A Christmas Evening

A Christmas novella written by Ken Freeland
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INDEX

CHAPTER 1

Friday – Homeward Bound

The bell released them all at once. Sneakers slapped tile. Lockers banged shut. Someone yelled about a missing worksheet like it was a crime scene. Then, almost instantly, the noise thinned, draining away until the hallway felt flat and ordinary again, like nothing important had happened at all.

Jesse ended up walking beside Thomas without thinking about it. That was how it usually went. They lived in the same neighborhood, and after a while the walk home stopped being a choice and started feeling like gravity—quiet, unavoidable.

“Coach Miller’s gonna make us run suicides on Monday,” Jesse said.

Thomas groaned. “I’ll die on the first ‘su.’ They’ll bury me next to the vending machine.”

“You’ll haunt it,” Jesse said. “Steal quarters from the living.”

They laughed—the easy, unthinking laughter of boys who didn’t yet know what real trouble felt like.

They passed the convenience store on the corner, its OPEN sign flickering like it couldn’t make up its mind. The air smelled faintly of fryer oil and gum. A bunch of seventh graders clogged the bike rack, one kid trying to pop a wheelie and failing hard enough that he blamed gravity out loud.

Thomas stopped to retie his shoe. His laces were always coming undone. Jesse waited, scuffing frost off the curb with his sneaker.

“You think we’ll get snow before Christmas?” Jesse asked.

“Maybe,” Thomas said. “Texas snow is just rain trying to act special.”

“Guess we’ll sled on mud.”

“Still counts.”

They drifted through the usual stuff—cafeteria pizza (basically cardboard), whether *Die Hard* counted as a Christmas movie (Thomas: yes, obviously; Jesse: undecided), and which teacher definitely had candy hidden in their desk. The conversation wandered the way it always did, loose and pointless, like they had all the time in the world.

Thomas spotted an old paint can in an empty lot and kicked a rock at it. Missed. Tried again. Missed worse.

Jesse took a turn and nailed it. *Ping.*

Thomas stared at the can. “You practice when no one’s looking.”

“Natural talent.”

“Natural b.s.,” Thomas said, grinning.

They kept walking. Maple Street was already half-decorated for Christmas. Plastic reindeer froze mid-leap on one lawn. On another, a baby Jesus inflatable sagged sideways, half-deflated, like someone had forgotten him.

Jesse noticed these things without knowing why he noticed them. Lately, he kept catching stuff like that—things just a little off. It wasn’t exactly a problem. Just… there.

Their street curved inward ahead of them, the sidewalks bending gently as if reconsidering their direction. Houses fanned out in a loose circle, driveways facing one another, the road narrowing until it stopped pretending it went anywhere else. This was where Jesse lived. The street didn’t continue; it simply folded back on itself.

They were almost halfway home when Thomas said, abruptly, “That video today was messed up.”

Jesse felt it before Thomas finished the thought.

“The one in social studies,” Thomas went on. “The news clip.”

Jesse nodded. He didn’t look at Thomas. He already knew which one.

Gaza.

The classroom had gone quiet when the teacher turned the lights down. The footage had played on the screen, official-looking, calm-voiced, like every other news segment they were supposed to learn from.

But the images hadn’t been calm.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Thomas said. “Those people running. Did you see the kids?”

Jesse shrugged, too fast. “I mean… news videos never show the whole thing. There’s always more going on than what they show.”

The words came out automatically. He’d heard versions of them his whole life.

Thomas stopped walking.

“Jesse,” he said. “That was a refugee camp.”

Jesse felt heat creep up his neck. He didn’t like how thin his answer had sounded, even to himself.

“Israel’s complicated,” he said. “They’re always defending themselves. That’s what Pastor Harrow says.”

The moment he said it, he knew it didn’t really land. It sounded borrowed. Like something he was supposed to say.

Thomas stared at him. Not angry. Just… disappointed.

“So blowing kids up is defending yourself now?” Thomas asked quietly.

Jesse winced.

He wanted to say more. Wanted to explain it better, make it make sense. But all he really had were phrases, and suddenly they felt small.

“They’re God’s chosen people,” he added, because that was the part he knew by heart.

Thomas shook his head. “Man… I don’t know. That sure didn’t look to me like anything God would choose.”

The words landed harder than Jesse expected. Not because they were rude, or even because they sounded rebellious, but because they didn’t slide off him the way they always had before. For a moment, the familiar certainty stirred—the sense that this was settled ground, that there was an answer ready if he reached for it.

But nothing came.

He could almost hear Pastor Harrow’s voice, steady and assured, closing ranks around the question the way it always did. Jesse had trusted that voice. It had always been enough.

Except now it wasn’t.

Thomas wasn’t asking what God willed. He was asking why God would will it. And Jesse felt, for the first time in their many forays into this topic, that he had run out of road.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, their shoes pushing dry leaves along the curb. The earlier mood hadn’t disappeared—it had just dimmed, like someone had turned the lights down.

At the point where the road looped back on itself, Thomas slowed. This was as far as he ever came.

“See you Monday,” he said, giving a small nod.

“Yeah,” Jesse said, forcing a groan. “Suicide Monday. Can’t wait.”

Thomas snorted and continued on, heading past the bend where the street straightened out again.

Jesse turned inward, following the curve that led him home.

Friday Evening

Jesse crossed his lawn slowly, avoiding the thorny bushes his dad kept meaning to trim. The front window glowed warm and yellow, but tonight it felt less like a welcome than a test.

Inside, everything was normal. His mom stirred something on the stove—cinnamon and nutmeg in the air. His dad watched football in the den with the volume low. The house hummed the way it always did.

Jesse dropped his backpack on a chair instead of hanging it up and sat at the table without realizing it. The images from the video hovered in his mind now that he wasn’t trying not to think about them.

Running people.

Smoke.

Kids being carried.

Did Pastor know about this part?

Did anyone?

His mom glanced over. “You okay? You look wiped.”

“Yeah,” Jesse said automatically. “Just tired.”

Later, alone in his room, Jesse shut the door and leaned against it for a moment, as if listening for something he hoped wouldn’t follow him in. The house sounded the same as ever—pots clinking, the low murmur of the game from the den—but it all felt farther away now, as though he’d stepped slightly out of sync with it.

He sat on the edge of his bed and picked up his phone. The screen lit his face. The search bar waited, blank and expectant.

He thought of Thomas’s voice—not loud, not dramatic, just shaken. He thought of the kids in the video, running without knowing where to run to. Refugee camp. Safe place. Those words didn’t line up in his head.

Could it really be that bad?

He wanted it not to be. He wanted there to be an explanation he’d somehow missed, a detail that would put everything back where it belonged. Pastor Harrow always said the truth didn’t fear questions. If that was right, then asking shouldn’t feel like this.

His thumbs hovered over the screen. He typed slowly, one word at a time, as if each one carried weight:

Gaza

Refugee

Camp

Bombing

Video

He stared at the phrase once it was there. His chest felt tight, like he was about to jump from somewhere high.

Before he could change his mind, Jesse closed his eyes and tapped SEARCH.

For a split second he hoped nothing would come up. That there would be some error, some dead end, a message telling him the video had been misleading or taken out of context.

The results came instantly.

Pictures.

Clips.

Different angles of the same thing.

It was all there.

He opened his eyes slowly, like he might be able to soften the blow by not looking all at once.

His stomach tightened. Thomas hadn’t exaggerated. If anything, the video at school had been the mild version.

Jesse dropped the phone onto his bed.

He wanted someone to explain it. To tell him how this fit with what he’d been taught. To make it line up again.

But if he asked Mom and Dad, he already knew what they would say to him: *Well, what did Pastor Harrow tell us about this?* And he already knew what Pastor Harrow had preached last Sunday.

Then it suddenly struck him.

Pastor Harrow.

Sunday.

He could ask then. He should ask then.

Jesse climbed into bed early that night, though he knew sleep wouldn’t come fast. When he closed his eyes, the images were still there—running people, smoke, kids being carried—sharper now that he’d seen them again.

He wasn’t angry.

He wasn’t choosing sides.

He was just unsettled in a way he didn’t have words for yet.

He practiced the question in his head, over and over:

Pastor, we watched a video in class…

Is it true refugee camps were bombed?

How can this be right?

Every version felt dangerous.

But the questions wouldn’t leave him alone.

He promised himself he would ask on Sunday.

He had to.

Before turning out the light, Jesse sat up in bed and folded his hands the way he’d been taught. He hadn’t planned to pray. The prayer arrived on its own, awkward and unfinished.

He told God he was confused.

He said he was trying to do the right thing. Everyone he trusted seemed certain—his parents, the people at church, Pastor Harrow most of all—and yet none of what he’d heard so far explained what he’d seen. Not really.

He didn’t ask for courage. He didn’t ask for answers spelled out.

He asked for help seeing clearly.

If this was right, he wanted to understand how.

If it wasn’t, he wanted to know what he was supposed to do with that.

He asked—quietly, almost embarrassed—for some kind of pause. A break in the action. Something solid he could trust.

The words ran out before the feeling did. Jesse lay back and stared at the ceiling, waiting for a sense of peace that didn’t come, only a tired stillness that eventually pulled him under.

CHAPTER 2

Saturday — Special Delivery

Jesse was given his Saturday chore after breakfast, the way chores were usually given—casually, as if they were favors.

“Go straighten the back room,” his mother said, already turning back to the sink. “The shelves, too. Just make it neat.”

The back room was where things went when no one wanted to decide what to do with them. It held coats that didn’t fit anymore, a broken lamp waiting on a part that would never be ordered, and an old bookcase that bowed slightly in the middle from years of uneven weight. Dust hung in the air there, undisturbed but not abandoned.

Jesse worked without hurry. He stacked magazines, aligned spines, wiped a shelf with the hem of his old T-shirt. The room felt cooler than the rest of the house, quieter, as if it had been set aside for listening.

The old bookcase towered above him, but was mostly empty now. He noticed the gathering dust underneath the bottom shelf, and he crouched down to tip it so he could sweep underneath. That’s when he heard it—a sudden whoosh, followed by the dry scrape of cardboard on wood.

The sound came from above him.

He looked up just in time to see a box begin to slide off the top of the bookcase, slowly at first, then decisively—like something had brushed it rather than shoved it.

The lid slipped free in midair. Papers burst out and scattered across the floor in a soft, startled rush.

Jesse froze.

For a second he expected his mother to call out, to ask what had fallen, to tell him to be careful. Nothing came. The house continued in its Saturday rhythm—water running somewhere, a cabinet closing, the distant sound of a radio.

He knelt and began gathering the papers, automatically, the way he'd been taught. That was when he noticed the handwriting.

It wasn't printed. It wasn't neat. It leaned forward slightly, as if the words themselves were in a hurry.

He picked one up and saw a date at the top. Years earlier than he would have guessed.

Then a name.

Miriam.

The recognition landed before understanding did.

He hadn't meant to read anything. He told himself that even as his eyes caught on a line, then fastened on another. The tone of the letter—clearly addressed to her sister, Jesse's mother—came through first: careful, searching, restrained.

Questions, not accusations.

He read a few sentences, then another page. Then another.

His heart began to beat faster than it should have been, not from fear exactly, but from the effort of fitting things together.

At first, his mind refused the simplest conclusion.

This couldn't be his mother.

His mother didn't write like this. His mother didn't sound like this. His mother spoke as if Pastor Harrow's theology had been handed down with the furniture—solid, unquestionable, meant to be kept in place. If Jesse asked an awkward question at the dinner table, she didn't pause to think; she corrected. If he hesitated, she insisted. Doubt, in their house, was not a stage. It was a flaw.

But here, in his hands, was a voice that hesitated.

A voice that raised moral concerns as if they mattered.

He kept reading because he needed to prove he had misunderstood.

