

# Orb

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## *Dedication*

To my Savior for not giving up on me.



# 1

*Thursday night, April 4*

Meshach suffered from a bellyful of Lubbock, Texas. The city sprouted on a flat plain with a view of nothing but sunup and sundown, unless the wind blew. Then, gusts stirred enough dirt in the air to make the noon sun disappear and cause the streetlights to come on. Today looked like pictures of the Oklahoma dustbowl. It was impossible to escape the smell of dirt. Grit covered his face and arms, every inch of him. People lived here and liked it.

Nighttime didn't bring relief. The quarter-moon protested, refused to peek though the dust, and added to the darkness.

Not much for playground equipment in the little park. A metal slide and two plastic creatures mounted on coiled springs. When the gusts hit them, they looked like horses galloping. A small merry-go-round sat next to that. Kid powered. Push until dizzy then hop on and ride it out.

He walked to the swing set just beyond the creatures and opted for the lowest of three rubber seats swaying on the end of their chains. He sat and stretched out his legs as a chill eased up his back. His black shirt would have been warm enough on a sixty-degree night, but not in the buffeting wind.

His dog tugged the leash to its end and then sat in the dirt and whined. The mutt cost him ninety-five dollars and a round-trip drive to Amarillo. The longest four hours of his life. Like driving across the moon. The broad who ran the shelter for wayward canines cited a long list of maladies the vet had treated when the dog arrived, as if to justify the sale price. Would have been more but Mr. Maxwell, she'd called him with all due reverence and respect—the dog, not the vet—had already been neutered. Poor thing. Dropped off on a country road, what was he to do? She'd welled up with tears when Meshach left with him. She should have bought the cur and took him home herself.

Maxwell had short brown hair, big ears and weighed twenty pounds. He looked like a Chihuahua on steroids and acted twice as spastic. His boney tail stayed tucked away and rarely made an appearance.

Meshach glanced at his watch: 11:18. If what he'd witnessed the last three nights held true, he had five minutes. He'd timed the walk from where he sat to the driveway. As soon as the car turned the corner, he and Maxwell would take a little stroll. Should put him there just right.

In the distance, two headlights probed the dusty night. The vehicle he was waiting for only had one lamp on the driver's side. He knew because he broke out the other one with a rock two hours ago. Meshach stood and pulled the dog toward the slide just in case.

A streetlight five houses down revealed the two beams belonged to a black-and-white. Meshach gave the cruiser a cursory glance then focused on his prized mutt. To one of Lubbock's finest peacekeepers, he was just a man outside to let his dog tend to its business before bedtime. The cop slowed then continued around

the park and disappeared down another avenue.

Ninety-five dollars well spent.

A second car appeared...His.

*Fifty seconds.*

He crossed from the slide to the curb and stepped onto the street. Maxwell kept the leash taut, running around in a circle, pulling every direction except the right one.

Meshach strode across the pavement and stepped onto the sidewalk in front of a plumber's house. The man had crawled out of his work truck a little after six on the past three evenings, hugging what looked like the love of his life—a twelve-pack of beer. The place on the other side of his target sat vacant.

Maxwell took Meshach's pause in the darker area under a tree as a cue to piddle. The car turned the corner behind him, illuminating the playground. Max flipped around, bowed up and bug-eyed, as if he didn't know whether to bark or run for his life. "Easy, pooch, easy," Meshach whispered.

The headlight lit him, and his shadow jumped out and stretched down the sidewalk. He hunched his shoulders, looked straight ahead and walked. The dog shied then followed.

The garage door on the next house rumbled to life. The opener dragged the white wooden panels on squeaky rollers. The car slowed and turned onto the driveway fifty feet ahead. The single light lit the dark recess. A blue mountain bike sat on one side of the walk-in door and a small plastic trashcan on the other side, both outlined against slick white walls. The wind carried a white paper cup, bits of trash, and dried grass on a tour of the garage then stirred the lot in a small eddy on the concrete floor.

The red Honda eased into the garage. The door slid down the rails. The moment it reached the halfway point, Meshach dropped the leash and sprinted across the driveway. At the door, he laid out flat and slid through the last sliver of opening into the space behind the car. The door immediately reversed direction.

