

FRANK PERETTI

VISITATION

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*In loving memory of Kip Jordon.*

## PROLOGUE

THE HAMMER RANG against the nail, piercing skin, cutting vessels. It rang against the nail, piercing muscle, chipping bone. It rang against the nail, anchoring arm to rough-hewn wood. It rang. It rang. It rang.

And then the ringing stopped, and the young man hung there under the scorching sun, faint with pain, alone. He could not shift his weight, flex his knees, or even turn his head without feeling the fire of the nails. His wrists were swelling around the nail heads. His blood was drying in the sun, turning brown on the wood.

He cried out, but God did not listen. It could have been God who drove the nails, then put his hammer down and turned away, smiling in victory. It could have been God who left him to bake and bleed in the sun, unable to stand, unable to fall, as the sun marked the passing hours across the cloudless sky.

Stinking with sweat. Crimson with sunburn. Dried blood crackling around the nails. Pain the only reality.

He cried out, but in the cauldron of his sun-boiled mind he heard only the voices of his accusers and the ringing, ringing, ringing of the hammer—sounds that would forever haunt his memory and echo through his nightmares.

## THE VISITATION

“You’re a child of the devil,” they said. A child of the devil who needed to be contained.

A child of the devil?

He cried out once again, and this time, a voice, a mind, answered and a power coursed through him. Suddenly, he could bear the pain and make it fuel for his will. With burning will, he determined he would live.

And living, he knew what he would do.

# 1

SALLY FORDYCE left the house as soon as the breakfast dishes were done, walking a little, jogging a little along Highway 9—a narrow, straight-as-a-string two-lane with a fading white line and an evenly spaced parade of utility poles. This was eastern Washington State, quiet and solitary. Wheat fields, spring green, stretched in every direction over the prairie swells. Straight ahead, the highway dipped and rose gently into the distance until it narrowed to a vanishing point at the far horizon. The sun was warm, the breeze a little biting. It was April.

Sally was nineteen, blonde, slightly overweight, and severely unhappy, mainly because she was no longer married. She had believed everything Joey, the trucker, told her about love, and how she was that girl silhouetted on his mud flaps. The marriage—if it happened at all—lasted three months. When he found another woman more “intellectually stimulating,” Sally was bumped from the truck’s sleeper and found herself coming full circle, right back to being Charlie and Meg’s daughter living at home again. She had to keep her room clean, help with dinner and dishes, get home by eleven, and attend the Methodist church with them every Sunday. Again, her life was not her life.

She had tasted freedom, she thought, but she was turned away.



She had no wings to fly and nowhere to fly even if she did. Life wasn't fair. (To hear Charlie tell it, he and Meg must have made up a list of all the dumb mistakes they hoped she would never make and given her a copy. Needless to say, things were tense.)

Even before she tried Joey, the trucker, Sally used to find escape out on the wheat prairie in the stillness of the morning. Now she returned, even fled to this place. Out here, she heard no voice but her own thoughts, and her thoughts could say whatever they wanted. She could pray too, sometimes aloud, knowing no one but God would hear her. "Dear God, please don't leave me stuck here. If you're there, send a miracle. Get me out of this mess."

In all fairness, it was past time for Sally to feel that way. Except for those who had wheat farming in their blood and couldn't wait to climb on a combine, most everyone growing up in Antioch heard a call from elsewhere—*anywhere*—sooner or later. When they came of age, all the kids who could find a way out left—usually—for good. Sally had come of age, all right, but had not found a way out. Charlie and Meg would probably tell you that she was not the kind to look for one, either. She was still waiting for it to come to her.

The halfway point of her jog was a spreading cottonwood at the top of a shallow rise, the only tree in sight. It was monstrous, and had to have been growing there long before the roads, farms, or settlers came along. Sally double-timed her way up the rise and was breathing hard by the time she reached it. She'd developed a routine: Every day she braced herself against the huge trunk and stretched out her leg muscles, then sat and rested for a moment between two prominent roots on the south side. Recently, a short prayer for a miracle had also become part of the routine.

The stretches went easily enough. She had cooled down, her breathing had settled, she could feel the flush in her cheeks from the exercise and the cool air.

She rounded the tree—

And almost jumped out of her skin.

A man was sitting between the two roots, exactly in her spot, his back against the gnarled trunk and his wrists draped lazily over his

knees. He had to have been there all during her stretching-out, and she was immediately curious, if not offended, that he had said or done nothing to indicate his presence.

