

# 1

*"Who will go for us . . . ?"*

## NEW YORK CITY

Trent Cooper watched the empty Sunday streets unfold beyond his window. He had never been in the backseat of a limo before. Twice he had ridden up front, playing aide to his boss, Darren, whom he loathed along with everyone else forced to work for the man. Today, however, was different. Today Darren was the one forced to play ride-along. Trent had often studied passing limos, hungering to be one of those people with the power and the expense accounts. The feeling of having arrived, even for a moment, was so exquisite not even Darren's fury could touch him.

His boss must have noticed Trent's satisfied smirk, for he was seething as he said, "Enjoy it while you can, worm. Ninety minutes from now, you'll be just another greasy stain on the sidewalks of Times Square."

"Whatever you say, boss." Trent was usually the guy who just went along. It was protective coloring he had picked up as a kid. Vanish in plain sight, and escape multiple poundings from guys who were bigger and stronger and fascinated by the sight of other people's blood.

"You mocking me? Really?" Darren obviously wanted to pace, which of course was impossible, even in a stretch limo. So he fidgeted. His well-padded frame highlighted every squirm. "You think I'm playing games here, Cooper?"

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"No, sir. I know you aren't." Trent glanced over. The guy was a toad in a suit.

"Your future is in my hands. You better be thinking of how you're going to write a resume when your previous employer is just *waiting* to call you a class-A clown."

Trent turned back to the window. There really wasn't anything on that side to hold his attention. To tell the truth, he was a little disappointed in the ride. The stretch Cadillac bounced hard over the smallest dips. The ceiling was low and dark, the rear seat slightly concave. An acre of dark carpet separated them from the backward-facing seats. The divider was in place, making the rear compartment feel like a coffin for two.

"This is your last chance," Darren said. "I want to know what you sent to headquarters. And I want to know now."

The scene beyond the limo's side window was much more interesting. Back home when he was a kid, church would have just been getting out. Trent had always skipped out of those tall doors like he was being released from a weekly prison. People smiled down at him, the poor kid whose family hadn't been able to afford the operations he needed, so the church had taken up collections. They talked in loud voices, like having a cleft palate turned him deaf. His mother kept a vise grip on his hand, smiled back to them and talked with this brittle happiness like they didn't have a care in the world, what with the church family taking such good care of them. Trent had hated them all.

"I've had it with your insubordination, Cooper," his boss said. "I've asked you a question and I *demand* an *answer*."

Trent forced his mind back to the present. He rarely indulged in memory games. As far as he was concerned, the best thing about his past was how it fueled his drive and determination, and granted him the fury required to make it. Even here. In Manhattan. The Capital City of Broken Dreams.

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The sunlit streets were just coming alive. Elegant alcoves held sidewalk cafés where laughing people burned through money. Couples dressed in clothes that cost more than his car walked arm in arm toward their next good time. Trent traced a line around the sunlight on his window and mouthed a silent word. *Soon.*

The limo pulled around the corner and parked before the headquarters' side entrance. The door had no sign. Anyone who needed to ask what lay beyond the brass portal did not belong.

Darren leaned over so far his belly flattened against his thighs. "That's it, Cooper. As of this minute, you are *fired*."

Trent did not wait for the driver to make it around to his side. He opened his door and stepped into the sunlight. Instantly the uniformed guard opened the brass door and wished him a good morning. Trent stepped back and let his boss storm past. He gave himself a moment to breathe in the fresh air, the light, the thrill of finally having won a chance. He whispered to the amazing day ahead, "Showtime."

## CLEVELAND

If anyone had asked John Jacobs how he saw himself, he probably would not have replied. John had spent his entire adult life being both strong and silent. But if he were pressed to divulge the truth, he would have said that he was a big man imprisoned inside too small a life.

John knew the church service was over. But he could not bring himself to open his eyes. To do so would require letting go of the most incredibly intense experience he had known in years.

Then he heard his wife call his name. When he looked up, John saw the church's senior usher leaning over the pew, watching him gravely. "I'm fine," he told them both.

Heather demanded, "Why on earth didn't you say something?"

"I was praying," he said. In a very unique manner, true enough.

"You're supposed to be leading Sunday school," Heather said. "It's time to start."

He knew that was beyond him. "Will you do it?"

"John, what's the matter?"

