

**I ESCAPED
THE TRAP OF LIFE**



A Fictional Novel

A story of one man's courage to reclaim his soul

*"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it:
but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the
same shall save it." Luke 9:24*

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Open Heaven Christian Church and Pastor Joel Martin.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

All Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible.

DEDICATION



*To every soul who has poured themselves out for others
until the vessel ran completely dry —
and to those who, in their quiet anguish, dared to ask:*
Is there something more for me?

There is. There always was. The Lord says this to you...

*"Be still, and know that I am God: I will
be exalted among the heathen, I will be
exalted in the earth." – Psalm 46:10*

Enjoy your reading.

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PROLOGUE

What the Mirror Refused to Show

There are men who disappear before they die. Not in the dramatic sense — no car wrapped around a guardrail, no note left on a kitchen table. They simply fade away from society. They become indistinguishable from the furniture of other people's lives: always present, always useful, always forgotten, and always taken for granted by the indifference of people whose love has waxed cold.

"And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold." Matthew 24:12

Edward James Newman was such a man — one who was taken for granted by his family and peers.

For sixty-two years, he had been a husband, a father, a businessman, a church deacon, a friend, a confidant, a problem-solver, a peacemaker, and an emotional landfill. He had been everything to everyone — and somewhere along the way, he had been no one to himself.

The world would not recognize his disappearance as an escape. They would call it madness. They would call it a nervous breakdown. They would call it a crisis, a tragedy, perhaps even a crime. But to the Lord God, who searches all hearts and knows all things, it was understood what Edward Newman had done — and why — long before Edward himself could find the words to express why he did what he did. He Escaped The Trap of Life!

This is the story of a man who decided to stop dying slowly and chose instead to begin truly living life, even if it meant living entirely alone, trusting only in God.

Edward learned and understood that placing your trust in man was a curse because people will always fail and lead you away from God if you allow it.

"Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD." Jeremiah 17:5

This is the story of a man and a prophet no one ever acknowledged or really knew. A man of God no one ever truly saw or respected as a vessel of light that God sent into this world. No, not even his family really knew or understood him. They all took Edward for granted until one day the Lord made him free!

God sent Edward James Newman to the world to suffer as a chosen vessel, just as Paul the Apostle was chosen by God to suffer for His name's sake in order to bring the light of God's love to everyone in his life. Edward understood this and he also understood and accepted this calling of God upon his life, fulfilling the will of God through much sorrow and pain, only to please his heavenly Father through his obedience, and to teach others what the unconditional love of God the Father truly meant in this life.

"But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." Acts 9:15-16

Edward understood the words that God spoke into Apostle Paul's life, and the Apostle Paul understood and wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil."

When Edward James Newman disappeared, he helped everyone he had previously known in his life to understand the love of God the Father who is in heaven.

This is a story about Edward escaping the trap of life. And his homecoming.

Although this book is fictional and the characters are also fictional, I pray that God speaks deeply into your heart to reveal to you the greatest gift that God has given to humanity — Love.

Our heavenly Father's Love through the suffering of Jesus Christ His Son, who gave up His life and suffered on the cross to show all of us the condition of our hearts and redeem us back to God through His selfless act of love and willingness to obey His Father in heaven, even unto death to save us all.



✿ Scripture for Reflection ✿

*"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end."
— Jeremiah 29:11 (KJV)*

CHAPTER ONE

The Day the Dam Broke

Edward Newman had a particular way of arriving at his office every morning. He would park in the same spot — third space from the left in the second row — retrieve his brown leather briefcase from the backseat, check his tie in the rear-view mirror, and take exactly four slow breaths before stepping out of the car. Those four breaths were the only four moments in his entire day that belonged entirely to him.

On the morning that changed everything, he did not take his four breaths.

He sat in the car for twenty-two minutes. His hands rested in his lap like two birds too tired to fly. The engine had been off for fifteen of those minutes, and the Tennessee morning — gray and heavy with impending rain — pressed against the windshield like a cold, indifferent hand.

Something was different today. He could not name it, not yet. It lived somewhere beneath language, beneath conscious thought — a trembling in the subterranean architecture of his soul. If he had possessed the vocabulary, or perhaps the permission, to describe it, he might have said: I am done. I have been done for a very long time, and no one noticed. Including me.

Instead, he got out of the car, straightened his tie, and went inside.

Marcus Webb was waiting.

Marcus had been Edward's business partner for eleven years, and in all of those eleven years, Edward could not honestly say he had ever trusted the man completely. Marcus had a smile that arrived a half-second before his eyes caught up to it, and Edward had noticed that particular delay long

ago. He had noticed it and said nothing. That was, perhaps, the story of Edward Newman's life in miniature: he noticed things and said nothing. Edward was always very aware of everything people do and say; he would study their motives.

"Ed," Marcus said, rising from the chair across from Edward's desk. His voice carried the particular warmth of a man preparing to do something unpleasant. "We need to talk about the Harrington account."

"Good morning, Marcus," Edward said, setting his briefcase down. "What about it?"

"I spoke with Gerald Harrington last night. He's pulling the contract." Marcus paused, leaning forward. "He said you told him at the Rotary dinner last month that we couldn't guarantee delivery before the fourth quarter."

The room went very still.

Edward looked at his partner with the calm, clear eyes of a man who has spent decades managing other people's emotions before he could manage his own. He said, quietly: "I never said that."

"Ed —"

"Marcus." His voice was steady. Not loud. Not aggressive. But something in it had changed — a frequency, a temperature. "I did not say that. I told Gerald Harrington that we were on track to deliver in the third quarter and that we had contingency plans in place. I did not tell him we couldn't guarantee delivery. That is not something I said."

Marcus spread his hands in that gesture of helpless reasonableness that Edward had come to despise over the years. "Ed, I'm just telling you what Gerald told me. Maybe there was a miscommunication. Maybe he misunderstood."

"Or maybe," Edward said softly, "someone told him something different from what I said. And it was not Gerald who got it wrong."

The silence between them was enormous.

Marcus left. The meeting ended with no resolution, no apology from Marcus, no acknowledgment. Just the practiced fake smile, the careful exit, the door clicking shut with its neat little sound of finality.

Edward Newman stood at his office window for a long time after that. He watched a sparrow land on the parking lot asphalt, peck at nothing, and fly away. He thought: That bird has more freedom in its small bones than I have known in sixty-two years of living.

The dam did not break dramatically. It did not crack and roar and sweep everything away in a flood of visible emotion. It simply... gave. Like old wood finally surrendering to long, patient rot. Like a man who has held his breath for decades and finally exhales.

Edward Newman sat down at his desk, looked at his hands, and thought: This has to end.

He did not mean his job. He did not mean his partnership with Marcus. He meant something far larger and far more terrible than both of those things combined.

He meant his entire life as it had been constructed. Every brick of it. Every compromise. Every swallowed word. Every morning he had given away.

He meant all of it.

Edward knew that God was leading him to reveal his new name with a new identity that he would not tell others about, because he knew they would not know this new man that God was revealing to him.

For the first time in Edward James Newman's life he began to feel free. He knew that this new man would not have to give an account to anyone but God, and knew that this new man would be free to follow and worship God in Spirit and in Truth without the approval or acceptance of anyone.



❖ Scripture for Reflection ❖

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it."

— Revelation 2:17 (KJV)

CHAPTER TWO

The Inventory of an Empty Man

He drove home that evening through streets he had driven for thirty-one years, and for the first time in all those years, he truly looked at the route — as though he were a stranger passing through a town he would soon never see again.

The grocery store was lit up like a carnival at the corner of Fifth and Meridian. He pulled in. Not because he needed anything in particular. He pulled in because he needed to think, and movement helped him think, and somehow the act of walking through aisles of things he did not need was preferable, in that moment, to arriving home.

