

THE WATCHMAN

V. B. Tenery

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THE WATCHMAN

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To my daughter Holly. The love of my life.
And to my critique partners in Scribes 201 and
Scribes 222 in appreciation for your encouragement
and for keeping me straight.

1

“I have set watchmen on thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace, day nor night. . .”
Isaiah 62

Hebron, Wyoming

What if you knew you could learn the deepest, darkest secrets of anyone you touched, but it would cost you emotionally? What if from your earliest childhood you could disappear in thirty-minute intervals and while invisible, you could move through solid objects with impunity? What if these anomalies came as natural as breathing—clothing and anything in pockets or hand disappeared—an unknown field that surrounded you erasing everything inside?

What would you do with such powers?

I’d settled that question long ago, but this afternoon, as I focused on the scene outside my car window, it occurred to me perhaps I needed to rethink my mission. I’d covered domestic abuse cases during my five years with the Hebron Police Department, and I’d put away a lot of bad people. Different scenario here. I was no longer a cop.

Ahead, a small boy stepped from a school bus into the upscale Crown Heights neighborhood. Dead leaves and powered snow swirled around his high-end sneakers as he shuffled along the sidewalk.

My foot hovered over the gas pedal. The image

disturbed me, and I almost drove away. His small shoulders slumped forward, and I was hooked. I had to know.

He stopped and turned around as if he might go back to the bus stop. He reversed and faced me again.

Confused? Lost?

Cute kid, maybe six years old. The designer logo on his backpack bounced with each step. Blond locks pressed against his brow under a blue baseball cap, reminding me of another little boy—minus the designer gear.

Decision made, I swung the SUV to the curb, snatched the cell phone from its holder, and texted my friend.

Got 2 bow out of dinner talk 2 u later.

I left the car and stepped to the sidewalk. With a glance both ways, I moved into the boy's path. Slow and easy. Not too close, not too fast. I didn't want to frighten him.

With my friendliest smile, I took a step closer. "Hey, son, can you tell me where to find Oak Street?"

He gazed up at me and shook his head. Eyes dull, as if he'd lived life and found it wanting.

I patted his shoulder. "Thanks, anyway."

He winced and jerked away as if I'd slapped him. I'd suspected abuse, but his pain caught me by surprise. In an instant his life opened up, film clips at the speed of light. Visuals of physical pain, overwhelming fear, helplessness, and a silent scream for help...*please, help me*. Emotions too heavy for a child to carry streamed through my consciousness. With proof of abuse came certainty. The violence at home was escalating.

Something frightening rose within me—rage

against the defenselessness of children and those who caused them pain. Abuse cases drew and repelled me at the same time, reviving memories I'd long ago buried.

I inhaled a resolute breath. When had I ever walked away from a troubled child? I couldn't save the world—just the small corner God gave me. A common man, given uncommon gifts—a watchman on the wall.

I scanned the area for traffic and pedestrians. When I turned back, the boy had quickened his pace through the gated entrance to his home.

Invisible, I wheeled and followed him.

Inside the house, a woman's voice called from the kitchen. "Cody, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom." The boy took the stairs two at a time to his room with me close behind.

"Get ready for dinner. Hurry, your father will be home any minute."

At the top of the second-floor landing, a spacious lounge area came into view.

Kid-friendly furniture, bookshelves, stereo components, and a wide-screen plasma television filled an area with scattered group seating. Four doors opened onto the landing. The boy's bedroom was the first one on the left at the top of the stairs.

Cody tossed his jacket and backpack on the bedpost, and darted into the bathroom. Hands shaking, he turned on the tap, splashed water on his face, and grabbed a towel from the rack. After a swipe at his cheeks, he bounded to the stairs. Halfway down, he stopped and then hurried back to the bathroom. He wiped down the sink with the damp towel and dropped it into the clothes hamper. With a quick glance, he scanned the room before heading back

downstairs.

At the ground floor, the stairway emptied into the living room. The accoutrements of wealth spread out before me. More showroom than a home—decorative and spotless. The room held no smiling family photos, books, or personal touches, no warmth. Even the Christmas tree with its silver and glass ornaments seemed cold and sterile. Not my taste, but what did a former Marine know about interior design?

On the right, a formal dining room opened into a kitchen exuding homey smells of spices and yeast.

Cody took a seat in the bay window, drew up his legs, and wrapped thin arms around his knees. His gaze followed his mother as she put finishing touches on the evening meal.

The woman examined each piece of china with care and then replaced the dish on the placemat. She picked up the silverware and polished each piece with a towel. Her frantic actions told a story. A lump formed in my throat. I knew the drill by heart. Perfection was an elusive goal she could never attain.

From the back entrance, a car hummed into the garage.

