

CHAPTER 1

The Night Shift

“Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice.”

Job 4:15-16

The hum of the Painesville electrical grid was a sound Daniel Reyes felt in his teeth. It was a low-frequency vibration, the thrum of a town breathing through copper veins. To Daniel, it was the sound of order. As a senior lineman for Painesville Municipal Electric, order was his religion. He didn't care much for the kind they preached at Grace Community anymore, not since Elena's funeral seven years ago, but he believed in the sixty-hertz pulse of the American Midwest. If the lights stayed on, the world was still turning. He knew every substation, every major transformer, every vulnerable line stretching from the river to the suburbs. He knew the grid better than he knew the contours of his own face in the mirror. The grid was honest. It followed the laws of physics. It didn't lie, it didn't hide, and it didn't take away the people you loved without a reason you could point to on a schematic.

“Reyes, you seeing this drop on the Eastlake feeder?” The voice crackled over the radio, pulling Daniel's gaze from the dark expanse of the Ohio night. He was perched forty feet up in a bucket truck, the cold autumn air biting at the exposed skin between his collar and his hard hat, carrying the cold iron smell of Lake Erie a few miles to the north. Below him, the streets of Painesville were a quilt of yellow streetlights and flickering blue

television glows. Here and there a window held a smaller, steadier light, the glow of a face bent over a screen, somebody else awake at this hour and alone with it, and Daniel understood that particular kind of light better than he wanted to. The town looked peaceful from up here, a sprawling, sleeping beast that relied on men like him to keep its heart beating.

"I see it, Miller," Daniel replied, clicking his mic. "Probably a transformer blowing a fuse on 4th. Heading that way now." He lowered the bucket with a hydraulic hiss that felt loud in the stillness. It was 2:14 AM. This was the hour when the world belonged to the shift workers, the insomniacs, and the ghosts. Daniel preferred it that way. In the daylight, the house felt too empty, the silence where Elena's laughter used to be too heavy. At night, he had the grid. He had wires to strip and breakers to reset. He had problems he could solve with a pair of insulated pliers. He didn't mind the cold, either. It kept him awake, kept his mind focused on the immediate, tangible reality of his job. He didn't want to think about the bills piling up on the kitchen counter, or the fact that Sofia was pulling away from him, retreating into her computer screens and soldering irons. He definitely didn't want to think about Mateo.

He climbed into the cab of the truck, the heater blasting a dry, dusty warmth against his boots. He checked his phone. No missed calls. That was good. It meant Sofia hadn't snuck out to some party in Oakwood, and Mateo was, hopefully, sleeping through the night.

Mateo. The thought of his nine-year-old son brought a familiar tightening in Daniel's chest. For six months, the boy hadn't slept more than three hours at a stretch. He woke up screaming about the tall things and the smiling man in the corner. The child psychologist Daniel had spent too much money on called it *delayed grief manifestation*, a fancy way of saying the boy missed his mother. Sofia, at sixteen, called it Mateo being a weirdo. Daniel just called it a nightmare. He wanted it to be a nightmare. Because if it wasn't a nightmare, then Daniel was failing at the

one job that mattered more than keeping the lights on. He was failing to protect his son.

He remembered the last time Mateo had woken up, his small body rigid with terror, pointing at a corner of the room that was perfectly, completely empty. *He's watching me, Dad. He says I can see the wires.* Daniel had held him until the shaking stopped, feeling utterly useless.

He pulled the truck onto Fourth Street, the headlights cutting through a thin veil of river fog that clung to the asphalt. This part of Painesville had seen better days; the houses were narrow, two-story frame buildings with sagging porches and windows boarded up against the encroaching silence of the Rust Belt. There it was, the transformer, a gray, oil-streaked cylinder perched high on a weathered cedar pole, leaking a faint wisp of acrid smoke that smelled of burnt insulation and ozone. The fog made the streetlights bleed into fuzzy, indistinct halos.

He parked the heavy rig, the air brakes sighing like a tired giant. He set the outriggers, the metal feet biting into the cracked pavement with a satisfying crunch. This was the part of the job Daniel loved: the meticulous, step-by-step ritual of safety. Rubber gloves, rated for twenty thousand volts. The fiberglass hot stick. The face shield. His wife had died of a cancer no one saw coming. Here, if you followed the rules, you lived. If you didn't, the arc-flash turned you into carbon. It was fair. It was a transaction he understood.

