall lit gold by candles she could not see. The smell came out to meet her — hot wax, and dust, and old wallpaper paste, and underneath it something else, something cold and mineral, like the air at the bottom of a well.

From somewhere inside, the watch ticked on.

"Behind me," Kincaid said quietly. He had his gun out now, held low along his leg, and his flashlight in the other hand, though he did not need it. "Both of you. Right behind me. Alvarado, you hold the door. Anybody comes out who isn't us, you stop them. Anybody comes up that lane, you stop them too."

"Yes, sir."

The sheriff stepped across the threshold. Corbin went after him. Maris went last, and as she crossed, she said it under her breath, the way she had said it in the car, the way her father must have said it in this very house thirty years ago: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*

The front hall was bare. Peeling wallpaper, a staircase going up into darkness on the right, a coat tree with nothing on it. On the left, a wide doorway with pocket doors drawn back into the walls.

The candlelight came from there.

They stood in the doorway of the parlor, the three of them, and for a long moment none of them could speak.

Maris had read her father's confession so many times that she could have recited it. She had read the description of this room until she saw it in her sleep. *The parlor at the Hollis place. Faded roses on the wallpaper. A mirror over the mantel that Ambrose always covered with a black cloth before we began, because he said it should not see. A rag rug pulled back to the wall. Nine straight chairs from the church basement, in a circle. The box in the center on the bare boards. Nine candles in iron holders, one behind each chair. And the names. Ambrose had us write our own names on the floor, in chalk, in front of our own chairs. He said a promise must be signed.*

Someone had built it again.

Every piece of it.

The faded roses climbed the walls in the candlelight. The mirror over the mantel was draped in black. The rag rug lay rolled against the baseboard. And in the center of the bare, scarred floorboards, in a perfect circle, stood nine straight-backed wooden chairs — folding chairs, gray metal frames with wooden seats, and on the back of each one, stenciled in white, *GRACE FELLOWSHIP — FELLOWSHIP HALL.*

Behind each chair, an iron candlestick. In each candlestick, a tall white candle.

All nine burned.

Eight of the flames were blue. Not the faint blue at the base of an ordinary flame, but blue all the way up, cold and steady and wrong, like gas jets. They did not flicker. They did not lean when the air moved. They stood perfectly still.

The ninth burned yellow. Small. Ordinary. Wavering a little, the way a candle does.

And in the middle of the circle, on the bare boards, sat the box.

Walnut, black with age. Iron corners. The lid closed. Corbin had last seen it lying in the mud at the bottom of a hole under the cellar stairs — or rather, he had last seen the *hole*, empty, with the watch lying in it. The box had been gone. Whoever dug it up had taken it.

Now it was here. And on its lid, face up, gold case gleaming in the candlelight, lay David Whitlock's pocket watch. Ticking. The scratched words caught the light. *Not this. Something else.*

"Kincaid," Corbin said very softly. "That watch was in your evidence locker."

"I know," said the sheriff. His voice was strange. "I signed it in myself."

And on the floor, in front of each chair, written in white chalk in a large, careful, old-fashioned hand — a copybook hand, a schoolhouse hand — were the names.

Ambrose Lark.
Ruth Ellery.
Harlan Pike.
Walter Dobbins.
Lorene Dobbins.
Bernadette Kell.
Orson Vale.
Celia Marsh.

And in front of the ninth chair, the one behind which the single yellow candle burned:

Daniel Whitlock.

A line of chalk had been drawn through her father's name. Neatly. Once. And beneath it, in the same careful hand, fresh, the chalk dust still lying loose on the boards:

Keaton Whitlock Bellamy.

The ninth chair was empty.

Maris made a sound. Not a word. Just a sound, low in her throat, the sound of a woman seeing her son's name on a grave.

"He was there," she said. "He was right there. I saw him through the window. He was sitting right there."

"He's in the house," said Kincaid. "He's in the house somewhere, ma'am. We'll find him."

From somewhere above them, from the dark at the top of the stairs, a floorboard creaked.

Then another.

Then footsteps, slow and light, crossing a room overhead from one side to the other. And stopping.

* * *

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

"*Keaton!*"

Maris was already turning toward the stairs. Kincaid caught her by the arm.

"Wait."

"That's my *son* — "

"You don't know what that is." The sheriff's grip did not loosen. His eyes were on the dark at the top of the staircase. "You don't know who's up there with him. And you don't know who's down here with us." He jerked his chin toward the back of the house. "Listen."

They listened.

Under the ticking of the watch, under the soft drip of rain from the eaves, there was another sound. Low. Ragged. Coming from somewhere toward the back of the house, below them.

Someone was crying.

A man.

Kincaid let go of Maris's arm and went down the hall toward the kitchen with his gun up, and after a moment Corbin and Maris followed. The kitchen was dark and stank of mildew and old grease. Beyond it, the door to the cellar stood open, and a faint light came up the stairs — a flashlight, lying on its side on the dirt floor below, throwing a long fan of light across the stones.

At the bottom of the stairs, in the mud beside the hole where the box had been buried, a man sat with his back against the wall and his knees drawn up and his face in his hands.

He was wet through. His good coat was black with mud to the elbows. A shovel lay beside him. And when Kincaid's flashlight hit him, he flinched and lifted his face, and it was Garrick Bellamy.

Maris stopped on the third step from the bottom.

For a long time, nobody said anything.

She had not seen him this close since the courtroom. Since Judge Ames read the order aloud and Garrick sat at the respondent's table in his deacon's suit with that patient, wounded look on his face, the look that said *I am a good man and she is a hysterical woman and everyone here can see it.* She had been afraid of that face for fifteen years.

It was not that face now. It was the face of a man who had seen something he could not unsee. His lips were gray. His hands, when he held them up into the light, were shaking.

"Maris," he said hoarsely. "Maris, I didn't know."

"Where is he?"

"I didn't know it was *him* she wanted. I swear to God. I swear on my mother's grave, I thought it was — " He choked. "She said it was about the house. She said if I bought the farm in my name, and brought the chairs, and did what she told me, you'd — she said you'd need me again. She said she could make you *need* me." He laughed, a terrible broken sound. "I believed her. Can you believe that? I believed her."

"*Where is my son?*"

"Upstairs." He pointed a shaking finger at the ceiling. "She took him upstairs. When the candles went blue. She told me to come down here and dig. She said there was one more thing in the hole." He looked down at the mud between his knees. "There's nothing. I've been digging for an hour. There's nothing down here but dirt."

Kincaid came down the last steps and stood over him. "Garrick Bellamy," he said, very evenly, "you are in violation of a protective order, and I am placing you under arrest. Stand up and put your hands behind your back."

Garrick stood up. He did not argue. He turned around and put his muddy hands behind his back, and the cuffs clicked shut, and Kincaid walked him to the stair rail and cuffed one wrist to the iron post.

"You'll keep," the sheriff said.

"Sheriff." Garrick twisted around to look at him. "Sheriff, listen to me. Don't go up there. Whatever you do. Don't let her go up there." He was looking at Maris now. "That woman isn't — I don't know what she is. She doesn't sleep. She doesn't eat. I've never once seen her eat. And when the candles went blue, she *laughed.* Like a little girl at a birthday party. And the boy just sat there and looked at her like — like he couldn't look away."

"Who is she, Garrick?" Corbin said quietly. "What's her name?"

"Lark. Mrs. Lark. That's all she ever told me." He shook his head. "But she knew everything. She knew about you. She knew about your daddy, Maris. She knew about the hallway."

Maris came down the last three steps and stood in front of him.

He was a tall man. He had always seemed taller than he was, to her, because of the way he stood over people. He did not seem tall now. He seemed like what he was: a frightened, foolish, weak man in a ruined coat, chained to a stair rail in a dead woman's cellar.

"I'm going to say this once, Garrick," she said. Her voice was perfectly steady. "And then I'm going upstairs to get my son."

He waited.

"The order still stands," she said. "Everything you did to me, every year you made me afraid in my own house — that's still true, and I'm still not coming back, and you're still not coming near us." She drew a breath. "But I don't hate you. I thought I did. I don't. I don't have room for it." She stepped back. "*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood.* You're not the thing I'm fighting tonight. You never were. You were just the door it used."

Garrick stared at her. His mouth worked.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I know," said Maris. And she turned and climbed the stairs.

* * *

> *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

The staircase to the second floor was steep and narrow and turned once at a landing, and the candlelight from the parlor did not reach past the turn. Above the landing, the dark was total.

Kincaid went first with his flashlight. The beam showed them bare treads, gray with dust — and in the dust, two sets of footprints going up. Sneakers. And a woman's boot with a low square heel.

None coming down.

"Keaton," Maris called. "Baby. It's Mom. Can you hear me?"

Silence. The watch ticked below them.

At the top of the stairs, a hallway ran the length of the house, with doors on either side. All of them were closed. Kincaid tried the first. An empty bedroom, the wallpaper hanging in long strips, a rusted iron bedstead against the wall. The second: a bathroom with a cracked clawfoot tub full of dead leaves. The third was locked.

Kincaid put his shoulder to it once, twice. On the third try, the frame splintered and the door flew inward.

It was a small room at the back of the house. A sewing room, maybe, once. There was a window, and the window was open, and the wet night air was blowing in. In the middle of the floor stood a single straight-backed chair, and draped across the back of the chair, neatly, as if its owner had just stepped out and meant to come right back, was a long gray woolen scarf.

On the seat of the chair lay a sneaker.

A boy's sneaker, men's size ten. Worn smooth at the heel.

Maris picked it up and held it against her chest beside the Testament and made no sound at all.

"The window," said Corbin.

Kincaid was already there, leaning out with the flashlight. Below the window, the roof of the back porch sloped down toward the yard. The shingles were slick and black with rain. There was no one on them. There was no one in the yard below. The beam swept across the wet grass, the sagging fence, the line of dark sycamores, and found nothing.

"They didn't go out this way," Kincaid said slowly. "There'd be marks on the shingles. That roof's been soaking for six hours. You couldn't step on it without leaving a print." He pulled his head back in. "Somebody wants us to think they went out the window."

"Then where are they?"

Overhead, very faintly, there was a sound. A scrape. Like something heavy being dragged across bare boards.

All three of them looked up at the ceiling.

"Attic," said Corbin.

And it was in that moment — standing in that cold little room with the gray scarf on the chair and her son's shoe in her hands and the sound of something dragging across the floor above her — that the fear came for Maris all at once.

It did not come as a voice this time. It came as a weight. As if the air itself had thickened and was pressing down on her from every side, pressing on her chest, her throat, her eyes. Her knees went weak. Her vision narrowed and grayed at the edges. And with the weight came a certainty, total and cold and absolutely convincing, that she was too late. That she had always been too late. That whatever was up there in the dark had already happened, and she was going to climb those stairs and open that door and find —

She felt Corbin's hand close on her shoulder.

"*The LORD is my light,*" he said. Not loudly. Close to her ear. "*And my salvation. Whom shall I fear?*"

She could not answer him. Her throat would not open.

"Say it with me, Maris. *The LORD is the strength of my life.*"

"*Of whom,*" she whispered, "*shall I be afraid.*"

The weight did not lift. But it shifted. It cracked. Like ice on a pond when the first warm day comes, a long hairline crack running through it from one side to the other, and through the crack, air.

She breathed.

"*God hath not given us the spirit of fear,*" Corbin said, "*but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.* That's not your fear, Maris. That's its fear. It's trying to hand it to you. Don't take it."

"I won't," she said. And her voice was her own again.

From far below them, from the front of the house, came a sound none of them expected.

A dog barking.