*What the...* He'd missed one little detail. He'd blocked the beam on the safety device meant to protect pets and kids from being crushed.

His mother's prissy, ever-preaching voice screamed at him like it was yesterday. *Best laid plans, honey!*

Now what? Exposed to the street and nowhere to hide if someone drove by, he pushed onto his knees, then his toes, in a crouch below the car windows, and made sure he was out of the eye's beam.

The dog stood in the middle of the street looking at him. That was an appropriate place for Maxwell. The dog didn't like him, and he didn't like the dog. The relationship worked in Meshach's favor because if the mutt ran to him...

The white backup lights came on. The broad had put the car in reverse. If she gassed the engine, he'd have no choice but to run. That would ruin their date.

The Accord rocked slightly as the woman's weight shifted inside. She had to be thinking about the door, looking back, pondering the workings of a mechanical device she didn't have the first clue about. Her car door opened. A radio voice...*bringing you another fifteen minutes of uninterrupted...*The backup lights went out and the engine died. The metal of hot exhaust pipes creaked. The garage door lurched and screeched its way down the tracks again, finally closing with a groan. Silence. Shoes scuffed on the concrete. The



headlight went out. A thump as the car door closed. *The dome light stays on for how long? Too long.* A strong gust shook the paneled door and sucked air from the confined space with a weak whistle. He used the noise to cover his movement and duck-walked along the passenger side of the car. Her shadow grew larger on the wall and edged toward the door leading into the house. Darkness consumed the garage. He stood. A dainty cough and a strong breath followed the tap of shoes and the jingle of keys. The knob clicked, and he moved into the doorway. Light lit a laundry room. She faced away.

He knew she was pretty, smelled pretty, a hint of lemon, slim but shapely, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, wearing tan slacks and a green pullover. She'd just waited on him at the restaurant two hours earlier. Her nametag read *Bethany*. She'd been nice.

His hand covered her mouth.

~\*~

Meshach held tissue paper over the lens of a small pen-light. He clicked it on and pointed the muted beam at his trussed-up victim and then eased silently across the light-colored carpet through the house. A floor lamp next to a dark couch and chair flanked by two end tables, all arranged to face a medium-sized television, made up a small living room. Blue light glowed from the satellite receiver on the shelf below the television. Cardboard boxes littered the guest bedroom. The master bedroom, her bedroom, smelled lemony, like her. *Your mom would be disappointed you didn't make your bed, Bethany.*

A picture in a chrome frame stood next to a clock/radio glowing with the time: 1:11, in green, atop a small bedside-table. Bethany and two other women posed with their arms wrapped around each other against a blue sky. *Her BFFs.*

Like the couch, stuffed animals covered the bed. The pink bear, the blue-and-white dog, the brown cat, like a boy's baseball pennants and football posters tacked to the wall, were all attempts to prolong childhood. Stupid.

He picked up her pillow, buried his face into the cool cloth and breathed deeply. She'd recognize the strange scent later. He could imagine her reaction and utter disgust. He smiled.

Back in the kitchen, he opened the fridge—bottled water, leftovers from Chili's, a plastic carton of 2% milk, sandwich meat, cheese, condiments, and four wine coolers. He smelled the milk, opted for a berry cooler and carried the bottle to the kitchen table and sat down.

*A billionaire's kid renting a forty-year-old house in the older part of town was what, a lesson in life?*

Her cell rang. He opened the side pocket of her handbag and checked the caller. "So, his name is Matthew, eh?" he whispered. "Not Matt, but Matthew. Is he on his way to see you right now? Nod yes or shake your head no. His life depends on it."

She shook her head.

He placed the phone on the counter next to what was left of the roll of duct tape he'd used on her. The phone stopped ringing and vibrating after a few seconds. Now, Matthew would wonder why she hadn't answered. Must be serious about each other for him to call so late. Or he was the assuming, jealous

type and wanted to make sure she was home right after work.