He pulled on his thick rubber gloves, the familiar smell of talc and warm rubber grounding him. He grabbed his hot stick, feeling the reassuring weight of the fiberglass in his hands. But as he stepped out of the cab, the air felt different. It wasn't a smell or a sound, at least not at first. It was a pressure. A sudden thickening of the atmosphere that made his ears pop. It felt like the moment before a massive Midwestern supercell breaks, when the sky turns a bruised green and the static in the air makes the hair on your forearms stand on end. He looked up at the transformer, expecting to see a squirrel fried on the busbar or a

branch that had finally succumbed to gravity, but the pole was clean. The smoke was coming from inside the casing, a mechanical failure, nothing more. He swallowed hard, trying to clear the sudden, sharp ringing in his ears. It felt like the air itself was vibrating, a frequency just below the threshold of human hearing.

Then he saw it. Just at the edge of his vision, standing near a rusted, peeling playground set in the small park across the street. A shape. Too tall for a man. Seven feet, maybe eight. Thin, impossibly thin, like a shadow stretched long by a setting sun. It stood perfectly still next to the slide, its form slightly darker than the surrounding night, a tear in the fabric of the fog. It didn't have features, not exactly. It was more of an impression of a face, a suggestion of eyes that were looking directly at him.

Daniel blinked, rubbing his eyes with the back of his glove. "Too much caffeine, Reyes," he muttered to the empty street. "Lay off the thermos." When he looked again, there was only the swing set, swaying slightly in the phantom breeze. The chains creaked. *Skree, skree, skree*. A rhythmic, lonely sound that seemed to echo off the brick walls of the nearby warehouses.

He stood there for a long beat, his hand hovering over his tool belt, waiting for the shape to reappear, for a logical explanation to present itself. A trick of the light. A stray dog. A teenager in a hoodie. But a teenager wasn't eight feet tall. And a stray dog didn't make the air feel like it was holding its breath. Nothing moved. He shook it off, forced his boots to move toward the bucket. Order. Pulse. Voltage.

He spent the next forty-five minutes forty feet in the air, his hands moving with the fluid, unthinking muscle memory of two decades. He bypassed the cutout, replaced the blown fuse link, and tightened the lugs with a steady hand. He focused on the task, on the tangible reality of copper and porcelain. But he couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on his back. Not human eyes. Something colder. Something that didn't blink. He found himself checking his blind spots more often than usual, his grip on the hot stick

unnecessarily tight.

When he finally slammed the cutout closed with his hot stick, a brilliant blue spark jumped, illuminating the fog for a fraction of a second. In that flash, he thought he saw the shape again. Closer now, standing right at the base of his truck. He nearly dropped the stick. But when the light faded and the streetlights on the block hummed back to life, casting their familiar, sickly yellow glow over the street, there was nothing there but the outriggers and a discarded soda can. His breath caught, a sharp, ragged sound. He leaned over the edge of the bucket, peering into the shadows below, his pulse loud in his ears. Nothing. Just the quiet, sleeping street.

“Order restored,” he whispered, but the words felt hollow.

He lowered the bucket, his heart hammering against his ribs. He didn’t look back as he retracted the outriggers and climbed into the cab. He didn’t look in the rearview mirror as he pulled away. He just drove, the heater blasting against his boots. He tried to convince himself the grid was still the only thing in Painesville that had a pulse. He turned the radio up, letting the static and the occasional chatter of the dispatcher fill the silence in the cab, drowning out the lingering memory of that terrible, silent pressure.

By the time he pulled into his driveway, the sky was turning a bruised purple. The Reyes house was a modest ranch-style house with peeling white paint and a porch swing that Elena had always meant to strip and stain. Daniel sat in the truck for a moment, watching the house. It looked peaceful. It looked normal. A sanctuary against whatever was out there in the fog.