Deep and hoarse and furious, the bark of a big old hound, coming closer. And behind it, Alvarado's voice raised in alarm — *Sir! Sir, stop right there!* — and then another voice, an old man's voice, cracked and rough and loud as a church bell:

"*Get out of my way, son. I been waitin' thirty years to come back in this house, and I'll not be stopped on the porch.*"

Corbin's head came up.

"Orson," he said.

* * *

Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

— John 8:32

He was standing in the parlor doorway when they came down.

Orson Vale. Eighty-three years old, soaked to the skin, his overalls black with creek water to the hips. He had a kerosene lantern in one hand and a hickory walking stick in the other, and around his neck, on a loop of baling wire, hung an old iron horseshoe. At his feet stood Jubal, the big red hound, his hackles up, his lips drawn back from his teeth, growling steadily at the circle of chairs.

The old man was not looking at them. He was looking at the room.

He stood very still in the doorway and looked at the faded roses and the black-draped mirror and the nine chairs and the eight blue flames, and the lantern shook in his hand so that its light jumped and swung across the walls.

"Lord God," he whispered. "Lord God Almighty. She made it all over again."

"Mr. Vale." Corbin crossed the hall to him. "How did you get here? The bridge — "

"Didn't come by the bridge. Come across the bottoms. There's a footbridge on my land, back of the Dobbins place, old swinging bridge Walt built in '62. Creek was right up under it. I come across anyhow." Orson did not take his eyes off the chairs. "Took me three hours. Jubal near drowned. I near drowned." He reached into the bib pocket of his overalls with a shaking hand and pulled out an old flip phone and held it up. "Got this at one in the morning."

Corbin took it and looked at the screen.

COME TO THE HOUSE WHERE IT STARTED, ORSON. YOUR CHAIR IS READY. WE ARE FINISHING IT TONIGHT.

"I wasn't gonna come," Orson said. "Thirty years I been hidin' in that house of mine with every horseshoe and bell and mirror I could find, and I wasn't gonna come. And then I got down on my knees on my kitchen floor and I asked the Lord what to do, first time in a long time I asked Him anything, and He said, *Orson, you been hidin' long enough.*" He finally turned his head and looked at Maris. "So here I am. Where's the boy?"

"Upstairs," said Kincaid. "In the attic. We think."

"With her."

Nobody answered.

Orson nodded slowly, as if that was what he had expected. Then he walked into the parlor.

He walked around the outside of the circle, slowly, his stick tapping on the boards, Jubal growling at his heels. He did not step inside. He walked around it the way a man walks around a grave, reading the names in the chalk one by one. *Ambrose Lark. Ruth Ellery. Harlan Pike.* At his own name he stopped for a moment and looked down at it, and his face did something complicated.

Then he came to the ninth chair, and the chalk line through Daniel's name, and the new name written underneath.

He stood there a long time.

"Mrs. Bellamy," he said at last, without looking up. "I need to tell you something. I need to tell all of you something. And I need to tell it now, before we go up those stairs, because if I don't, I don't believe I'll ever get the chance again." He leaned on his stick. "Bernadette's page. The pastor called me about it last night. Read me some of it over the phone. Before I stopped answerin'."

"Yes," said Corbin.

"She got most of it right. Bernadette always did try to get things right." Orson's voice was low and rough. "But she got one thing wrong. She thought it was Ambrose. She thought Ambrose was the one wanted the Ninth Promise. That it was his plan all along. We all thought that. For years." He shook his head. "It wasn't Ambrose."

The room was very still.

"Ambrose Lark was a proud man and a foolish man," Orson said, "and he started all this, God forgive him, with his books and his séances and his talk about doors. But he didn't know what the ninth chair was for. Not till that night. Not till the thing said it out loud." He turned and looked at Maris. "When it said *a child*, I saw his face in the blue light. He was as scared as your daddy was. Maybe more. He'd never thought it would go that far. And when your daddy stood up and said no — when the candles went out — Ambrose stood up too."

"Ambrose — " Maris began.

"In the dark. I heard him. I was sittin' right next to him. He said, *That's it. That's enough. It's over. We're closin' it.* And then he started prayin'. Out loud. The Lord's Prayer. *Our Father, which art in*

heaven." Orson's voice cracked. "First time anybody'd prayed in that room in two years. First time. And he got as far as *hallowed be thy name.*"

He stopped.

"And then?" said Kincaid, very quietly.

"And then he stopped prayin'." Orson's hand tightened on his stick until the knuckles went white. "Not like a man stops. Like somethin' stopped him. There was a sound in the dark. I'll hear it till I die. Like a breath bein' cut off. And a little scuffle on the boards. And then nothin'."

Nobody moved.

"Your daddy got his lighter lit," Orson said. "And Ambrose was on the floor. And Ruth — Ruth was a nurse, you know, at the county hospital, thirty years — Ruth got down beside him and put her fingers on his neck. And I saw her face. And I saw his neck, in that little light." He closed his eyes. "There were marks on it, Sheriff. Long red marks. All the way around. Like somethin' had been pulled tight."

"Not his heart," said Kincaid.

"Harlan said heart. Harlan was the one with money, and the one the county doctor played golf with. He said heart, and Ruth didn't say anything, and none of us said anything. We were so scared. We just wanted it to be over. We all swore." Orson opened his eyes. They were wet. "*Be sure your sin will find you out.* Book of Numbers. I been knowin' that verse my whole life. Thirty years it took. But it found me."

"Orson," said Corbin gently. "Who was it? In the dark. Who killed Ambrose Lark?"

The old man looked at him.

"It wasn't the thing," he said. "I want you to understand that. That thing can scare you to death, and lie to you, and lean on you till you can't breathe. But it don't have hands. It needs somebody to lend it theirs." He drew a long, shaking breath. "When the lighter came on, everybody was lookin' at Ambrose on the floor. Everybody but me. I was lookin' at the person sittin' on the other side of him. Because I'd heard that scuffle come from their side. And I saw what they were holdin' in their two hands, before they put it away."

"A scarf," Orson said. "A long gray silk scarf. Folded up neat. And the one holdin' it — "

From the top of the house, through two floors and a ceiling, came a scream.

A boy's voice. High and cracked and terrified, the voice of a child, not a fifteen-year-old.

"*MOM!*"

* * *

> *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*
>
> — 1 John 4:4

Afterward, Maris would not remember the stairs.

She would remember the scream, and then she would remember being at the top of the second-floor hallway, with Kincaid's flashlight swinging wildly and the old man's lantern bobbing far below and Jubal baying like a bloodhound on a trail. She would remember a narrow door at the end of the hall, and behind it a steep, ladder-like flight of steps going up into the dark, and the cold — the cold — pouring down those steps like water.

She would remember that she did not wait for Kincaid.

She went up those attic stairs with her son's sneaker in one hand and her father's Testament against her heart, and she did not stop, and she did not slow down, and she said the only thing she could think of over and over and over all the way to the top. Not a prayer. Just a name.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.

The attic was empty.

It was long and low and bare, the roof beams sloping down to the floor on either side, the boards gray with dust. A round window at the far end showed a pale smear of storm-light. There was no furniture. No trunks, no boxes, nothing.

There was no Keaton.

There was only a single mark in the dust in the middle of the floor. A long, wide smear, as if something heavy had been dragged from the window end of the attic to the head of the stairs. As if someone had been pulled.

And then, from far below them — from the front of the house, from the parlor — they heard it.

The ticking had stopped.

In the silence where it had been, there was a new sound. A soft sound. A sound like a single breath let out, slow and satisfied, by a great many mouths at once.

Corbin was the first to understand. "The parlor," he said. "We left the parlor."

They went down again. Kincaid first now, Maris on his heels, Corbin behind, the old stairs groaning under them. They came off the bottom step into the front hall and turned toward the wide doorway with the pocket doors, and Orson Vale was standing in it, motionless, his lantern held up in front of him, his face the color of ash. Jubal had stopped barking. The big hound was pressed flat against the old man's legs, trembling.

"Orson — "

"I only stepped into the kitchen," the old man whispered. "To see to the fella in the cellar. I wasn't gone a minute. Not one minute."

Maris pushed past him into the parlor.

All nine candles were blue now.

The ninth, the one behind her father's chair, had changed. Its flame stood tall and cold and still like the others, and in its light the chalk letters on the floor seemed to glow. *Keaton Whitlock Bellamy.*

And in the ninth chair, her son was sitting.

He was wet and muddy and barefoot on one side. His jacket was torn at the shoulder. His face was white. His eyes were open, wide open, and they were fixed on the box in the center of the circle, and they did not blink, and they did not move when she said his name.

In his lap, held loosely in both hands, lay his great-grandfather's gold pocket watch. Silent. Its hands stopped at seventeen minutes past three.

"Keaton," Maris said. "Keaton. Baby. Look at me."

He did not look at her.

And behind him — outside the circle, in the shadow beyond the reach of the nine blue flames, where the candlelight thinned and gave out against the faded roses on the wall — someone was standing.

A woman. Small. Straight-backed. In a long dark coat buttoned to the throat. Her hair was gray and pinned up neatly at the back of her head, and her face, in the blue light, was pale and finely lined and perfectly calm, and her eyes were gray as a winter creek.

Around her shoulders, loose, she wore a second scarf. Not wool. Silk. Long and gray and folded neatly.

She laid one gloved hand on Keaton's shoulder, lightly, the way a grandmother might.

"Hello, Maris," she said. Her voice was soft and pleasant and faintly Southern, the voice of a woman who taught Sunday school and wrote thank-you notes by hand. "My, how you've grown. The last time I saw you, you were wearing a yellow dress."

Behind Maris, in the doorway, Orson Vale made a sound like a man struck in the chest.

The woman's gray eyes moved past Maris to him, and she smiled.

"Hello, Orson," she said. "You've kept your chair waiting a very long time." She looked around at the nine blue flames, the nine chalk names, the boy who would not blink, and then back at Maris, and at the men crowded in the doorway behind her. Her smile did not change.

"Come in," she said. "All of you. Sit down. We have a promise to finish."

CHAPTER NINETEEN
Take Your Stand

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.
— 2 Corinthians 11:14

Nobody sat down.

They stood in the wide doorway of the parlor, the four of them — Maris a step inside, Corbin and Kincaid at her shoulders, Orson Vale behind them with his lantern shaking in his hand and his old hound pressed against his knees — and looked at the small gray-haired woman standing behind Keaton's chair.

She waited for them with perfect patience. One gloved hand rested on the boy's shoulder. The other hung at her side, holding nothing. Her face in the blue light was mild and pleasant, the face of a woman who brought casseroles to funerals and remembered everyone's birthday.

It was Orson who said her name.

He said it the way a man says the name of someone who died a long time ago, and whom he has seen every night since in his dreams.

"Celia."

The woman smiled at him. "Hello, Orson."

"You're dead." The old man's voice was barely a whisper. "We buried you. March of '99. I stood at the back of the funeral home. I *saw* the casket."

"You saw a casket," said Celia Marsh. "You didn't see what was in it." She tilted her head a little, considering him. "You never did look very closely at anything, Orson. That was always your trouble. You saw just enough to be frightened, and then you looked away."

Kincaid had his gun up. He held it in both hands now, steady, pointed at the center of the woman's chest. "Ma'am," he said, "step away from the boy."

She did not move. She did not even look at the gun.

"Sheriff Kincaid," she said pleasantly. "Bramwell. Your mother called you Bram, didn't she? I knew your mother. She sang alto at Calvary Baptist. She had a lovely voice. It's a shame what happened to her."

The gun did not waver. But something went across the sheriff's face, quick as a shadow.

"How did you get into my evidence locker?"

"With a key." She sounded faintly surprised he would ask. "I've had a key to every door in the Henley County Building for nineteen years. I clean it. Five nights a week, ten p.m. to four a.m. Mrs. Ann Carter, the quiet lady with the cart." She smiled. "You've said good evening to me a hundred times, Sheriff. You've never once looked at my face."