He chose a cart and began to push it slowly. A woman in the cereal aisle cut in front of him without a glance, reaching across his space to grab a box from the lower shelf, her cart jabbing his ankle as she maneuvered. She did not say excuse me. She did not acknowledge him at all. He was invisible to her, and all she cared about was herself and her belly.

"For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things. For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." — Philippians 3:18-20

Edward moved on, saying nothing to the woman.

In the produce section, a man focused on his cell phone walked directly into Edward's cart, looked at him with naked irritation — as though

Edward had materialized there without permission — and walked away muttering quietly. Edward stood for a moment, holding a bunch of bananas he did not really want, wondering when the simple act of existing in a public space had become so fraught with hostility.

He put the bananas back. He did not buy anything. He walked out of the grocery store.

Back in the car, he sat with the engine running and thought about his wife, Eleanor.

Eleanor Newman had been a beautiful woman once — not physically diminished, even now, but beautiful in the way that lakes are beautiful: serene on the surface and sometimes impossible to reach below it. They had married thirty-six years ago, and Edward could still remember the precise way she had looked at him in the church that morning: as though he were everything she had ever imagined a life could be.

He could not remember the last time she had looked at him that way.

What he could remember was breakfast that morning. Eleanor had spoken for forty minutes — he had timed it, unconsciously, the way you time the intervals between lightning and thunder — about her sister's ongoing problems, the women's ministry meeting she was organizing, the new curtains she wanted for the front room, and the frustrating inadequacy of their neighbor's lawn care practices. In forty minutes of continuous speech, she had asked him no questions about him. None. He had offered two responses to her rambling and three nods. He did not think she had noticed him either.

He thought about his children. Two of them: David, thirty-four, who lived in Seattle with his girlfriend and called on birthdays and Christmas if the time zone math worked out in his favor. And Renata, thirty-one, who lived forty minutes away and might as well have lived on the moon for all

the texture their relationship had. They loved him, he supposed. In the abstract way that people love furniture: they would notice its absence, but they had long since stopped seeing it.

He thought about his church.

Grace Fellowship had been his spiritual home for twenty-two years. He served as a deacon, organized the men's prayer breakfast, provided financial counsel to three families in the congregation, deliverance prayers when needed, and had never — not once — been the recipient of a personal pastoral visit. Pastor Raymond Goode was a gifted speaker, a charismatic leader, and a man who had never learned Edward Newman's middle name.

Edward thought about the way Pastor Goode moved through the congregation after services: the warm handshakes and the shoulder-grips, the practiced warmth directed always toward the most visible and affluent people, the most vocal, the most useful in obvious ways. Edward had sat in the same pew for two decades watching these theatrical gestures. He felt as if he might as well have been part of the woodwork. As he sat there, he remembered what the Word of God said about this.

"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?"
James 2:1-4

He sat in his car outside a grocery store in the growing dark and held the full weight of his life in his hands for the first time. He realized that he had allowed all of this in his life because he did not confront any of it.

What he felt was not bitterness. It was something quieter and more devastating than bitterness. It was the recognition of a destructive pattern so pervasive and so long-established that he could not locate its beginning — a pattern in which he gave and gave and gave, and in return received the same thing a river receives when it empties into a desert: nothing. The desert simply takes and remains unchanged.

He was sixty-two years old. By most measures, a successful man. A business. Two homes. A church life. A marriage of more than three decades. A reputation for reliability, for generosity, for quiet competence.

And inside: a silence so deep and so old that he could no longer tell whether it was peace or something that had died long ago and been left in place.

He drove home.

Eleanor was on the phone with her sister when he came in. She waved at him without looking up. He went to his study, closed the door, and sat at his desk in the dark.

He opened a notebook. He had not written in it for years. He found a pen.

At the top of a fresh page, in his careful, measured handwriting, he wrote three sentences on the page:

What if I disappeared?

What if I start a new life?

Will I begin to enjoy the life Jesus wants me to live?

He stared at those words for a long time.

Then he turned the page, and began to plan.



❖ *Scripture for Reflection* ❖

"Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved." — Psalm 55:22

CHAPTER THREE

The Architecture of Escape

He did not tell anyone what he was thinking.

That, in itself, was revolutionary for Edward Newman, who had spent his adult life compulsively informing, explaining himself to others, justifying, and seeking approval for every significant decision he made. He had once spent three days agonizing over whether to change his regular oil change appointment without consulting Eleanor. But this — this vast and irreversible turning of his entire world — he kept entirely to himself, and found, to his astonishment, that the keeping of it felt like the first real breath he had drawn in years.

He spent three weeks researching Alaskan mountains. Not in any furtive or hurried way — he was methodical by nature, thorough in all things — but with the deliberate, unhurried attention of a man designing his own resurrection. He read about the climate, the wildlife, the land costs, the fishing regulations, the growing seasons at various latitudes. He read about small cabin construction and off-grid water systems and composting toilets and the varieties of herbs that would survive a coastal Alaskan winter inside a well-insulated greenhouse.

He found five acres on the Kenai Peninsula. The land sat on a gentle slope above Cook Inlet, at the end of a track road that became impassable in deep winter without snowshoes. The nearest town — if you could call it that — was eleven miles away. There was no cell service. There was no neighbor within visible distance. There was only the inlet, and the mountains beyond it, and the enormous silence of a world that did not require anything of anyone who chose to live within it.

The price was within reach of a small fraction of what he would recover from his assets. He thought about that for a long time. He had spent thirty years building wealth — three homes, the business, the investment accounts, the vehicles — and the totality of what he had built would, when liquidated, amount to approximately fourteen million dollars after taxes and fees. He needed perhaps only ninety thousand for the land and cabin construction. He would need perhaps twelve thousand per year to live on thereafter, fishing his proteins, growing his food, trading nothing with no one.

The rest he would give away to support those in need.

This decision came to him not as a dramatic moment of generosity but as a simple, obvious fact: he did not need it, and money he did not need was weight he should not carry into a new life. He drew up a list of charities he had long believed in and never fully supported. Orphanages. Homeless veterans. Childhood literacy programs. Rural hospice care. Families of missionaries. He allocated carefully, as he had always done everything, and felt, as he wrote the figures, a peculiar lightness spreading through his chest.

He hired an attorney in Nashville — not the one he regularly used, who was Eleanor's cousin's husband — to begin the quiet work of asset preparation. He chose a real estate broker in Anchorage to handle the land purchase. He commissioned the cabin through a builder in Homer who specialized in off-grid construction and asked him no unnecessary questions.

The cabin would be twelve feet by twenty feet. One room with a sleeping loft. A wood-stove. A composting toilet. A rainwater collection system supplemented by a hand-dug well. A small greenhouse attached on the south face. A dock he would build himself in the spring and a small fishing boat equipped with fishing gear.

The cabin would be smaller than his current walk-in closet.

He prayed every morning during those three weeks. Not the rote prayers of habit, not the dutiful intercessions for others that had characterized his prayer life for so long — but raw, unpolished, sometimes wordless prayer that was more like sitting in the presence of God and finally being honest about the state of his soul. He wept during some of these prayers. Not from self-pity but from relief: the relief of being entirely seen by the one Being who had always entirely seen him.

"So Hagar gave this name to the LORD who had spoken to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "Here I have seen the One who sees me!""
Genesis 16:13

Lord, he would whisper. Is this right? Is this what You have for me? Am I running from something, or am I finally running toward You?

And in the deep, unhurried way that God answers those who wait long enough to hear: he felt, rather than heard, the answer settle into him like warmth settling into cold hands. Not validation of everything he had planned. Not divine rubber-stamping. But something more essential than either of those things: the sense that God had been waiting for Edward Newman to stop managing his life long enough to let his life go and give it to God, trusting the outcome no matter what happens to his life. Edward realized that trusting in God in life meant that he would be required to trust God even if God called him to die to his own will and desires.