With quick, deft movements, she placed Beef Wellington, browned to perfection, on the table. She must have spent half the day preparing this meal.

A door slammed. "Rachel," a male voice called.

"We're in the kitchen, Harry." Her mouth formed a thin, strained smile.

Harry's linebacker form filled the doorway. Tough guy. He could beat up a woman and child.

He took the chair at the head of the table. Cody and his mother joined him, taking seats across from each other.

Rachel rose and filled Harry's wine glass as he cut the beef into precise, small bites, seemingly oblivious to the tremor in her hand.

The chimes of the analog wall clock sent a reminder my time limit had run out. I could leave or let the family find an intruder observing their evening meal.

I left with reservations.

Cody should be OK for a short time. His father would look for a reason to justify his cruelty, a reason to convince Cody the abuse was his own fault. Tactics used by abusive parents everywhere.

Back in my car, I drove to the front gate and forced my attention to the job. Cody needed a champion, and like it or not, I'd been tagged his designated knight.

Half an hour later, again invisible, I re-entered the kitchen. The meal had ended, and Harry sipped coffee from an engraved demitasse cup.

I braced for the explosion, and it didn't take long.

Cody removed the napkin from his lap, folded it, and laid it on the placemat. When he released the napkin, his hand hit the milk glass. The crystal tumbler spilled onto the tablecloth, bounced to the floor, and shattered, sending glass shards across the tile.

Harry's glare flashed at Cody. "You clumsy little fool. Look what you've done."

Rachel jumped to her feet, darted to the kitchen, and grabbed a handful of paper towels. "Don't yell at him. It was an accident. You make him nervous."

A vein popped out on Harry's left temple. "Proper table manners are important to his future, regardless of his *feelings*. Obviously, a lesson he'll never learn from his mother." Harry turned to Cody. "Go to your room. I'll be there in a minute."

Cody pushed back from the table and stumbled upstairs. I followed his dejected form back to his room.

Rachel's pleas echoed up the stairwell. "Leave him alone, Harry. He's just a little boy. Accidents happen."

A sharp slap sounded, followed by dead silence.

Doors slammed downstairs as though Harry searched for something. Heavy, deliberate steps ascended upward. Cody's eyes widened as his father drew nearer.

The knob turned, and Harry stood in the doorway, a leather belt clasped in his hand. He strode to Cody's window and closed the blinds.

Rachel slid into the room. She skirted around Harry and stood between Cody and his father.

Cody screamed. "No, Mom. He'll hurt you." He tried to get around her, but she held him back.

"Get out of the way, Rachel." Harry bit out each word.

Rachel's chin went up, and her shoulders squared. "I'm not moving an inch. Not now—not ever."

My hands shook so badly I had to squeeze them into fists to keep from decking Harry. Breaking his jaw would ease the chaos in my gut and let him feel the pain he'd dealt Rachel and Cody. Inwardly, I railed against my limitations, but common sense prevailed. I couldn't just materialize in Cody's room without serious repercussions.

I had to leave again, but this wasn't the end. I was coming back for Cody and Rachel.

Outside the gate, once more flesh and blood, I punched 9-1-1 on my cell. "I want to report a disturbance at 1220 Cedar Hills Drive. I hear a child screaming." I gave my name and waited.

The authorities wouldn't take long, but that didn't

stop me from pacing. Crown Heights' four-man police department received few emergency calls. Vanity cops more than a law enforcement unit, but this wasn't the time to be picky.

In less than five minutes a patrol car passed. Brake lights came on, and the vehicle backed up and eased to the curb in front of the estate. Two officers emerged and marched to where I stood. They could have been brothers, both thin and athletic with neat dark hair and brown eyes.

"Officer Ryan," he said and thrust his thumb toward his colleague. "That's Officer Duncan. Did you report the disturbance?"

"That would be me. I'm Noah Adams."

"Did you witness an altercation of any kind?"

"No, only the child's screams. Sounded frantic. Perhaps someone should check it out."

Duncan strode to the gate and spoke into the intercom. "Police. Open the gate, please."

Ryan pulled a notebook from his jacket. He cocked an eyebrow. "Got some ID? You look familiar. You a cop?"

"Used to be. Five years on the HPD. Private investigator, now."

"You packing?"

"Goes with the job." I handed him my license and concealed weapon permit.

He examined them carefully and handed them back. "You don't live in the neighborhood?"

"No, just passing through."

"How did you come to be outside the home? You couldn't hear anyone scream driving by."

I looked the cop straight in the eye and lied. It didn't sit well, but I justified it—a kid's safety was on

the line. "I pulled over to make a call on my cell phone. I don't like to drive through residential areas while I'm on the phone." That much was true.