The letters moved back and forth between questions of faith and questions of belonging. Miriam wrote with a careful intensity, as if choosing each word so it would not be mistaken for an attack. She asked Jesse’s mother how certain teachings could be squared with the things they had once agreed were central—mercy, humility, and a faith that leaned toward care before correctness.

Jesse could follow it, even now. The words were not academic; they were moral. They had edges, but not barbs. Miriam wasn’t trying to win. She was trying to keep something from being lost.

His mother’s replies—shorter, more tentative—were folded in among Miriam’s letters. She wrote about wanting unity in her marriage. About not wanting to live in constant disagreement. About how exhausting it was to feel like every Sunday was a debate she wasn’t prepared for. She admitted, in a way that made Jesse’s stomach tighten, that she sometimes trusted her husband’s certainty because her own felt thin.

The pattern slowly became clear.

His mother had not changed her mind all at once. She had drifted, by degrees—questioning, hesitating, stepping back, then stepping back again. And each time she stepped back, Miriam pressed—not angrily, not accusingly, but insistently—trying to hold her sister to the convictions they had once named together.

There was no rupture in the letters. No dramatic break.

Just a gradual narrowing.

In the last letter Jesse read, the tone had changed. His mother no longer asked questions. She explained herself. She wrote that she had decided to join her husband’s church, that it was the right thing to do for their family, that peace mattered. She acknowledged Miriam’s concerns without answering them.

What stood out most was what was missing.

There was no mention of doubt.

It wasn’t that doubt had been defeated.

It had simply been put away.

Jesse sat back on his heels, surrounded by papers that felt warmer than they should have been.

This wasn’t something that had come from outside.

This was family.

He glanced toward the doorway. The hall was empty.

Carefully, he stacked the letters back together, not in their original order—he had no idea what that was—but with a care that surprised him. He placed them back in the box, set the lid on top, and slid it to the back of the shelf where it had been.

His hands were shaking now.

He stood and dusted off his knees, listening again to the ordinary sounds of the house. They hadn't changed. No one had noticed anything missing. Or found.

But Jesse felt as if something had shifted in the air.

Not a fact, exactly.

A shape.

He finished the chore quickly after that. Too quickly. When he was done, he washed his hands longer than necessary, scrubbing as if the dust itself were to blame—as if what had unsettled him could be rinsed away and made ordinary again.

Upstairs, he closed his bedroom door and sat on the bed.

He wanted, instinctively, to be angry.

It was easier to be angry.

But as he replayed the letters in his mind, the anger would not settle into a clean shape. His mother hadn't sounded cruel. She hadn't sounded deceptive. She had sounded tired. She had sounded afraid of being the one who never stopped questioning—afraid of what questioning might do to her marriage, to her sense of belonging, to the fragile peace of a household that needed agreements in order to function.

And yet.

The same voice that had once written like that was the voice that now corrected him before he finished his sentences.

He could feel the connection forming, quiet and ugly in its logic.

If she had paid for her peace by closing a door, then the worst thing he could do was try to open it.

Maybe that was why she enforced certainty the way she did.

Not because she was sure.

Because she needed to be.

A thought pressed in, unwanted but undeniable:

Someone in his family tree had once raised the same kinds of questions he had lately begun asking himself.

And someone else had decided they belonged in a box, set high enough to be forgotten.

He lay back and stared at the ceiling, the image of the sliding box replaying itself, over and over.

It hadn’t fallen like a mistake.

It had fallen like a message.

Almost as though it were pushed.

By the time his mother called him for lunch, Jesse had not decided anything.

But he understood something he hadn’t the day before.

The answers he was looking for had a history.

That night, lying in bed with the house finally quiet, Jesse tried again to sort through what he had seen. The letters replayed themselves in his mind—not their exact words, but their movement, the way they seemed to narrow toward an ending that felt less like a conclusion than a closing.

Tomorrow was Sunday.

Social hour.

He had already planned to ask Pastor Harrow his question. The thought of it returned now, heavier than before.

For a moment, a simpler idea tempted him. He could do what his mother had done. He could accept the certainty that was offered, submit to it, and let the discomfort drain away with time. It would be easier. It would mean no more circling thoughts, no more unease. Just trust, obedience, peace.

Wasn’t that what faith was supposed to be?

But the thought curdled as soon as it formed. He saw again his mother’s last letter—so calm, so final—and felt something tighten in his chest. Whatever peace she had chosen, it had come at the cost of questions that still mattered.

No, he realized. He couldn’t do it that way. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

He wasn’t trying to challenge anyone. He wasn’t trying to be difficult. He just needed answers that made sense—answers that could live alongside what he had seen, not erase it.

His question shouldn’t be dangerous. And if it was, then that told him something he shouldn’t ignore. He didn’t know where asking would lead—only that not asking wasn’t an option anymore.

Jesse turned onto his side and pulled the blanket up to his chin.

Tomorrow, he would ask, he determined. He said a quick prayer for the courage he would need tomorrow, then nodded off into a light sleep.

CHAPTER 3

Sunday — Breaking the Silence

The folding tables had already been set up when Jesse and his parents reached the fellowship hall. Coffee urns hissed softly. Someone had brought donuts—glazed and powdered, arranged in careful circles like they mattered. The hum of conversation filled the room, cheerful and self-assured, as though nothing troubling had ever happened anywhere.

Pastor Harrow stood near the coffee, laughing with a small group. He looked especially relaxed, his sermon already delivered, his work for the morning complete. Jesse lingered near the edge of the room, his hands shoved into his pockets, his heart beating harder than he expected.

He hadn't planned to speak up here. He had told himself that if the chance didn't come naturally, he would let it go. But when Pastor Harrow spotted him and smiled, something tightened in Jesse's chest.

"Yes, Jesse?" the pastor said kindly, noticing the way Jesse had been hovering at the edge of the group. "You look like you've got something on your mind."

The nearby conversations softened, not stopping so much as thinning, like people pretending not to listen.

Jesse swallowed. "Yeah. Um. We watched a video in social studies this week. About Gaza."

A few heads turned now, and there was a noticeable reduction of the social hum around him.

"It showed a refugee camp being bombed," he went on. "I was just wondering… is that true?"

There it was. Out in the open now.

Pastor Harrow nodded slowly, the way adults do when they recognize a question they've answered many times before.

“Well,” he said, “war is always complicated. Hamas operates from within civilian populations. They always use innocent people as shields. Israel has a right to defend itself, and unfortunately that means tragic things can happen.”

Jesse listened, trying to make the words line up with the images in his head. They almost did. Almost.

“And of course,” Pastor Harrow added smoothly, “Israel does everything it can to avoid civilian casualties.”

He paused, then smiled wider, as if remembering something.

“But lucky for us, you don’t have to take my word for it.”

He gestured toward a man standing a few steps away—a guest Jesse hadn’t noticed before. The man wore a dark blazer and a small knitted cap. He had kind eyes, or at least practiced ones.

“Many of you remember Rabbi Levin,” Pastor Harrow said. “He’s graciously agreed to share some insights with us again today.”

A ripple of approval passed through the room. Jesse felt it—the subtle shift. This was different now. This wasn’t opinion. This was expertise.

The Rabbi stepped forward, nodding politely.

“Thank you, Pastor,” he said. His voice was calm, measured, reassuring. “I know emotions run high when people see disturbing images on television. But it’s important not to believe everything we hear on certain news channels.”

Several people nodded.

“Israel takes great care to avoid harming civilians,” the Rabbi continued. “The Israeli Defense Forces are the most moral army in the Middle East. They issue warnings. They assess threats carefully. But when terrorists hide among civilians, tragic outcomes become unavoidable.”

The room was quiet now—not tense, but settled. Relieved.

The Rabbi looked directly at Jesse.

“Do you understand?”

The word landed heavier than Jesse expected. Not harsh—but firm. Friendly, but final. It carried the faint sting of being talked down to, as if the question had already been filed away and labeled for him.

Jesse felt his face warm. For a moment, he considered nodding and letting it end there. That was what everyone expected. That was what a good kid did.

“I guess so,” he said, then surprised himself by continuing. “I’m just… trying to understand something.”

The Rabbi waited, smiling.

“If they’re the most moral army,” Jesse said carefully, “why would they bomb a refugee camp in the first place? I thought that wasn’t allowed.”

The smile flickered—just for an instant. A pause too small for anyone else to notice.

“Well,” the Rabbi said, a bit more quickly now, “the term ‘refugee camp’ can be misleading. Many of these areas are long-established neighborhoods. And legality in war is very complex—international law allows for action when combatants are present.”

He spread his hands gently, as if laying the matter to rest.

“It’s tragic,” he said. “But responsibility lies with those who choose to operate from among civilians, not with those who are defending themselves from them.”

Heads nodded again. Several murmurs of agreement could be heard.

The Rabbi’s composure returned fully now. He gave Jesse a small, practiced smile—measured and reassuring, the kind meant to signal closure rather than warmth.

“Does that help?”

Jesse hesitated, suddenly aware of the semicircle that had formed around them—the faces turned politely toward him, waiting. Then he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

It felt hollow as soon as he said it.

Pastor Harrow clapped his hands lightly. “Thank you, Rabbi. I think that was very instructive.”

The room resumed its hum. Coffee was poured. A joke was told nearby. The moment passed, absorbed back into the pleasant rhythm of Sunday morning social hour.

Jesse stood where he was for a second longer, the words echoing in his head—not wrong exactly, but not right either. He couldn’t say what the problem was. Only that something didn’t add up.

But beneath the confusion was something else too—unexpected, steadier.

He felt a flicker of pride, and with it a quiet relief. He had done it. He had raised the question. All week he'd wondered whether he would have the nerve, whether he would freeze or back down when the moment came.

He hadn't.

Whatever else he felt—uncertainty, lingering doubt, the sense that the answers hadn't quite held—he knew this much: he hadn't stayed silent. He had stepped forward instead of shrinking back.

His thoughts felt jumbled now, overlapping rather than lining up—the Rabbi's calm certainty, Pastor Harrow's easy confidence, the images from the video, Thomas's candid remarks from earlier in the week—all of it rushing together without settling. He couldn't yet tell which parts mattered most, or where the trouble really was.

But beneath the jumble was a sharper realization, one that sent a quick, almost exhilarating jolt through him: something in the world itself had shifted. Not inwardly, not privately—but out there, in the way things now moved and reacted. The smooth current he'd always floated along had been broken.

He noticed it in small ways. His mother caught his eye from across the room and looked away just as quickly, her mouth tightening, a faint crease of disapproval settling in before she masked it. A few conversations nearby resumed with a little too much cheer, as if to hurry past what had just happened.

That was new. And unsettling. And unmistakable.

He would sort out the explanations later—the gaps, the parts that still didn't make sense. That work could wait. What mattered now was that he'd crossed a line he hadn't known was there. He had asked the question out loud, and the world hadn't stayed the same afterward.

And if the stream didn't clear on its own, he already knew what he would do. When he walked home with Thomas on Monday he'd say it out loud again, the way he always did when things got tangled. Thomas always seemed to have an answer for everything—or at least a way of working a question over until the weak spots showed.

CHAPTER 4

Monday — Suicide is Painful

They didn’t say anything serious at first.

Both of them walked a little stiffly, shoulders tight, backpacks riding lower than usual. Jesse’s legs still felt like someone had poured sand into them. Every step down the sidewalk tugged at muscles he hadn’t known he owned until that afternoon.

“Those suicides were brutal,” Thomas said finally, like he was stating a fact no one could dispute.

Jesse let out a short laugh. “I thought my lungs were going to crawl out of my throat and beg for mercy.”

“I barely made the last turn,” Thomas said. “I swear my legs just stopped listening.”

Jesse nodded. “Coach Miller kept yelling like that was supposed to help.”

Thomas dropped his voice into a gravelly rasp and spread his arms wide, doing his best imitation. “All right, gentlemen—consider these suicides my Christmas present to you.”