Kincaid said nothing. His jaw was like iron.

"That's how it's done, you see." Celia's gray eyes moved over all of them, one by one, almost fondly. "That's how it's always been done. People think the darkness comes in with thunder and fire. It doesn't. It comes in with a mop bucket at ten o'clock at night. It comes in with a casserole and a sympathy card. It comes in looking like a nice old lady who writes thank-you notes in a beautiful hand." She glanced at Corbin. "Isn't that right, Pastor? *Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.* I always liked that verse. It's the most honest thing in the whole Book."

"You wrote the notes," Corbin said. "The message on the mirror. *Doors work both ways.*"

"Ambrose's ink. Ambrose's pen. He left me everything, you know. His books. His house. His name." She touched her own breast lightly, where a woman might wear a brooch. "*Mrs. A. Lark.* He was going to marry me. Did you know that? In the spring of '97. He'd promised." Her smile thinned. "And then he got down on his knees on this floor and started to pray, like a frightened little boy, and tried to undo everything we'd worked for. Two years of work. Thrown away. Because a machinist from First Methodist didn't have the stomach to finish it."

"So you killed him," said Orson.

Celia looked at him for a long moment.

"I finished his sentence for him," she said softly. "He was saying *hallowed be thy name*. I didn't care for the rest of it."

From the ninth chair, Keaton made a small sound.

It was the first sound he had made. His eyes were still fixed on the box. They had not moved. But his lips had parted, and his throat was working, as if he were trying to speak from very far down in himself and could not get the words up.

Maris took a step toward him.

"Don't," said Celia, without raising her voice.

And all nine candles leaned toward Maris at once, as if a wind had blown through the room — though there was no wind — and their blue flames stretched out long and thin toward her like reaching fingers, and the cold that came off them stopped her where she stood.

"The fire," Corbin said. His voice was very steady, but Maris could hear what it cost him. "Quarry Road. March of 1999. Someone died in that house."

"Someone did."

"Who was she?"

"No one." Celia's face was perfectly serene. "A poor soul from a shelter in Ashby County who had no one in the world to miss her. I gave her a warm bed and a hot supper and my ring. It was more than anyone else had ever given her." She smoothed the gray silk scarf around her shoulders. "I needed to be dead, Pastor. The others were starting to talk. Ruth had started going to church again. Walt had started having nightmares out loud. Dead women aren't suspected of anything. Dead women can wait."

"Thirty years," said Kincaid.

"It is patient," said Celia Marsh. "And so am I."

She looked down at the boy in the chair beneath her hand. And for the first time, something came into her face that was not mild or pleasant at all.

"And now," she said, "it's time."

* * *

> *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

She spoke a word.

None of them would ever be able to say afterward what the word was. It was not English. It was not any language Corbin had ever heard, and he had heard a good many in thirty years of ministry. It was short and harsh and seemed to have too many consonants in it, and when she spoke it, the house answered.

Every door on the ground floor slammed at once.

The sound was like a gunshot multiplied by ten. The pocket doors behind them shot out of the walls on their rusted tracks and crashed together, shutting them all inside the parlor. Upstairs, doors banged one after another down the hallway, *bang, bang, bang, bang,* like someone running and slamming them as they went. The windows rattled in their frames. Plaster dust sifted down from the ceiling in a fine white rain.

And the black cloth over the mirror fell away.

It did not slide. It dropped, straight down, all at once, as if the nail holding it had simply ceased to exist. And the mirror over the mantel stood uncovered for the first time since the night Ambrose Lark died, and in the mirror —

Maris would not look. She knew better. She had stood in her own bathroom at 3:17 in the morning and read a message written on her own mirror in her own steam, and she had learned what mirrors could show. She kept her eyes on her son.

But Kincaid looked.

The sheriff was facing the mantel, and the mirror was right in front of him, and he could not help it. Corbin saw him look. Saw his eyes go to the glass. Saw his face go slack and gray.

In the mirror, the parlor was the same. The nine chairs. The nine candles. The box. The boy.

But in the mirror, all nine chairs were full.

Nine figures sat in the circle. Gray and indistinct, like smoke shaped into people. Bowed heads. Folded hands. And standing in the center of the circle, over the box, there was a tenth figure. Tall. Much too tall. Its head bent against the ceiling. Its shape was not clear; it seemed to be made of the absence of light rather than of anything else, a place where the reflected candlelight simply stopped. It was leaning down over the ninth chair. Over the boy.

And it was *looking out of the mirror at Kincaid.*

The sheriff's gun dropped. It hit the floorboards with a clatter and slid away under a chair, and he did not seem to notice. He stood there with his empty hands at his sides, staring at the glass, and his lips moved.

"I see it," he said. "Oh, God. I see it."

"Don't look at it, Sheriff," said Corbin. "Look at me. *Look at me.*"

Kincaid could not.

Then Jubal went for the circle.

The old red hound had been trembling against Orson's legs since they came into the house. Now, with a sound Corbin had never heard a dog make — a roar, almost — he launched himself across the room toward the empty space above the box. Toward nothing. Toward the place where, in the mirror, the tall shape stood. He leapt, jaws snapping at the air —

And was thrown backward as if he had struck a wall.

He hit the floor and slid and scrambled up again, yelping, his hackles standing straight up, and stood at the edge of the circle barking hoarsely and wildly at nothing at all. At the thing none of them could see except in the glass.

"Jubal!" Orson stumbled forward, lantern swinging. He tore the iron horseshoe from around his neck on its loop of baling wire and held it up toward the circle in his shaking hand, the way a man holds up a torch against wolves.

Celia laughed.

It was a light, girlish laugh, like a child at a birthday party. Exactly as Garrick had said.

"Oh, Orson," she said. "Still with your horseshoes? Thirty years of horseshoes and bells and mirrors nailed to every wall. Did you really think any of that would ever keep it out?" She shook her head, smiling. "That's the trouble with frightened men. They'll trust anything except the one thing that works."

Orson stared at the horseshoe in his hand.

Then, slowly, he lowered it. He looked at it for a long moment — a lump of old iron on a bit of wire, rusted and worn — and let it drop to the floor.

"You're right," he said hoarsely. "God help me, Celia. You're right about that one thing."

He got down on his knees. Right there, at the edge of the circle, in his creek-soaked overalls, eighty-three years old, with his dog barking beside him and the blue flames leaning over him. He folded his big ruined hands.

"*Our Father,*" said Orson Vale, "*which art in heaven.*"

The candles roared.

They did not flicker. They *roared,* all nine of them at once, their blue flames shooting up three feet tall with a sound like a furnace door thrown open, and the cold that came off them hit Orson like a fist. He rocked back on his knees. His face went white. But he did not stop.

"*Hallowed be thy name.*"

And in the ninth chair, Keaton Bellamy screamed.

It came tearing up out of him all at once, as if whatever had been holding it down had been startled by the prayer and let go for an instant. His head snapped up. His eyes, for the first time, came away from the box and found his mother in the doorway, and they were wild and wet and terrified and *his* — his own eyes, fifteen years old, the boy she had raised.

"*Mom!*" he screamed. "*Mom, help me! I can't get up! I can't get up, it won't let me get up — Mom, please, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, help me —* "

He was straining against nothing. Pulling with all his strength against the seat of the chair as if he were tied to it, as if invisible hands were pressing down on his shoulders. The cords stood out in his neck. The gold watch slid off his lap and hit the floor.

"*MOM!*"

* * *

> *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

In the cellar, chained to the stair rail by one wrist, Garrick Bellamy heard the boy scream.

He had been sitting in the mud at the foot of the stairs since Kincaid left him. He had heard the doors slam overhead, and the old dog roaring, and the strange girlish laugh that made his skin crawl. He had heard the old man start to pray. He had put his free hand over his face and told himself none of it was his business anymore. He was under arrest. He was chained to a post. There was nothing he could do.

Then he heard Keaton scream *Mom, help me,* and something inside Garrick Bellamy broke.

He had known that boy his whole life, or near enough. He had taught him to throw a curveball in the backyard. He had sat in the bleachers at his Little League games and yelled until he was hoarse. He had also stood in that boy's bedroom doorway, more times than he could count, and shouted at his mother until she cried, while the boy lay in bed with the covers pulled over his head pretending to be asleep.

He had never once let himself think about what the boy heard.

He thought about it now.

He stood up. He took hold of the stair rail with both hands, the free one and the cuffed one, and pulled. It was an old rail in an old house, held to the stringer with nails that had been rusting in the damp for a hundred years. He pulled until the veins stood out in his forehead and the cuff bit into his wrist and the blood ran down into his palm. On the third pull, the post tore out of the stair with a shriek of nails.

He went up the cellar stairs with the cuffs swinging from one wrist and the broken post still hanging from them.

The pocket doors to the parlor were shut. He did not try to open them. He put his shoulder to the place where they met and drove through them like a linebacker, and they burst apart on their rotten tracks, and he stumbled into the room.

Celia turned and looked at him.

"Garrick," she said. "How nice. I wondered if you'd come up."

He did not answer her. He was looking at Keaton. At the boy straining in the ninth chair, white-faced, crying, his hands clawing at the seat. At the blue fire roaring up from nine candles. At Maris standing frozen in the doorway with something clutched against her chest.

He started toward the chair.

"I wouldn't," said Celia mildly.

He kept coming. He reached the edge of the circle, and the chalk names on the floor, and he stepped over the boy's name and grabbed the boy under the arms and *pulled* —

And was thrown.

Flung backward as if a giant hand had swept him off his feet. He flew six feet through the air and hit the mantel with his shoulder, and something in his arm snapped with a sound like a green branch breaking. He slid down to the floor beneath the uncovered mirror and lay there gasping.

Celia stood over him. She did not touch him. She looked down at him with an expression of gentle, almost tender pity.

"You don't understand, do you?" she said. "You still think this is about the boy. You still think you're the hero who's going to rescue him." She crouched down beside him. "Garrick. Dear. You *brought the chairs.* You drove them out here in your own truck from your own church. You signed your own name on the deed to this house. You opened your hand to it years ago, a little at a time, every time you stood over that woman in a doorway and made her afraid in her own home. Every time you shouted and the boy pulled the covers over his head. Every one of those times, you made a little room for it." She smiled. "That's all it ever needs. A little room. You've been building it a room for fifteen years."

Garrick lay against the mantel and looked up at her, and his face crumpled.

"She's right," he said.

He said it to no one. To the ceiling. To the room.

"She's right. I did that. I made room for it." He was crying now, openly, the tears running down into the mud on his face. "I told myself I was a good man. I stood up in church every Sunday. I passed the plate. I prayed out loud. And then I went home and — " He could not finish. His good hand clawed at the floorboards. "God. Oh, God. I did this. It's my fault. Whatever's in that boy, I let it in. I opened the door."

"Yes," said Celia gently. "You did."

"Then take it out of me." Garrick was not speaking to her. His eyes had gone past her, up, to the ceiling, to something none of them could see. "Lord, if You're there — if You're really there — I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all of it. I'm sorry for what I did to her. I'm sorry for what I did to him. Don't make him pay for it. Make me pay for it. Take it out of me. Not him. *Not him.*"

He got up.

It took him two tries. His left arm hung crooked and useless at his side. The cuffs dangled from his wrist with the broken post still attached, clanking. But he got up. And he did not go for the boy again. He limped into the circle and stood between the ninth chair and Celia Marsh — between the boy and the woman — with his broken arm hanging and his one good hand held out in front of him, palm open, empty.

"You don't get him," he said. His voice was shaking. "You hear me? You don't get him."

Celia looked at him for a long, thoughtful moment.

"How touching," she said. "It won't help, of course. But how touching."

And Maris, standing in the doorway with her father's Testament against her heart, realized that everyone in the room was looking at her.