Meshach glanced at her lying on the floor and twisted off the cap on the drink. Careful not to touch the rim to his lips, he tilted his head and poured a cool shot into his open mouth. He set the bottle on the table and knelt next to her. Her chest heaved slowly at first, then faster and faster. The bellows fanning her fears of the unknown. He slid his gloved-hand over her arm, down her waist, and let it rest on her hip. She tensed, and a whimper escaped her throat as he leaned close, breathed in deeply through his nose, and whispered with his lips, brushing the duct tape covering her ear, "The boogie man visited you this night. You heard his voice. Be grateful. Most don't."

## 2

*Sunday afternoon, April 7*

Wes Hansen arrived fifteen minutes before the scheduled three o'clock appointment. He'd never met Cole Blackwell, but from the scant bit of information he found on the Internet, the oil man didn't appear to be a person who abided amateurs.

Cole had picked the Ship Tavern, one of four restaurants in the famed Brown Palace Hotel, in downtown Denver, as the venue for their meeting. Wes usually searched for information about a place he'd never visited to get a feel about what and where, but he'd driven by the Brown a hundred times. He'd heard the place was ritzy, but what he saw when he entered the lobby surprised him. Dainty clinks of porcelain cups. Painted nails and extended pinkie fingers. Rattling saucers and teapots arranged on small square tables littered with scones and finger cakes. Looked like he'd stepped back into the 1920s in time for High Tea.

He didn't particularly care for tea, hot or cold, so the draw eluded him. The ladies appeared to be in high form.

Wes navigated the lobby and entered the wedge-shaped restaurant, leaving the light piano music and muted female whisperings behind. He scanned the booths along the wall, the four-place tables around the

floor, and the long oak bar. Of the forty or so patrons, he picked out three lone men, all bellied up to the bar with empty stools between them. None matched Cole's description.

A college-aged kid dressed in a black suit, white shirt, and black tie approached. "Good afternoon, sir. A table for one?"

"Two, please." Wes said. "A business associate will be here soon. I'd like to have the table at the end of the bar, if that's OK. Looks like the most secluded."

"It is. I'm Brent."

"Brent, I'm Wes."

Brent took his job seriously. The proper butler, direct and formal, but then Wes didn't run with the likes of the Brown Palace crowd, so maybe he played his part well.

His host led him past the replica of a ship's mast standing floor-to-ceiling in the middle of the room and then waited for Wes to choose a chair at the table. "Kevin will be your server. Can I start you off with a beverage? Something from the bar?"

"Black coffee will be fine for now. Thanks."

"Very well." He gathered up two of the four place settings and returned to his post at the entrance.

A description of Wes's state of mind rarely included the adjective *apprehensive*, but he'd never met a billionaire, much less sat down with one for a job interview. He told himself Cole was just a man. As his high school football coach used to say about the opposing teams, "They put their pants on one leg at a time just like we do."

A man who fit Cole's description entered the restaurant and looked around. As Brent zeroed in on him, the guy removed his camouflaged ball cap, used it

to indicate Wes, and walked to the table. "Wes Hansen, I'm Cole Blackwell."

Wes stood. "Mr. Blackwell, my pleasure." Cole's firm handshake and direct green eyes gave the same message: pure confidence. He obviously knew Wes by sight. The mention of his name wasn't a question. Cole had either done his homework or made an assumption. Wes didn't believe Cole made many of the latter.

He smiled. "Call me Cole." He slid out the opposite chair and sat.

The traits Wes had subconsciously attributed to the man since their first phone conversation two days earlier flew out the window. His six-foot, one-eighty frame sporting Wranglers, khaki shirt and scuffed cowboy boots walked straight out of the backwoods. This was no pinstripe-suited millionaire with a cloud of attentive male aides and doting blond secretaries floating around him everywhere he went.

The waiter approached and placed Wes's coffee on the table in front of him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Blackwell. Nice to see you again. Could I start you out with something to drink?"

"Good to see you, Kevin. Water, with a twist of lemon, please."

"Something from the grill?" Kevin looked between them.

"Nothing for me. Wes?" Cole said.

Wes held up his cup. "Thanks, but I'll be fine with coffee, if you don't mind topping this off when the time comes."

"Yes, sir." The waiter left.

Cole watched the young man as he made his way along the bar. He placed the Bass-Pro Shops cap on the seat of the chair to his right. A tinge of gray singed the

edges of his light brown hair. Wes knew the man was fifty-five, but he looked ten years younger.