Jesse snorted despite himself. “That sounded even worse out of his mouth.”

“Pathetic,” Thomas said. “Like he thought we were gonna be grateful or something.”

They walked a few more steps, letting the complaints burn themselves out. The anger was already fading, settling into the dull ache that always followed. Ordinary pain. Familiar pain.

Maple Street came into view, quiet and half-lit in the early winter dusk.

After a moment, Jesse said, “So… yesterday was weird.”

Thomas glanced over at him. “Your church thing?”

Jesse hesitated. “Yeah. At church.”

Thomas waited.

Jesse kicked at a loose pebble, watching it skitter ahead of them. “The Rabbi. What he had to say.”

Thomas blinked. “A Rabbi?” he said. “Like… at your church?”

Jesse felt the Rabbi’s words lining up in his head the way they had on Sunday, neat and ready. He repeated them slowly, careful to get them right. “He said Hamas hides among civilians. That they use people as shields. So Israel has to do what it does, even if it looks bad. And that they try to warn people first.”

He stopped talking and listened to the silence that followed. The explanation sat there between them, thinner than it had sounded in the fellowship hall.

Thomas frowned slightly. “Okay,” he said. “But if it’s a refugee camp… where are people supposed to go?”

Jesse opened his mouth, then closed it.

“I mean,” Thomas went on, not pressing, just thinking out loud, “they’re already there because they don’t have anywhere else. So ‘leave’ and go where?”

Jesse felt the same unsettled tug he’d felt on Sunday. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I guess… that part wasn’t really explained.”

They walked a few steps farther.

They walked in silence for a few steps.

Then Thomas said, “Can I say something without you thinking I’m being a jerk?”

“Yeah,” Jesse said.

“I just keep wondering,” Thomas said slowly, choosing his words, “who decides there were Hamas in that camp in the first place.”

Jesse frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Thomas said, “every time Israel bombs something—schools, hospitals, apartment buildings—there’s always supposed to be Hamas there. Same with churches. Mosques too. Doesn’t that seem… convenient?”

Jesse didn’t answer right away.

“Like,” Thomas went on, “no matter what gets hit, the explanation’s already waiting. It’s never just ‘we messed up’ or ‘we hit the wrong place.’ It’s always ‘there were Hamas there.’”

He shrugged. “I’m not saying it’s never true. I’m just saying it sounds like something you can say about anything, after the fact.”

Jesse felt the words land one by one. He thought of the Rabbi’s calm certainty, how complete it had sounded.

“I guess,” Jesse said, “he didn’t really say how they knew. Just that they did.”

“Right,” Thomas said. “It’s like once they say that, you’re not supposed to ask any more questions.”

They walked a few more steps, the quiet stretching again.

“And anyway,” Thomas said, glancing over, “can I ask you something else?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did your pastor have a Rabbi explain it?”

Jesse blinked. “I mean… it didn’t seem weird at the time.”

“I mean,” Thomas said, shrugging, “I don’t go to your church, so maybe I’m missing something—but you have a Christian pastor, right? Shouldn’t he be the one explaining stuff to you?”

Jesse slowed a little. He’d replayed the Rabbi’s answers in his head all day, but the question Thomas was asking hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“I guess… because the Rabbi would know more?” Jesse said. Even as he said it, the answer felt worse than unfinished. It felt indefensible, like something he was repeating out of habit rather than belief.

Thomas tilted his head. “More about what, exactly?”

Jesse didn’t answer right away. He pictured Pastor Harrow’s easy smile, the way the room had relaxed when the Rabbi stepped forward.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “I just… nobody thought it was weird.”

Thomas nodded slowly. “If I were in your place, I think I’d wonder about that too.”

They reached the place where the sidewalk curved and Thomas slowed.

Thomas shrugged. “I’m not saying those guys are lying,” he said. “I just don’t think the answer they gave you actually answered the question you were asking.”

Jesse looked down the street toward his house, the road bending inward ahead of him.

“Yeah,” he said after a moment. “That’s true. It didn’t.”

Thomas clapped him lightly on the shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

Jesse watched him head off, then turned toward home, starting the last leg of his walk alone, down the cul-de-sac where his family lived. Sunday replayed itself in pieces—the fellowship hall, the Rabbi’s calm voice, the way the room had gone still. And now he could see something else too: how hard it had been for him to speak at all, and how quickly the room had moved to seal the moment back up again.

He hadn’t just imagined that resistance. He’d felt it—the sudden tightening, the undertow of pressure to agree, the sense that he’d crossed an unspoken line. He’d broken the quiet rule that kept things smooth. And the explanations that followed just sort of… closed things up.

That was what bothered him now. Not the question itself—but the way it had been folded away.

It hadn’t felt wrong to ask. What felt wrong was how quickly it had been made to disappear.

CHAPTER 5

Tuesday: Testing the Waters

On Tuesday, Jesse was waiting outside the school doors when he caught himself doing it again.

Waiting for Thomas.

It still struck him as odd. Not the waiting—that part had become automatic—but *who* he was waiting for. A boy who hadn't been there three months ago. A boy who, at first, hadn't even known which direction was home.

Jesse had shown him. Thomas's family had just moved into the neighborhood—new home, unfamiliar streets, boxes still stacked like unresolved questions. They had met during gym class, and when Thomas told him where he lived and joked about probably getting lost on the way home, Jesse insisted on walking with him that first afternoon. That was how they hit it off. What began as a kind of joking favor had become a daily habit, and both boys looked forward to the way their daily walks home helped them unwind.

They didn't have much in common. That was the strange part.

As Jesse leaned against the cold brick wall, watching the after-school crowd thin, his thoughts wandered—as they had been doing far too often lately—back to Thomas's family.

How did their world *add up*?

In Jesse's home, everything made sense. Or at least it was supposed to. Events unfolded according to God's plan. History had an arc. Suffering had a grand purpose, even if it was sometimes hidden. You didn't need to fix everything, because everything was already being handled—by Someone infinitely more qualified.

Thomas's family didn't see it that way, he knew.

Jesse still didn’t know very much about them, just that they had moved to this area because Thomas’ father had landed a teaching position at a local college, and his mom worked part time from home through the Internet. But for them, judging from Thomas’s views of the matter, what was happening in Gaza wasn’t part of a divine ledger or a mysterious long game. It was simply a human catastrophe. A violation of moral order. Full stop.

That idea unsettled Jesse more than he liked to admit.

How could anyone live in a world like that?

A world where injustice wasn’t *explained*, only named. Where suffering didn’t resolve into meaning, but demanded response. Wouldn’t you be exhausted all the time? Wouldn’t you feel constantly compelled to *do something*—to fix problems so vast they made your own life feel embarrassingly small?

Jesse tried, experimentally, to imagine himself inside that worldview. Just for a moment. Just dipping a toe in.

He just couldn’t see how it worked.

And yet what unsettled him most was this: he hadn’t meant to test this water at all, and yet somehow his toe was already in it. Lately he was finding himself, without quite deciding to, looking for answers the old explanations no longer seemed to give. His world today no longer felt as solid as it had even a week ago. The explanations were still there, but they had begun to feel thinner—like the cardboard angels in his church nativity play that made everything seem more real, but tipped right over if you accidentally bumped into them.

“Earth to Jesse.”

Thomas had appeared beside him, backpack slung low, grin slightly crooked. He always looked faintly amused, as if the world were an interesting documentary he hadn’t quite decided how seriously to take.

They started walking, the familiar rhythm settling in. A few jokes. A complaint about homework. The weather, which had committed itself firmly to being gray until Easter.

Then Thomas said, casually, “So—Christmas. We’re officially there now...no homework for a whole week! Hard to believe! What are you looking forward to?”

Jesse didn’t have to think. “Family. Traditions. Everything being… the way it’s supposed to be.”

Thomas nodded. “Yeah. That’s nice.”

They walked a few more steps.

“Oh—hey,” Thomas added, as if remembering something only mildly important. “Mom says I can invite you over today. She’s baking Christmas cookies. You want to come?”

Jesse hesitated. Not because he didn’t want to—but because some deeper part of him recognized this for what it was. This wasn’t just an invitation for cookies. It was a chance to see, up close, how people managed to live without the kind of religious certainty he had always taken for granted—how they bore the weight of the world without handing it off to God for safekeeping.

He nodded. “Sure.”

Thomas’s house was smaller and more worn than his own, but everything about it still felt *normal*.

That, more than anything, disarmed him.

The entryway smelled like cinnamon and something faintly burnt. Someone had hung a crooked wreath on the wall with a thumbtack instead of a hook. Shoes were scattered in the same mildly accusatory way shoes always were. A dog barked once, decided Jesse was acceptable, and retired from the investigation.

This was not the lair of a different species.

It was a house.

And yet…

As he leaned against the kitchen counter, watching Thomas’s mother scrape dough off her fingers, she said, almost as an afterthought, “I’m working on the last batch—do you guys want to help?”

Jesse nodded before he quite realized he had, and found himself with a sleeve rolled up, flour dusting his hands. As he worked, his eyes drifted—drawn by curiosity even as a part of him hesitated—to the refrigerator.

It was covered in the usual things: grocery lists, school flyers, a crooked photo of Thomas when he was younger and missing a front tooth.

And then there was the poster.

Not big. Not dramatic. Just a half-sheet, printed plainly:

CANDLELIGHT VIGIL — FRIDAY

END THE GENOCIDE IN GAZA

Jesse stared at it longer than he meant to.

Thomas's mother noticed, not in a *caught-you* way, but in the way adults sometimes notice when a child has wandered into new territory.

"Oh, that's just our reminder," she said easily. "Otherwise Friday sneaks up on us."

"Reminder for…?" Jesse asked, though the words were right there in front of him.

"We do a candlelight vigil most Friday nights," she said, rinsing her hands. "Out in front of the Lockwood-Grummin-Martin plant."

It took Jesse a second too long to realize what she'd said.

The plant?

The one whose name came up at the dinner table in careful, grown-up sentences—spoken with the same tone people used for weather or mortgage rates or other things that simply *were*?

The company whose logo was stitched onto his Little League jersey? The one printed on the banners in the high-school gym? The name on the Fourth of July fireworks program, the scoreboard, the scholarship fund? The company that paid for the Christmas toy drive every December, that made the town feel generous without anyone having to ask where the money came from?

The company his father always described in careful phrases—*good jobs*, stable jobs, jobs that let people raise families, send kids to college—*because he was executive vice president of operations*?

The room didn't change.

That was the strange part.

The oven hummed. A timer clicked somewhere. Thomas's mother wiped her hands on a dish towel and smiled at him, waiting—patiently, kindly—for a response he hadn't yet assembled.

Jesse felt a tightening behind his ribs, as if something had cinched inward.

They're talking about us.

The thought arrived without heat. Without accusation. Just recognition.

She went on, explaining the vigil in the same calm voice she might have used to describe a potluck or a book group. There was no triumph in it. No righteousness. Just consistency.

“To protest their role in manufacturing the munitions being used in Gaza,” she said. “Thomas mentioned that you guys saw a video about it last week, so I’m pretty sure you already know why!”

When she asked if he might like to join them sometime, the answer rose immediately.

“I’d have to ask my parents first,” Jesse said.

That was true in more ways than one. His parents would wonder how he could possibly even ask such a question...the prospect of his protesting in front of Dad’s workplace wasn’t remotely conceivable.

She accepted his reply without comment.

And that, somehow, made it harder.

For a moment, Jesse had the impulse—quick, almost reflexive—to excuse himself. To say he should probably head home. To retreat back into the tidy circle of the cul-de-sac, where things lined up properly again and explanations still worked.

It felt less like fear than like self-defense.

But the feeling stalled.

Because another image had surfaced, uninvited.

Aunt Miriam’s house.