Ryan pointed at me. "Wait here." He joined Duncan in the squad car. Someone buzzed them through the gate, and the cruiser inched up the drive.

Cody's mother waited in the doorway under the portico as the two cops walked up the steps. Voices drifted from the entrance, too low for me to understand.

Before long, an irate Harry stood at the door. He pointed in my direction and shouted something unintelligible, and probably unflattering.

Duncan motioned me inside.

Ryan took a step toward me as I reached the group. "You said you heard screams?"

"That's right." If the police didn't believe me, I could always confess an honest mistake. At least Harry would know someone knew his secret.

"You're a liar." The vein in Harry's temple popped out again. "No one here screamed." He glared at Ryan. "He's got the wrong house."

"I'm certain the sounds came from here. Where's your son?" In an instant, I realized my error. The screams could have been those of a daughter. I glanced at the group around me. No weird looks. I eased out the breath I'd been holding.

Harry's gaze turned hard. "What do you want with my son?"

Duncan turned and locked in on Harry. "Get your son, sir."

Harry disappeared and after a short wait, he appeared with Cody in tow.

"What's your name?" Ryan asked the boy in a soft

tone.

"C-Cody." He moved close to his mother.

"I'm Officer Ryan, and I'm here to make sure you're safe. You OK?"

Cody nodded.

"Has anyone hurt you?"

The boy shook his head, but his hands trembled, and he chewed at his lower lip.

I moved into his line of vision. "Cody, turn around and lift your shirt."

Cody blanched and backed closer to Rachel. Apparently he didn't recognize me from our earlier encounter. If so, he gave no indication.

Ryan turned a hard glare at me. "You're out of line, Adams. We'll handle this." He turned to the boy. "It's OK, Cody. No one will harm you. Lift your shirt."

Harry's confidence appeared to slip. A red flush started at his neck and spread over his face. He seemed to weigh the danger of refusal. "Do you know who I am? I'm Judge Harold London! You can't come into my home and undress my son. I'm calling my attorney." Harry swung around to face his wife. "Bring me the phone."

Rachel hesitated.

"Bring me the phone!"

The two cops looked at each other and then back at me. "You sure about this?" Ryan asked.

I couldn't back down now. "Sure as death and judgment."

Cody huddled against his mother. Right cheek red, her left arm held at an awkward angle, Rachel reached down, turned Cody around, and raised his shirt. Long black bruises stretched from the top of his shoulder to his waist. Two swollen red welts stood out

among the older stripes on his back.

Echoes from my past reared their ugly head, but I pushed them away. This wasn't the time.

Suppressed anger mottled Harry's face. Hard dark eyes stared back at me. In that moment, I knew he wouldn't admit abusing Cody. Survival would supersede any sense of wrongdoing.

Duncan gave his partner a knowing nod and drew Rachel aside.

Ryan returned to the patrol car and came back with a camera and handed it to Duncan. He motioned Rachel and Cody to follow him indoors, presumably to photograph Cody's bruises.

Ten minutes later, Crown Height's finest led a cursing, handcuffed, Judge Harold London away, shoved him none too gently into the cruiser's backseat, and slammed the door.

Large snowflakes fell as the squad car moved down the driveway and onto the street. Arms clasped around her body against the cold, Rachel stood there, Cody at her side, and watched the cruiser until it disappeared from sight.

She looked down at her son. "Do you want something for pain?"

He shook his head. "No, Mom. I'm good. It doesn't hurt." He turned and disappeared through the entryway.

For the first time, I noticed Rachel London was a lovely woman. Tall, slim, with classic high cheekbones and large green eyes. Pale, bruised, and frightened, but strikingly beautiful.

I caught her gaze. "If you'd like, I'll take you and Cody to the hospital or to a shelter—somewhere your husband can't get to you."

She gave a short, sardonic laugh that wrinkled her mouth. "That would be useless. Harry knows the location of the Hebron shelter. We don't need a doctor; we need to get far away from here as fast as possible."

"Do you have any family?"

She stared at some point in the distance then turned to me. "No. I grew up in an orphanage in Cheyenne."

Typical abuse victim. A woman alone with no family. "I'm sorry."

Silence filled the space between us for a moment. She gave a dismissive shrug. "It was a long time ago. I'm over it." Her voice dropped to a husky tone and she looked up at me. "How did you know? Cody didn't scream."

"Are you sure? Perhaps you were too frightened to hear."

"Maybe." Uncertainty clouded her features. "Mr...I don't even know your name."

"It's Adams, Noah Adams. I'm a private investigator." I searched my jacket and handed her my card.