He let himself in through the back door, kicking off his boots in the mudroom. The house smelled of stale cereal and the lingering scent of Sofia’s vanilla body spray. He moved quietly, a ghost in his own home, heading toward the kitchen to pour a glass of water. He leaned against the counter, letting the cool water soothe his dry throat. He closed his eyes, trying to banish the image of the tall shape by the slide.

A floorboard creaked behind him. Daniel spun around, his heart jumping. Sofia was standing in the hallway, her arms crossed over her ENGINEERING IS MAGIC sweatshirt. Her dark hair was a bird's nest, and her eyes were rimmed with red.

"He's doing it again," she whispered. Her voice was sharp, brittle with exhaustion.

"How long?" Daniel asked, setting the glass down.

"Since three. He won't go back to sleep, Dad. He says the smiling one is sitting on his chest." She looked at him, her expression a mix of anger and desperate plea. "You have to do something, Dad. I can't keep doing this every night."

Daniel sighed, a deep, weary sound that seemed to start in the soles of his feet. He walked past her, his calloused hand briefly touching her shoulder. She didn't pull away, which was as much affection as a sixteen-year-old girl in Painesville, Ohio, was allowed to show. "I'll handle it, Sof. Try to get some sleep before school."

"I have a physics test," she muttered, rubbing her eyes. "I can't fail physics, Dad. Mom would kill me." The mention of Elena hung in the air between them, a heavy, unspoken thing.

"You won't fail," Daniel said quietly. "Go to bed."

Mateo's room was at the end of the hall. The door was cracked open, a sliver of light from a dinosaur night-light spilling onto the carpet. Daniel pushed it open, the hinges squeaking slightly, a sound he kept meaning to fix but never seemed to find the time for. Mateo was sitting bolt upright in bed, his small hands clutching a frayed blue blanket, the one Elena had knitted for him when he was a toddler, now pilled and thin from years of use. He wasn't crying. That was the part that always unsettled Daniel. If the boy had been sobbing, Daniel would have known what to do. You hold a crying child. You tell them it's just a dream. You promise them the monsters aren't real. But Mateo wasn't hysterical. He was attentive. He stared at the corner of the room, the space between the heavy oak dresser and the closet door where the shadows pooled deep and heavy, his eyes wide and

fixed, unblinking.

"Hey, buddy," Daniel said softly, the floorboards groaning as he sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped, and he reached out to ruffle Mateo's hair, which was damp with sweat. "I'm home. Shift's over. It's okay."

Mateo didn't look at him. His gaze remained locked on that corner, his breathing shallow and rhythmic, like a small animal playing dead to avoid a predator. "He says you fixed the lights, Dad."

The water in Daniel's stomach turned to ice. "What?"

"The tall one. In the corner." Mateo pointed a small, trembling finger at the empty space beside the dresser. The dinosaur night-light cast a weak, green glow that barely reached the shadows. "He said he liked the sparks you made. He said he liked the way the blue light looked in the fog." Mateo's voice was flat, devoid of emotion, merely reporting a fact.

A cold finger of dread traced its way down Daniel's spine, vertebra by vertebra. *Just a coincidence*, he screamed at himself internally. *Kids hear things. He probably heard me talking to Miller on the radio when I picked him up from school last week. He's a smart kid. He's just putting things together. He's grieving. He's just grieving.*

"There's nobody there, Mateo," Daniel said, his voice sounding thin and unconvincing even to his own ears. He stood up, his joints popping, and walked to the corner. He made a show of swatting the air, of opening the closet door and rattling the empty hangers. The metal clinked loudly in the quiet room. "See? Just shadows. Just your old soccer cleats and some dust bunnies. Nothing but air."

Mateo finally looked at his father. His expression wasn't one of a child who had been comforted or proven wrong. It was the look of a child being pitied by an adult who didn't understand the rules of the game. It was a look of profound, weary patience that belonged on the face of an old man, not a nine-year-old boy.

“He’s not in the closet, Dad,” Mateo said, his voice a mere whisper that seemed to carry more weight than a shout. “He’s standing right behind you. He’s leaning over your shoulder to see if you’re lying.”