* * *

> *Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.*
>
> — Ephesians 6:13

It came for her then.

Not the thing in the mirror. Not the blue fire. Something quieter. The candles did not roar. The doors did not slam. It was simply that, between one breath and the next, the room went silent.

Utterly silent.

The dog stopped barking. Orson's prayer stopped in the middle of a word. Keaton's crying stopped. Kincaid, Corbin, Garrick, Celia — all of them were still there, Maris could see them, but they were *still*, motionless, frozen like figures in a photograph, like the nine gray shapes in the mirror. The blue flames stood motionless on their candles. Even the dust in the air hung suspended in the light.

And in the silence, close to her ear — so close she could feel the cold of it on her neck — a voice spoke.

She knew it.

She had known it all her life. She had heard it once before, when she was eleven years old, lying in bed in her yellow nightgown with the covers pulled to her chin, at seventeen minutes past three in the morning, the night after her father came home from the Hollis farm. She had heard it through the wall, from the hallway, where her father sat in his kitchen chair. A low voice. Gentle. Patient. Reasonable. She had not been able to make out the words then. She had told herself in the morning that it had been a dream.

It had not been a dream.

It was the voice that had whispered to her father in this very room. The voice that had leaned close to Ruth and Harlan and Walt and Lorene and Bernadette and Orson and Celia and Ambrose, one by one, and told them what it wanted. The voice that had knocked three times above her bed in her own house. The voice that had written on her mirror.

It had been waiting for her for thirty years. And now, at last, it was here.

Maris.

It was so gentle. That was the worst of it. It was so gentle and so kind, like a grandfather's voice, like someone who had known her since she was a baby and loved her very much.

You belong to what your family began.

The words went into her like cold water.

Your father sat in that chair. Your father said yes eight times. Your father's blood is in your veins, and his promises are in his blood. Everything you have — your house, your health, your son — all of it grew out of the ground he tilled in this room. You were born inside his bargain. You've lived inside it every day of your life without knowing it. The voice was closer now. Almost tender. *You belong to what your family began. You always have. The boy belongs to it, too. That's all I'm asking. Only what's already mine.*

Maris stood very still.

She thought of her father in his hallway chair. Eighteen years of nights. She thought of the eight notches under her mother's kitchen table. She thought of the green Testament in her hands, swollen with rain, and the date in the margin, and the one word in pencil underneath. *Maybe.*

She thought of all the years she had spent running. Running from Garrick. Running from her own house. Running from her father's secrets, and her own fear, and the knocks in the night, and the

shadow beside her son's bed. Every time she had heard this voice — or something like it — she had run. Moved to a new room. Changed the locks. Filed the papers. Put the knife under the mattress. Turned on every light in the house.

And it had followed her every time. Because you cannot run from something that thinks you belong to it.

She opened her mouth.

"No," she said.

Her voice sounded strange in that frozen silence. Small. But it was hers.

"I don't belong to my family's past."

The silence changed. It did not break, but it shifted, the way a held breath shifts. She could feel the voice considering her. Surprised, almost. Curious.

No? it said softly.

And then, gently, reasonably, the question it had been asking every human being since a garden at the beginning of the world:

Then who do you belong to?

Maris looked down at her hands.

In one of them was her son's muddy sneaker. In the other, pressed against her heart, was the small green New Testament her father had carried through every night of her childhood. *Given to Daniel by his mother, June 1977.* She opened her fingers on it. Felt the soft, wet, swollen leather. Felt the weight of it, which was almost nothing, and was everything.

She remembered a verse. She did not know where it came from. It simply came, the way the right words sometimes come, from somewhere outside you.

Ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price.

She gripped her Bible.

And she lifted her head and looked straight into the empty air in the center of the circle, where the mirror had shown the tall dark shape bending over her son, and she answered.

"Jesus Christ."

* * *

> *And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve … but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*
>
> — Joshua 24:15

She did not shout it.

She had expected, if she ever got here, that she would have to shout. That she would have to scream it over the roar of the fire and the slamming of the doors, the way she had shouted in her own house on the night she first declared it hers. But she did not need to shout. She said it in an ordinary voice. Quietly. The way you say your own name when someone asks you for it.

Jesus Christ.

And the silence broke.

Not with a crash. With a sound like a long, long breath let out. All at once the room was moving again — the dog barking, the old man on his knees finishing *thy kingdom come,* the boy crying in the ninth chair, Garrick standing with his good hand out — and Maris was walking.

She walked into the circle.

She stepped over the chalk names on the floorboards. She walked past the box with its iron corners. She did not look at the mirror. She did not look at Celia Marsh. She walked straight to the ninth chair, where her son sat straining and weeping, and she knelt down in front of him and put her

hand on his chest, over his heart, the way she had done every night when he was small and could not sleep.

The cold that came off the blue flames hit her like a wall of ice. She felt it on her face, on her hands, in her chest. She felt the pressure of the thing bending over her — the weight of it, the vast patient hunger of it, leaning down, down, as it had leaned over her father in that same chair thirty years ago.

She did not run.

For the first time in her life — for the first time in all the years of knocks and shadows and slammed doors and late-night phone calls and police reports and courtrooms — Maris Whitlock Bellamy stood her ground and did not run.

"Keaton," she said. "Look at me, baby."

He looked at her. His face was wet and white and terrified.

"Do you know who you belong to?"

He shook his head. His lips were trembling.

"You belong to Jesus," she said. "Your grandpa found that out in this room thirty years ago, when he stood up out of this chair and said no. It took him the rest of his life to really believe it. And I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry it took me this long." She pressed her father's Testament into his hands, over his heart, under her own. "But it's true. You're not owed to anybody. You're not part of anybody's promise. You were bought with a price, and it's already paid. All of it. Do you hear me?"

His fingers closed on the little green book.

"Say it with me," Maris said. "You don't have to believe it all yet. *Maybe* is enough. Just say it."

Keaton's lips moved. No sound came.

"*I belong to Jesus Christ*," Maris said.

"I — " His voice cracked. He tried again. "I belong — "

Behind them, Celia Marsh said, very sharply, "*No.*"

It was the first time her voice had risen. It cracked across the room like a whip. And for an instant, in the blue light, her mild pleasant face was not mild at all. It was white and stretched and furious, and her gray eyes were enormous, and Maris saw what thirty years of waiting had made of her.

"You can't," Celia hissed. "You *can't.* It's owed. It was *promised.* Eight promises given, one owed. I've given my whole life to this. I gave it *Ambrose.* It promised me — "

"*I belong to Jesus Christ*," said Keaton Bellamy.

He said it out loud. Hoarse and cracked and barely more than a whisper. But he said it.

And the ninth candle went out.

Just that one, at first. The cold blue flame behind his chair shrank down to a point and winked out, and a thin thread of gray smoke rose from the wick into the still air. Then the eighth. Then the seventh. One after another around the circle, going out like lights in a house where someone is walking from room to room at bedtime — *Daniel. Celia. Orson. Bernadette. Lorene. Walter. Harlan. Ruth* — until only one was left. The first. The one behind the chair with *Ambrose Lark* written in chalk in front of it.

It burned on for a long moment, alone.

Then it, too, went out.

Darkness.

Then, after a long breath, gray light. The window. Dawn was coming up over the river bottoms, pale and cold and clean, and the first thin light of it came through the uncurtained glass and lay across the floor of the parlor, across the chalk names and the empty chairs and the box with the iron corners.

Keaton came up out of the ninth chair as if a rope had been cut. He fell forward into his mother's arms, and she held him, the two of them kneeling together on the bare boards in the gray light, and he sobbed into her shoulder like a little boy, and she rocked him and said nothing at all.

On the floor beside them, the gold pocket watch lay face up where it had fallen.

It had started ticking again.

Across the room, Celia Marsh stood alone by the cold candles with her hands at her sides. She was looking up. Up at the ceiling, at the empty air, at the place where the tall dark shape had been. She was waiting for something. For an answer. For it to come back for her.

It did not come back.

"You promised," she whispered. Her voice was very small and very old. "You *promised me*."

Nothing answered her. Nothing at all.

Then Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid was beside her. He had found his gun under the chair, but he did not draw it. He had something else in his hand — a small, worn red New Testament, its cover soft with age, which he had taken out of his breast pocket without seeming to know that he had done it. *For Bram,* it said on the flyleaf, in his mother's hand.

He stood looking at the old woman for a long time. He was shaking. His face was gray and wet.

"I saw it," he said. Not to her. To Corbin, to anyone. "In the mirror. I saw it. All my years wearing a badge, I never once — " He stopped. "I can't explain it. I'm never gonna be able to explain it. I'm not even gonna try to put it in a report." He looked down at the red Testament in his hand. "But I saw it. And I saw it go."

Then he put the Testament back in his pocket, and took out his handcuffs, and turned to the woman by the candles.

"Celia Ann Marsh," said the sheriff of Henley County, very quietly, "you are under arrest for the murder of Ambrose Lark."

She did not resist. She held out her small gloved wrists like a woman holding out her hands to be warmed at a fire. And she never once took her eyes off the ceiling.

Corbin Thorne knelt beside Orson Vale on the floor, and put his arm around the old man's shoulders, and together they finished the prayer. Out loud. All the way to the end. *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.*

"Amen," said Orson. And began, very quietly, to weep.

And Maris knelt in the gray dawn with her son in her arms and her father's Testament between them and the watch ticking on the floor, and did not run, and did not need to.

As for me and my house, she thought, *we will serve the LORD.*

Outside the farmhouse window, over the river bottoms, the sun came up.

CHAPTER TWENTY
Who Won the War

> *For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light.*
>
> — Luke 12:2–3

Her name was Dorothy Ann Pruitt.

She was fifty-seven years old in March of 1999. She had been born in Ashby County and had lived there all her life, the last six years of it in and out of the Women's Shelter on Depot Street. She had a sister in Tennessee she had not spoken to in two decades. She liked crossword puzzles and Patsy Cline and the color green. The shelter director, who was still alive and still running the place at eighty-one, remembered that Dorothy used to sing in the kitchen when she thought no one could hear her.

On the sixth of March, 1999, a kind, soft-spoken woman with beautiful handwriting had come to the shelter and offered Dorothy a room in her house out in the country. A warm bed. Hot suppers. A little light housework in exchange. Dorothy had packed her one bag and gone.

Three days later, she died in a fire on Quarry Road, wearing another woman's ring, and was buried under another woman's name.

For twenty-seven years, nobody had looked for her.

Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid found her in nine days.

It took a court order to exhume the coffin in the Marsh family plot, and a lab in the state capital to pull DNA from what was inside it, and a long phone call to a woman in Knoxville who had not heard her sister's name spoken aloud since 1997. But in the third week of December, the state medical examiner signed a new certificate, and the name on it was the right one.

Kincaid drove to Tennessee himself to tell the sister. He did not have to. He went anyway.

"It's the least anybody can do," he told Corbin afterward, standing in the parking lot of New Hope Chapel with his hat in his hands. "Give her back her name. Nobody else ever did."

That was how it went, those weeks after the farmhouse. One name at a time. One file at a time. One thing that had been spoken in darkness, brought out and set down in the light.

Celia Ann Marsh was charged on the twenty-sixth of December with the first-degree murder of Ambrose Lark in November of 1996 and the first-degree murder of Dorothy Ann Pruitt in March of 1999. Additional counts followed in the weeks after: the abduction of a minor, burglary of a government facility, tampering with evidence, identity fraud, and conspiracy. The district attorney, a careful man who did not like to say more than he had to, said only that additional charges were "under review."

Because Kincaid had not stopped with Dorothy Pruitt.