"I'm all right. I just need a little time, is all." He followed her into the classroom, seated himself, and pretended to watch his wife as she announced she'd be teaching and led their group in the opening prayer. Heather had graduated from Bible college and knew the Scriptures better than he ever would. In general she preferred to stand back and let him lead, but many of the insights he brought to the class were drawn from their study time together. Heather had led her college tennis team to the state quarterfinals and still played three or four times a week. She was tanned and lean and carried herself with an athlete's natural grace.

John found himself watching her anew. He saw his wife of twenty-seven years, the mother of their two children, the woman who had helped him bear the intolerable loads of this life, and he loved her so much his heart hurt.

Something must have connected, for she stopped in mid-sentence and said, "John, will you tell me what it is?"

There might have been another thirty or so people in the room. But the way she spoke those words made the impossible feel natural. The concept of public confession was daunting. But he felt that her request was proper. It was time.

John said, "I have the impression that God spoke to me."

Heather resumed her seat next to him. "Back in church?"

"When the pastor led us in the opening prayer. And it just kept growing." He touched the small book in his pocket that dealt with listening to God. The church had bought several boxes and offered them around. "Heather and I have been studying this in our morning prayer times." John shook his head. He might have been trying

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to listen. But he wasn't sure he was actually ready for what had just happened.

Heather asked, "How do you know it was the Lord?"

"There've been a few moments in my life I know I'll never forget. Times that I've felt if there was one ounce more joy or love, I'd explode. I just couldn't contain anything more." He spoke with a slow deliberation, normal for John. He rarely sped up his words. "When you said you'd marry me. That was one. Seeing our boys take their first breaths, those were two more. The experience in the sanctuary was that powerful."

A man who had been John's friend since high school asked, "What did God say?"

John sat for a while, then replied, "He asked who would go for him."

Heather asked, "Go where?"

"He didn't say." There had been a unique intensity to the experience. One that left John utterly certain that this silent exchange had not been manufactured by his own brain. "I answered like Isaiah. I said, 'Here am I, send me.' And God said, 'Take the turning, and walk the unlikely road.'"

He took a long breath. Once again the images were so intense he shut his eyes and bowed his head, returning in all but body to the sanctuary and the moment. "I asked how I would know the message was really from God. He said, take the turning, and I would find him waiting there."

"What turning was he talking about, John?"

To that, he shook his head. He knew exactly what God was referring to. But that was something he was not ready to talk about. Not with anyone.

# 2

*“God’s hidden wisdom . . .”*

## NEW YORK CITY

Trent Cooper stood by the vast windows overlooking Times Square, his back to the reception area and his pacing boss. Trent understood the man’s terror. They both had good reason to be afraid. The elegant chamber was littered with the carcasses of former executives. The vultures inside the office beyond the double doors were experts at picking flesh from bones.

Trent had never felt calmer.

His every sense was on hyperalert. He stood on the fifth floor, close enough to ground level to observe the people scurry around the square. In Trent’s research of the man behind this meeting, one of the articles had criticized the office’s location. In New York, higher was better. Penthouses were intended to hold the power brokers. But Trent understood exactly why Barry Mundrose had placed his office right here. Trent did not see hordes of tourists and locals jostling and rushing and pointing and talking. He saw an audience. *His* audience. The people he would both mold and shape into a mass of mouths eager to swallow whatever he next produced. Like a huge flock of baby birds, all their colorful wings flapping as they scrambled and cheeped and craved whatever crumb he decided to deliver.

The reception area held a variety of aromas. Fresh ground coffee, fresh cut flowers, furniture polish, a hint of some exotic spice in the

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lovely receptionist's perfume. Overlaying was a tight electric burn, the flavor of desert air the instant before lightning flared. Most people could not identify the subtle tang. They fretted and churned without knowing exactly why.

He tasted the air with the tip of his tongue. The charge was as intense as anything he had ever known, and took him straight back to his childhood. He recalled nights huddled in the storm cellar behind their house, his father out on the road somewhere, his mother cradling his head in her arms, probably not even aware of the noises she made, moans linking fragments of pleas to God, hidden and helpless and afraid.

Even there, Trent was never frightened. He loved the sound of the approaching storms, like electric beasts stomping the dry Oklahoma soil, the thunder rolling out warnings of their approach. Until finally, *bam!* the strikes became so close the thunder and the lightning joined into one gigantic explosion, striking faster and faster and faster, his mother wailing her fears, the wind howling, the cellar doors rattling as the giant battered and bellowed. Then it marched away until they were safe to emerge, and there was nothing left of it except the soft rumble of its force beyond the horizon.

That and the flavor of power on his tongue.