"Oh!" she gasped, then caught her breath. "Hello. I didn't see you there."

He only chuckled and smiled at her with a kindly gaze. He was a remarkably handsome man, with olive skin, deep brown eyes, and tightly curled black hair. He was young, perhaps as young as she was. "Good morning, Sally. Sorry if I startled you."

She probed her memory. "Have we met before?"

He shook his head teasingly. "No."

"Well, who are you?"

"I'm here to bring you a message. Your prayers have been heard, Sally. Your answer is on his way. Be looking for him."

She looked away for only a moment, just a slight, eye-rolling gesture of consternation. "Be looking for who—?"

He was gone.

"Hey!"

She walked around the cottonwood, looked up and down the road and across every field, and even looked straight up the trunk of the tree.

He was gone, just like that, as if he'd never been there.

After one more hurried trip around the tree, she stopped, a hand against the trunk to steady herself, her eyes scanning the prairie. Her heart was beating faster than when she'd come up the rise. Her breathing was rapid and shallow. She was shaking.

AT OUR LADY OF THE FIELDS CHURCH in Antioch, Arnold Kowalski was busy dust-mopping the quaint little sanctuary, pushing the wide broom between the pews and down the center aisle, moving a little slowly but doing a thorough job. Arnold had been a soldier, a carpenter, a diesel mechanic, and a mail carrier, and now, since retiring, he had taken upon himself the unofficial title of church custodian. It wasn't a paid position, although the church

did provide a little monetary gift for him each month as an expression of love and gratitude. He just did it for God, a few hours a few days a week, pure and simple. It brought him joy, and besides, he liked being in this place.

He'd been a devout member of Our Lady of the Fields for some forty years now. He never missed Sunday morning mass if he could help it. He never failed to make it to confession, though now at seventy-two the confessions were getting shorter and the penance easier. He liked to think that God was happy with him. He considered himself happy enough with God.

Except for one thing, one minor grief he had to carry as he moved slowly down the center aisle pushing his broom. He couldn't help wishing that God would pay just a little attention to Arnold's arthritis. It used to flare up occasionally; now it was only on occasion that it didn't. He was ashamed to think such a thought, but he kept thinking it anyway: *Here I am serving God, but God keeps letting it hurt*. His hands throbbed, his feet ached. His knuckles cried out no matter which way he gripped the broom. He was never one to complain, but today, he almost felt like crying.

*Maybe I'm not serving God enough*, he thought. *Maybe I need to work longer. Maybe if I didn't take any money for what I do here . . .*

*What am I missing?* he wondered. *What am I leaving out?*

He always took off his hat when he entered the building and blessed himself before entering the sanctuary. Right now, as usual, he was wearing his blue coveralls. Perhaps a tie would show more respect.

He pushed a little more dust and dirt down the center aisle until he stepped into a beam of sunlight coming through a stained-glass window. The sun felt warm on his back and brought him comfort, as if it were God's hand resting on his shoulders. From this spot he could look up at the carved wooden crucifix hanging above the altar. He caught the gaze of the crucified Christ.

"I don't want to complain," he said. Already he felt he was overstepping his bounds. "But what harm would it do? What difference would it make to this big wide world if one little man didn't have so much pain?" It occurred to Arnold that he had addressed God in anger. Ashamed, he looked away from those gazing wooden eyes.

But the eyes drew him back, and for a strange, illusory moment they seemed alive, mildly scolding, but mostly showing compassion as a father would show to a child with a scraped knee. Sunlight from another window brought out a tiny sparkle in the corners of the eyes, and Arnold had to smile. He could almost imagine those eyes were alive and wet with tears.

The sparkle grew, spreading from the corners of the eyes and reaching along the lower eyelids.

Arnold looked closer. Where was the light coming from that could produce such an effect? He looked above and to the right. It had to be coming through that row of small windows near the ceiling. To think he'd been attending this church for so many years and never noticed this before. It looked just as if—

A tear rose over the edge of the eyelid and dropped onto the wooden cheek, tracing a thin wet trail down the face and onto the beard.

Arnold stared, frozen, his mind stuck between seeing and believing. He felt no sense of awe, no overshadowing spiritual presence. He heard no angelic choir singing in the background. All he knew was that he was watching a wooden image shed tears as he stood there dumbly.