He had gone back, quietly, to the county archive basement and pulled the file on every member of the Circle of Nine who had died since November of 1996. Ruth Ellery. Harlan Pike. Walter and Lorene Dobbins. Bernadette Kell in her monastery in Kentucky. Daniel Whitlock. He read every page. He drove out to every address. He talked to every neighbor and nurse and coroner's assistant still living who would talk to him.

Most of the deaths were exactly what they appeared to be. Old age. Illness. The ordinary sorrows that come to everyone.

Two of them were not.

He did not say which, publicly. Not yet. But he sat in Maris Bellamy's kitchen one evening a few days before Christmas, with a cup of coffee going cold in front of him, and told her that one of those two names was not her father's.

"Your daddy died of his heart," he said. "His real heart. I read every word of it. The doctor at the hospital was a good man and he did his job right, and there wasn't anybody in that room with him at the end but your mother." He looked at her steadily. "I wanted you to know that. For certain. I wasn't gonna let you wonder."

Maris put her hand over her mouth and nodded and could not speak.

The county building in Henley got all new locks the first week of January. Every door. Every cabinet. Every evidence locker. The night cleaning contract went to a company out of the capital. And Sheriff Kincaid, who for years had walked past a quiet gray-haired woman with a mop cart every night without once looking at her face, made it his business from then on to learn the name of every person who swept his floors.

* * *

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

— Proverbs 28:13

Garrick Bellamy pleaded guilty.

He did not have to. Whitfield, his lawyer, the same polished man in the same expensive suits who had stood up in Judge Ames's courtroom in the autumn and called Maris unstable, told him he had defenses. The protective order violation could be argued. The financial charges were complicated. A jury might be sympathetic to a man with a broken arm and a sad story about a manipulative old woman.

Garrick fired him.

It came out in pieces, over the following weeks, what investigators found once they began to look. The deed to the Hollis farm in the name of Nine Oaks Holdings, LLC. The cashier's check that paid for it. The account the check had been drawn on. And the money that had flowed into that account in the six weeks before — forty-one thousand dollars, moved in careful amounts from the building fund of Grace Fellowship Church, where Garrick Bellamy had served as deacon and treasurer for eleven years.

The elders of Grace Fellowship sat in a long silent row in the back of the courtroom on the day of his plea, and did not look at him.

He stood in front of the judge in an orange jumpsuit with his left arm in a cast from shoulder to wrist, and when she asked him how he pleaded, he said "Guilty" in a clear voice, four times, to four counts. Then he asked if he could say something.

The judge allowed it.

He did not turn around. He did not look at Maris, sitting three rows back with Gloria Esposito on one side and Corbin on the other. He kept his eyes on the bench, and his good hand flat on the table in front of him, and he spoke very slowly, like a man reading something he had memorized.

"For fifteen years," he said, "I made my wife afraid in her own house. I did it with my voice and I did it with my hands and I did it with my silence. I did it in front of her son. I told her it was her fault. I told the church it was her fault. I told myself it was her fault." He stopped and swallowed. "It wasn't her fault. Not any of it. I did it. And when she finally got free of me, I went looking for anybody who'd help me get her back. I didn't care who. I didn't care what they wanted. That's how I ended up in that farmhouse." His voice cracked. "I'm not asking for anything. I don't deserve anything. I just wanted it said out loud, in a room where it would be written down. So nobody could ever say she lied."

He sat down.

He received six years, with the possibility of parole after three. The judge added, from the bench, that the protective order would be extended in its own separate proceeding, and that she expected it to be extended for the full term the law allowed.

Corbin visited him in the county jail a week later. They sat across from each other at a steel table in a gray room, and for a long time neither of them said anything.

"I'm not gonna tell you it's all right," Corbin said finally. "Because it isn't."

"I know."

"And I'm not gonna tell you she'll forgive you. That's hers to decide. Not mine. Not yours."

"I know that too." Garrick looked down at his cast. "I said some things at that farmhouse. To God. With that woman standing over me. I asked Him to take it out of me." He was quiet a moment. "I meant it. I still mean it. But I've been sitting in here thinking — I don't guess repenting means you get to skip the consequences. Does it?"

"No," said Corbin gently. "It means you stop running from them."

Garrick nodded slowly. Then, after a long time: "Would you come back? Sometime? I don't know anything. About the Bible, I mean. I sat in church every Sunday of my life and I passed the plate and I never once read the thing." He laughed, a short, raw sound. "Can you believe that? Deacon eleven years. Never read it."

"I'll come back," said Corbin. "Every Tuesday. I'll bring you one."

* * *

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.

— James 5:16

Orson Vale told the whole truth on the fourth of January, in the small back office of New Hope Chapel, with a recorder running on the desk in front of him.

Kincaid was there, and a stenographer from the district attorney's office, and Corbin. Elowen Pryce sat in the corner with her hands folded in her lap and her gray cat, whom she had refused to leave at home, asleep in a carrier at her feet. And Maris sat directly across from the old man, because he had asked that she be there, and because she had said yes.

It took four hours.

He told them how it began. How Ambrose Lark, the history teacher with the restless mind and the library of strange old books, had started talking in the spring of 1994 about "the thinness of things." How he had found Agnes Hollis's diaries in an estate sale, the diaries of a country medium who had held séances in that same parlor in the 1920s and written of a door she had opened and could not close. How he had begun gathering people around him, one at a time, people who were lonely or grieving or afraid. Ruth, whose mother was dying. Harlan, whose money could not buy him peace. Walt and Lorene, who had buried their only son. Bernadette, who had never been loved. Orson himself, who had come back from Korea forty years before and never once slept through the night.

And Celia, who had come on her own, and who had understood from the beginning, better than any of them, what they were really doing.

"She was the one who brought your daddy in," Orson said to Maris. "Spring of '96. He'd buried his own father the winter before. Old David Whitlock. And he was tore up over it, couldn't get past it. She found him somehow. Started talking to him about how maybe there was a way to talk to his daddy one more time. And he was grieving, and he was scared, and he came." The old man's voice was rough. "I always thought Ambrose picked him. For the ninth chair. Like Bernadette thought. It was her. It was always her. She picked the one man in the county who had a little girl and a broken heart and wasn't strong enough to say no." He looked at Maris. "Except he was. At the end. When it counted."

He told them what each of them had promised, that last night. Ruth her sleep. Harlan his conscience. Walt and Lorene their grief, that they might never stop mourning their boy. Bernadette her prayers.

"And you?" asked Kincaid quietly.

Orson looked down at his hands.

"My courage," he said. "That I'd never once stand against it. Never, as long as I lived." He laughed, a broken sound. "And I didn't. Thirty years. Horseshoes on every wall. Bells on every door. Mirrors in every window. Hiding. That wasn't protection, Sheriff. That was me keepin' my promise." He closed his eyes. "Until that night at the farmhouse. When I put down that horseshoe and got on my knees. First time in thirty years I stood against it. First time." His voice cracked. "Took me eighty-three years to break one promise worth breaking."

He told them who carved the notches.

"Your daddy," he said to Maris. "The eight under your mama's kitchen table. He came out to see me in the summer of '97 and he told me about 'em. He said every time he looked at that table he wanted to remember, one for each time he'd said yes to it, so he'd never get proud. So he'd never forget what he'd been forgiven." Orson shook his head slowly. "And he left the ninth place blank on purpose. Said it was the one he'd never give. Said he'd sit in front of that empty place every night if he had to, so it'd stay empty."

"Somebody cut the ninth," Maris said quietly. "After he died."

"Celia," said Kincaid. "She told us. In her interview. She broke into your mama's house the week after his funeral in 2014. To mark it." His jaw tightened. "She thought it was funny."

Maris did not say anything for a long time.

At the end, when the stenographer had packed away her machine and Kincaid had shut off the recorder and the winter dark was coming down outside the office window, Orson Vale got up out of his chair. It took him a while. He was very tired. He came around the desk, slowly, leaning on his hickory stick, and stood in front of Maris, and then, to her astonishment, he got down on his knees on the floor in front of her.

"Mr. Vale — "

"I knew," he said. "From the very first. I knew it was Celia who killed Ambrose. I saw the scarf in her hands. And I said nothing. Thirty years I said nothing. If I'd spoken up in '96, she'd have gone to prison and that poor Pruitt woman would be alive, and you'd never have had a single night of it. Not one knock. Not one." He bowed his gray head. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know how to ask you to forgive me."

Maris looked down at the old man kneeling in front of her.

She thought of all the nights. All the knocks. All the fear. She thought of the shadow beside her son's bed. She thought of her father, who had been forgiven eight times and spent the rest of his life sitting in a hallway because of it.

She got down on her knees on the floor beside him and put her arms around him.

"You don't have to know how," she said. "I forgive you, Orson."

He wept like a child. And in the corner, Elowen Pryce wiped her eyes with a lace handkerchief and said softly, to no one in particular, "*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.* James five. I always did think that was the most practical verse in the Bible."

* * *

Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

— Mark 9:24

Keaton came to the chapel on a Thursday afternoon in the middle of January, alone, on his bicycle, and knocked on the office door.

Corbin was not surprised. He had been expecting it.

The boy came in and sat in the chair across from the desk with his jacket still zipped to his chin and his backpack on his knees, and for a while he did not say anything. He looked around the little office, at the shelves of books and the framed picture of Diane and the window looking out on the gravel parking lot. He looked everywhere but at Corbin.

"Can I ask you something?" he said finally.

"Anything."

"Is it okay to still have questions?" He said it fast, like he'd been practicing it on the ride over. "Like — I said the thing. At the farmhouse. *I belong to Jesus Christ.* I said it. And I meant it. I think. When I said it, I really did." He picked at the strap of his backpack. "But I've been reading Grandpa's Testament, the green one. Every night. And there's a lot in there I don't get. And sometimes I lie in bed and think, what if it was just the chemicals in those candles? What if it was just in my head? What if I only said it because I was scared?" He looked up for the first time. "Does that mean it didn't count?"

Corbin leaned back in his chair.

"Let me show you something," he said, and opened his Bible on the desk and turned it around so the boy could read it.

"Mark nine," he said. "There's a man whose son has been tormented by an evil spirit his whole life. Since he was a little child. And he brings the boy to Jesus, and he says, *If thou canst do any thing,*

have compassion on us, and help us. And Jesus says to him — " Corbin put his finger on the line — "*If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.*"

Keaton read it.

"And the father," Corbin said, "cries out, with tears. Right there. Read it."

"*Lord, I believe,*" Keaton read slowly. "*Help thou mine unbelief.*"

"That's it," said Corbin. "That's the whole prayer. *I believe. Help my unbelief.* Both at the same time. In the same breath." He tapped the page. "And you know what Jesus did? He didn't say, come back when you've got it all figured out. He didn't say, your faith isn't good enough. He healed the boy. Right then. Because the man brought what he had, and he was honest about what he didn't have, and that was enough." He closed the Bible. "Questions don't mean it didn't count, Keaton. Questions mean you're taking it seriously. Your grandpa wrote *Greater is he that is in you* in the margin of that Testament on the worst night of his life, and he spent eighteen years after that still sitting in a hallway, still scared. You think his faith didn't count?"

Keaton was quiet for a long time.

Then he unzipped his backpack and took out the little green New Testament. It had dried out over the weeks, swollen and wavy, the cover gone soft and stained. He opened it to the page with the date in the margin — *11/22/96* — and the verse worn almost through, and under it, in pencil, his own crooked word. *Maybe.*

"Do you have a pen?" he said.

Corbin handed him one.

Keaton bent over the page and wrote something underneath. Carefully. He did not show it to Corbin, and Corbin did not ask. But when he closed the book, the boy's ears were red, and his eyes were wet, and he was almost smiling.

"Can I come back?" he said. "Like — next Thursday? And just ask stuff?"

"Every Thursday," said Corbin, "for as long as you want."

On the way out, at the door, Keaton stopped.