You were always Mine, that deep, unhurried presence seemed to say. Come now and be only Mine.

On the forty-third day after the morning Marcus accused him of something he had not said, Edward Newman placed his business on the market, along with both homes simultaneously, the vehicles, and every significant possession he owned.

He told no one.

He did not leave a note. He did not send a text message or an email. He set no out-of-office message. He simply, quietly, methodically began to untether himself from a life that had never truly been his own — and felt, with each document signed, each asset transferred, each lock turned for the last time, the peculiar and devastating liberation of a man who has finally, after sixty-two years of living for others, chosen for himself.

Or rather, had chosen God leading him.

Which, for Edward Newman, at long last, was exactly the same thing.

Edward knew that it was his time to be alone with God so he could find within him the life that God wanted him to live. When Edward chose to quit living his life for others who did not really appreciate or acknowledge who he was, he gave up the life he was living so he could find and live the life the Lord had for him. This was to Edward a great exchange.

"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Matthew 16:26

As Edward began to humble himself daily in prayer and seek the will of God, he was being changed from within by the love, power and comfort of the Holy Spirit, who was teaching Edward how to begin living the life that God wanted him to live.

Edward's current desires in life began to die. As his desires began to change, the life of the Lord began to live in him.

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live

by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20



✿ Scripture for Reflection ✿

"And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." — Luke 9:23-24 (KJV)

CHAPTER FOUR

The Morning He Was Gone

On a Tuesday in October — clear and cold and still, the kind of morning that feels like a held breath — Edward Newman rose at four o'clock, dressed in the dark with the quiet efficiency of long practice, and left the house on Maple Grove Drive for the last time.

He carried one bag. It contained two changes of clothes, his Bible — worn at the spine, margin-marked in three colors of ink — a small journal, a photograph of no one else (only a single image of Cook Inlet at sunset that he had found in a travel magazine three months prior and kept as a kind of north star), and enough cash for his connecting flights and the new life he was about to begin to live.

He did not look back at the house.

He had learned, in his planning, that the looking back was the most dangerous part. Not emotionally — he had made his peace. But practically: a man who looks back is a man who hesitates, and hesitation has ended more escapes than any locked door.

"And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:62

He drove his car to the long-term parking lot at the airport, left the keys and the signed title and signed bill of sale to the car in the cup-holder, along with a note that said: Free to anyone who discovers this 2026 Ford F-150 Raptor. He walked inside. His ticket was booked under his legal name. He had no reason to hide. He was breaking no law. He was simply

leaving — the most radical and most legal act available to a free man in a free country — and the fact that no one had expected it of him was not his crime, but theirs.

The flight to Seattle. The connection to Anchorage. The small propeller plane to Homer. By the time the wheels touched down on Alaskan tarmac, the world he had left was beginning to wonder where he was.

Edward Newman did not know this yet. He was watching the inlet from the window of the taxi that drove him to his land, watching the water catch the low Alaskan light and turn it into something that had no adequate name in any language he knew — and he was, for the first time in as long as he could remember, simply present. Simply himself. Simply alive. He felt free.

The cabin would not be ready for another three weeks. He had arranged to stay in a small lodge in town until it was complete. He did not mind. He walked the five acres every morning, learning the slope of the land, the way the wind came off the water, the angle of the October sun. He was studying his new life the same way he had once studied his first apartment in Los Angeles as a young man: with the reverent attention of someone who intends to make a place truly home.

He fished for the first time since he was fourteen years old. He wasn't bad at it, though not yet a great fisherman. He sat in the cold and the silence and the occasional magnificent failure of catching no fish, and felt something he eventually identified, with some surprise, as joy.

Meanwhile, on a Tuesday evening in Tennessee, Eleanor Newman came home to find his car gone, his closet rearranged and half-emptied, and no note on the kitchen counter and no text message on her cell phone.

She stood in the kitchen for a long moment, looking at the space where his reading glasses usually sat on the counter, and felt a fear she could not quite name.

She called his cell phone seven different times. It rang until it went straight to his voicemail.

She called again. And again. All seven times, no answer from Edward.

The house, which had always held his quiet presence like a vessel holds water, now held only its own four walls. Eleanor Newman put her hand on the kitchen counter where his glasses should have been, and felt, for the first time in years, how absolutely still the world became when Edward Newman was not in it.



✦ *Scripture for Reflection* ✦

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul." — Psalm 23:1-3 (KJV)

CHAPTER FIVE

The Unraveling — Those He Left Behind

The first forty-eight hours were characterized, among those who knew Edward Newman, by a collective refusal to believe that anything was genuinely wrong. People have a remarkable capacity for the most comfortable explanation available, and the most comfortable explanation was that Edward had simply gone somewhere without mentioning it to anyone — a fishing trip, perhaps, or a business conference he had forgotten to put on the shared calendar.

This comfort lasted approximately four days.

By the fifth day, when the office manager at Newman & Webb tried to process payroll and found that the business bank account had been liquidated and the business itself quietly placed in the hands of a Nashville acquisition firm, Marcus Webb had what people at the office described afterward as "an episode." He sat in his leather chair and stared at his computer screen for forty-five minutes without speaking. Then he picked up his phone and called his attorney.

"He sold the company," he said. "The whole thing. Without telling me." A pause. "Can he do that?" Another pause, shorter. "What do you mean, check the partnership agreement?"

He checked the partnership agreement. Edward had, over the course of eleven years, patiently and quietly and with the thoroughness that characterized everything he did, maintained a majority stake in the business. What Marcus had perceived as a partnership of equals had been, legally, a relationship in which Edward held the greater portion and the ultimate authority as CEO and CFO of the corporation. He had simply never exercised it. Until now. Edward sold the entire company.

The realization washed over Marcus Webb in waves. All those years of maneuvering, of managing Edward, of treating him as a useful subordinate dressed in a partner's clothing — and Edward had held, in his patient, quiet hands, the power to end everything at any moment of his choosing. Edward had donated most of the company's money to charities without the need of Marcus's approval.

He had chosen this moment.

The co-workers told different stories to different people. Sandra from accounting, who had always been quietly kind to Edward and whom Edward had once helped through a medical billing nightmare with characteristic thoroughness, cried when she heard. "He was the best one of us," she told her husband that evening. "We never told him that. Not once in twelve years." Edward left Sandra a severance pay of half a million dollars because he knew she was a kind and genuine person.

Greg from sales — who had borrowed money from Edward twice and repaid it once and never mentioned the discrepancy — told his friends at the gym that he'd "always thought Ed was a little off" and that this kind of thing "didn't surprise him." This was not a true statement. He was deeply surprised. He was also, though he would not have recognized the word for it, ashamed. Edward left nothing to Greg.

Eleanor Newman's grief was complicated. Edward left her a beautiful home worth a million two, and three million dollars in federally insured banks.

She sat across from a detective in the third week — the case had been officially filed as a missing persons report, though there was no evidence of foul play — and tried to describe her husband to a stranger. She opened her mouth and found, to her horror, that she was not certain she knew him well enough to paint the picture that was being requested by the police officer. She realized she really did not know her husband Edward

because she never took the time to speak intimately with him. She realized she never made any attempts to really connect with him.

"What were his hobbies?" the detective asked.

Eleanor thought. "He used to fish. When he was young."

"Did Edward have friends outside of work?"

"He had... people from church. And Marcus. His business partner."

"Was he happy in life and in your marriage?"

The question sat in the air between them. Eleanor opened her mouth and closed it. Opened it again.

"He never verbally complained," she said finally.

The detective wrote something down. Eleanor looked at the words she could not read upside down and felt a cold, terrible understanding begin to move through her — the understanding that "he never complained" was not the same thing as "he was happy," and that she had, for thirty-six years, accepted the one in place of the other.