Cole focused on Wes. "As you heard, I'm here often enough to be on a first name basis with the hotel's staff. I'm in Denver a couple times a month on business. I love this place. You know, several presidents have stayed here, Teddy Roosevelt for one, and the Beatles, the 'Unsinkable' Molly Brown, no relation to the builder, a Mr. Henry Brown. Quite a history going back into the 1890s."

Kevin brought Cole's water and a carafe of coffee.

The information surprised Wes, the part about the hotel's name in particular. He thought the title derived from the color of the stone exterior. "I used to live not far from here, but this is my first time in the hotel. I was shocked when I walked in. I never dreamed the place was like this. Impressive. Gives you a rare glimpse back, but I suppose the reality of back then was less nostalgic than it is now."

Cole took a long drink and set the glass on the table. "Wes, I appreciate you making time for me today."

The man didn't dally getting to the point of their meeting. "Mr. Blackwell, Cole, you had my attention when you mentioned Bubba. He and I go way back." Not like anyone needed to know, but he'd be off his rocker not to make time for a billionaire.

"You served together in Iraq."

Again, it wasn't a question. "We did."

"He said you're an excellent investigator. I'm counting on it. In the oil business, we drill what we call tight-holes. Are you familiar with the term?"

"No, sir, I'm not."

"We keep 'em secret. The information and what's

discovered, if anything. Bidding against the competition for adjacent properties or leases can cost millions, so we guard the information we obtain. We call such projects a 'tight-hole.' I'll wager you didn't find much about my personal life in your Internet search." He raised an eyebrow.

Wes nodded, which confirmed he'd found nothing and had done a search.

"I like it that way. Tight-hole anyone asking questions." Cole slid two business cards from his shirt pocket and placed one of them on the table. "I received that in the mail two weeks ago."

Wes picked up the white card. Printed in bold, large caps was the name or acronym MESHACH, evenly spaced over a bare eyeball. The eye was black with no lashes, lids or brows. On the back, printed in pencil, was *You'll pay*. "One of the three guys in the fiery furnace."

Cole shook his head. "One of the four. The Lord joined the first three if you'll remember."

"Yeah, you're right, and it's not a name I've ever heard in reference to anyone otherwise."

Cole tapped the second card on the table. "Look, since the Deepwater Horizon burned and sank in the Gulf of Mexico, I get a threat a week on average. Or I should say my company does. That card is the first threat I've received at my home."

"You've been to the police?"

"So many times I'm like the boy who cried wolf. Most of the threats are rambling manifestos and don't name me directly. No individuals or organizations take the credit, so there's nowhere to look. The envelope the card came in bore a fictitious address and a few prints, but none matched previously booked individuals.



Then there's this one." Cole slid the second card across the table.

Wes examined a card identical to the first one, but with *I'm watching you* written on the back, again in pencil, in the same block letters. "By mail too?"

Cole's jaw set. His green eyes suddenly held a look Wes had seen many times in some very dangerous men. Call it determination, resolve, the will to inflict grievous bodily harm to another human being. "My daughter, Bethany," —he paused then finished through clenched teeth—"found it in her purse."

Now that was personal.

"She's twenty-two, going to college at Texas Tech, in Lubbock. Her boyfriend, Matt, got worried about her when she didn't answer his calls. He found her Friday morning bound and gagged on the kitchen floor of her house." Cole sat back and took another long drink of water then continued, "The man got into her rental house somehow. No forced entry. No prints. No witnesses."

"Your daughter?"

"Fine, physically. Uninjured in every respect, including what goes through everyone's mind when a reprobate assaults a woman. He used duct tape on her hands, feet, even her mouth and eyes. She's missing a number of lashes and won't need to pluck her brows for a while. She said he whispered. Never said a word out loud. He told her the boogiemán had visited and she was lucky she heard him. He stole her car, but only drove it two blocks." He took a deep breath and let it out in one strong puff. "Yesterday, Beth found that card in her purse. Now, she's a wreck."

Wes had his ideas about the man whispering. Beth would recognize her assailant's voice if she met him on

the street, or in a lineup, and a voice in the night would humanize him. Obviously, the man wasn't human, at the least, not humane. Who did stuff like that to other people?