"Pastor Thorne?"

"Yes?"

"My mom says you can get baptized in the creek. Out by Mr. Vale's place. In the spring." He looked at the floor. "Ridley Creek. The same one that — you know. That went down. That night."

"You can," said Corbin. "If you want to."

Keaton nodded slowly. "I think," he said, "maybe I want to." And then, after a moment, very quietly: "Not maybe. I want to."

He went out to his bicycle. Corbin stood at the window and watched him ride away down the gravel lane in the cold January sunshine, and did not trust himself to say anything for a while.

Later, he found out what the boy had written. Maris told him, months afterward, on the bank of Ridley Creek, on a bright morning in April, with the water running clear and cold and gentle over the stones. She had seen it herself, one night, when Keaton left the little green book open on the kitchen table.

Under his grandfather's verse. Under his own crooked *Maybe.* One more line, in ink this time, in a hand that was trying very hard to be neat.

Yes. 1/15. — K.

* * *

> *The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever.*
>
> — Deuteronomy 29:29

"I can explain some of it," Kincaid said.

It was the last week of January, and they were sitting on the porch of the parsonage on Mill Road — Corbin and the sheriff — in the thin winter sunshine, with coffee. Kincaid had a folder on his knee. He had been carrying it around for weeks. He had not opened it.

"Go ahead," said Corbin.

"The candles," said Kincaid. "The blue flames. Lab in the capital tested the wax. Copper chloride, mixed right in. It's an old trick. Stage magicians used it. Burns blue, steady, real eerie. She had a whole box of it in the trunk of her car." He tapped the folder. "The texts from the boy's phone. She took his phone off him in the truck and sent 'em herself. The knocks at Mrs. Bellamy's house — some of 'em, anyhow — she had a key. Copied it off Garrick's ring a year ago. She'd let herself in at three in the morning and rap on the walls and walk out again before anybody got down the stairs. Same with the message on the mirror. She wrote it in soap on the glass while Mrs. Bellamy was asleep. Shows up in the steam."

"And the boy in the chair?"

"Thermos of hot chocolate she gave him in the truck. Toxicology came back last week. Enough of a sedative in him to make a grown man stare at a wall for an hour." Kincaid's jaw tightened. "That's why he couldn't get up. That's part of why."

"Part."

The sheriff was quiet for a while.

"I can explain about seventy percent of it," he said finally. "Maybe a little more. Which is about seventy percent more than I thought I'd ever be able to explain, the night we drove out there." He looked out across the yard at the bare maple. "The rest of it, I can't."

He did not list them. He did not need to. They both knew.

The creek dropping two feet in two minutes and rising again behind them. The doors slamming all at once, every one in the house, in a house where the boards were swollen so tight none of them would have closed on their own. A grown hound thrown six feet backward by nothing at all. A grown man thrown across a room into a mantelpiece. The candles going out one by one, in order, from the ninth to the first, in a room where there was no wind. A gold watch, stopped at 3:17, starting up again on its own on the floor.

And the mirror.

"I've never told anybody what I saw in that mirror," Kincaid said. "Not Alvarado. Not the DA. Not the state investigators. I'm not ever gonna put it in a report." He turned the folder over on his knee. "But I saw it, Pastor. Bending over that boy. And I saw it go when he said that name." He was quiet. "I've been sitting in the back row at your church three Sundays now. You noticed?"

"I noticed."

"I don't know what I believe yet. Not all of it." The sheriff took his mother's red Testament out of his breast pocket and turned it over in his fingers. *For Bram.* "But I'm done pretending I didn't see what I saw." He looked at Corbin. "Is that enough?"

"*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God,*" said Corbin quietly. "*But those things which are revealed belong unto us.*" He smiled. "You've got more revealed than most people ever get, Bram. You don't have to understand all of it. You just have to be faithful with what you've been shown."

Kincaid looked at the red Testament for a long moment.

Then he put it back in his pocket, over his heart, and picked up his coffee, and the two men sat on the porch in the winter sun without saying anything else for a long time.

* * *

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

Maris came home from the courthouse on the second Tuesday in February at a quarter past six in the evening, with the extended order in a manila envelope under her arm.

Judge Harriet Ames had read it into the record in the same courtroom where it had all begun, in the autumn, back when Maris had stood up at the petitioner's table in her one good blouse with her hands shaking so badly she had to hold them behind her back. The respondent had not appeared. He had sent, through his new public defender, a single typed paragraph consenting to the extension and declining to contest any part of it. The judge had read that into the record too.

The order was extended for five years. The maximum the law allowed.

Gloria Esposito had hugged her on the courthouse steps. Corbin had shaken her hand. Kincaid, standing at the bottom of the steps by his cruiser, had touched the brim of his hat to her and said, "Mrs. Bellamy," and nothing else, and she had understood.

Now she came in through the front door of her own house, and set her purse on the hall table, and hung her coat on the hook, and walked into the kitchen, and sat down at the table, and opened the envelope.

She read it through once. All of it. Every line. *Petitioner. Respondent. Shall not. Shall not. Shall not.* The judge's signature at the bottom in blue ink. The seal of the court.

Then she folded it back along its creases and got up and opened the kitchen drawer beside the stove.

It was the junk drawer. Every kitchen has one. Take-out menus and rubber bands and dead batteries and a flashlight and three rolls of tape and a book of matches from a restaurant that had closed in 2019. She laid the protective order in on top of the take-out menus, and closed the drawer, and stood there a moment with her hand flat on the front of it.

In the autumn, she had kept the first order in her purse. Everywhere. She had slept with her purse on the nightstand. She had taken it out and read it in the middle of the night, by the light of her phone, the way some people read the Psalms. She had made copies and taped one inside the front door and one on the refrigerator and one in the glove box of her car.

Now it was in the junk drawer with the dead batteries. Exactly where it belonged.

"Mom?"

Keaton was in the doorway. He had his grandfather's green Testament in one hand, the way he carried it most evenings now, and his history homework in the other. On the mantel in the next room, she could hear it ticking — David Whitlock's gold pocket watch, which Kincaid had released from evidence in January and which now lived in a little glass dome on the mantelpiece, where Keaton wound it every night before bed.

"Hey, baby."

He came into the kitchen and looked at the drawer and then at her.

"Was that it?" he said. "From court?"

"That was it."

He nodded slowly. He set his homework down on the table. Then he said what he had clearly been carrying around all day, maybe for weeks, maybe since the morning they came home from the farmhouse in the gray dawn with the sun coming up over the river bottoms.

"So is it really over?"

Maris did not answer right away.

She turned her head and looked toward the kitchen window.

It was full dark outside. February dark, the kind that comes down at six o'clock and stays. The window over the sink was a black square, and in it she could see the reflection of the kitchen — the warm yellow light, the table, the drawer, her son standing in the doorway with the little green book in his hand. Beyond the reflection, nothing. The backyard. The fence. The gate to the gravel alley, latched now with a new padlock. The dark.

For months — for years, if she was honest — she would have gone to that window. Immediately. Without thinking. She would have crossed the kitchen and pressed her face to the cold glass and cupped her hands around her eyes and stared out into the yard, searching the shadows by the fence, checking the gate, checking the alley, checking for the shape of a truck parked where it shouldn't be. She would have checked the lock on the back door twice. Three times. She would have lain awake afterward listening.

She looked at the dark window for a long moment.

And she did not go to it.

She did not check the lock. She did not cup her hands against the glass. She did not get up at all. She simply looked at the window the way you look at a window — at the night outside it, which was only night — and then she turned back to her son.

"Sit down," she said. "Let me tell you something."

He sat.

"Is it over?" she said. "Garrick's in prison. Celia's in prison. The house on Ridley Bottoms Road is boarded up again, and the box is in a vault in the capital, and the chairs went back to Grace Fellowship. So yes. That part's over." She reached across the table and took the little green Testament out of his hand, gently, and opened it to the page with the date in the margin. *11/22/96. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.* Under it, *Maybe.* Under that, *Yes. 1/15. — K.*

"But I'll tell you what I've figured out," she said. "And it took me a long time. It took me my whole life, and your grandpa's whole life, and about three months of being more scared than I've ever been. You want to know what I figured out?"

"What?"

"There's still going to be dark outside that window. There's always going to be. This world's got a devil in it, Keaton. He's real. You saw him. He knocks on doors and he whispers in the rain and he tells lies to scared people at three in the morning, and he's not going to stop doing that just because one old woman went to prison." She closed the Testament and laid it on the table between them, and put her hand on top of it. "But here's the thing. I spent fifteen years running from him. Changing the locks. Checking the windows. Getting papers from the court. Like if I could just build the walls high enough, I'd finally be safe." She shook her head. "That's not how it works. You can't out-run him. You can't out-lock him. And you can't get a restraining order against the devil from Judge Ames."

Keaton almost smiled. "So what do you do?"

"You do what your grandpa did. What I did, at the end. You stop running. You stand. *Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*" She tapped the Testament. "That's the only restraining order that ever really worked. And it was signed a long time ago. Not in a courthouse. On a cross. Outside Jerusalem. By the only One who's ever had the authority to enforce it."

She looked at the black window one more time. Calmly. And then away.

"Is it over?" she said. "Baby, it was over before it ever started. That's what I didn't understand. I thought I was fighting a war. I thought I had to win it. But the war's already been won. It was won before your grandpa ever sat in that chair. Before Ambrose Lark ever bought a book. Before any of it." She smiled at him, and her eyes were wet, and she did not mind. "We just had to learn whose side we were standing on. And who already won the war."

Keaton looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded, slowly, and picked up his grandfather's Testament, and put it back in his pocket.

"Okay," he said. "Can we have spaghetti?"

Maris laughed. It came up out of her all at once, surprising her — a real laugh, loud and warm, the first one in longer than she could remember. "Yes," she said. "We can have spaghetti."

They made it together. He burned the garlic bread and she let him. They ate at the kitchen table with the radio on and the back door locked once, the ordinary way, and the dark window over the sink, and neither of them looked at it again.

Later, after he had gone up to bed — after she had stood outside his door for a moment, the way she always would, the way any mother would, and listened to him breathing, and then gone to bed herself without sitting down in any chair — the house was quiet.

On the mantel in the front room, under its little glass dome, David Whitlock's gold watch ticked on through the night.

Midnight.

One.

Two.

At seventeen minutes past three in the morning, nothing knocked.

And Maris Bellamy, asleep in her own bed, in her own house, did not wake up to listen.

* * *

THE END

Epilogue

> *To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.*
>
> — Isaiah 61:3

One year later.

On the twenty-second of November, a cold, bright Saturday with frost still white in the shadows of the fence rows, a small crowd gathered at the end of a long gravel lane on Ridley Bottoms Road.

The farmhouse was gone.

The county had condemned it in the spring, and in June a crew with a backhoe had taken it down in a single afternoon. Maris had not gone to watch. Kincaid had. He told her afterward that it came down easy, like it had been waiting to, and that when they broke up the cellar floor there had been nothing under it at all. Just dirt. Just red clay and limestone, the same as under any other house in the county.

Where it had stood, there was a new building now.

It was not large. A long, low, single-story house of pale brick with a deep front porch and white rocking chairs and a row of windows that faced east, toward the river and the sunrise. Eight bedrooms. A big kitchen. A playroom with a mural of a field of yellow daisies painted on the wall by the art students from the high school. A garden plot behind it, turned over and mulched for winter. And beside the front door, a small bronze plaque, newly set into the brick.

DOROTHY'S HOUSE

A Place of Safety for Women and Children

"He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust." — Psalm 91:4

In memory of Dorothy Ann Pruitt, 1941–1999.

She was not forgotten.

It had happened the way most good things happen, which is to say slowly, and through a great many people, and in ways no one could have planned.