The church prayer vigil was organized by Sister Patricia Okafor, who ran the hospitality committee and had a gift for marshaling collective emotion into organized response. It was held on a Wednesday evening, and forty-three people attended. They sang. They prayed. They shared fond memories of Edward.

It was during the memory-sharing that something quietly devastating occurred: of the forty-three people present, every single one could recall things Edward Newman had done for them. Money lent. Problems solved. Burdens shared. Rides given. Meals organized. Deliverance prayers he prayed. Hours and huge sums of money he donated to help the church.

Not one person — not a single one — could recall a thing they had done for him, not even a simple question asking Edward how he was doing.

Pastor Raymond Goode sat in the front pew and listened to this parade of one-sided generosity and felt, in the place where a comfortable man's conscience lives, a discomfort so acute it was nearly physical. He had preached, three Sundays prior, on the parable of the sheep and the goats: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." He had preached it with passion and authority and the absolute conviction of a man who believes himself to be among the sheep.

Now he sat in the front pew of his own church and understood, with a clarity that felt almost unkind, that Edward Newman had been one of the least of these — not in any economic sense, but in the deeper, truer sense of the invisible, the overlooked, the taken-for-granted — and that he, Raymond Goode, shepherd of this flock, had driven past that particular sheep for twenty-two years without stopping to greet or welcome him on Sunday mornings.

He did not weep publicly. He was more worried about the money that Edward had donated every week to help the church pay all of its bills. Raymond went home that night and knelt beside his bed, which he had not done since seminary, and said something honest to God for the first time in a very long while.

Father God, forgive me for I did not know or understand what I was really doing. Forgive me for making the ministry about me and my ministry and not about you, Lord. Forgive me for not shepherding your flock the way you wanted me to. — Amen.



☞ *Scripture for Reflection* ☞

"Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me... Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me." — Matthew 25:40, 45 (KJV)

CHAPTER SIX

The Questions That Would Not Rest

Where is he? What really happened to Edward?

The question moved through the circles of Edward Newman's former life like weather: present everywhere, predictable in its patterns, and ultimately impossible to stop. It entered conversations at dinner tables and in hallways, it surfaced in dreams and in the space between sleeping and waking, it stood at the center of every gathering where people who had known him tried to make sense of the incomprehensible. Everyone in that small Tennessee town knew of Edward James Newman.

How does a man like Edward Newman simply disappear?

David Newman flew home from Seattle on the tenth day. He sat in his mother's kitchen — a kitchen he had not sat in for three years — and looked at his hands and did not know what to say or feel. He was a man who had inherited his father's quietness without inheriting his father's depth, being more like his mother when it came to his feelings and emotions. The quietness in him now was less contemplative than hollow. An emptiness that left David speechless overshadowed him.

"Did he ever talk to you?" Eleanor asked her son. "About being unhappy?"

David looked up. "Dad didn't really... talk. Not about himself. When he spoke to me, he always helped me when I needed his help, and then always spoke about Jesus to me," David replied.

"I know." She turned toward the window. "I thought that was just who he was. I thought he was always a good father, provider, and a good man," she said. "And now he is gone."

"Maybe it was." A pause. "Or maybe none of us made it easy for him to be anything else. Or maybe we made him into what we wanted him to be. I really don't know," he said, as she wept.

It was the most perceptive thing David Newman had said in years. He recognized this, dimly, and felt something shift behind his sternum — something that might, given time and honesty, become grief. The Lord began to touch David's heart in those moments of grief.

Renata Newman called her mother every day and could not bring herself to come home. Not yet. She told herself this was about logistics — she had a demanding job, a new apartment, a new husband, and a hundred valid reasons. But in the honesty of three o'clock in the morning, she understood that she was afraid of what she might learn about herself in that house. About all the Sundays she had said she'd visit and hadn't. About the voicemails she had listened to and not returned for three days, sometimes four. About the birthday call she had made two years ago from a restaurant, barely audible over the noise, wrapped up in four minutes because her friends were waiting. She rarely spoke to Edward, her father.

Her father had not complained. He had said, each time: "It's all right, sweetheart. I know you're busy. I miss and love you, and one day you will know that I do."

She lay in the dark of her apartment and heard those words in his voice and understood, for the first time, that "it's all right" spoken in resignation and "it's all right" spoken in peace are not the same sentence. One is a statement. The other is a concession from a man who has learned that his needs are not welcome.

At the police department, the detective assigned to the case — a heavysset woman named Lieutenant Carol Briggs who had seen most varieties of human behavior in twenty years of investigative work — reviewed all the available facts and reached a conclusion that she did not entirely share with the family: there was no evidence of foul play, no

evidence of financial desperation, no evidence of mental health crisis. What there was evidence of was meticulous, methodical, months-long planning by a man of sound mind and clear intention.

"He left," she told her partner, a younger man named Torres. "He just left. On purpose."

"People don't do that," Torres said.

"Most people don't. But this man —" she tapped the file — "this man did. And I'll tell you something else." She leaned back in her chair. "He planned it better than most people plan their retirements. Whatever was driving him, it wasn't weakness. It was the opposite."

At Grace Fellowship, the prayer vigil became a weekly occurrence. Each Wednesday, a smaller group than the one before it gathered to pray for Edward's safety and return. By the sixth week, the group had dwindled to eleven faithful souls, most of them women who had actually noticed and appreciated the quiet constancy of his service to others.

Sister Patricia, who organized and led each session, found that her prayers were shifting in a direction she had not expected. She had begun by praying for Edward's return. She was now, she realized, praying for his peace — wherever he was. The change had come upon her gradually, the way understanding always comes when we allow it: in the space between our assumptions and the reality that quietly refutes them. God was showing Sister Patricia that Edward was okay.

"Maybe," she said to Sister Cora after one such meeting, "maybe he's exactly where he needs to be. Maybe God sent him somewhere, and we're all so busy missing him that we can't see God's hand in it."

Sister Cora considered this. "But we didn't even know he was that unhappy."

"That," said Patricia gently, "is exactly my point."



❖ Scripture for Reflection ❖

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." — Isaiah 40:31 (KJV)

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alaska — The First Winter

The cabin was finished in November, and Edward Newman moved in on the first morning after the builder's crew made their final inspection. He stood in the doorway for a long moment before crossing the threshold, the way a man might stand at the entrance to a holy place — because that was, he had come to understand, exactly what it was.

Twelve feet by twenty feet. A wood-stove in the corner, already seasoned and reliable. A sleeping loft overhead, accessible by a ladder he had helped build himself. A small kitchen counter with a hand pump for the well water that pumped into a small cistern. A south-facing window that captured every available hour of winter light. The greenhouse attached on the south wall, already holding seedlings of kale and winter herbs under grow lights powered by a small solar array.

It was the most beautiful and peaceful home he had ever lived in. This home had the peace of God as it is in heaven.

The first Alaskan winter was an education unlike any he had received in sixty-two years of schooling by the world. He learned cold in ways that a man who has always lived in centrally heated houses cannot previously imagine — the way it enters through the smallest gap, the way it settles into iron and timber and flesh with democratic thoroughness, the way it demands attention and respect and preparedness in terms that are not negotiable. He learned fire in the complementary way: the discipline of building and maintaining a fire that would carry heat through a night that dropped to minus twelve, the meditative quality of splitting wood in the frozen silence of a dawn without birdsong.

He learned fishing again. He was not great at it for longer than he had anticipated, and this was instructive in itself: he was unaccustomed to being bad at things, having spent so much of his life competently managing the demands placed upon him by others. To sit on the inlet in the cold and catch nothing and then go home and eat what he had grown instead — this was a lesson in humility and sufficiency that no sermon had ever successfully delivered.

He prayed every morning. Not in the manner he had prayed at Grace Fellowship, where prayer was a performance calibrated to the expectations of the room, but in the manner of a man alone with the source of all things: honestly, sometimes messily, often silently, always truly.