Then his first coherent thought finally came to him. *I have to get up there.* Yes, that was the thing to do; that would settle it. He hurried as fast as the pain in his feet would allow him and brought a ladder from the storeroom in back. Pausing before the altar to bless himself, he stepped around the altar and carefully leaned the ladder against the wall. Every climbing step brought a sharp complaint from his feet, but he gritted his teeth, grimaced, and willed himself up the ladder until he came eye to eye, level to level with the carved face.

His eyes had not been playing tricks on him. The face, only a third life-sized, was wet. He looked above to see if there was a leak in the ceiling but saw no sign of a stain or drip. He leaned close to study the image for any sign of a device or some kind of trickery. Nothing.

He reached, then hesitated from the very first tinge of fear. Just

what was he about to touch? *Dear God, don't hurt me.* He reached again, shakily extending his hand until his fingertips brushed across the wet trail of the tears.

He felt a tingling, like electricity, and jerked his hand away with a start. It wasn't painful, but it scared him, and his hand began to quiver. Electric sensations shot up his arm like countless little bees swarming in his veins. He let out a quiet little yelp, then gasped, then yelped again as the sensation flowed across his shoulders, around his neck, down his spine. He grabbed the ladder and held it tightly, afraid he would topple off.

A strong grip.

A grip without pain. He stared at his hand. The vibration buzzed, and swirled under his skin, through his knuckles, across his palms, through his wrists. He lightened his grip, tightened it again, held on with one hand while he opened and closed the other, wiggling and flexing the fingers.

The pain was gone. His hands were strong.

The current rushed down his legs, making his nerves tingle and his muscles twitch. He hugged the ladder, his hands glued to the rungs, a cry bouncing off the wall only inches from his nose. He was shaking, afraid he would fall. He cried out, gasped, trembled, cried out again.

The electricity, the sensation—whatever it was—enveloped his feet and his scream echoed through the building.

SUNDAY, PASTOR KYLE SHERMAN prayed the prayer of benediction, the pianist and organist began playing the postlude—a modern rendition of “Be Still My Soul”—and the congregation of the Antioch Pentecostal Mission rose to leave. The after-service shuffling was the same as one would see in any church. Folks gathered up their coats, Bibles, Sunday school papers, and children, then formed slow-moving clusters in the aisles and doorways to joke and chat. Families, singles, friends, and visitors passed through the main doorway where the young pastor stood to shake their hands and

greet them. Kids went as wild as their parents would tolerate, running outside after being scolded for running inside.

Dee Baylor was among the departing saints that day. A steady and constant presence at Antioch Mission, she was a robust, heavy-set woman in her forties with a prominent nose and hair that added measurably to her height. Short, mousy Blanche Davis and tightly permed, blue-rinsed Adrian Folsom were walking with her across the gravel parking lot as the three worked excitedly to keep the Christian grapevine alive.

“That’s all he said?” Adrian asked.

Dee didn’t mind repeating the story or any part of it. “Just that ‘her answer was on his way.’ And according to Sally he said *his* way, not *its* way.”

“So who was he talking about?” asked Blanche.

“Maybe her future husband,” Adrian ventured. “God told me I was going to marry Roger.”

“So what about the crucifix at the Catholic church?” Blanche wondered.

“You can’t limit God,” Dee answered.

“No, you can’t limit God,” Adrian agreed with extra insistence in her voice.

“But a weeping statue?” Blanche asked, making a crinkled face.

“That sounds awfully Catholic to me.”

“Well, it’s something a Catholic would understand.”

Blanche considered that in silence.

“We need to be seeking the Lord,” said Dee, her eyes closing prayerfully. “We need to be expecting. God has plans for Antioch. I think the Lord is ready to pour out his Spirit on this town.”

“Amen.” That was what Blanche wanted to hear.

“Amen,” Adrian echoed.

Dee looked up at the sky as if looking toward heaven. The clouds were breaking up now. Patches of blue were beginning to show, promising a pleasant afternoon.

Adrian and Blanche walked and continued the conversation until they noticed they were by themselves. They looked back.

“Dee?”

She was standing still, clutching her Bible to her bosom and looking heavenward, her lips moving rapidly as she whispered in another language.

“Dee?”

They hurried to her side. “What is it?”

All she could do was point, then gasp, her hand over her mouth.

Adrian and Blanche looked quickly, afraid something might fall on them. They saw nothing but billowing clouds and patches of blue sky.

“I see Jesus,” Dee said in a hushed voice. Then, raising one hand toward the sky she shouted ecstatically, “Jesus! I see you, I see you!”