The Hollis farm had been bought with stolen money, and so in the spring, when Garrick's case was closed, the court ordered it forfeited and sold to make restitution to the building fund of Grace Fellowship Church. And the elders of Grace Fellowship — the same men who had sat in a long silent row at the back of the courtroom on the day of Garrick's plea — had met for three nights in a row in their fellowship hall, and on the fourth night had voted, unanimously, not to sell it.

They had given it away instead.

"We didn't see it," the eldest of them, a retired pharmacist named Hollis Grant, had said to Maris when he came to her door in April to tell her. He had stood on her porch with his hat in his hands, an old man with a careful voice, and he had not been able to look her in the eye. "Eleven years he served at our table. We shook his hand every Sunday. We heard the talk, some of us, and we didn't want to hear it. We didn't see what was happening in your house because we didn't want to see it." He had swallowed. "We can't give you back those years, Mrs. Bellamy. But we'd like to give that land to something that would have helped you. If you'll let us."

So they had built Dorothy's House.

Grace Fellowship gave the land. New Hope Chapel gave the first year of operating money, out of a building fund of its own that Corbin and Diane had been saving for a new roof for eleven years and decided, over one long kitchen-table conversation, that they did not need as badly as they had thought. Half the churches in Henley County sent work crews on Saturdays all summer. A contractor from Ashby County who had grown up in that shelter on Depot Street with his mother poured the foundation for free and would not tell anyone why.

And on this cold bright morning, exactly thirty-one years after the last night of the Circle of Nine, they dedicated it.

Corbin preached. He did not preach long. He stood on the new porch with the sun on his face and his breath smoking in the cold and read from Isaiah, *beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning,* and then he closed his Bible and looked out at the people standing in the frost-white yard.

"Thirty-one years ago tonight," he said, "nine people sat in a room on this spot and made promises to the dark. They thought they were opening a door. They thought they'd get something out of it. And for a long time it looked like the dark had won. It cost a man his life. It cost a woman her name. It cost a little girl her childhood, and her father his peace, and it reached down the years and came for her son." He paused. "But that isn't the end of the story. It never was. The dark doesn't get to write the last chapter. God does."

He looked at the bronze plaque by the door.

"Tonight there will be women sleeping in this house who have been afraid in their own homes. Children who have pulled the covers over their heads. Mothers who have checked the locks three times and lain awake listening." He paused again. "Tonight, on the very ground where nine people made promises to the dark, they're going to sleep safe. Because God keeps His promises too. And His are better."

There was a moment of silence in the cold.

Then Maris Bellamy stepped forward with a pair of scissors and cut the yellow ribbon across the door. And the first resident of Dorothy's House — a thin young woman from two counties over named Rachel, with a four-year-old on her hip and a black eye that was almost healed — walked up the steps and through the door, and stood in the bright front room looking around her at the daisies on the wall and the windows full of sunrise, and began, very quietly, to cry.

Maris went in after her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"I know," she said. "I know. It's all right. You're safe here."

In the front room, against the wall beneath the windows, there was a long row of folding chairs. Gray metal frames. Wooden seats. On the back of each one, stenciled in white, *GRACE FELLOWSHIP — FELLOWSHIP HALL.*

There were nine of them.

The elders had asked if they could send them. Maris had thought about it for a long time, and then she had said yes.

Every one of them had been painted a soft spring yellow.

* * *

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.

— Joel 2:25

They were all there that morning. Afterward, Maris would remember each of them in the bright cold sunshine, the way you remember the faces at a wedding.

Elowen Pryce, ninety years old now and thinner than ever, sat in one of the white rocking chairs on the porch in a wool coat and three scarves with her gray cat in her lap. She had finished her book over the summer. Not the history of Reconstruction she had been working on for forty years. A different one. A slim, careful, honest account of the Circle of Nine, from the first meeting in Ambrose Lark's library in the spring of 1994 to the gray dawn in the parlor at the Hollis farm. Every name. Every promise. Every death. She had typed it on her old electric typewriter, two hundred and twelve pages, and had it bound in plain green cloth, and given the only copy to the Henley County Public Library with a single instruction written inside the front cover in her own spidery hand.

To be given to anyone who ever asks about the Nine.

"Somebody will," she told Maris. "Someday. Some frightened young woman in a house where things knock in the night. And she'll need to know it's been done before. And how it ended." She stroked the cat. "History isn't for the people who lived it, child. It's for the ones who come after."

Orson Vale was eighty-four. He had come in his old truck, with Jubal riding up front, and he stood at the edge of the yard with his hickory stick and looked at the new house for a long time without saying anything.

He had taken down the horseshoes in March. All of them. Every bell and every mirror and every bundle of dried herbs and every iron nail he had hung on his walls in thirty years of hiding. Keaton had helped him, three Saturdays in a row, the two of them up on ladders with pry bars and buckets. When they were done, the old house on Pike Creek Road had looked naked and strange, pale squares on the siding where the mirrors had been. Orson had stood in his front yard and looked at it for a long time.

Then he had gone inside and hung one thing on the bare wall over his kitchen table, where he would see it every morning. A small framed card, in Keaton's careful handwriting.

Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid. — Joshua 1:9

He still did not sleep through the night. He said he probably never would. He was eighty-four and he had been in Korea and he had sat in that parlor, and some things a man carried to the grave. But when he woke up now, at three in the morning, he did not lie there listening to the walls.

He prayed. For Maris. For Keaton. For Bram Kincaid. For the women who would sleep in Dorothy's House. For Garrick in his cell. For Celia in hers.

"Somebody's got to," he said. "Might as well be the fella who's awake."

Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid had been re-elected in November, unopposed. He had been baptized in Ridley Creek in May, a month after Keaton, in the same cold clear water, by Corbin, with half his deputies standing on the bank in uniform pretending they weren't crying. He still sat in the back row at New Hope on Sundays. He still carried his mother's red Testament in his breast pocket. And he had, over the summer, quietly reopened eleven old domestic violence cases in Henley County that had been closed without charges going back twenty years, and gone and knocked on eleven doors, and asked eleven women if they were safe.

Three of them had said no.

All three were sleeping in Dorothy's House by Christmas.

"It's not much," he said to Corbin. "Eleven doors."

"It's eleven more than anybody knocked on for them before," said Corbin.

And Garrick Bellamy was not there, of course. He was in the state penitentiary, and would be for at least another two years. He had written exactly one letter in that time that was meant for Maris — not to her; the order forbade it; but to Corbin, to keep, in case she ever asked to read it. She had not asked. Corbin had not offered. It sat in a drawer in his office at the chapel, sealed.

But Corbin drove to the penitentiary every other Tuesday, as he had promised. And he told Maris, once, only because she asked, that Garrick had read the whole Bible through twice now, cover to cover. That he had started a Bible study on his cell block, and that it had grown from two men to fourteen. That he had asked the prison chaplain to help him write to Grace Fellowship, and to every person in that congregation he had ever lied to about his wife, one by one, and tell them the truth.

"Is he different?" Maris asked.

Corbin thought about it for a long time.

"I think he's trying to be," he said at last. "I think that's all any of us ever are."

Maris nodded. She did not say anything else. She was not ready yet to say anything else. Corbin did not push her. Forgiveness, he had told her once, was not a feeling you waited for. It was a door you decided to leave unlocked. But you were allowed to take your time walking to it.

* * *

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

— Luke 23:34

Celia Ann Marsh was sentenced in September to two consecutive terms of life without the possibility of parole.

She did not speak at her sentencing. She did not look at the families in the gallery — Dorothy Pruitt's sister, who had driven up from Knoxville; the great-nephew of Ambrose Lark, who had driven down from Ohio; Maris, sitting with Keaton on one side and Corbin on the other. She sat at the defense table in a gray jumpsuit with her gray hair pinned up neatly at the back of her head and her small hands folded on the table in front of her, and she looked at nothing at all. When the judge asked if she had anything to say, she shook her head once.

At the very end, as the bailiffs led her out, she stopped in the side doorway and turned and looked up. Not at the judge. Not at the gallery. Up. At the ceiling of the courtroom. At the empty air.

As if she were still waiting for something to come back for her.

It never did.

Corbin went to see her once, in October, at the women's prison in the western part of the state. She agreed to see him. She sat across from him at a steel table and was perfectly pleasant and asked after Diane and his health and whether the winter was expected to be a hard one. And then, near the end of their half hour, she asked him one question, very quietly, with her gray eyes on his face.

"Did it say anything? At the end. About me."

Corbin looked at her for a long time.

"No," he said gently. "It didn't say anything about you, Celia. It never does. Not after it's done with you."

She looked down at her small hands.

She did not ask him anything else.

He told Maris about it afterward, sitting on her front porch in the October dusk. And Maris was quiet for a long time. And then she got up and went into the house, and came back out with a book in her hands.

It was a Bible. A plain one, with a soft black cover. Brand new. She had bought it for Keaton in August, for his birthday, but he had wanted to keep reading his grandfather's green Testament instead, and so it had sat on her shelf since then, unopened.

She sat down on the porch step with it on her knees, and took a pen out of her pocket, and opened the front cover. She wrote something on the flyleaf. It took her a long time. She crossed out the first thing she wrote and started again.

Then she closed it and held it out to Corbin.

"Would you send it to her?" she said.

Corbin looked at the Bible in her hands. Then at her face.

"Maris," he said slowly. "Are you sure?"

"No," she said. "I'm not sure about anything where she's concerned. I don't know if I'll ever be sure." She looked out at the dark yard. "But I keep thinking about my daddy. Sitting in that hallway every night for eighteen years. Forgiven eight times, and never quite believing it. And I keep thinking — she's sitting in a hallway too, now. A long gray one. With nobody on the other side of the door." She held the Bible out a little farther. "She waited thirty years for the wrong thing to come back for her. Somebody ought to tell her there's a Right One who still might. If she asks."

Corbin took the Bible.

He did not open it. He did not read what she had written. But he sent it to the women's prison in the western part of the state the next morning, by ordinary mail.

He never found out whether Celia Marsh read it.

But it was not returned.

* * *

> *I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety.*
>
> — Psalm 4:8

That night — the night of the twenty-second of November, the night they dedicated Dorothy's House — Maris woke in the dark.

She did not know at first what had woken her. Not thunder. The night was perfectly still and clear and cold. Not a sound in the house. She lay in her bed with her eyes open and listened, and there was nothing to hear. Only the soft tick of the furnace and, very faint, from the front room, the steady sound of David Whitlock's gold watch under its glass dome on the mantel, where Keaton had wound it before he went up to bed.

She turned her head and looked at the clock on her nightstand.

3:17.

For one long breath, she lay very still.

A year ago, she would have been out of bed already. She would have been in the hallway with her heart pounding and every light in the house blazing, standing outside her son's door with her hand on the knob. She would have checked the windows. Checked the locks. Lain awake until dawn, listening.

She did not get out of bed.

She lay in the dark and listened to the quiet, and the quiet was only quiet. The house was only a house. The night outside her window was only night, clear and cold and full of stars. Down the hall, her son was asleep in his room with his grandfather's Testament on his nightstand and the moon night-light glowing by the door — he had kept it, after all; he said he liked it. And across town, on Chestnut Street, an old woman was asleep with a gray cat at her feet. And out on Pike Creek Road an old man was awake, she was fairly sure, and praying, the way he did every night now at this hour. And in the parsonage on Mill Road a pastor and his wife were asleep side by side. And on Ridley Bottoms Road,

in a long low house of pale brick, a young woman named Rachel and her four-year-old daughter were sleeping safe for the first time in longer than either of them could remember, in a room that faced the sunrise.

Maris lay in the dark and thought about all of them.

Then she did what she had learned to do. Not what she had done for thirty years. What she had learned.

She prayed.