Her refrigerator, too, had once been a gallery of paper reminders—posters, flyers, handwritten notes about vigils and meetings and causes Jesse hadn’t fully understood at the time. He remembered asking, once, why she put them up where everyone could see.

“So I don’t forget who I’m trying to be,” she’d said.

This wasn’t alien behavior.

Uncomfortable, yes. Disorienting. But not unknown.

They went back to cookies. To jokes. To normal things.

But something had already been set in motion.

They sat around the small kitchen table once the last batch came out of the oven, the air thick with warmth and sugar. Thomas's mother poured hot chocolate into mismatched mugs—dark, rich, and steaming.

"It's made with raw milk," she said, noticing Jesse's curious look. "A friend gets it from a farmer just outside town. Safer than it sounds," she added with a smile.

Jesse took a sip. It tasted fuller somehow, heavier, like something closer to what milk was *supposed* to be. He filed the thought away, another small difference he didn't quite know what to do with.

The boys talked with their mouths half full—about a ridiculous math quiz, about a teacher who seemed to take personal offense at late homework, about nothing in particular. It felt easy. Ordinary.

Then Thomas's mother glanced at the clock and smiled apologetically.

"You boys will excuse me, won't you?" she said. "I want to catch the latest report about Gaza before I start fixing dinner."

She picked up the remote and turned on the television, clearly not directing it toward them, simply folding it into the room the way some people turned on a radio. The boys went on talking at first, but Jesse found his attention drifting.

The screen showed grainy footage of tents—makeshift shelters sagging under pooled rainwater. The ground beneath them was mud. People moved slowly, wrapped in whatever layers they could manage.

The announcer's voice was steady, practiced.

"Recent storms have flooded displacement camps across Gaza, leaving thousands exposed as temperatures drop. Several children are reported to have died from hypothermia overnight."

Jesse felt something tighten in his throat.

The camera lingered on a small pair of shoes set beside a tent entrance, soaked and darkened. A woman wrung water from a blanket that was already too thin to matter.

"Israel continues to block the delivery of humanitarian supplies," the announcer went on, "and has prohibited UNRWA from conducting relief operations in the Strip, further worsening the crisis."

No one commented. Thomas's mother watched silently, arms folded, absorbing the details the way someone might listen to a weather forecast that carried real consequences.

Jesse stared at the screen longer than he meant to. He wasn't used to this kind of seeing—unmediated, unresolved. At home, suffering arrived already interpreted, already placed inside a story with guardrails. This didn't feel finished. It felt cold.

He realized he was holding his cookie untouched, the chocolate softening against his fingers.

The boys' conversation faded without anyone deciding to stop it.

This, Jesse understood dimly, was how it worked here.

You didn't gather everyone around and announce that it was time to pay attention. You didn't insist. You simply let the world be present, even when it intruded—right into the kitchen, right into the middle of something sweet.

And somehow, they kept living anyway.

Walking home later—to the cul-de-sac where his family lived, the road looping neatly back into itself—Jesse found his thoughts refusing to settle. What he had seen at Thomas's house replayed itself in fragments: the poster on the refrigerator, the calm voice, the images on the screen. He hadn't known what to do with it then, and he didn't know now.

Standing by the living-room window, watching the early dusk gather, he thought again of that refrigerator—Thomas's, and the one it had quietly reminded him of.

Aunt Miriam's refrigerator.

He remembered it clearly now: flyers and placards held up with mismatched magnets, handwritten reminders tacked up without ceremony, as if conscience were simply part of daily housekeeping. The recollection didn't arrive as a revelation. He had already made the connection back at Thomas's house. It returned now simply because it wouldn't let go.

The sound of tires on gravel cut through his thoughts.

A car pulled into the driveway. An Uber.

Jesse leaned forward, then straightened as the car came to a stop. The door opened. Aunt Miriam stepped out, gathering her coat against the cold.

Before he quite realized what he was doing, Jesse was out the door.

“You made it,” he said, grinning as he reached for her bag.

She set the bag down and pulled him into a hug—warm, unhurried, the kind that didn’t ask permission or rush to let go. Jesse froze for a half second, then found himself leaning into it. He wasn’t used to this kind of contact in his own house. What surprised him was how natural it felt.

As they walked toward the house together, the sight of her—real, present, unmistakable—loosened something that had been waiting all afternoon.

In Jesse’s larger family circle, Aunt Miriam and her late husband, Uncle Jeffrey had always been in the minority—a minority of two, a small island of dissent in a sea of shared dogma. Their convictions, held in tandem, radiated a gentle confidence that made their difference feel less like resistance and more like simple, unembarrassed truth. But when Uncle Jeffrey died, that island shrank to a lone figure on a shoreline. Suddenly Miriam stood alone—a minority of one—and the family fully expected widowhood to “bring her around,” restoring what they called unity and what she privately recognized as capitulation. But she never capitulated. She continued to uphold her convictions, heresies in the rest of the family’s eyes, with a poise that suggested she somehow had the world on her side. She didn’t, of course. Yet in her presence you could almost believe she did.

Jesse brightened as his mind drifted back to that vivid, enchanted month he had spent with Aunt Miriam and Uncle Jeffrey the summer his mother was pregnant with Jessica. That was back when relations among the adults had been more cordial—back when his mother could still speak with her sister without that brittle undertone of disapproval. There had even been traces of true affection between them then. But those days were gone now, replaced by a guarded politeness. His parents continued to include Aunt Miriam in major family events—not without audible sighing—but only because, as his mother always said, “family is family,” a phrase delivered more like a legal requirement than a sentiment.

Aunt Miriam lived a few miles away, in the poorer part of town. The difference had been instantly noticeable to young Jesse: smaller houses, older cars, simpler clothes, worn furniture with stories in the wood grain. He had noticed the contrast, but was still too young to pass judgment on it. It was just different—neither better nor worse, just a separate climate with its own seasons.

What had struck him most was the atmosphere. At home, tension hovered between his parents like low pressure before a storm; at Aunt Miriam’s house, it was as absent as thunder on a cloudless day. Aunt Miriam and Uncle Jeffrey treated each other with an ease that seemed almost rehearsed—mutual respect, patient listening, disagreements resolved quietly rather than performed loudly. And then there were the walls: framed protest placards, black-and-white photos of marches and sit-ins, and a grainy portrait of an old activist giving a speech with fire in his eyes. At the time, it had all

seemed quaint, like artifacts from a museum. Yet those artifacts lent the house an unexpected warmth, as though the very plaster believed in something.

There was another difference too, one he hadn't fully appreciated as a child but remembered now with a clarity that startled him. Charity—real charity, the quiet, unadvertised kind—seemed to be the very atmosphere Aunt Miriam and Uncle Jeffrey breathed. They were always helping someone: a neighbor who had fallen on hard times, an elderly couple whose roof needed patching, a single mother struggling to make ends meet. They never announced it, never offered long explanations, never made a show of sacrifice. They simply acted—as though kindness were not a decision but a reflex.

Now that she was retired, Aunt Miriam spent several days each week volunteering at the local food bank. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to her, as ordinary as getting up in the morning. And Jesse remembered how she never passed a homeless panhandler without stopping, without looking the person in the eye and offering something—money, a sandwich, a word of dignity. His own parents reacted very differently: Whenever they saw a homeless person approaching, they reflexively crossed to the other side of the street, as though poverty were contagious or improper to acknowledge. He hadn't given this much thought before, but the contrast was quietly beginning to dawn on him.

Yet the real comfort, he now understood, had come from the way they treated him. At home, his parents were forever pushing him toward something vaguely defined as "success," a glittering horizon that receded every time he approached it. They corrected him, managed him, shaped him, trimmed him like a hedge in their vision of propriety. Aunt Miriam and Uncle Jeffrey did none of that. They simply let him be. They never spoke down to him, never mocked his curiosities, never made him feel small, and—most miraculous of all—never flinched when he asked questions that would have sent his parents into embarrassed silence. They were unflappable.

His father had taken the family on many summer vacations—beach trips, mountain cabins, amusement parks—but the family was always part of the package, with all its noise and friction. Aunt Miriam's home had been different. It was the only place he'd ever been where he felt like a whole person instead of a junior trainee in the family's ideological boot camp.

He realized now, with a kind of bittersweet astonishment, that the best vacation he had ever had was the one spent in that small, aging house on the other side of the tracks.

CHAPTER 6

Wednesday: Christmas Eve

Wednesday arrived without the usual jolt.

No alarm. No rush. No half-conscious scramble for shoes and backpack. Jesse woke the way people wake on weekends—slowly, with the faint suspicion that he had forgotten something important, and then the small relief of realizing he hadn't.

From downstairs came the sound of adult industry: cabinets opening, a pan set down with purpose, his mother's voice moving through the kitchen as if she were already hosting an invisible crowd. The air smelled different—warm, sweet, spiced—like the house had begun to bake itself into holiday.

He lay there for a minute longer than he meant to, listening.

It should have felt restful.

Instead it felt… staged. Like the quiet before a pageant.

When he finally came down, his mother had already arranged breakfast as though it were a gift rather than a meal—toast done just right, fruit in a bowl, something warm on a plate that made Grace squeal in delight as if pancakes were proof that God approved of Christmas. Grace—his younger sister by three years, all elbows and opinions now—had long since outgrown the age where mornings required negotiation; she arrived in the kitchen fully awake, fully convinced the day was already underway.

"You're up," his mother said, bright but brisk. "Good. Eat. We've got a lot to do today."

Grace was already half-finished, her feet kicking the chair legs, unable to sit still. She looked at Jesse with a grin that practically had ribbon on it.

"It's Christmas Eve," she announced, as if Jesse might have missed the memo.

“It’s still Wednesday,” Jesse said automatically.

Grace shook her head with eight-year-old certainty. She had stopped believing in Santa a few years back—an event the family still referred to jokingly as “The Debunking”—and ever since then she had taken a proprietary interest in how Christmas was conducted, as if exposure to the truth had promoted her to junior management. “Not today. Today is *Christmas Eve*.”

Their mother didn’t correct her. She wore that small, satisfied look she got when something in the household aligned with the calendar the way she wanted. Jesse wondered—briefly, quietly—how much of faith was like that: the comfort of everything being in its proper place.

Aunt Miriam appeared at the edge of the kitchen in her coat, keys in hand, a scarf looped around her neck.

“I’m going to drop off some holiday greetings to Mrs. Donnelly,” she said, like she was slipping out of a ceremony without making a scene. “I’ll be back before long.”

His mother nodded, already turning back to her list. “Bring her the cookies, please. And tell her we’re praying for her.”

Miriam’s eyes flicked toward Jesse—just a second—and something passed between them that wasn’t quite an expression, more like a shared awareness: the knowledge that *praying for someone* could mean a dozen different things depending on what you were willing to see.

Then she was out the door.

The day wore on in assignments.

Carry boxes down from the attic. Fetch serving dishes. Vacuum the living room. Help his father shift furniture so the tree would be “centered better.” Small work, repetitive work, the kind that fills a holiday with the illusion of purpose.

The television stayed on.

It was always on in their house, but today it felt like another member of the family—talking softly in the background, never quite allowed to be silent. The Christian station rotated through cheerful hosts, earnest segments, and the constant hum of reassurance.

Between songs and smiley holiday graphics, the anchors spoke about the “holy land” with that familiar tone—somber for a moment, then resolutely confident, as if tragedy could be safely filed under prophecy.

Jesse didn’t always catch the details. He wasn’t trying to. But the phrases drifted into him anyway:

security… terrorists… Israel's right to defend itself… ancient promises…

He would feel himself stiffen, not fully understanding why, and then loosen again, as if his mind were trying to practice the art of not noticing.

Around mid-afternoon, Uncle Regis arrived like a gust of confident air.