The receptionist called from her station by the grand double doors, "Gentlemen, Mr. Mundrose will see you now."

## BALTIMORE

Alisha Seames sat at the head table in the church hall. One Sunday each month, the families brought in food and ate together following the service. Actually, it was more like a midday break, because most folks stayed over for a second helping of praise and worship after eating. The main table was on a little rise, like a knee-high stage. Alisha sat with her back to the rear curtain. She loved

being up there at the head table. She'd spent extra time on her dress and her hat and her makeup and her shoes. Knowing everybody was looking. Just loving it.

Only not today.

"Alisha, what's the matter, sister? Why aren't you eating?"

She would like to tell Pastor Terry Reeves that she wasn't hungry. But she wasn't going to disgrace herself by telling a lie. She was always hungry. She didn't understand how other people managed to hold to a diet. She could eat a huge meal and twenty minutes later be hungry again. She was always struggling with her weight, and she was always getting bigger.

The pastor was a smooth-skinned, handsome man. Some said he was too young to lead a church the size of theirs. But Alisha knew better. He was not just a great preacher. He was also a leader. She had never been more aware of this fact than right here, right now, when he leaned across his wife to ask again, "Are you all right, sister?"

Alisha knew his wife did not like her. Celeste Reeves thought Alisha was pushy and opinionated. The two women also had a history. Celeste sang in the choir that Alisha led. Celeste had let it be known that she thought she should be in charge there too. Alisha positively lived for that choir, and nobody, not even the pastor's wife, was going to knock her off that perch. When Celeste had realized she couldn't take over the adult choir, she started working with children in one of Baltimore's worst neighborhoods, fashioning them into a choir all her very own. And now the woman wanted to bring them in and join them with Alisha's group, less than a week before the choir's biggest event of the year.

But Alisha couldn't think about that now. Not and stay focused on what needed doing.

Alisha rose to her feet. "Excuse me, I've just got to go . . ."

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She didn't finish the sentence because she didn't want to be telling anyone exactly what it was that she just had to go do. Because of her girth, she bumped every chair in turn as she made her way off the narrow stage. She heard the stairs creak as she descended, and she saw people stare at her, and she knew they'd be talking. But this couldn't wait. God had spoken to her, and that was a fact. After a lifetime of praying, it had actually happened, and she dreaded what was coming next. Because as soon as God had said, "Take the unlikely road," Alisha had known just exactly what that turn was. She didn't want to do it. She hated the very idea of what was coming next. But God had said he would meet her there. And that left her with no choice. None at all.

Twenty minutes later Alisha pulled up in front of a house she never thought she'd visit. The Rothmore district of Baltimore was a leafy enclave shining with wealth on this crisp April day. The brownstone townhouse fit the rich surroundings, as did the white Porsche Cayenne parked in the drive. Alisha took a double-fisted grip on her purse and marched up the front walk like she belonged.

The door was answered by Kenneth, of course. It had to be him that appeared, not Alisha's sister. It just had to be like this, the whole nasty business just pressed into her face like God had meant all along to challenge her in the toughest possible fashion. She loathed how Kenneth pretended to be delighted to see her. She detested his accent, like he didn't know better than to stop breathing through his nose when he spoke. "Alisha, what a pleasant surprise. Does Tabby know you're coming?"

She hated that too. How he called his wife like he would a cat. But Alisha didn't snip at him that Tabatha, the name their mother had given her sister, was a fine name. All she said was, "I was in church, and I felt like I needed to stop by."

"Of course. Welcome." He stepped back, waving her inside. Like some highbrow earl or something. Instead of what he truly was, the

godless white man who had stolen Alisha's baby sister away. "Please, come in."

The interior was exactly as Alisha had imagined, beautiful and pristine and very expensive looking. A rich white man's idea of a perfect home, full of antiques so delicate Alisha was afraid to sit down anywhere. Kenneth led her into a parlor and said, "Let me just go tell Tabby you're here. I won't be a moment."

As he bounded up the stairs, Alisha seated herself on the sofa. It wheezed softly, like a rich man's sigh. Probably never had a black woman plunk herself down here before. Which she knew was untrue before the thought was even formed. And she wasn't angry at the man. Not really. She was just angry. Like she wanted to yell at God for putting her in this position, but she couldn't, so she just sat there. Being angry at a room.