Daniel didn’t turn around. He couldn’t. His feet felt like they were rooted into the subflooring. For a split second, the green light from the night-light seemed to dim, and he felt a rush of freezing air against the back of his neck, a cold so intense it felt like a physical touch, like the brush of a cold, wet cloth. He felt the sensation of something vast and ancient, something that smelled of dry earth, old copper, and a strange, metallic sweetness, leaning over him. He could almost hear it. Not a voice, but a vibration. A low-frequency thrum that matched the hum of the grid, but was somehow wrong.

Finally, the vibration seemed to say, though no words were spoken. It was an impression pushed directly into his mind, a thought that wasn’t his own.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the pressure vanished. The night-light brightened, casting its familiar green glow across the carpet. The room was just a bedroom again, messy and mundane, filled with Legos and comic books. Daniel spun around, fists clenched, breath coming in ragged gasps. Nothing. Just the wall. Just the framed picture of a T-Rex Elena had hung up three weeks before she went into the hospital. He stared at the picture, waiting for the dinosaur to move, for the wall to bleed, for something to prove he hadn’t just imagined the whole thing.

“Right,” Daniel said, his voice cracking, his hands shaking so hard he had to shove them into the pockets of his jeans. “Enough stories. It’s almost morning. Sofia,” he called out to the hallway, “go get him some juice. The orange kind he likes. Mateo, you’re staying in my bed for the rest of the night. We’ll put on a movie. Something loud. Maybe that superhero one you like.”

“Can we keep the lights on?” Mateo asked, his voice returning to that of a normal nine-year-old, small and vulnerable, the ancient weariness gone.

“Every single one of them,” Daniel promised, and he meant it. He wanted the house to be visible from orbit. He wanted to drown out every shadow in Painesville, to banish the dark to the very edges of the earth.

As he led his children down the hall, Daniel felt the weight of the house pressing in on him. He looked at Sofia, who was walking ahead of them, her shoulders slumped with a fatigue that no sixteen-year-old should know. She looked like her mother, especially in this light: the same stubborn set of her jaw, the same way she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. It broke his heart every time he saw it.

“Dad?” she asked, pausing at the kitchen door, the refrigerator light illuminating her pale face. “You okay? You look like you saw a ghost.”

Daniel forced a smile, the kind he used explaining a high bill to an angry customer. “Just tired, kiddo. Long night on the Eastlake feeder. Go on, get the juice.”

He watched her go, then looked down at Mateo, who was holding his hand with a grip that was surprisingly strong for a boy his size. The boy wasn’t looking at the corners anymore. He was looking at Daniel, his eyes filled with a strange, quiet pity.

“He’s not mad, Dad,” Mateo said. “The smiling one. He’s just happy we’re finally starting to see.”

Daniel didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He didn’t have the words. He just led his son into the master bedroom, the room that still smelled faintly of Elena’s lavender laundry detergent, and turned on every lamp until the room glowed like a beacon, harsh and unforgiving. He sat on the edge of the bed, watching the door, his hand resting on the phone on the nightstand. He thought about calling Miller, telling him he was sick and couldn’t come in tomorrow. He thought about calling the police, but what would he say? *There’s a tall shadow in my son’s room?* He thought about calling the pastor, maybe Pastor Sosa at Grace Community, but he hadn’t spoken to the man in years.

Instead, he just sat there, listening to the hum of the refrigerator and the distant, mournful sound of a train whistle, waiting for the sun to come up and prove that the world was still the way he thought it was. He sat there a long time, and the sun came up, and it did not prove anything at all. The light filled the kitchen the way it always had, and the refrigerator hummed its steady sixty-hertz hum, and Daniel understood, somewhere underneath thought, that the thing on his street had not been an ending. It had been a beginning. And that the smiling one his son kept describing was only the first.

Daniel Reyes, the man who believed in order and voltage, closed his eyes and did something he hadn't done in seven years. He didn't pray. Not yet. He just whispered a name into the light. "Elena. I hope you can't see this."

But deep down, in the part of him that still understood the grid, he knew the truth. The dark wasn't just thinning. It was tearing away. And when it was gone, there would be nowhere left to hide.

For the first time in his life, the hum of the grid didn't feel like order. It felt like a whistle in the dark. It was the last normal morning he would ever see.

The story continues October 31.
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