Leaving the card in her purse had an eerie twist. "The card is an aftershock. He knew she'd find it sooner or later, and his intrusion would become real again. If she'd found it next week, or the week after, she wouldn't know how long it had been there, since the first assault or ten minutes. And every man she sees walking the street could be him."

"He opened and drank a wine cooler too." Cole sat up in the chair and glanced around. The wish-I-could-get-my-hands-on-him look returned. "Lubbock P.D. is investigating. They're checking for DNA on the bottle, but I don't think he's that dumb. I believe he's long gone. It's obvious he took her car to get back to his car. A man walking the streets after midnight would attract a cop."

"Yes, he would. That gets me to wondering how he entered the house. Anyway, I believe he's after you," Wes said.

"You think?"

Wes nodded. "There's no easier way to upset a family man than by going after his family, his wife or his kids. He had your daughter but didn't hurt her, at least not physically. He likes control. He feels he's in control. He relishes the thought of your reaction and distress."

"Well, he knew where to kick me, and he holds all the cards because I haven't got the first clue as to whom or why or where to even begin looking. Disgruntled ex-employee," Cole scanned the ceiling, "or I don't know. I'm lost."

“Or someone who doesn’t like what you do for a living.”

Cole nodded and fingered his empty glass. Wes waved at Kevin who refilled the glass and took his leave.

“There’s something else.” Cole tapped the tabletop with his index finger. “He’s been stalking Bethany for a while. He tried to engage her, friend her, on a social media site a month ago. It’s not like you can forget the name Meshach. Not if you’re a Christian and have heard his story.”

“Did she accept, remember a profile, see a picture, or notice anything we can use?”

“Nope. Not that I’m aware of. I’ve warned her about the social media stuff. I have to say she’s been good about what she shares with her friends. I still don’t like it.”

“That’s a place to start. I have a guy who’ll be all over it.” Wes pulled out his cellphone, took pictures of the front and back of both cards and returned them to Cole. “I’ll get you a proposal together today.”

Cole shook his head and thumbed a third card from his shirt pocket. “I don’t need a proposal. Get on him. Get him. Do what you need to do. I don’t care what it costs. Take this.” He handed over his business card—Cole Blackwell Jr., Deepwater Energy. “I have two aircraft. My personal pilot and plane are at your disposal. His cell number is on the back. Brooks, Jordan Brooks. He’s in Salt Lake City, and he’s expecting your call. He’ll take care of you.”

“Cole, I don’t think—”

“Wes, a man always wonders if he would be able to pull the trigger on another human being to protect his family. I’m in a situation I’ve never been in. Now, I

know I could hunt this guy down and shoot him on sight.”

“Yes, sir, and they call that murder, not self-defense.”

Cole took the saltshaker and shook out a portion onto the table. Then, he slowly, methodically, used the bottom of the shaker to grind the salt into a fine powder, one white crystal at a time.

Wes knew the feeling, the helplessness and frustration of not being able to put a face or name to an enemy. Every grain of salt had *Meshach* written all over it.

Cole’s nostrils flared as he thumped down the shaker and swept away the salt with his balled fist. “Exactly! Right now, I’d take the Lord’s vengeance and make it mine. Find him.” Cole grabbed his cap and slapped it on his head. “OK, I have to fly to Texas and pick up a dog.”

He finished what he had to say as abruptly as he’d started. “A dog?” Wes said.

“Yeah. Matt said the thing was sitting on the porch when he arrived to check on Bethany. He had on a collar with a leash attached, but no ID. He’s the ugliest creature walking on four legs I’ve ever seen. So homely he’s cute. His tail wags him, not the other way around. I told my daughter she has to advertise. Someone lost him. She knows I’m right, but she’s latched on to him anyway.”

So a witness to Meshach’s entry into Bethany’s house existed. Too bad dogs couldn’t talk. He didn’t want to say it, but he’d just acquired his first lead. He had a good feeling she’d be able to keep the dog. No use in telling Cole his thoughts. Might ruin his daughter’s relationship with her new pet if she

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discovered who the previous owner had been.