Brother Norheim walked by. He was old, bent, and hard of hearing, but a respected church pillar. He knew how a church should be run and how the Spirit moved and how to properly wash out the communion cups so as not to offend the Lord. When he started “Bless the Lord, O My Soul” from his pew in the evening service, everybody sang right along whether Linda Sherman could find the right key on the piano or not. He could see the ladies were excited about something.

“What are you looking at?”

“I see the Lord!” Dee gasped, and then she broke into a song. “I see the Lord . . . I see the Lord . . . He is high and lifted up, and his train fills the temple!”

Adrian and Blanche kept staring at the clouds, hoping to spot something, making quick sideways glances at each other for clues.

Brother Norheim looked the sky over, smiling with three golden teeth and three gaps. “The firmament showeth his handiwork!”

“What do you see?” Adrian finally asked.

Dee pointed. “Don’t you see him? Right there! He’s looking right at us!”

Adrian and Blanche looked carefully, following the point of Dee’s finger. Finally, Blanche drew in a slow, awe-struck gasp. “Yeeesssss . . . Yes, I see him! I see him!”

"Where?" Adrian cried. "I don't see him."

"Isn't that incredible!"

Adrian put her head right next to Blanche's, hoping to gain the same perspective. "Show me."

Blanche pointed. "See? There's the top of his head, and there's his ear and his beard . . ."

Adrian let out a crowlike squawk she usually saved for funny jokes and deep revelations. "AWWW! You're right! You're right!"

Now all three women were pointing and looking while Dee kept singing in and out of English. Brother Norheim moved on, glad to see the saints on fire, but others came alongside to see what the commotion was all about. Dave White, the contractor, saw the face right away, but his wife, Michelle, never did. Adrian's husband, Roger, saw the face, but found it an amusing coincidence and nothing more. Don and Melinda Forester, a new couple in church, both saw the face but disagreed on which direction it was looking. Their kids, Tony and Pammie, ages eight and six, saw Jesus but also saw several different animals on top of his head.

"Look!" said Adrian. "He's holding a dove in his hand, you see that?"

"Yeeahhhhh . . ." Dave White said in a hushed voice, his face filled with awe.

"He's ready to pour out his Spirit!" Dee announced with a prophetic waver in her voice.

"Eh, beats me," said Roger, squinting at the sky.

"He's speaking to us in these last days!"

"You're crazy," Michelle insisted. "I don't see anything."

"Hey Pastor Sherman!" Tony yelled. "We see Jesus in the clouds!"

"There's a rooster!" Pammie squealed.

"IT JUST KEPT GOING FROM THERE," Kyle Sherman told me.

"The three women started seeing all kinds of things because the clouds kept changing. For a while Jesus had a dove in his hand, and



then after that he turned into a door—you know, the door to the sheepfold, the door to heaven, whatever you want—and then—” Kyle looked toward the ceiling as he recalled the appearance of the sky. “Uh . . . a flame, I think.” He drew it in the air with his hand. “Kind of wavy, you know, up and down like a pillar of fire.”

Kyle hadn’t used any names up to this point, so I asked him, “Are we talking about Dee Baylor?”

He nodded, looking abashed.

“Adrian Folsom and Blanche Davis?”

Kyle nodded again, a reluctant yes.

“Makes sense,” I said, picking up my coffee cup and taking another swallow.

It was Monday, the typical pastor’s day off. Kyle Sherman and I were sitting at my kitchen table with coffee cups and a bag of Oreo cookies between us. He was still in his twenties, dark-haired, wiry, a fresh horse ready to gallop. For the past four months, he’d been at this table in this little house several times, keeping in touch and trying to be a good shepherd.

And hoping to keep some strays from straying further, I surmised. I know I caught his attention the moment he arrived to take over the pastorate. I was still the official pastor until I passed my mantle to him, but I was conspicuously missing. Antioch Pentecostal Mission had a pastor—a *former* pastor—who couldn’t go near the place.

Kyle immediately did the pastoral thing by coming after—coming to—me and becoming a regular part of my life, welcome or not. The minister in me understood what he was doing and admitted that, if I were in Kyle’s place, I would have done the same. As for the rest of me . . . well, I’ll get to that.

Today’s visit was decidedly different from the others, however. I hadn’t heard quite so many Praise Gods or Hallelujahs from Kyle today. I could tell the spiritual escapades of Dee Baylor and company were weighing on him.

“Dee seems like she’s—” Kyle was either struggling for words or waiting for me to fill in the blanks.