

T H E G I R L
B E H I N D
T H E R E D
R O P E

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS HOT THAT DAY IN THE HILLS OF TENNESSEE. I remember because the aged boards that made up the tiny church's floor creaked with every step. As if to say, *I'm tired of all you meat sacks treading on me. Be still.*

But we couldn't be still. Not on that day.

I was only a child, six years old, but my memories of what happened on that Sunday are clear. Or maybe hearing the retelling over and over has crystalized a distorted version of them in my mind. Either way, I remember.

It was late August in Clarksville, a small town along Route 254 in the hills west of Knoxville. I was seated on the third pew next to my mother, who cradled my newborn brother, Lukas, in her arms. From the first time I laid eyes on his tiny fingers and heard his soft cooing as he stared up at me, all I dreamed about was having a baby like Lukas of my own one day.

My older brother, Jamie, fidgeted to my left. The small, decaying building that housed Holy Family Church needed a new air-conditioning unit the congregation couldn't afford, so the windows had been opened. But without a morning breeze, the sanctuary felt like a sauna, slowly cooking the faithful as if extracting punishment for hidden sins—a helpful reminder of the hell to come for all who did not adhere to the dictates of a holy God.

It was the tenth Sunday since the flock of Holy Family had received

the prophecy of the destruction that would soon visit the earth. We all accepted the word given to Rose Pierce as truth. She was a devout woman who loved Jesus and his church, a dedicated servant of Christianity. We had repeated the prophecy until it was etched first in our brains, then on our hearts, which is why none of us could be still that Sunday.

In three years' time, a great scourge would cleanse the earth.

We were a small community of the purest faith, the bride of Christ, the elect, ever diligent to obey the teachings of righteousness from the word and always on guard against the sinful ways of the world. Only seventy-two in that day, the Holy Family was seen as radical and fringe to many in our small town. *Fringe*, a word I only understood because my mother had explained it to me and my brother after we'd overheard her arguing again with our father.

Arguing because my dad didn't buy into all the fear-mongering, as he liked to call it. Billy Carter, a redheaded boy my age, called him *faithless* to my face, and it was clear the whole church thought the same. Half of me thought so too. Either way, my dad had stopped attending the services, so he wasn't there that hot August Sunday. If he had been, he would have become an instant believer in the prophecy Rose had delivered.

Because in the space of five terrifying minutes, everything about all of our lives was forever and irreversibly changed.

Our shepherd, Harrison Pierce, husband to Rose, had prefaced his sermon with a few remarks that I don't recall before pausing and holding the congregation in silence, eyeing us each with care. Then, in a gentle but gripping voice, he repeated the prophecy.

"In three years' time, because the world has turned away from holiness, the world's sin will rise up against them in monstrous form and destroy the wicked. But those with true sight will be

shown what is to come and delivered from the great fury. The chosen remnant shall seek refuge away from the world and wait until the ground has been cleansed of sin. For then those with eyes to see and vigilant of faith will be spared from destruction and inherit the earth as the pure bride under the law of a holy God. So be it.”

“So be it,” we all repeated.

Each one of us believed that we were those called to receive true sight, but none of us knew what that sight would show us. We only knew that an angel named Sylous had appeared to Rose and delivered truth, so we could remain true to the end and be presented as a pure bride to Christ.

Having spoken the prophecy, Harrison glanced at his wife, dipped his head once, and took a deep breath. He nervously scanned the flock. “Today, dearly beloved, is the day we have been waiting for. Today . . . Today we will all be given eyes to see what is to come.”

I sensed Sylous before I heard the door at the back of the small sanctuary softly closing. I knew it was him before I saw him. Every hair on my body stood on end. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe, much less turn to see.

It was as if my soul knew who he was before my mind could catch up.

I had expected an angel with wings and a choir, maybe because I was only six and naïve, but when I finally turned with the rest, Sylous was nothing like anything I had imagined.

There, standing at the back of the room, stood a man dressed head to toe in white. Pants, suit jacket, shoes, all pristine white. His skin was tanned, tight across a chiseled jaw. Red lips and warm smile, but it was the bright blue of his eyes that has always wandered into my dreams. Beautiful and terrifying at once. Intriguing and dangerous.

For a moment, I forgot he was an angel. Maybe he wasn't—no one really knew, not even Rose, because according to the Bible, even angels could show up as men and you wouldn't know the difference.

No one moved. No one dared speak. All eyes were fixed on the man standing at the end of the center aisle.

Rose was the first to kneel. I saw her from the corner of my eye, there on the end of the pew, sinking to the floor with head bowed in reverence. Her husband followed suit beside the podium, eyes wide, face white.

Without further hesitation the rest of us knelt, sliding off the pews to our knees. My heart was pounding. My eyes were fixed on the angel sent to save us. Then, without warning, my excitement shifted into something else. Fear. My brother Jamie must have felt the same, because he grabbed my hand, trembling. I glanced at little Lukas, who slept soundly in my mother's tight embrace.

Sylous started forward, his slick shoes clicking across the creaking wood. All the way to the stage, where Harrison knelt. He stepped up to the podium and turned to face us, eyes moving slowly across the pews.

When they met mine, I was sure he'd peeled back my skin and was seeing what hid inside me. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. None of us could.

"The purity of your hearts has been acknowledged," he began. "You are ready to see what few have ever seen." His voice was gentle and kind, with unmistakable authority. "Will the bride say yes to Jesus?"

"Yes," Rose whispered from where she knelt.

Then others and all: "Yes."

"Then you are ready," Sylous replied.

A long beat of silence held us on edge.

"In three years' time, because the world has turned away from

holiness, the world's sin will rise up against them in monstrous form and destroy the wicked.”

The floor under our knees began to vibrate. The old wooden pews shook, knocking against the floorboards. I was aghast, terrified, but Sylous continued without a concern in the world.

“Today you will be shown a foretaste of the destruction to come so you might be delivered. Seeing what you see today, you will seek refuge away from the world and wait for that day of reckoning. When it comes, you will be spared in a safe haven as you wait for the world to be cleansed of sin.”

Dust fell from the ceiling onto my shoulder, and a back pew rattled loose enough to slap against the floor. A shutter to my left fell from its hinges. Hands were extended everywhere, searching for something sturdy as the building felt like it was going to collapse.

“For then those with eyes to see and vigilant of faith will be spared from destruction and inherit the earth as the pure bride under the law of a holy God.”

With the last utterance of the prophecy, the shaking stopped and, but for dust in the air, all was still again. My mother was breathing heavily beside me; Jamie's hand was clenching mine with enough force to leave a mark. Only little Lukas remained oblivious in his deep sleep—how, I have no idea.

“Now I give you eyes to see,” Sylous said.

The sound of rushing wind filled the church. It surrounded us, behind and in front, to the right and to the left. What the rest of the world couldn't see, we saw.

And what we saw struck terror in our hearts.

Screams ripped through the chapel. Cries for protection, weeping from some. All in the blink of an eye, as what couldn't possibly be real closed in around us.

My bones rattled and my skin went numb. No one could experience what visited us that day and remain the same.

Through all the chaos, Sylous's words whispered through my mind.

Now I give you eyes to see.

And so we saw.