He brought in gift bags and boxes and set them under the tree with exaggerated care, as if the tree were an altar and he were placing offerings before it. He clapped Jesse on the shoulder hard enough to count as a friendly shove.

"There he is," Regis said. "The young man."

Jesse managed the expected smile.

Regis fell into the living room with his parents the way a man falls into a recliner—natural, possessive, as if the house had been built for his comfort. He found the bourbon with almost no help, poured himself a glass with the gravity of ritual, and settled in front of the TV like it was a hearth.

The Christian station was running a segment about "unrest" overseas.

Jesse's father leaned slightly forward, arms folded, listening with the focused calm he usually reserved for sermons. "You know," he said, not looking away from the screen, "Scripture's pretty clear about this. God promised that land. People forget that part when it gets uncomfortable."

Regis snorted. "Unrest," he said, with the contempt of someone repeating a euphemism he didn't respect. "You know what that is? That's people refusing to accept the will of God."

Jesse's mother made a small, noncommittal sound, the kind she used to keep conversations from becoming arguments.

"Exactly," Regis said, pleased to find reinforcement. "Covenant isn't up for debate. You don't negotiate with people who reject God's order. That's what all this noise is about — rebellion dressed up as victimhood."

Jesse's father nodded. "They talk about mercy," he added, "but mercy doesn't mean letting evil run wild. Even Jesus overturned tables." His father watched the screen and nodded along with the broadcaster, as if the story were already familiar and required no further thought.

Regis took a drink.

Then another.

And as the afternoon slid toward evening, his words grew sharper, less filtered—like the bourbon was dissolving whatever thin layer of civility he normally carried.

Jesse listened as the language shifted — less overtly political now, more pious. Words like *order*, *judgment*, *obedience* floated through the room, clothed in scripture and spoken calmly, as if they were meant to settle things rather than stir them up. He didn't quite know why it bothered him, only that something about the way they were being said made his chest feel tight, like a door had been closed somewhere without anyone admitting it.

"These Palestinians," he said at one point, as if the whole people could be spoken of the way you spoke of a nuisance animal. "Always whining. Always causing trouble. They've been given chance after chance."

Jesse felt his stomach tighten even more.

He hesitated, then spoke — not to challenge, not even to argue, but the way a child asks a question when something doesn't quite add up.

"But… aren't they people too?" he asked quietly. "I mean — families? Kids?"

The room paused, just long enough for the question to exist.

Regis turned slowly toward him, eyes glassy but alert, a smile tugging at his mouth that didn't reach anywhere kind.

"Careful, Jesse," he said, voice suddenly patient, almost indulgent. "That's how they get you. They use kids to make you soft. Evil always hides behind innocence."

Jesse's father cleared his throat. "Your uncle's right," he said. "You can't let sentiment override truth. Feelings aren't the same thing as faith."

Regis leaned forward, watching the screen with vindictive relish. "If they'd just stop fighting the Chosen People, maybe they'd stop getting what's coming to them."

Jesse's glance caught Aunt Miriam—she had returned quietly, without announcement, and now stood near the doorway holding a dish towel she hadn't used yet. She didn't interrupt. She didn't argue.

But her face had changed. Not dramatically—Miriam didn't do dramatic—but in a way Jesse could read now that he had begun noticing such things: a stillness, a contained disgust, a kind of grief that refused to become performance.

And Jesse realized, with a little internal jolt, that she wasn't just silently disagreeing with Uncle Regis.a and his dad.

She was ashamed of them.

Not for saying something “impolite,” but for revealing something ugly that the room was otherwise trying to keep covered

Regis laughed at something on the television and poured himself another drink.

By the time they were called to dinner, his voice had that loose, half-crocked confidence of a man who believes every thought he has is truth and every truth deserves to be spoken.

Dinner was what it always was on Christmas Eve in their family: abundant, warm, carefully made, their mother moving between dishes with that proud tiredness that said *this is what a good woman does.*

Jesse ate. He talked when spoken to. He laughed at the places where laughter was expected.

But some part of him felt strangely far away, as if his mind were hovering above the table watching the scene like a play whose ending it already knew.

Afterward, they gathered in the living room.

Opening presents on Christmas Eve had become the family’s quiet compromise after Grace’s belief in Santa Claus had collapsed under the weight of chimney logistics and inconsistent handwriting. Doing gifts the night before had proved more practical—letting Christmas Day itself breathe, free of pretense, so everyone could drift in and out of their own plans and still come together later without the strain of performing wonder for a bearded stranger no one actually believed in anymore.

The tree lights blinked softly, casting that warm glow that makes everything look gentler than it is. The gifts waited beneath the branches like they had been placed there by Providence.

Before they began, his mother said, “Let’s sing.”

Regis—already flushed, already buoyed by bourbon and self-righteousness—was oddly eager. “Now you’re talking,” he said. “Let’s do a real one.”

They chose *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.* Jesse hadn't heard it in a while. It sounded gentle at first, almost innocent. The melody moved through the room like something soft laid over sharp edges.

Peace on the earth, goodwill to men.…

Regis sang loudly, with conviction, as if the words were proof of something rather than a plea. Jesse felt the irony land—not like a joke, not like cleverness, but like a bruise: the strange dissonance of singing peace while the television, even now, muttered about "defending" and "cleansing" and "standing with Israel," and the man beside him had just spoken of a whole people as if their suffering were deserved.

Jesse glanced at Aunt Miriam.

She sang too, but more quietly, her eyes lowered, as if she were singing *toward the words themselves*—toward something older and truer than the way they were being used in this room. Jesse couldn't have said what that difference was, only that her voice seemed aimed somewhere else entirely, as if the song meant one thing to her and something far more settled to the others.

When the carol ended, his mother turned the station back up—now it was only Christmas music, bright and harmless—and announced it was time.

Presents.

Grace tore into hers with delighted ferocity. Jesse opened his more slowly. He tried to stay present, to be grateful in the way he'd been trained to be grateful.

Then Uncle Regis handed him a box with a grin that was already half a challenge.

"Open that one," Regis said. "That one's from me."

Jesse opened it.

A baseball cap — navy blue, stiff-brimmed, unmistakable. A thin braid of gold cord traced the edge of the brim, decorative and faintly martial. Embroidered squarely on the front was the flag of Israel, its blue stripes crisp, the Star of David bright and centered, as if daring the eye to look away.

This was not just another baseball cap. With its stiff brim and that thin line of gold braid, it felt almost official — less a gift than part of a uniform. Holding it, Jesse had the uneasy sense of standing at the edge of an induction ceremony he hadn't volunteered for, as if the cap were meant to be put on as proof that he already belonged — that he was already, somehow, in the service of an authority he had never chosen. The room seemed to lean toward him, waiting not for a speech exactly, but for the small, visible act that would confirm he was fully enlisted.

Regis watched him, smiling, already imagining alignment.

His mother smiled too, pleased at the gesture, as if it were just a fun present.

Aunt Miriam didn’t smile.

Jesse held the hat in his hands. The stitching felt stiff and new, the embroidery slightly raised beneath his fingertips. He stared at the flag longer than he meant to. The pride in the room was not his — it came at him from the smiles, the watching, the expectation — and what he felt instead was the answering pressure: the weight of being treated as if agreement were already his. The kind that comes when an object is asking something of you on other people’s behalf.

He sensed, without anyone spelling it out, what the cap would mean in this house. Not just support, but *siding*. Not just belief, but visibility. Wearing it would say he was on the right team — that he understood what was expected of him, and willingly acknowledged it.

He managed a thank-you. He even managed a small laugh.

But inside, something quiet recoiled.

Later, Grace got her new game set up and begged Jesse to play with her. He did. He sat beside her on the rug while the screen flashed bright colors and easy victories. She squealed and laughed and demanded he stop “being so slow.”

He tried.

He really did.

But his heart wasn’t in it. He felt drained in a way he couldn’t explain—like the day had extracted something from him without his permission. Not his energy exactly. Something subtler. A kind of innocence. Or the ability to pretend he was innocent.

By the time the adults were playing carols downstairs and Regis was talking too loudly about something on the TV, Jesse found himself wanting bed the way you want refuge.

Earlier than usual, he said goodnight.

No one stopped him.

In his room, the house sounds softened: muffled music, distant laughter, the low drone of the television. The window was slightly open, letting in a blade of winter air that made his comforter feel warmer by contrast.

He lay back, exhausted—not from work, but from the strange effort of being present in a room where the words didn’t match the spirit.

He could hardly forget.

But he had to ignore it in order to do his quotidian thing.

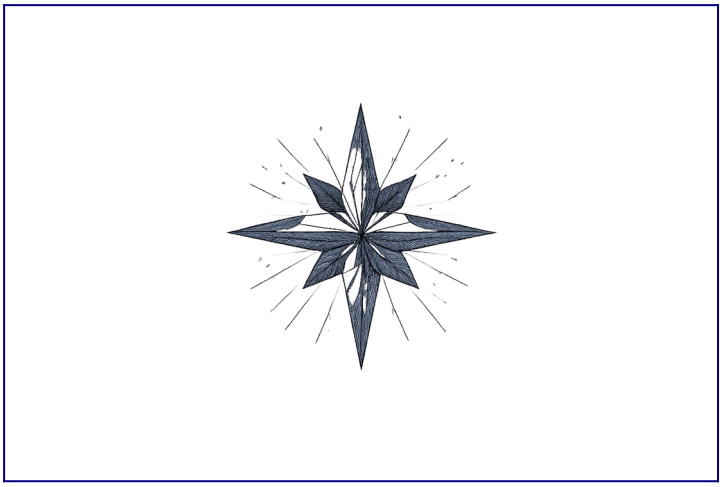
And as he sank down into the warmth, the carol downstairs drifted up faintly, thin as smoke:

“God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing…”

But the phrase melted before completion.

He was already gone.

CHAPTER 7



Jesse’s Christmas Dream

Jesse slipped into sleep so quickly it felt less like drifting and more like being carried — carried straight into a dream he somehow recognized even before it formed.

He was back in his family’s usual pew at church.

Not for the first time. Not by a long shot. He had dreamed of this place before, especially on Sunday nights after Pastor Harrow’s sermons — sermons that always left him uneasy, though he’d never been able to articulate why.

Everything looked normal at first. The sacristy was decorated for Christmas; a children’s choir assembled on the risers; families settled into their seats with that dutiful pre-holiday cheer.

The choir master lifted his arm.

The children opened their mouths to sing.

“God rest ye merry gentlemen…” Jesse leaned back, expecting the familiar carol.

Then his brow creased.

Something in the second line landed wrong in his ear — not loudly, just… sideways, like a note sung with the right pitch but the wrong intention.

“God rest ye merry gentlemen…”

The next line came, but Jesse heard something else entirely slip through it — faint, like a ghost under the melody:

“…for bad faith you display—”

Jesse blinked. That couldn’t be right.

He leaned forward, listening harder.

The children continued, but now the lyrics came through twisted, unsettling:

“By thinking you can follow Christ…”

He tugged at his mother’s sleeve. “Mom… did you hear—?”

She smiled without looking down. “Well it’s our children’s choir, dear. They sing this song every year.”

But this wasn’t the same song as last year: the distortion was already spreading.

The next line arrived fully changed — unmistakably, irreversibly:

“By glutting Christmas Day…”

Jesse froze. This wasn’t mishearing. This was transformation.

The melody bent — subtly at first, then more openly, as though an unseen hand were reshaping it into a darker, truer form.

And as the remainder of the verse unfurled, the shift completed itself. The wrongness was no longer wrongness — it was a new song, effortless, confident, meant to be heard.

Only he seemed able to hear it.

His mother was still singing along to the traditional carol.

And then the children’s faces began to change.

They shifted — darkened — bearing unmistakable features of Palestinian boys and girls. Not metaphorically, not symbolically, but literally, as though transformation was simply another kind of light.