Past events started running through her brain, tight little bundles of emotions packed around each mental image like grenades. How their mother had gone up to work in Chicago, leaving Alisha and her sister to be raised by their grandmother. How the mother had not come back, not even when their grandmother had become ill, and so Alisha had become mother to the sister who was only four years younger than herself. How Alisha had scrimped and saved and worked so Tabatha could finish high school, and go on to community college, and then win a scholarship to the university where her husband taught sociology. How the first thing Alisha had known about their relationship was when Tabatha had told her about the engagement. What a night that had been. That particular argument had blistered the paint. But it did not hold a candle to the quarrel they'd had the day before the wedding, when Alisha learned there was not to be a preacher, not even a *white* preacher. Instead, they were getting married down in the courthouse. Because neither Tabatha nor her white-bread husband believed in God.

"Alisha? What are you doing here?"

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It was just amazing how tiny her sister was. People seeing the two of them together might not have said anything, but Alisha had a lifetime's experience at reading the unspoken verdict in their faces. How Tabatha was beautiful and lithe and narrow-waisted and long-limbed, like a dancer. And Alisha was just plain big.

And there Tabatha stood. Poised and refined. Like she'd been born to live in this elegant, historic row house, with a man who had inherited more money than they knew what to do with, and how they didn't find any need for God. Her little sister. All grown up.

Alisha pushed herself to her feet. "Hello, Tabatha."

"You have to excuse me, I'm a little shocked. I thought you said you'd never set foot in my home."

Kenneth hovered in the front hallway. He cleared his throat, which was probably a white man's way of being nervous. "Will you ladies take coffee?"

Alisha had no idea how to respond. Which Pastor Terry's wife would definitely say was a first. When she didn't speak, her sister said, "We're fine here, Kenneth. Just give us a moment, please."

The woman even talked white.

"I'll just be in the kitchen if you need me."

Tabatha stood there, studying her sister, like she'd never set eyes on the woman before. "Why are you here?" she asked again.

Alisha had not known what she was going to say until that very moment. But the words were there waiting. As she spoke, she wondered if that was what God had meant when he'd said that he would meet her at the turning.

Alisha said, "I've come to apologize."

Tabatha cocked her head. "Why now? I mean, excuse me for asking, sister. But after all this time, don't you think you owed me a phone call before turning up out of the blue?"

"Yes. You're right. And I would have, if I'd thought of it."

"You didn't think to call me."

"No. I'm sorry."

"Two apologies in the space of a minute. After four years of nothing." Tabatha gave a reluctant wave at the sofa. "I suppose you might as well sit back down."

She remained where she was. "I was in church this morning."

"Of course you were. It's Sunday. Where else would you be?" Tabatha walked to the narrow table by the window, opened a silver box, and pulled out a cigarette and lighter.

Alisha watched her sister light up. "I didn't know you smoked."

"Since I was fifteen. We all have our secrets." The smoke deepened her voice, making it sound sultry. "So you were in church."

Alisha nodded slowly. "God spoke to me. And said I needed to do this."

Tabatha eyed her through the smoke. "God takes such a personal interest in your affairs that he tells you to come apologize?"

Normally the acidic cynicism would have been enough to set Alisha alight. In this case, however, she felt nothing. Not even regret. Just a calm so complete she might as well have been seated in her car out front, instead of inside this place where she most certainly did not belong. "That's right. He does."

"Any idea why he waited four years to send down that little note?"

"I suppose . . . Maybe he didn't think I was ready."

"But you're ready now."

Alisha nodded. "You're looking good, Tabatha."

"Money will do that to a person." She stubbed out the cigarette. "I'm happy, Alisha."

"I'm glad."

"I'm not going to stand here and have you use this apology as an excuse to tell me I'm living a godless life."

"I didn't come here to do anything more than apologize."

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“Not now, not ever. You hear me? I won’t have you sitting on your little church throne and spouting judgment over me or my man. I’m all grown up now, just like you said. I’m living my life. You hear me? *My* life.”

Alisha heard that, and she heard how her sister had waited four long years for the chance to say those words. And the knowledge was enough to send a tear hot as lava rolling down her face. “I’ve missed you. So much.”

Tabatha’s face went through a remarkable transformation. For a brief instant, the determined poise melted like soft wax, and the woman showed a heart that ached. The eyes liquefied, the lips trembled, the hands danced up and around and down. Then Tabatha took a hard breath, and rebuilt the tight facade that fit this room and this world. “In that case, why don’t you join us for lunch. We’re having a few people over.”

“Thank you, Tabatha. That is so sweet of you. I’m happy to accept.”

Alisha just knew it was going to be awful.