He read his Bible from Genesis to Revelation, slowly, without any agenda except to hear what God was actually saying without the mediation of anyone else's interpretation. He read passages he had heard preached his entire life and found things in them he had never been permitted to notice before, because someone had always been preaching at him before he could listen for himself.

He found, in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs, words about virtue that he had always heard applied exclusively to women, and read them again in the silence of his cabin and understood that the qualities described — faithfulness, industry, wisdom, care for others, management of household affairs — were qualities he had embodied his entire life, unseen and unacknowledged. He realized that the woman mentioned in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs is the church, the body of Christ.

He found, in the first Book of Kings, the story of Elijah under the juniper tree — exhausted, despairing, asking God to let him die — and an angel who came not with theology but with sustenance: Arise and eat. Because the journey is too great for thee. He read those words and wept in a way he had not wept since childhood, in the honest, unguarded way of a

man who has finally found his story somewhere in the ancient words and understands that God has always known his name.

He wrote in his journal every evening. Not for anyone else. Not to be read or shared or used as material for a memoir. Simply because the thoughts needed to go somewhere outside his own skull, and the journal was the only available witness.

He wrote about the silence. He wrote about it with something approaching reverence, because the silence he had found here was nothing like the silence he had feared — the silence of being ignored, the silence of being forgotten, the silence of a house in which he did not matter. This silence was alive with the presence of God in the way that a great cathedral is alive with the faith of those who built it: not empty, but full in a way that noise can never be.

The first winter was hard. He was cold more often than he would have wished, and lonely in ways he had not anticipated, and sometimes frightened by the sheer scale of the wilderness around him. He fell on the ice outside his cabin in January and bruised three ribs and lay there for a moment looking up at an Alaskan sky so full of stars that it seemed structurally impossible, and thought: I am sixty-two years old, I am lying on the frozen ground of Alaska in the middle of the night, and I have never felt more completely held by God than I do right now.

He got up. He went inside. He put more wood on the fire.

He was, against all odds and all reasonable expectation, beginning to be happy.



✦ *Scripture for Reflection* ✦

"And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee." — 1 Kings 19:7 (KJV)

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Eleanor Finally Understood

Three years after Edward Newman disappeared, Eleanor Newman sold the house on Maple Grove Drive.

She could not have said exactly when the shift happened — when the grief of abandonment became the grief of comprehension. The two are very different things. One points outward, at the person who left. The other points inward, at the person who remains, and what they find when they honestly examine the landscape of their own behavior.

Eleanor's honest examination took time. It took the detective's file, which she read in full one afternoon when she had nothing to distract her, and which cataloged with gentle precision the extraordinary financial generosity Edward had directed outward — to charities, to strangers, to people whose names she recognized and some she did not — and nothing, nothing at all, directed toward himself, because a man who has nothing left for himself cannot direct anything toward himself.

Eleanor also discovered in Edward's life what the Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20:

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20

It took the conversation with Sandra from the office — the accountant who had cried when she heard he was gone — who told Eleanor, over coffee and with the quiet courage of someone who has decided that

kindness requires honesty: "He was the best person in that building, Mrs. Newman. He was the best person I have known professionally in my life. And I think... I think no one told him. Not enough. Not nearly enough."

It took the night Eleanor found his journal — not the one he had taken with him, but an earlier one, from five years prior, that she discovered on the back of the closet shelf he had left behind. She sat on the bed with it closed in her hands for nearly an hour before she opened it. When she did, she read slowly, with the attention of a woman learning a language she should have learned decades ago.

He had written, in his careful handwriting, about the loneliness of feeling invisible in his own marriage. He had written about the conversations that were always about her needs, her worries, her plans, her sisters, her ministry — and how he had gradually stopped trying to offer his own inner life because the offerings went uncollected. He had written about this not with anger but with the wondering sorrow of a man who does not fully understand why he is invisible, who has not yet arrived at the conclusion that visibility is something one must sometimes demand rather than wait to be granted.

*"For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God."
Colossians 3:3*

Eleanor realized what the Word of God meant when God said it is not good for a man to be alone. Yet while in his presence, she had always ignored Edward and never submitted to what he wanted. She thought about how she always wanted him to become what she desired so he could satisfy her own selfish desires in life. She realized that she never really helped Edward; she only thought about what she wanted in their union.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord." Ephesians 5:22

"And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him." Genesis 2:18

He had written, in one entry: Lord, I don't think she sees me. I don't think she has seen me in a very long time. I don't know if I have made it easy to be seen, or whether I have made myself so quiet that I have become part of the background and invisible to her. I know that You see me. I suppose that must be enough. But I am lonely and need your help, Lord. I am so very lonely in my own house.

Eleanor Newman read those words and felt them settle into the deepest part of her, the part that cannot be argued with or managed or explained away. She had not known, and that was both true and insufficient — insufficient because the knowing had been available to her, in a thousand signals she had not chosen to receive, in a thousand silences she had attributed to his personality rather than his pain of being alone without his helpmate alongside him. Eleanor finally realized that it was too late; he was gone. The door of their union was closed because of neglect. She realized that she had spent her days trying to help others while her own life was empty and void of God's will — her marriage to a man who gave everything that he humanly possibly could, including leaving her alone so she could draw nearer to God and never forget what Edward gave to her: True Love.

"And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Romans 5:5

She closed the journal. She sat in the room that had been his and hers for thirty-one years and did something she had not done in longer than she could precisely recall: she was entirely honest with God. She asked forgiveness not in the general, managed way of public prayer but in the specific, particular, undefended way of a woman who knows exactly what she is confessing. God forgave her and healed her heart.

*"But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."
Matthew 6:6*

She did not know where Edward was. The investigation had reached its quiet, unresolved end: no body found, no evidence of violence, no reasonable conclusion other than voluntary departure by a living man. He was, somewhere in the world, alive. She understood this with a certainty she could not have rationally supported but did not need to rationalize.

She hoped he was well. She prayed for him always.

She hoped, in the complicated, unassuming way of a woman who has been honest with herself about the cost of her own inattention, that wherever he was, he had found the peace she had never made room for him to find in his own home.

She sold the house. She moved into a smaller apartment. She joined a different church — one she had found on her own, for reasons of her own — and began, for the first time in her adult life, to examine what it meant to love someone with the attention they actually required and needed, rather than the attention that was convenient.

She never stopped thinking about him.

She never stopped, quietly, praying that God would hold and help him. — *Selah*

As a few years passed for Edward in Alaska, he ran out of coffee and a few things he needed, so he made the eleven-mile hike to the small grocery store in Homer.

Upon arriving at the store, he met a beautiful forty-five-year-old woman named Liz. She had wavy, sandy, long blonde hair and eyes that looked right through Edward when she made eye contact with him. Her

voice was like a soft wind blowing in the spring. They talked for about three hours and began to fall in love.

Liz and Edward's conversations were never selfish, hurtful, or threatening in any way; they were always fruitful and filled with words that brought to life their very existence. The words they exchanged were like fire melting ice on the Alaskan sea when they communicated. You could hear the crackling of the ice melting on the water on this quiet and beautiful late spring day as they spoke with one another.

Liz would stop in to visit Ed at his cabin every day just so she could hear Edward speak about the love of God to her. She never took Ed for granted. She felt a love that was freeing her of all her past hurts and fears that had caused her to become shy. As words flowed from his mouth, she was falling deeply in love with Ed. As the weeks went by, both Liz and Edward fell deeply in love with each other. They became inseparable, and Liz eventually came to live with him at his small cabin. Their love grew; she felt loved by him and secure in his presence because all she could think about was the genuine love she was experiencing, a love she had never felt from anyone. She knew that Ed loved her deeply and was patient with her to open up her heart for him.