And they sang:

“God damn you merry gentile men,
For bad faith you display,
By thinking you can follow Christ
By glutting Christmas Day,
While Gaza’s children starve to death
From taxes that you pay.
O tidings of judgment and woe, judgment and woe,
O tidings of judgment and woe.”

Jesse was more than stunned. Children don’t sing like this in church! This was blasphemous, he thought at first. He tried to retune his ears to the normal carol — but the alternative would not disappear.
This dream had chosen for him.

The choir changed before his eyes.
These were no longer suburban kids — but Palestinian children! They sang the next verse even louder:

“In Gaza’s streets we walk forlorn
Midst ruins, charred and spread;
Our daylight dims in drifting smoke
As hope seems all but dead;
Our nights are pierced by distant cries,
Our dreams by terror led.
Do not forsake our suff’ring and pain, suff’ring and pain;
Do not harden to our suff’ring and pain.”

He remembered the words of Thomas, who always talked politics like a grown-up: “Genocide,” he once called it. Jesse had looked it up. The word unsettled him for weeks. The urchins continued:

“In shattered schools our futures dim,
No refuge left to learn;
Our books lie torn on blood-stained floors
Where classrooms can’t return;
And teachers fall while shielding us
From blasts that sear and burn.
Feed the minds Zion’s terrorists would starve, that they would starve;
Feed our minds that Zion’s terrorists would starve.”

Yes — he had heard about Gazan schools being demolished by Israel on the news.
Always “Hamas was hiding there,” they said.
Yet it was always students who died. On they sang:

“In shattered wards the lines grow long,
There’s little place to heal;
Our doctors faint beside the beds
Their hunger too is real;
And newborns fade in darkened halls,
Amidst the mangled steel.
Good Samaritans are not Pharisees, not Pharisees;
Good Samaritans are not blind Pharisees.”

How can anyone bomb a hospital? Jesse thought.
Wasn’t that illegal? Wrong?
But no one stopped it. So he had tried to forget. These lyrics wouldn’t let him. He realized that the children were accusing everyone in his church of being Pharisees, and he knew the gospels well enough to know exactly what this meant. The next verse followed:

“In dungeons dark we waste away,
No charges, no appeal;
Our wrists are bound, our bodies bruised
By blows we cannot heal;
And countless cry in windowed vans
Where screams no walls conceal.
Free the captives, as Jesus’ words declare, as they declare;
Free our captives as His gospel declares!”

Thomas again — Israel kept children in prisons, he had told him.
Without trial.
He hadn’t wanted to believe it. The song continued:

“Our homes lie crushed in smoking heaps,
No refuge left to see;
Whole families lost in shattered rooms,
Where once our lives ran free;
Still lifeless bodies lie beneath,
That mere hands cannot free.
Raise the ruins where innocence was slain, where it was slain;
Raise the ruins where our innocence was slain.”

He had seen a very clear picture of Gaza’s rubble once.
On the television.
And looked away.

Now he could not.

And the unfairness of it struck him all at once.

Why him? Why now? Why should he be the only one who could hear what was being said so plainly—what was clearly meant for everyone sitting in these pews? The thought stirred a childish resentment he did not want to feel, let alone examine too closely. He had only come to church as he always did, expecting nothing more than to leave unchanged, to traipse home with his family to Sunday dinner with all the fixings—no fuss, no friction, no questions that followed him out the door.

He felt the old, familiar desire to be guided rather than summoned—to let adults, pastors, someone else, decide what was true and what could safely be ignored. Why should this be his to hear? Why should he be the one left holding it?

But as the choir sang on, unrelenting, another thought pressed in, unwelcome and difficult to shake.

Was it possible, he wondered, that these people were not here to be changed at all?

Was it possible they came instead to be reassured—to have sinful choices blessed, easy comforts affirmed, studied silence explained away?

The idea made his chest tighten. What if what he had always taken for innocence was really something else—something cultivated by degrees, Sunday after Sunday? A kind of moral shelter, warm and familiar, built on looking the other way.

And what if the suffering he was so plainly hearing now—the suffering the rest of them refused to hear—was not merely being ignored, but quietly condoned—because their economic security was somehow entangled with it?

The thought made his stomach lurch. *No!* he thought—almost pleading.

The idea felt too large for him — like one of those things adults only whispered about behind closed doors after the children were sent to bed. Except now it was as though someone had left that door ajar, and he found himself staring into a room he was never meant to see.

And what he glimpsed there chilled him to the bone.

Not the adults themselves — but the shape of the adult he might one day become. A Jesse who nodded through quiet justifications, who learned the practiced silences, who let his faith shrink to the size of Pastor Harrow’s certainties. A Jesse who, in time, would become deaf to the very plaints of the victims he heard so clearly now — as deaf as everyone else sitting in these pews.

He realized with a jolt that this wasn’t just their judgment the spectral choir was heralding in no uncertain terms — it would someday soon be his too. A prearranged future was already hurtling toward him at full speed, he now grasped, and was quietly shaping him even now, unless he could somehow change its course.

The calm faces around him, the practiced hymns, the way the sermons moved week after week as though nothing terrible lay beneath their comfort—all of it seemed, suddenly, to fit together too well. What if this place did not exist to confront evil, but to make the profitable suffering of others feel distant, justified—even righteous?

The walls of the shelter the community had built around itself had cracked wide open now—for Jesse, anyway.

He sensed—with a strange mingling of loss, trepidation, and something like relief—that the breach had widened beyond repair.

Behold two siblings brave and small,
Orphaned in infancy;
They gather bread for little ones,
With trembling dignity;
Your faithless silence shrouds their songs
Of stout fidelity.
Let compassion breed mercy as they sing sorrowful songs
For to such as these God's Kingdom belongs.

As this verse was being sung, two of the children had stepped forward from the group. They were a brother and sister orphaned at a young age when a bomb destroyed most of their home and took their parents' lives. Jesse realized that the boy, Sami, was his own age...but he was so emaciated and frail looking that he might have been mistaken at first glance as a much older man. His sister, Amina, had also aged well beyond her years. Only a glimmer of her fading youth was visible, yet Jesse realized she couldn't be much more than 14 years old. Sami sang the first solo:

I bargain hard for rice and flour,
And patch what's left to wear;
My sister tends the little ones,
With braids and whispered prayer;
We trade our childhood for their meals—
It's more than we can bear... **Little ones, Jesus showered with His care — tenderest care;
Ye who orphan them yet bear His Name…beware!

Sami stepped behind Aminah, who now took center stage to sing the next verse with a voice that was forthright yet noticeably faltering:

One day my brother water sought, I stayed to guard the flame;
A soldier overpowered me
And did what I can't name;
May tears that I cannot hold inside
Release me from my shame...

To all victims of Zion, O our God — Thy mercy show;
****But to scandal-blessing Christians — grant them woe*!***

At this point Jesse felt an overpowering sense of rage, and his hands formed clench fists as tears streamed down his cheeks. This was just wrong... worse than wrong...it was downright evil! He wanted more than anything to protect this young girl, but realized that even her own brother had been unable to do so. He was overwhelmed with a sense of righteous anger….

The Sami and Aminah stepped back into the chorus, which songfully introduced the next soloist:

Our pastor stood among the ruins,
and tended those who cried;
He whispered "God remembers you,"
and would not run or hide.
They found him with the children's names
still folded by his side.
I'm the Vine, you're the branches, we are one living tree—
For the least of these My brothers do for Me.

A young Palestinian Christian pastor now took center stage, and in a rich baritone voice sang his indictment:

You claim His Name across the sea,
And boast fraternity;
You say we're brothers in the Lord,
One Church, one family;
Yet bombs your hireling preachers bless slay shepherds such as me!
What remains of His solidarity, of charity?
Is your rapture premised on atrocity?

These words made Jesse recall Pastor Harrow's insistent promises that those who loyally supported the state of Israel would experience a rapture and be taken up to heaven before the Second Coming. Clearly this just didn't make moral sense….

That word *hireling* snagged in Jesse's mind like a thorn. He had never heard it before — not in church, not in Sunday school, not anywhere. It sounded old, sharp, and accusing, as if it belonged to a secret vocabulary of judgment he was suddenly expected to understand.

He felt a flush of embarrassment, as though he should know what it meant, should have learned it somewhere along the way. But the more he tried to grasp it, the more it unsettled him. Whatever a hireling was, it clearly wasn't good. It sounded like a warning, or a verdict.

And the worst part — the part that chilled him — was the creeping sense that this strange, heavy word might have something to do with Pastor Harrow. He didn't know why he thought that. He didn't want to think it.

But the choir's accusation seemed to be pointing straight at a kind of pastor who spoke boldly about Israel, confidently about prophecy, triumphantly about the rapture… and Jesse felt his stomach twist, because he knew someone exactly like that.

He didn't understand the word. But he understood the fear it stirred in him. It made him feel smaller, unprepared — as though the ground beneath the hymnbook he'd always trusted had shifted without warning.

"Love one another," Jesus pled — His final, tender plea;
Yet some of you who say "Lord, Lord" betray Gethsemane.
Forsaking Gazan brethren in their hour of agony:
He's the Vine, we're the branches — sharing wine, O can't you see:
Only grapes of wrath grow from apostasy.

The word *apostasy* made Jesse recoil. He knew it — or half-knew it — from a Sunday-school lesson he could barely remember, something about people who said they followed Jesus but ended up choosing beliefs that betrayed Him instead. It had sounded abstract then, like a warning meant for adults in far-off times and places.

But now, hearing it hurled from the mouths of these children — grief-stricken, luminous, accusing — the word slammed into him with the force of something final. He didn't fully understand its theology, not even close, but emotionally it landed like an atomic blast.

Apostasy. Whatever it truly meant, he sensed it wasn't about questionable opinions or wrong guesses. It was about falling away — turning from truth — betraying Christ in the moment when His teachings mattered most.

And the terrifying part was this: He suddenly realized that the choir wasn't describing distant, ancient failures. They were naming something happening here, now — in this very church. Maybe even in the people he trusted. Maybe even, somehow, in himself.

He didn't have the vocabulary for it. But the stakes were unmistakable. This word carried judgment — and it demanded something of him he didn't feel at all ready for.

Repent, you merry Gentile men—
Repent while yet you may;
Your comfort fattened on our graves
Shall haunt your dying day;
For God shall weigh these victims' pleas
On His appointed day.

O tidings of judgment and woe, judgment and woe,
O tidings of judgment and woe.

And then, all the children looked directly at Jesse and sang a final refrain at full volume:

He's the vine — you're the branches — choose your fruit; what will it be:
Grapes of wrath — or mercy's wine from Galilee?

And there it was, the choice before him...stark, unavoidable, and he knew it was his to make, his and nobody else's. Neutrality was no longer option, there was no middle ground left to stand on. He could still choose to ignore these plaintive voices like everyone else in his church, or he could stand alone in acknowledging them, and in seeking justice for them, whatever that might mean.

The choir began, slowly, eerily, to fade.
Not because the dream was ending…
But because he had not yet fully chosen to hold onto them.

That realization terrified him more than their apparition had.

He tightened his focus — and they brightened again, returning into clarity.

Aminah drifted forward, weightless, luminous in her brokenness.
She came directly to him.

"Do you promise to pray for us," she asked softly, "help us as much as you can, and never forget us?"

"Yes," Jesse said — surprised by the steadiness in his voice. "This is my Christian obligation."

"Yes it is, Jesse," she replied. "And because you recognize this, you able to hear us — while the others cannot. Some once could… but they have forgotten us now."

"I don't want to ever forget you," he whispered. "And I'm sorry I didn't hear your voices sooner."

She hugged him — briefly, tenderly — and then removed the keffiyeh from around her neck.
Yet she did not appear without one.

"This is to help you remember us every day," she said. "Most people won't be able to see it. But those whose Christian charity reaches us will be able to see it just as they see and hear us — though I have to warn you: those who hate us will be able to see it too."

