

Flashback Chapter: The Storyteller

“Some stories are not meant to be told.
Some were never meant to happen at all.”

I wasn't born in Burrington.
And I reckon I won't die here either. Least not in
a way that'll stick.

Truth is, I don't remember the name of the town
I first came from. It might've been somewhere
near Tennessee or maybe farther west, back
when borders were little more than ideas and the
rivers did the talking. I was just a boy when I first
learned how to tell a story worth listening to. My
audience? The wind. The fire. The dark.

You see, I wasn't raised by kin. I drifted. From
hand to hand, place to place. But I made friends

of the ones who had none, children left behind,
quiet-eyed girls and sharp-boned boys with soot
on their cheeks and too many nights behind
them. I told them stories not to teach them
anything... just to remind them they still had ears
to hear.

A tale can do that, you know.
It can pull you back from the edge.

Even as a child, I always knew more than I
should've. Not from books, not from lessons. It
came from the earth. I'd press my palm into the
dirt and it would hum. Not in sound, but in story.
The grass remembers. The wind remembers. And
sometimes, if you listen hard enough, it'll tell you
things that haven't happened yet.

That's how I heard of Burrington.
Before it was Burrington.

Didn't know the name. But I saw it. In flashes.
Dreams. Dust-thick visions that stuck to me like
smoke. Always a town swallowed by silence.

Always a boy standing in the middle of it,
watching time fall apart around him.

Didn't meet him then.

Didn't know his name was Elijah.

But I'd seen him.

And he'd seen me.

I wandered a long while before I got here. I'd sit
in church basements and schoolhouses,
whispering bedtime tales to children with hollow
eyes. Sometimes they smiled. Sometimes they
cried. But always, they listened. I spoke of things
I didn't understand. Stories that came from
somewhere else, through me, not from me.

I reckon it was around the time I saw my own
shadow vanish in broad daylight that I knew it
was time to go where the earth was calling.
That place turned out to be Burrington.

No map led me. No man invited me. I just
followed the quiet.

When I arrived, the sky was gray like ash, and the streets were empty save for the boy – Elijah. Standing still as a root, staring at me with those eyes that'd lived through too many years. He didn't speak right away. Just tilted his head, like he recognized something in me.

“You're late,” he said, voice like dry paper.

I asked what he meant.

But he just smiled. “You'll see.”

Strange child. Kind, but strange. Always watching, always knowing. He led me through the town like a ghost guiding a guest. Showed me the square, the church, the library – though back then, the light didn't shine quite so bright through its windows.

He became my aide, you could say. Sat with me during story hour. Brought the curious children, warned off the bitter adults. I'd tell them tales, some real, some less so. Never gave them everything. Just enough to leave a question behind.

That's all a good story's meant to do.

I remember the evening I first saw her.

Lavinia Hark.

She was arguing with the mayor.

It was foggy, so thick it wrapped around the buildings like a second skin. They didn't see me. I was just a figure in the mist, listening as their voices cut through the hush.

"You said you'd protect me," she hissed.

Mayor Burrington; tall, proud, dressed like a man who'd never once lost a thing – looked at her like she'd just torn open the sky.

"I can't protect what you refuse to hide."

That's all I heard.

They vanished into the mist after that. And I didn't follow. Some stories you're meant to witness only halfway.

But I stayed.

I stayed because I knew someone would come.

Someone who'd need the stories.
Someone who'd need to remember what
everyone else had tried to forget.

And now, she's here.
She looks like Lavinia... but she ain't Lavinia.
I feel it. The story's bending again. The loop is
tightening. Elijah watches her the way he
watched me when I first came.

And I reckon it's all about to begin again.
Only this time, maybe... just maybe... someone'll
finish the tale.

I've been in Burrington so long, the birds know
not to sing near me.
Not sure what day it is anymore. That's the funny
thing, this town gave up on calendars long before
the people stopped looking at clocks. Time don't
pass here, it wanders. And when it doubles back,
it never knocks.

But I remember this night clear as any I've ever
lived.

It was just after the harvest, what passed for one, anyway. The trees had begun to rot from the inside out. The soil, too damp in some places and too dry in others. The children were restless. Elijah more than most.

I'd promised them a story beneath the old oak tree, the one with bark split like ribs and branches

that curled like fingers grasping for something long lost.

They gathered around, their knees tucked close to their chests, eyes wide, hands dirty. Elijah sat cross-legged beside me, his expression blank but alert.

"Tell us the one about the girl who stole from the moon," a little boy named Abram asked.