They did everything together. They fished, planted a greater variety of vegetables in their greenhouse, hiked together, and bought mountain bikes to trail the breathtaking scenic paths they explored together, beholding the wondrous beauty of God's magnificent creation.

They held hands and kissed for the first time under the moonlight that evening, and every evening after that, watching the sunset. They became so close and inseparable it was as if they became one person, yet each retained the unique identity that God had created them to be.

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." Genesis 2:24

Ed literally cleaved to Liz, so it appeared as if they were glued together by God, and they both loved every moment of it!

Their love was based on so much genuine truth and devotion that nothing could come between them. Ed loved Liz like Christ loves His church and was willing to die for her. Liz was drawn to Ed's love so much that she was willing to submit to him with the deepest love and respect she had ever shown to anyone.

This love was not born out of obligation nor was it transactional in any way, but came naturally without any effort from either one. This love was so true and pure, that words cannot express its depths or height, and they both knew and clearly understood one another and the love they had for each other. Their love mirrored the kind of love God has for all of his children.

"Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:39



❖ *Scripture for Reflection* ❖

"Love suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own." — 1 Corinthians 13:4-5

CHAPTER NINE

The Years That Passed Like Water

Time in Alaska moves differently than time in the world.

Edward and Liz would have been hard-pressed to explain this to anyone who had not experienced it, which was, increasingly, the only relevant qualifier — there was no one to explain anything to except God. But they felt it as a physical truth: the seasons here were not the quiet background noise of a life primarily conducted indoors, punctuated by brief awareness of weather. They were the entire foreground. They were the event. Winter was not the space between autumns. Summer was not the space between winters. Each season was its own full universe, demanding and generous and unlike anything they had known before, and the years built themselves from these universes in a way that felt simultaneously faster and more spacious than any years Ed and Liz had previously lived.

They fished. They grew. They read. They prayed. Edward and Liz walked their five acres in every season: in the spring when the inlet ice broke and the eagles returned and the light came back with a force that felt almost physical; in the long Alaskan summer when the sun barely set and the greenhouse exploded with more abundance than they could eat and they preserved what they could and gave thanks to God for what they couldn't; in autumn when the world turned gold and scarlet and the fishing was finest; in winter when the silence was so absolute it had texture.

In the fifth year, they built the dock for their fishing boat. It took them most of the summer, working hard, making mistakes and correcting them and making different mistakes, and when it was finally finished they sat at the end of it at midnight — the sky pale with lingering summer moonlight — and Edward kissed Liz ever so softly, and they laughed and they rejoiced in their accomplishment.

Their laughter was not at anything in particular; it was because their love was so pure and blessed by God that they were rejoicing together. The satisfaction of a dock completed by their own hands, in their own time, for no one's pleasure but their own.

In the eighth year, Ed began writing. Not a journal — he had kept that faithfully from the beginning — but something larger. A reckoning with everything he had observed and experienced and been given to understand during sixty-two years of living for others and eight years of living for God.

He wrote slowly, in longhand, in the careful way he did all things. He had no plan to publish or share. He wrote because the writing was itself the act: the giving of form to understanding, the making of meaning from experience, the work that prophets have always done in their solitude.

He was, though he had never been told this and had only dimly suspected it himself, a prophet. Not in the theatrical, public sense that the word conjures — not a man standing in the marketplace with a proclamation. But in the older, quieter, more difficult sense: a man given to see what others around him could not or would not see, and given the corresponding burden of that sight. He had seen the emptiness of his friendships while his friends remained comfortable. He had seen the transactional nature of his marriage while Eleanor managed her own comfort. He had seen the hollow center of a church that spoke of love and practiced self-interest. He had seen all of this and carried the weight of the seeing in silence for decades, because no one had created space for the prophetic word he carried. So God silenced him by bringing him to Alaska — it was like God who allowed Paul the Apostle to be arrested and imprisoned so he could write thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. God separated Edward to his writings that glorified the Lord and would eventually continue to reach millions after his passing without needing approval or recognition from anyone but God.

"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations." Jeremiah 1:5

God had known this about him from before his birth. God had been forming him for this desert — not the desert of punishment, but the desert of encounter, where the prophets have always gone to hear what the noise of daily life makes inaudible and impossible to hear.

*"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."
John 10:27-28*

In the twelfth year, the kale grew so abundantly that they could not eat it all before the cold took it, and he stood in his greenhouse looking at the overflow and laughed again, and then wept a little, and then laughed again. The rhythm of the laughing and the weeping had become familiar to him: it was the rhythm of a man who has let himself be fully alive again in his true identity in Christ, and who has discovered that full aliveness includes both weeping and laughing.

"For we are his masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Ephesians 2:20

He was seventy-four years old. He was thin and weathered and stronger in his hands than he had been at forty. His hair had gone entirely white and he wore it longer than he had ever worn it in his previous life, because there was no one to form opinions about it except Liz, who loved him. His beard was also white and also longer, and entirely without audience.

He was, by any conventional accounting, utterly alone before God in the wilderness of Alaska — were it not for Liz, whom God had brought into his life.

He was, by the accounting that mattered, never less than completely accompanied.

The only ones in his life that mattered to Edward were Liz and God.



❖ *Scripture for Reflection* ❖

"For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." — Hebrews 13:5-6 (KJV)

CHAPTER TEN

What the Pastor Learned

Seven years after Edward Newman disappeared, Pastor Raymond Goode experienced what he would later describe to his counselor as "the undoing."

It came for him, as these things often do, through an accumulated weight rather than a single blow. It had begun with the prayer vigil — that devastating parade of one-directional generosity — and had continued in the years since through a growing and increasingly impossible-to-dismiss awareness that his congregation contained people he had never truly seen. Not invisible because they lacked charisma or social standing, but invisible because he had trained himself, over two decades of pastoral work, to see primarily those who could reflect something back to him: prestige, influence, flattery, growth statistics at his church.

Edward Newman had reflected nothing back to him. Edward had simply served, faithfully, quietly, consistently, without seeking recognition or requiring management or creating problems that demanded pastoral attention. And Raymond Goode had walked past Edward every Sunday for twenty-two years and said the handshake words and moved on as if Edward were lucky to be part of his church.

"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."

Philippians 2:3

It was the counselor — a colleague in ministry who had known him since seminary — who finally said the thing Raymond had been circling for years: "Ray, when was the last time you shepherded someone who couldn't do anything for you?"

The question struck him with the force of something he had always known and never faced within his own heart.

He thought about Edward Newman for a long time after that. He thought about the fact that Edward — and this was what Raymond, in his seven years of reflection, had come to believe — had been a prophet of God, sitting in his congregation for two decades without ever being invited to speak, never asked to lead, never approached with the genuine inquiry that might have unlocked the prophetic gift he carried. He had been allowed to serve the physical needs of the church — the finances, the logistics, the prayer breakfasts, and deliverance sessions — while the greater gift of his insight and his seeing had gathered dust in the attic of a relationship Raymond had never thought to explore.

"I failed him," Raymond told his counselor, with the simplicity of a man who has stopped defending himself. "I failed him as a pastor and as a man, and I cannot repair it because I cannot find him."

"What would you say to him," the counselor asked, "if you could?"

Raymond sat with the question for a long time.

"I would tell him," he said finally, "that I see him now. That I see what he was, a man who taught me to love others unselfishly. That God has used his absence to teach me things his presence never could have — because I wouldn't have received them. I was too busy managing outcomes to be taught anything by a quiet and profound man of God."

He paused.

"And I would ask his forgiveness. Not because I expect he'd give it — though I suspect he would, because that was the kind of man he was. But because the asking is what I owe him, regardless of what I receive in return."

Raymond Goode began to preach differently after that. He began to see his congregation differently — not as assets or liabilities, not as the productive and the burdensome, but as what they actually were: human beings that God uniquely created with hidden depths and unspoken gifts and legitimate needs, every one of them bearing the image of God into a world that was in the habit of overlooking exactly that. No one is greater or lesser than another.