She placed it around Jesse's neck.

One more hug — light as breath — and she floated back to the choir.

They began to fade again… Jesse frantically felt for the keffiyeh Aminah had placed around his neck. Ah, thank God, it was still there, as vivid and tangible as anything Jesse had ever held.

Then the large front doors of the church creaked open. Looking beyond them, Jesse recognized Rabbi Levin holding open the door as Pastor Harrow strode in.

Pastor Harrow was beaming, greeting parishioners with practiced, confident handshakes as he made his way down the aisle.

When he reached Jesse's pew, Jesse instinctively turned and extended his hand.

But the pastor recoiled — violently, impossibly — as though he'd been jolted backward by an unseen force.

"What—?" Jesse started.

Pastor Harrow, trembling with indignation, pointed a rigid finger toward Jesse's neck.

"How dare you wear that in here?" he sputtered. "Take it off. Take it off now."

Jesse's hand moved obediently toward the cloth — a lifetime of compliance ready to reassert itself.

But something in him stiffened. A new steadiness — moral, not rebellious — rose to meet the moment.

"No, Pastor Harrow," Jesse said, astonished at his own calm. "This was a gift from people I really care about. And it's my right to wear whatever I choose."

The pastor's face reddened. "Then you may not remain in this holy place. There's the door, Jesse."

It was not a request. It was an exile.

Jesse stood still.

A quiet knowledge settled over him: there was no going back to the old, familiar sing-song.

He no longer wanted to.

His heart ached with grief and clarity — a painful joy, a recognition of truth and of the cost of seeing truly.

He looked around the church. He saw no one else hearing, seeing, understanding.

He remembered the gospel verse: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear…"

And then he walked out, and was met by the glowering stare of Rabbi Levin, who was shaking his head disapprovingly. Jesse ignored him and walked right past him.

He began walking down the road toward home, though “home” felt less like a destination than a question he hadn’t yet learned to answer.

He felt the exquisite agony of isolation — and the unexpected fire of love for a people he had never met, yet could no longer turn away from.

He had left the church, but he had stepped into something larger, something *seriously* Christian!

The winter light slanted low across the pavement. His breath rose in thin clouds. The keffiyeh stirred lightly against his chest — not fluttering like cloth, but almost… attentive. Present. A reminder and a companion.

After a bit, he noticed a small wooden bandstand set back from the roadside, the kind used for summer fairs or Fourth of July speeches. It seemed out of place in winter, but in dreams such things often appear without explanation.

And standing on it — as natural as a memory, as impossible as a miracle — were Aunt Miriam and Uncle Jeffrey.

Jeffrey looked young again, the way Jesse remembered him from that summer long ago: sun-browned, smiling, guitar slung over his shoulder as though it had never been laid aside. Aunt Miriam stood beside him, her posture relaxed, her expression luminous with welcome.

They were singing.

Not loudly. Not for a crowd. Just for him.

“You gotta walk that lonesome highway,
You gotta walk it by yourself.
Ain’t no one else can walk it for you.
You gotta walk it by yourself…”

The words drifted toward him like a hand extended — steadying, not rescuing.

Jesse stepped closer. His throat tightened, then loosened, then tightened again as he tried to sing with them. His voice trembled on the first few notes but found surer footing as he continued. Jeffrey nodded in quiet approval; Aunt Miriam smiled with something like pride.

When the verse ended, the music thinned into the air, and the bandstand began to fade — first the edges, then the boards, then the figures themselves, as though the dream were gently releasing them.

But the warmth remained.

This warmth was his only assurance that he was moving in the right direction.

As the distance grew between him and the church, he felt increasingly unburdened — yet the keffiyeh around his neck added gravity to every step. This new yoke was lighter because it was his own choice, and it felt right — but he honestly wondered whether this new cross might turn out to be heavier than his young shoulders could bear.

CHAPTER 8

Thursday – Christmas Day

Jesse’s hand went to his neck before he was fully awake, searching for the soft fold of fabric he had felt there only moments before. His fingers closed instead on the thin cotton of his undershirt, damp with sweat.

The dream was already retreating — not fading so much as pulling away. The images thinned at the edges, dissolving into the ordinary shapes of his room, but something tightly packed stayed lodged inside him.

From downstairs came the muted sounds of the house waking without him — cupboard doors opening, a chair scraping back, the low murmur of voices already warmed by the day. Someone laughed. The sound floated up the stairwell and faded.

He lay still for a moment, listening, waiting for his breathing to slow. It did, eventually.

When he finally got up, it was because the day was already moving forward. Christmas Day would unfold whether he was ready or not. He showered, dressed, and followed the familiar sequence of the morning, letting it carry him along.

The day moved on as it always did. The clutter beneath the Christmas tree was gradually cleared away, wrapping paper folded or tossed, boxes stacked to one side. A light brunch followed, his sister animatedly recounting her latest Xbox triumph while Christmas music hummed in the background from the ever-present Christian station on the television. Jesse listened when spoken to, nodded when expected, letting the ordinary rhythms carry him along.

By midafternoon the family had settled into their familiar ritual — *A Charlie Brown Christmas* flickering across the screen, the same laughs rising at the same lines, the same fond hush when

Linus stepped forward to speak. Jesse sat with them for a while, letting it wash over the room without quite reaching him.

When the commercials came on, he rose quietly and slipped down the hall to use the restroom.

The hallway was cooler, dimmer — a relief after the glow and noise of the living room. On his way back, he noticed the guest room door stood slightly ajar.

Inside, Aunt Miriam sat by the window in a straight-backed chair, a small lamp casting a warm pool of light beside her. She was reading, quietly absorbed, as though the rest of the house were happening somewhere far away.

He slowed. Then, before he quite knew it, his knuckles were lightly rapping on the doorframe.

Aunt Miriam looked up, her expression softening.

“Come in, sweetheart,” she said, carefully placing her bookmark in the book before laying it aside.

And Jesse stepped inside.

His mind flooded with the pleasant warmth of his memories of time spent with Uncle Jeffrey and Aunt Miriam — the first time he’d ever felt the world could be gentle, unhurried, and genuinely kind. Quiet evenings, unforced conversation, no pressure to prove he was on the “right side” of anything. Just the easy companionship of people who didn’t treat him like a recruit in someone else’s cause.

As he approached her, those memories wrapped around him like a blanket he hadn’t realized he’d been missing for years. It steadied him. Reminded him why he had come to her door and not anyone else’s.

Aunt Miriam noticed the shift in his expression — that quiet softening — and waited. She never rushed him; she never had.

Neither did she lean forward to search his face as he settled into the chair beside her; instead, she left a small, quiet space between them — the kind of space that invites truth instead of demanding it. The room seemed to exhale, as if even the lamp were willing to wait.

Only then did she speak, not to press him, but to give him somewhere to begin:

“You didn’t seem all that excited last night about Uncle Reggie’s present,” she said, with a slight laugh in her voice that felt almost conspiratorial.

Jesse looked down at the floor. “No… I wasn’t.”

Miriam waited a moment. “How come?”

“It’s like…” He stared at the floorboards. “Everything feels wrong. Not just today. Not just the cap.” He tried to laugh, but it came out thin. “Though that didn’t help.”

Aunt Miriam nodded once — not in agreement, but in clear understanding.

“What felt wrong about it?”

He hesitated. Then the truth slipped out before he could stop it.

“It wasn’t a gift,” he said. “It was… like a command.” Like everyone’s already decided who I’m supposed to be before I even—” His voice cracked. He blinked fast. “—before I even know what’s right.”

Jesse drew a shaky breath.

“Yeah. Like I was supposed to put it on and become someone I’m not… someone I’m not even sure I want to be.”

Aunt Miriam let the words settle.

Her silence was spacious, steady—an opening rather than an instruction. He felt himself hearing his own thoughts more clearly simply because she was listening.

“It hurt,” he almost whispered. “And it felt wrong. Like something in me kept pulling back. I tried to ignore it, but… I can’t anymore. Especially not after the dream I had last night.”

Aunt Miriam’s brow softened.

“Oh?” she gently inquired.

Jesse nodded — barely, but unmistakably.

“Yeah,” Jesse said, the words coming a little faster now. “It was a really weird dream, and you and Uncle Jeffrey were in it.”

At the mention of her late husband, something flickered across Aunt Miriam’s face — not surprise, not pain exactly, but a brief, involuntary softness that passed almost as quickly as it appeared.

“That so? And just what were *we* doing in *your* dream?” she laughed good-naturedly.

“I’ll tell you,” Jesse said. Then hesitated. “But first I have to tell you about what came before.”

She nodded once and waited expectantly.

The dream spilled out of him like a breath he could no longer hold.

He told her about the church — about the children's choir that wasn't really a choir at all. About the faces that didn't belong there. About the words they sang. He didn't repeat all the lyrics, but enough of them that their weight landed between them, unsoftened.

Aunt Miriam did not interrupt. She was entirely unruffled. She did not look away.

"And then," Jesse said, his voice lower now, "after Pastor Harrow told me I couldn't stay… after I left the church… that's when I saw you and Uncle Jeffrey."

She tilted her head slightly.

"He had his guitar," Jesse went on. "And you were both singing to me. That old hymn. The one about the highway."

He swallowed, then half-sang it, barely above a breath.

"You gotta walk that lonesome highway… You gotta walk it by yourself…"

Aunt Miriam's eyes held his — steady, unblinking. She gave the smallest nod.

It was enough.

In that nod, the dream crossed fully into waking life.

The meaning he had sensed but not yet fully faced came down on him all at once. Not as words, but as consequence:

That whatever had been entrusted to him in the dream was not symbolic. Not optional. Not something he could just admire and set aside. It was meant to be lived. And lived alone.

That no one was going to carry it for him. That the voices he had grown up trusting — the pastor's, his parents', the certainty that had always surrounded him — would not only fail him now, but would likely push back. Correct him. Pull him toward safer answers.

The realization frightened him.

Until now, belief had always arrived finished. Morality came prefabricated — shrink-wrapped.

He had borne its weight for as long as he could remember — the rules, the expectations, the warnings about what happened if you stepped out of line. He had carried it the way you carry something heavy because you're told to, not because you chose to.

What he had never been asked to carry was the responsibility for it. The thinking had been done elsewhere; the reasons settled in advance. His part had been obedience.

That might make sense when someone was too young to know better. Or unwilling to think at all.

But he wasn't any of those things anymore.

Now he would have to choose for himself.

And not with their help — but in spite of them.

The unfairness of it all hit him hard, and something broke.

The sound that came out of his chest surprised him — rough, involuntary — and before he could stop them, tears were flowing. He covered his face, embarrassed even as it happened, the television murmuring faintly down the hall, the rest of the house unaware.

Only then did Aunt Miriam reach for him.

She drew him into her arms and gently rocked him as the fear, grief, and sudden responsibility spilled out. She said nothing at first, letting it run its course.

"You do have to walk it yourself," she murmured near his ear. "But you're not alone. You never have been."

Held there, the weight did not vanish — but it became bearable. Her presence didn't solve what lay ahead. It told him something quieter and stronger: that what had awakened in him was real, and worth the cost of carrying.

He didn't feel ready.

But he no longer felt alone.

After a moment, Jesse shifted and wiped at his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt, sitting up a little straighter than he felt.

Aunt Miriam noticed without comment. She reached for the box of tissues on the nightstand and passed one to him.

“Thanks,” he said quietly as he regained his composure, then added, almost to himself, “I guess I needed that.”

He took another breath, slower this time, as if deliberately choosing it. He folded the tissue once, then again, and set it carefully on the edge of the nightstand.

“There’s something I really want to ask you about,” he said. The words came out steadier than he felt, but now they were out there.

Aunt Miriam gave a small nod, the kind that said she was listening.