Not for herself. She did not need to pray for herself tonight. She prayed for every woman awake in the dark at this hour, in every house in Henley County and every county beyond it. Every woman lying stiff and silent in her bed listening for footsteps in the hall. Every woman who had checked the lock three times. Every child with the covers pulled over his head. She prayed for them by name where she knew their names, and where she didn't, she asked God to fill in the names Himself.

He that keepeth thee will not slumber, she prayed. *Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. Keep them, Lord. Keep every one of them tonight. The way You kept us.*

Then she turned over on her pillow, and pulled the quilt up to her chin, and closed her eyes.

On the mantel in the front room, the watch ticked on.

3:18.

3:19.

And Maris Whitlock Bellamy — daughter of Daniel, who said no; mother of Keaton, who said yes; a child of God, who belonged to Jesus Christ — lay down in peace in her own house, and slept.

* * *

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

— James 4:7

THE END

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

When I began thinking about *Restraining Order Against the Devil*, I was drawn to the contrast between two kinds of protection.

There is the protection the law can provide.

And there is the protection only God can provide.

A restraining order can establish legal boundaries. It can give law enforcement the authority to intervene. It can help protect someone from a dangerous person.

Those protections are important.

But there are some battles that cannot be solved with paperwork, signatures, courtrooms, or human authority alone.

There are battles of fear.

Battles of the mind.

Battles of faith.

Battles involving the wounds left behind by the choices of others.

And, according to Scripture, there are spiritual battles as well.

That is the world Maris Bellamy enters in this story.

At first, Maris believes her greatest enemy is the man who has terrorized her for years. In many ways, he is. Human evil is real, abuse is serious, and this novel never intends to minimize either one.

But as the story unfolds, Maris begins to discover that something deeper has taken hold of her life.

Fear.

Fear has influenced the way she thinks.

The way she sleeps.

The way she makes decisions.

The way she looks at her past.

And even the way she sees God.

That is why one of the most important ideas in this novel is that **freedom involves more than escaping danger. It also involves refusing to let fear remain in control.**

The Bible never tells believers that life will be free from conflict.

In fact, Scripture repeatedly prepares us for spiritual opposition.

Ephesians 6 tells us to put on the whole armor of God.

First Peter 5 tells us to remain watchful.

James 4 tells us to submit ourselves to God and resist the devil.

But the emphasis of Scripture is never that Christians should become obsessed with darkness.

Our focus must remain on Christ.

That is an important distinction.

This book contains supernatural suspense, but I did not write it to glorify demons, darkness, occult practices, or fear.

I wrote it to point beyond those things.

The spiritual message of this novel is not:

“Look how powerful the enemy is.”

The message is:

“Look how much greater Jesus Christ is.”

That is why Pastor Corbin Thorne approaches spiritual warfare the way he does.

He does not depend on rituals.

He does not use superstition.

He does not treat the Bible like a magical object.

He continually brings Maris and Keaton back to Scripture, prayer, truth, repentance, faith, and the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Because ultimately, the believer's confidence is not found in our ability to defeat darkness ourselves.

Our confidence is found in the One who already conquered it.

Colossians 2:15 teaches that Christ triumphed over the powers of darkness.

First John 4:4 reminds us:

“Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”

Those truths stand behind this entire novel.

There is another theme I hope readers notice.

The sins and mistakes of one generation can affect another generation.

Families can pass down anger.

Fear.

Addiction.

Bitterness.

Abuse.

Secrets.

False beliefs.

And destructive patterns.

But our family history does not have to become our destiny.

Maris must eventually decide whether she will be defined by what her father did, what her husband did, or by who she has become in Jesus Christ.

That is one of the most important moments in the story.

The enemy tells her:

“You belong to what your family began.”

Her answer is the heart of the novel:

“I belong to Jesus Christ.”

There may be readers who understand Maris's fear more deeply than others.

Some may have lived through abuse.

Some may have been controlled or intimidated.

Some may carry painful memories from childhood.

Some may feel trapped by choices made years ago.

Some may be struggling with fear about what lies ahead.

If that describes you, I hope one message reaches you clearly through these pages:

Your past does not have to own your future.

Christ offers forgiveness.

Christ offers restoration.

Christ offers a new beginning.

And Christ offers a foundation stronger than fear.

There is also a message here for those who identify with Keaton.

Keaton has questions.

He has watched adults claim faith while behaving in ways that seem to contradict it.

That has left him skeptical.

I believe those questions are important.

Faith should not be afraid of honest questions.

Sometimes the path toward a stronger faith begins when someone finally becomes willing to ask what they truly believe.

And then there is Sheriff Bramwell Kincaid.

He wants evidence.

He wants explanations.

He wants everything to fit into a category he can understand.

Many readers may see themselves in him.

By the end of the story, Bramwell does not suddenly have every answer.

But he learns something important:

Not having an explanation is not the same thing as proving that no explanation exists.

My hope is that *Restraining Order Against the Devil* gives you more than suspense.

I hope it gives you something to think about.

Something to remember when fear comes knocking.

Something that sends you back to your Bible.

And perhaps something that reminds you that Christians are not called to run from every shadow.

We are called to stand.

Ephesians 6:13 says:

“And having done all, to stand.”

Sometimes standing is an act of tremendous faith.

So if you remember only one thing from this novel, remember this:

The enemy may knock.

Fear may whisper.

The past may accuse.

Darkness may surround you.

But none of those things have the final word.

Jesus Christ does.

And because of Him, the believer can say with confidence:

The battle may continue, but the victory has already been won.

Thank you for reading *Restraining Order Against the Devil*.

May this story strengthen your faith, deepen your trust in God's Word, and remind you that no darkness is greater than the light of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Paul Crawford

A Closing Prayer

“Father, I thank You for every reader who has walked through these pages. For the one who does not yet know You, I pray they would hear Your voice and receive Your Son, Jesus, as Lord and Savior. For the one who already believes, I pray You would set their heart ablaze with urgency—to speak, to share, to love, and to never be silent. May we all live as faithful watchmen, sounding the trumpet until the day You call us home. In Jesus’ mighty name, Amen.”

THE BIBLE WAY TO HEAVEN

1. Admit you are a sinner.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

No one is good enough to go to Heaven on his own merit.

No matter how much good we do, we still come short.

2. Realize the penalty for sin.

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a)

Just as there are wages for good, there is punishment for wrong.

The penalty for our sin is eternal death in a place called Hell.

3. Believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again for you.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Romans 10:9)

4. Trust Christ alone as your Saviour.

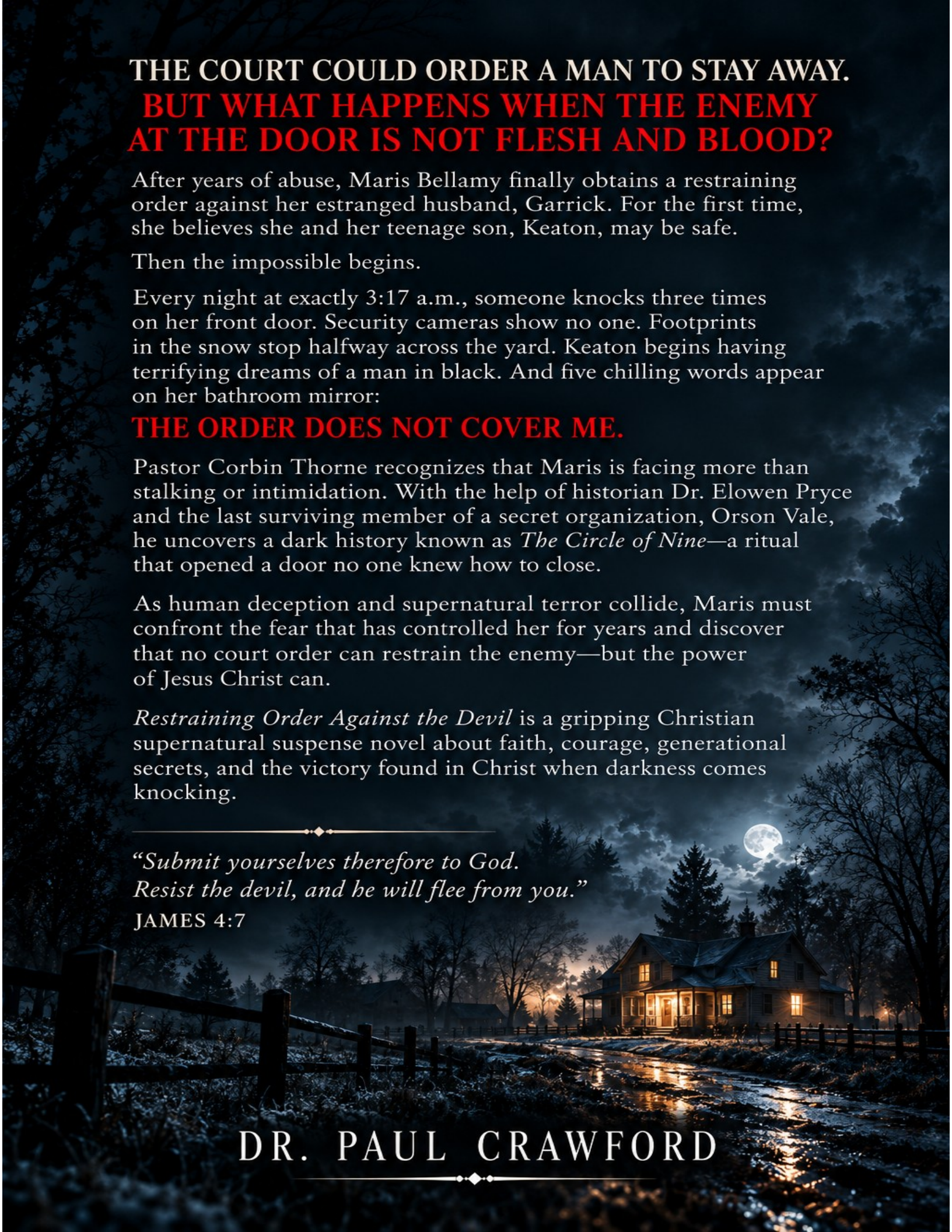
"...But the gift of God is eternal life though Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Eternal life is a gift purchased by the blood of Jesus and offered freely to those who call upon Him by faith.

Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved forever. Being saved is a one-time event.

Dr. Paul Crawford is more than just a Christian Author; His books are a source of inspiration and guidance on your spiritual journey. His books are created with a deep sense of faith and a desire to uplift and inspire all who read.


THE COURT COULD ORDER A MAN TO STAY AWAY.
BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE ENEMY AT THE DOOR IS NOT FLESH AND BLOOD?
After years of abuse, Maris Bellamy finally obtains a restraining order against her estranged husband, Garrick. For the first time, she believes she and her teenage son, Keaton, may be safe.
Then the impossible begins.
Every night at exactly 3:17 a.m., someone knocks three times on her front door. Security cameras show no one. Footprints in the snow stop halfway across the yard. Keaton begins having terrifying dreams of a man in black. And five chilling words appear on her bathroom mirror:
THE ORDER DOES NOT COVER ME.
Pastor Corbin Thorne recognizes that Maris is facing more than stalking or intimidation. With the help of historian Dr. Elowen Pryce and the last surviving member of a secret organization, Orson Vale, he uncovers a dark history known as The Circle of Nine—a ritual that opened a door no one knew how to close.
As human deception and supernatural terror collide, Maris must confront the fear that has controlled her for years and discover that no court order can restrain the enemy—but the power of Jesus Christ can.
Restraining Order Against the Devil is a gripping Christian supernatural suspense novel about faith, courage, generational secrets, and the victory found in Christ when darkness comes knocking.
"Submit yourselves therefore to God.
Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."
JAMES 4:7
DR. PAUL CRAWFORD