He became, over the years, a better pastor. He quit merchandising the parishioners who attended his church, and instead dedicated the church and all who attended to God, asking God to teach him how to lead and shepherd His people by demonstrating the love and humility of God the Father through his life: to love them all equally, without favoritism or pride. Raymond became a different man. Not cured of his tendencies toward the comfortable and the impressive, because a man's tendencies do not cure, they are managed — but aware of them, and consistently working against them by resisting pride and arrogance, and occasionally succeeding.

The transformation had its origin in the disappearance of a man he had never adequately known.

He considered that, sometimes, and felt the irony of it with something approaching reverence: that Edward Newman had done more for his spiritual formation by leaving than he had been permitted to do by staying.

That was what Raymond had come to believe: the way of prophets. Meekness and humility, but with the boldness to act when God bids them to move in the power of His Holy Spirit — as Edward did, leaving his past behind.

"Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert." Isaiah 43:18-19



🌹 *Scripture for Reflection* 🌹

"And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." — Jeremiah 3:15 (KJV)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Last Winter — And the Chariot of Fire

In the eighteenth year of Edward's Alaskan life, Edward James Newman turned eighty years old. His God-given wife, Liz, was now sixty-three years old.

He celebrated the day in his customary way: he rose before dawn, built up the wood-stove, made his coffee from water he had drawn the evening before and stored by the stove to keep it from freezing, and sat in his chair by the south window to watch the inlet wake up. The Alaskan October light was low and amber and of a quality that had no equivalent name because there was nothing else to compare it to. It simply was what it was: perfect.

He had been feeling the weight of his years more acutely since the previous spring. His hands, which had remained strong and useful well into his seventies, had developed a tremor that made woodcutting difficult and handwriting laborious. His knees had begun to ache in the cold with an insistence that couldn't be ignored. He had fallen twice in the past year — once inside, once on the dock — and both times he had lain still for a moment afterward, not in pain but in a peculiar suspended awareness, as though his body were asking a question it was not quite ready to finish.

He had been cold in a way that went deeper than weather for most of the past winter. Not the productive cold of a man doing useful things in a demanding environment, but the particular chill of a body that is beginning to conserve. He recognized it, in the honest way he recognized all things, for what it was: the beginning of the end of the physical portion of his journey in life.

He was not afraid.

He had lived for eighteen years in the complete and unmediated presence of God. He had read his Bible through seventeen times. He had prayed — truly prayed, not performed — every day of those years. He had written seven volumes of reflection in the careful handwriting that had grown gradually smaller and more deliberate as his hands aged. He had fished and grown and built and repaired and weathered and survived and, most importantly, been. Simply and completely and without apology or performance: been himself, in the fullness of who God had made him to be.

He had been, as he understood it, the loneliest man on the planet for eighteen years without the weight of the world upon his shoulders. His only comfort was his wife, Liz, and God throughout his journey of eighteen years living in Alaska. He spent his last years with the joy of having someone who not only understood him, but loved him with the purest love a man could receive from his wife. The love Liz demonstrated to Ed was beyond human words and comprehension.

He had also been, as he experienced it with a certainty too deep for doubt, never alone for a single hour. Liz was with him to the end of his life, pouring her unconditional love into Ed's life.

The loneliness was real in his previous life. He did not minimize it or spiritualize it into something more comfortable. He had ached for human companionship in ways that were physical in their intensity — the desire to hear another voice, to share a meal across a table, to be touched on the shoulder by a living hand. This was the cost of the life he had chosen, and he had paid it fully for sixty-two years without resentment, because the alternative — returning to a life of continuous, invisible emotional hemorrhage — was a cost he had already paid for six decades and could not pay again.

He had missed Eleanor sometimes, in the early years. Not Eleanor as she had been — managing her life and the life of others, and never quite

seeing or acknowledging him — but the Eleanor he had glimpsed occasionally in their thirty-six years together, the woman who had looked at him in the church on their wedding morning as though he were everything. He had held that woman in his prayers, wherever she was, whoever she had become. He had asked God to be gentle with her. He believed God had been.

He thought about his children less often than he once had, but never without love. David and Renata would be in their fifties now. He hoped they had become people who paid attention and learned how to love as their father had. He had prayed for this, consistently, for eighteen years: Lord, let my leaving teach them something my staying never could. He did not know whether his prayer had been answered. He would find out, perhaps, soon.

The November of his eightieth year arrived with a ferocity unusual even for Alaska: temperatures that dropped to thirty below Fahrenheit before Thanksgiving, blizzard winds that came off the inlet with the gathered force of the entire Bering Sea behind them, snow that fell horizontally and without pause for four days. Edward managed the woodstove faithfully to keep Liz and himself warm and comfortable, woke up early every morning to make small meals for them both, started his mornings with prayer for others, and wrote in his journal with the hand that shook more each week.

The entry from November nineteenth read, in part: Lord, I believe I am nearly done. Not as a complaint — please receive this as it is intended, which is a simple observation. My body is informing me in the ways that bodies use when they have reached their conclusion. I am not frightened. I find I am, if anything, curious — the same way I was curious about Alaska before I came here, the same wondering attention toward an unknown country that I cannot fully imagine but have every reason to believe is better than I expect. Lord, I pray you take care of my Liz, I loved her deeply, and ask that your holy angels watch over her should I go home to be with you.

He paused in the writing, set down the pen, and looked out at the inlet. The winter storm had passed in the night, and the world was still and white and enormous.

He was very cold. He had built up the fire, but the cold was not the kind that fires address. It was interior now, and quiet, and not unpeaceful.

He sat in his chair. He closed his eyes.

He was, in the truest and most profound sense, accompanied: his wife Liz was there beside him. And yet he knew that the threshold he was approaching was one every soul must cross alone into the presence of God to stand before Him and give an account for their lives.

"And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." — Hebrews 9:27

He had chosen this life with clear eyes and full knowledge, and he had lived the consequences of the choice without flinching for eighteen years, and he did not regret one moment of it.

He regretted only that the world had made the choice necessary.

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." — 1 John 2:15

He sat in his chair by the south window, his Bible open on his lap to the thirty-seventh Psalm — a psalm he had read ten thousand times in this chair, in this light — and felt, without hearing it with his ears, a sound he recognized. Not the wind. Something older than wind. Something that moved through the room and through him simultaneously, the way a note from a very large instrument moves through the air and through the body of the listener.

He opened his eyes and saw nothing of this physical world. Everything he was used to seeing in his physical body vanished as if a dark veil was removed from his eyes, and now he was seeing in the Spirit.

"9 But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. 10 But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. 11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God."
— 1 Corinthians 2:9-11

They were standing in the room. Two holy angels of God.

He had no words adequate to what he saw. He would not have needed words even if he had them, because words are instruments for the horizontal communication between humans, and what he was in the presence of was something vertical and complete that did not require the mediation of language. They were not small or decorative or anything remotely like the winged figures of greeting cards. They were presences. They were, in the most literal sense of the words he had spent his entire life treating too abstractly, **“the Glory of God appearing through him.”**

"10 When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day. 11 Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power: " — 2 Thessalonians 1:10-11

One spoke his heavenly name that God the Father had given him — a name no man knew: PURE-HEART.

"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."
Matthew 5:8

Not the name that had appeared on his birth certificate or business cards, church bulletins or mortgage documents. His real name — the name that God had known for him from before his birth, the name written on the white stone that the book of Revelation promises to those who overcome. He heard it and understood it and felt it resonate through every part of him that had ever been true, which turned out to be most of him.

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it."
— Revelation 2:17

Come, the angel said, and spoke his new name, which was also known to Edward.

The chariot was not a metaphor.