I smiled and began.

But something wasn't right that night.

The sky had been quiet all day, but as my story curled into its third twist, just as the moon girl

began to climb the sky, the clouds above shifted. Not just darkened. Shifted. Like something was writhing behind them.

Then came the sound.

Not thunder.

Not wind.

Not natural.

It was a groaning; deep and guttural, like the sky itself had been split open and the thing living inside it was finally stretching awake.

Elijah stood up first.

He turned to me and said, “They’re watching again.”

I didn’t ask who.

Just scooped the littlest girl under my arm and started ushering the children toward the church.

We didn’t run, not quite. But every step felt heavier, like something was pulling at our backs.

The doors of the church creaked open with a reluctant moan. No one had been inside in

weeks, maybe longer. The candles had long melted down to stubs, the air thick with dust and leftover sorrow.

I lit a lantern and held it high.

The light spread across old pews and crumbling hymn books. Above the altar, someone had painted over a section of wall, sloppily. Like they were in a rush to hide something.

I could still see the outline beneath it. Two small silhouettes. Holding hands. Standing too still.

I didn't say anything.
Neither did Elijah.

The children sat quietly in the pews, all of them instinctively bunching together. The girl in my arms tugged at my sleeve and asked, "Was that part of the story?"

I told her yes. I tell a lot of lies in the name of comfort.

That night, we slept in the church. The groaning never stopped. It came in waves, like the land itself was having trouble breathing. I sat in the back with Elijah. He didn't sleep. Just watched the door, his head tilted again like he was listening to something no one else could hear.

When morning came, the sky looked clean again. Blue like porcelain. But the air felt off, too still. The kind of stillness you only get after something barely misses you.

That was the first time I truly knew:
Whatever watches this town ain't finished yet.

Not long after, I overheard a conversation between two men at the general store, Bennett and Rulon. They spoke of me like I wasn't there.

"He don't eat much. Don't sleep much neither."

"He's not from here. That's why he can see it."

"You think he wants to stay?"

"I think he already knows how it ends."

They weren't wrong.
I did know. In pieces. In whispers.
But I stayed anyway.

Because whoever was coming... whoever would
need this place... would need me more.

I wasn't the hero. Never was.
But someone has to keep the stories.
Someone has to remember the shape of the
truth.
And I reckon that's me.

There were days after that night when I'd go
walking, just to listen to the ground.

I'd kneel by the stream near the edge of town,
fingers pressed to the soil, and wait for
something to speak. Sometimes it did.
Sometimes it didn't. But when it did, it never
used words. It used memory.

And memory in Burrington don't move in a
straight line. It loops. Collapses. Swells like a
bruise.

I saw the children's faces age backward.

I saw the church door swing open with no one near it.

I saw Lavinia crying by the river, and Elias too proud to hold her hand.

I saw the same parade a dozen different ways, always ending in silence.

The town rewrote itself, over and over, like a frightened animal chewing off its own leg to escape a trap it didn't know it built.

Still, I stayed.

Every time I thought of leaving, something stopped me. A word in the wind. A figure on the hill. A whisper in the rafters of the library that said, *Not yet*.

And then, one day... she came.

She drove in on four wheels and questions.

Dressed in city denim and doubt. Eyes full of logic that would be no good here. She didn't

recognize the story. Didn't believe she was part of it.

But I did.

Elijah was the first to see her, of course. That boy always did have a way of sensing what's next.

And me? I was already in the library, dusting off the journals that had been waiting for her touch

Funny thing is, she still thinks this is about her getting lost.

But it ain't.

It's about remembering.

It's always been about remembering.

Even when remembering hurts.

Sometimes, I see the end of things before they start.

Sometimes, I write the ending first and let the middle figure itself out.

But with her...

With Beck...

There's something I ain't quite figured yet.

I know she's not Lavinia. Not really.
But I also know the land don't care about names.
It only cares about echoes.
And she echoes louder than most.

Elijah's watching her now. Watching the way he
used to watch me. That same quiet patience. That
same hope stitched into the seams of fear.

And me? I'm sitting right here. In this chair.
Telling stories like I always do.
Because sooner or later, she'll come back
through that door.
And when she does, she'll want the truth.

But I won't give it all to her.
Not at once.
Because the truth, like the land, must be taken
slow.
Or else it'll rot you from the inside out.

So I'll keep telling tales.
Keep offering crumbs to lead her deeper into the
woods.
Because the deeper she goes, the closer she gets

to the fire.

And once the fire sees her...

Well.

That'll be a tale worth telling.