“I found something last weekend,” Jesse went on. “By accident.” He glanced up at her, then away again. “I was cleaning out the storage room. It was one of my chores. I was moving the old bookcase when a box slipped from the top and fell.”

He paused, choosing his words.

“There were letters in it. Old ones.”

He hesitated, then went on, more carefully.

“Between you and my mom,” he said. “I didn’t read all of them. I swear.” He looked up, wanting her to believe that part. “But it was pretty clear… she was different back then. And you were trying to help her hold on to something.”

He swallowed.

“Something she finally gave up on.”

For a long moment, Aunt Miriam said nothing.

It was as if an old wound had opened up — not visibly, not in any way she would have chosen, but in the small changes her body made without permission. She drew a little closer to Jesse, her voice dropping when she spoke.

“Before this goes any further, Jesse,” she said quietly, “this conversation stays strictly between us. All right?”

Jesse nodded at once. The seriousness of it didn’t frighten him; it steadied him. He felt a flicker of pride at being trusted with something that mattered, and he gave her his word without hesitation.

Aunt Miriam took a breath.

“Back then,” she began, “your mother and I were very close. Not just as sisters.”

She paused, as if checking whether the memory itself was still safe to touch.

“We talked about everything,” she said. “What we believed. What frightened us. What didn’t make sense but wouldn’t let us go. We prayed together. Argued sometimes. Changed our minds. Changed them back.”

Jesse listened, surprised not by the closeness she was describing, but by how natural it all sounded.

“She trusted her questions then,” Miriam went on. “And she trusted mine. We were still learning how to hold faith without shrinking it.”

Her hands shifted slightly in her lap.

“Then she met your father.”

She didn’t say his name.

“He was steady,” Miriam said carefully. “Certain. He believed in things being settled. In answers that didn’t move around.”

She glanced at Jesse, making sure he was still with her.

“At first, that steadiness felt like relief to her. Like rest.” She paused. “But over time, it began to crowd out the space where her questions used to live.”

Miriam’s voice stayed calm, but something underneath it tightened.

“I don’t think anyone meant for it to happen,” she said. “But little by little, the parts of her that wondered were treated like liabilities. Like things she needed to outgrow.”

She looked down, then back up.

“So I wrote,” she said simply. “Because I could feel her slipping away from herself. And because I didn’t know how else to stand beside her.”

She hesitated, then added, almost with a small, rueful smile, “Your uncle and I weren’t living nearby then. His work took us away for a few years — far enough that letters became the only way to keep a real conversation going.”

Jesse was quiet for a moment, turning this over.

“But if Dad believed differently,” he wondered out loud, “why did she find him interesting in the first place?” He frowned slightly, not accusatory, just genuinely puzzled. “You’d think that would’ve caused problems right away.”

Miriam exhaled, slowly.

“That’s just it,” she said. “Your father offered her something very real.”

She chose her words with care.

“He offered steadiness. A life that felt secure. A future that didn’t depend on constant argument or uncertainty.” She paused. “And she was tired by then, Jesse. Tired of swimming upstream.”

Miriam folded her hands together.

“He had a solid job. He took pride in providing. And your mother liked the life that came with that — the comfort, the sense of being looked after.”

She glanced at Jesse, gently.

“So her questions didn’t disappear all at once,” she said. “They just learned to stay quiet. Because keeping the peace felt safer than testing it.”

A faint sadness touched her voice.

“Avoiding friction can feel like love,” Miriam said. “Especially when the cost of speaking up feels like it might be losing everything else.”

Jesse nodded slowly. He didn’t speak right away.

What settled over him wasn’t recognition so much as apprehension.

“So… she learned not to push,” he said carefully. “Not to ask the kinds of questions that make people uncomfortable.”

He kept his eyes on his hands.

“And I guess,” he added, quieter still, “that’s what they’re trying to teach me now, too.”

He hesitated, then seemed to remember something else — a line he had read and not quite known what to do with at the time.

“There was something in one of the letters,” he said. “Something you warned her about.”

Miriam’s attention sharpened, almost imperceptibly.

“You called it Pastor Harrow’s… Zionism,” Jesse went on, carefully. “I didn’t really know what you meant by that.” He paused. “Because what the Bible says is that we’re supposed to love Israel. That the Jewish people are God’s chosen people.”

He looked up at her, uncertain but earnest.

“I’m not trying to argue,” he said quickly. “I just don’t understand how that fits with everything else.”

Aunt Miriam regarded him for a moment, then gave a small, almost weary smile.

“I wouldn’t mind if you were trying to argue,” she said. “Some questions are meant to be argued with. Faith was never supposed to be a closed room.”

She shifted slightly in her chair.

“You’re really asking two different things,” she went on, gently. “Let’s slow down and take them one at a time.”

She rested her hands together, as if setting a boundary not of silence but of focus.

“As a Christian,” she said, “I try to follow the words of Jesus first.” She met Jesse’s eyes. “Can you remember a time when he tells his followers to support a nation or a people simply because of who they are?”

Jesse thought for a moment, genuinely searching his memory.

“I don’t think he did,” he said finally.

Miriam nodded, not in triumph, but in agreement.

“That’s why we have to be careful,” she said. “Very careful. When we start putting words into his mouth — especially words about power, land, or who God favors.”

Her voice stayed calm, but there was a firmness in it now.

“If we’re going to call ourselves Christians,” she said, “then Jesus gets to speak for himself. Not pastors. Not politicians. And not traditions that came along much later.”

This all seemed to make sense to Jesse.

“But what about the chosen people part?” he asked. “That still feels important.”

Miriam nodded. “OK, then let’s be careful with it.”

She waited a moment.

“What do you think makes a people ‘chosen’ in the Bible?”

Jesse considered this. “Some kind of… covenant?”

“Yes,” she said. “And whose covenant is that old covenant?”

“The Jewish people’s,” Jesse replied. Then, almost automatically, he added, “Christians have a new covenant.”

“Exactly,” Miriam said. “So the first question is simply this: what does that old covenant obligate us to do as Christians?”

Jesse frowned slightly. “I guess… nothing really.”

Miriam nodded. “That’s already clearer than most sermons.”

She continued gently. “But even if we look at that old covenant on its own terms, what is a covenant?”

“An agreement?” Jesse suggested.

“Is an agreement one-way or two-way?”

“Two-way.”

“So it isn’t just a promise of favor,” Miriam said. “It’s a relationship — with conditions.”

Jesse felt the ground shift, slowly but unmistakably.

“Which means,” Miriam continued, “that being ‘chosen’ was never about permanent protection or moral exemption. It was about responsibility.”

She let that settle before going on.

“The covenant wasn’t a blank check,” she said. “It was a calling — to live a certain way. To practice justice. To show restraint. To care for the vulnerable. To remember that power belongs to God, not to kings.”

Jesse nodded, following.

“And when that covenant is broken,” Miriam added, “the Bible doesn’t look away. The prophets speak up — sometimes very sharply. Not against outsiders, but against their own people.”

She met his eyes.

“So covenant language in Scripture isn’t there to bless whatever a people happen to do,” she said. “It’s there to judge them when they forget what they were chosen for.”

Jesse sat with that.

“So when you warned Mom about… Zionism,” he said slowly, “you weren’t saying Jews don’t matter.”

“No,” Miriam said at once. “I was saying no nation gets to wrap itself in God’s promises while ignoring God’s commands.”

She softened then.

“Loving a people is one thing,” she said. “Sanctifying a state — or excusing its violence — is another. Jesus never asked us to do the second.”

The room grew quiet again, not heavy this time, but clear.

As Jesse felt this problem satisfactorily resolved, a different question rose up in its place — not abstract, not distant, but close enough to make him uneasy.

He hesitated, then looked at her.

“Then… what does it mean to be a Christian?” he asked. The question came out plainly, without ornament. He wasn’t testing her. He wanted her to tell him.

Miriam studied him for a moment, then shook her head gently.

“I could tell you my answer, Jesse,” she said, “but you’ve been told all your life by someone else what it means to be a Christian.”

She leaned in just slightly.

“Why don’t you tell me what you think it means to be a Christian?”

Jesse didn’t answer right away. When he did speak, his voice was quieter than before, but steadier.

“I think…” He stopped, searching, then tried again. “I think it means caring about what happens to people. Even when it’s not easy. Even when it makes things harder.”

He glanced at her, unsure, then went on.

“Not just saying the right things. Not just believing the right ideas. But actually paying attention — to who’s hurting, who’s being pushed aside — and not pretending you don’t see it.”

He took a breath.

“And I think it means not using God to make yourself feel right when something feels wrong.”

Aunt Miriam listened without interrupting. When he finished, she nodded slowly.

“That’s it,” she said. “Christianity isn’t something we just carry around in our heads.”

She reached out then — not hesitantly, but gently — and rested her hand against Jesse’s chest, just long enough for him to feel the warmth of it.

“It lives here,” she said quietly. “In the heart. Right, Jesse?”

Jesse felt something shift — something he hadn’t felt in a long time. Not excitement exactly, and not relief alone, but a quiet widening, as if a door he hadn’t known was closed had been opened.

He loved God. And, in a way that felt newly uncomplicated, he felt his care reach outward — toward people as they were, not as proofs or positions. The feeling didn’t rush him; it steadied him.

This, he realized, was joy — not loud or earned, but real.

Jesse reflected on what he had just said, and on what Aunt Miriam had explained moments earlier. As the images from his dream surfaced momentarily, and he recalled the promise he made to young Amina when she gave him the keffiyeh, he had a sudden realization, and rushed to put it into words:

“Aunt Miriam, I know that the people in Gaza are suffering and living out in the open in the middle of winter, because their houses were bombed by Israel. I know that we should be sending them food and ways to protect themselves from the weather, but Thomas says that Israel won’t let people give them any help. Doesn’t that make Israel God’s enemy?”

Aunt Miriam watched him for a moment longer, a sad smile resting gently on her face. “That’s a hard thing to see, Jesse, but once you see it, you can’t unsee it.”

Jesse felt like his old world had been completely turned upside down, but everything they'd discussed made perfect sense to him. "This is sure going to take some getting used to," he thought to himself. Jesse had secretly suspected for some time that this was how things really were, but now he felt he openly understood them, even if he was the only one in his family who did.

Studying his aunt's features now, he realized how much she resembled his mother.

He stood up and, quite without thinking about it, leaned down and wrapped his arms around her in a long, earnest hug.

"Thanks, Aunt Miriam," he said into her shoulder. "I love you."

She held him close for a moment, steady and sure.

"I love you too, Jesse," she said softly. "That's never going to change."

A few minutes later, Jesse slipped back into the hallway and ducked into the bathroom. He splashed a little cold water on his face, dried it carefully, and studied his reflection in the mirror.

His eyes were still a little red, but they were clear. More than that, they looked awake.

He straightened his collar, ran a hand through his hair, and took a steadying breath. He wanted to be present when he went back to sit with his family — not just visible, but there.

When he returned to the living room, nothing had changed. The television was still on. Someone laughed at something he'd already heard a hundred times before. The room was warm, crowded, familiar.

For the rest of his family, the day still did what it always did. It wrapped itself around them like insulation — softening the world, keeping harder things at a safe distance. Jesse could feel the pull of it too, the old invitation to let the lights and laughter smooth everything over.

But it no longer worked.

Not because he wanted the warmth any less, but because he no longer wanted the escape it offered. The truth he had seen — the children in the cold, the rain, the deliberate turning away — would not be pushed back out of sight. And he realized, with a quiet ache, that this comfort did not exist on its own. It was protected and maintained by decisions made far beyond this room — decisions that kept some people warm while leaving others, even little children, without shelter after destroying their homes.

He sat there anyway, the warmth pressing in on him, keenly aware that these two realities could no longer be kept apart.

For the first time in his life, Jesse felt that Christmas wasn’t just happening around him — it was happening inside him.