It was not a vision or a comforting symbol generated by a dying mind seeking consolation. Edward Newman had spent eighteen years in the wilderness of Alaska with God in the way that Elijah had spent his wilderness years, and he was being gathered home in the way that Elijah had been gathered home: not through ordinary dying, but through the deliberate, specific, remarkable intervention of a God who was not going to allow His prophet — who had preached pureness of heart — to be simply found frozen in a chair in an Alaskan cabin as though his ending were ordinary.

His ending was not ordinary.

His Bible remained open on the chair. The wood-stove continued its steady, small labor. The south window admitted the low winter light across the floor in a long rectangle of gold.

Edward Newman was gone. Not dead, but in the presence of God.

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

— *John 11:26*

The five acres were empty. The dock stood over the frozen inlet. The greenhouse held its winter herbs in the patient dark.

He was gone, and he was finally, completely, irrevocably, and forever home with the Lord in heaven.



☞ *Scripture for Reflection* ☞

"And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." — 2 Kings 2:11 (KJV)

EPILOGUE

What God Saw — And What He Always Knew

Before the foundations of the earth were laid, before the first morning star sang over the void, before time itself was wound and set in motion — God knew Edward James Newman.

He knew the man who would live sixty-two years in the quiet, crushing labor of loving people who could not or would not receive love with the reciprocity it required. He knew the eighty-year-old man who would cross a frozen threshold into His presence with a Bible worn to its threads and a heart that had, against every reasonable expectation, remained tender and pure before God. He knew the prophet who would speak in silence — whose life itself would be the proclamation — and He had always known that silence would be the most powerful sermon this man would ever preach to millions, because his writing reached millions including many ministers who would be transformed from the inside out when reading his profound writings that touched countless lives.

After his passing, his wife Liz published his writings and made them available on the internet for free to anyone who desired to learn the ways of the Lord and His love.

The people of Edward Newman's former life received the sermon fully only after his departure — **The Sermon of Silence**. This is the sad, recurring pattern of prophetic witness: the message rarely arrives cleanly in the hearing; it arrives in the aftermath, in the reckoning, in the silence that follows the prophet's passing. Marcus Webb received it as the recognition of the authority he had overlooked and the righteousness he had undermined and underestimated in Edward, and it changed the way he treated the people who worked for him for the remainder of his life. Eleanor Newman received it in the pages of a journal written by a man who had loved her past the

capacity to be loved in return, and it broke open in her a capacity for attention and genuine presence that the women in her new church would encounter and call trans-formative. Pastor Raymond Goode received it in the counselor's office and carried it back to a congregation that received, over years, a different shepherd — more honest, more humble, more genuinely attentive to the invisible.

The Scripture is clear about what God required of every person who shared Edward Newman's life and failed to provide. The Word of God speaks with precision about the obligation of the community of faith to one another — not the performed obligation of organized programs, but the radical, costly, attentive obligation of genuine love:

"And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." — Hebrews 10:24-25

They had assembled. They had failed to see one another — specifically, they had failed to see him. The assembling without the seeing is only geography.

*"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."
— Galatians 6:2*

Edward Newman had borne everyone's burdens for thirty-six years. No one had asked after the weight of his own.

"Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent

in spirit; serving the Lord; Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality." — Romans 12:10-13

They had received his distribution. They had not distributed to his necessity. They had accepted his hospitality and returned the door of their hearts half-opened at best, to a man who had needed, like all humans need, to be genuinely received and loved.

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification." — Romans 15:1-2

Edward had pleased his neighbor faithfully. His neighbor had pleased themselves. This is not accusation — it is diagnosis. The human heart, left unguarded and unexamined, defaults to itself. It takes the sustained work of the Holy Spirit, received in genuine surrender, to reshape that default toward genuine, sacrificial, attentive love toward others.

They had not done that sustained work. And a man who was also a prophet of God had paid the price of their failure — not with bitterness, which would have been understandable, but with a long, faithful, extraordinary act of self-preservation that was also, whether they understood it this way or not, a gift to them. His absence made them see what his presence could not: the poverty of their own love.

"Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve,

that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. 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 dine with him, and he with me." Revelation 3:17-20

God saw all of it. God saw the breakfast conversations in which Edward was not asked a single question about his own soul or well-being. God saw the prayer vigils held in absentia for a man who had prayed in that very room for twenty-two years for everyone else, without receiving one prayer in return. God saw the detective's file and the journal pages and the chair beside the south window where Edward had read the Psalms every morning for eighteen years while the inlet moved and the light changed and the wild world went about its ancient, indifferent, glorious business.

God saw, and did not forget.

The man who had been overlooked by his church was gathered home by two angels and taken to sit on the throne with Jesus. The man who had never been invited to preach was given the most complete sermon of his life to preach without words, over eighteen years, to everyone who had ever known him. The man who had been invisible in his marriage was known by the Maker of stars with the intimacy of a parent who knows their child's name before the child is born.

"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." Revelation 3:21

The prophet no one acknowledged was acknowledged by the One whose acknowledgment is all that finally, lastingly, truly matters. As Jesus

greeted him with these words: Well done, my faithful servant, welcome and enter into my everlasting kingdom.

And on the morning they came for him — those ministers of fire and glory who do not come for ordinary souls, who came for Elijah because Elijah was not finished but only relocating his ministry — Edward Newman went without hesitation. He went without looking back. He went in the direction he had been moving for eighteen years, and for sixty-two years before that without knowing it:

Toward the presence that had always known him.

His heavenly home — Heaven.

When he was taken into heaven, he was greeted like royalty. As he stood in the presence of God the Father and Lord Jesus Christ, he made one more request, humbly bowing his knees and his head.

"Father, I ask of you to take great care of my Liz. I loved her deeply and ask that your holy angels watch over her all the days of her life on earth. I also ask that you awaken those whom you allowed me to quietly minister to, and for my children that you have mercy upon them and show them the way of love and truth. I ask you to bless, heal, and restore all of them and bless Eleanor, who was distracted with the cares of this world. I ask in your name, Lord Jesus."

His request was granted by the Lord. The angels of the Lord were immediately dispatched to fulfill the request.

"For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." Psalm 91:11



Final Word of Scripture

*"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."
— Psalm 116:15*

*"Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."
— Matthew 25:21*



A FINAL WORD BY PASTOR JOEL

Many today have broken and empty lives because they have not learned the true meaning of love. Perfect love casts out all fear. The only way to be free from fear is to open your heart to God and allow Him to pour His love into your heart by the Holy Spirit when we all make peace with God.

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Romans 5:1-5

Jesus did not say people would know we are His followers by the number of verses we can quote or memorize. What God is looking for in anyone who claims to follow Him is the measure of love that shines through them. This is what matters most to God the Father, who is love.

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." John 13:35

Whoever does not have the love of the Father in their heart does not really know God.

*"He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love."
1 John 4:8*

"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" 1 John 4:8

Jesus said it this way in the gospel of Matthew:

*"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."
Matthew 7:12*

When Jesus spoke these words — "*whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them*" — He was teaching us all that how you treat others is what you should expect from them. One cannot treat others without kindness and expect kindness in return, or sow hatred and expect love in return, or take another for granted and expect them to remain. The way you want others to love and respect you is the way you must love and respect them, or expect nothing from them — because love is reciprocal.

"We love him, because he first loved us." 1 John 4:19

When we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with the love of God, we can then pour our love into others as God did with us when He loved us first.

The greatest thing we all must learn in this life is not how much recognition or approval we gain from people, not how many things we can accumulate in this life, not how transactional our relationships can be with our friends, co-workers, loved ones, or spouse. The greatest thing God is teaching us all is how to love, honor, and highly respect one another.

God is expecting every child of His to love one another.

"34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. 35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. " John 13:34-35

The greatest thing we will ever learn from God is love.

"And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 13:13



THE END

— *Pastor Joel Martin*