She studied it with blank eyes and slipped it into her pocket. A shiver ran through her body, her eyes wide. "We have to leave. Right away. Harry will never see the inside of a cell. My husband is a powerful man, Mr. Adams. A charter member of the good-old-boys network downtown. He'll be home within the hour, and he'll be raving mad. I don't even want to think what might happen." She shivered again. "We've left before. Wherever we go, he always finds us." Angry tears pooled in her eyes. "Harry said he would take Cody away from me if I tried to leave again. I'd go mad knowing Cody had to face his father alone." Her

jaw clenched. "Harry London will be a dead man before I let him take Cody away from me." Desperation resonated in her stiff posture and jerky motions.

"Murder isn't the answer. Cody needs you with him, not in prison. There's a place I can take you, a place where your husband can't find you. You'll need to pack extra-warm clothing for the trip. It's colder in the valley."

Her eyes brightened. "Where?"

"A friend's ranch near Green River. I'll call and make sure it's all right." I reached for my cell-phone. "I won't let him hurt either of you again. I promise."

She stood motionless, not making eye contact.

The toll of clock chimes from the entryway spurred her into action. "Cody, we're leaving. Gather up any toys you want to bring. Hurry. Your father will be home soon."

He appeared at her side. "Where are we going?"

She gave him a gentle nudge toward the open doorway. "We'll talk about it later. Right now, we must hurry." Her gaze tracked him down the hallway, and then she followed him inside.

While they packed, I called my friend Emma Hand.

Rachel returned with two suitcases. She blinked rapidly, trying to convey her sense of despair. "I appreciate what you're doing. I...I have to trust someone. There's no place else for us to go. But if you let me down and Harry finds us—" She dropped her gaze and drew a long, shuddering breath. After a pause, she raised her head, and looked into my eyes. "It could cost us our lives."

2

Somewhere on Highway 80

City lights disappeared in the rearview mirror as we trekked west toward Green River. An exhausted Cody fell asleep in the backseat soon after we left Hebron. The glow of the dash lights reflected Rachel huddled close to the door, eyes glued to the blackness, white-knuckled hands clasped in her lap.

My mind focused on the small family. They had lived with pain for a long time. Thank God, Emma agreed to take them in.

Emma Hand's place sat two hundred miles from Hebron, off Highway 80, the interstate that ran across the lower half of Wyoming. A desolate, sometimes dangerous, drive this time of year. Relentless winds sheered across the highway, and violent snow gusts often shut down the road for hours.

God's hand guided us through the storm. Red taillights from the tanker in front of us cut a path through the darkness, a shield from the heavy storm.

The long day wore on me, and I began to depressurize from the adrenaline rush of the past hours. I glanced at my silent companion. "If you're in pain, there's aspirin in the glove box."

She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her left ear. "I'm fine."

Wind danced flakes on the pavement before us like confetti at a Christmas parade. Through the

flurries, I spotted a fast food restaurant sign at the next exit. "I need a caffeine fix. How about you?"

"I'll take a soda. I'm not much on coffee."

The drive-thru lane stood empty. I placed the order at the intercom, moved forward, and paid the pimple-faced kid at the first window. He handed me my change, and I inched to the second opening.

Rachel's troubled gaze searched my face. When she spoke, the timbre of her voice hardened. "The first time I left Harry, we went to the shelter. I thought we'd be safe there. Of course, as a judge, he knew where to find me. Harry produced a letter from my doctor saying I'd had a nervous breakdown, and he took us back home. I paid dearly for that little indiscretion."

"Why would your doctor lie? He could lose his medical license."

"Dr. Saunders is a personal friend of Harry's. I'm sure my husband applied a great deal of pressure. Anyway, after that I decided to try something new. The last time, Cody and I packed my car after Harry left for work. We headed for California. I'd stashed money for six months so I wouldn't leave a trail he could follow. Somehow, he knew we had left. Before we reached the state line, the police stopped me and brought us back. That's when I knew I'd have to kill Harry to get away."

While we waited for our drinks, I scanned her face in the dim lighting. Where did she find the courage to keep going with such odds against her? She'd kept herself and her son alive through sheer strength and bravery.

"I can only imagine how hopeless you must have felt."

She gave a short laugh. "Whoever you are, it's

difficult to imagine we could be worse off than we've been with Harry."

Her chest rose as she inhaled a deep breath. "You're my last hope. I don't know if you're a guardian angel or a serial killer—a stranger who showed up at my door. Yet here I am taking my son on a trip to God-only-knows where."

"I mean you no harm, Rachel. Though a serial killer would probably say that as well." I managed a half grin. "But killers rarely call the police, give them their license number, and home address before kidnapping victims. You and Cody were in trouble. I wanted to help. It's as uncomplicated as that. Emma Hand is a fine woman. You'll be safe there, and you can leave whenever you want."

She frowned and gave her head a slow shake. "I have an appalling record of making the wrong choices where men are concerned." She lifted her chin. "But this time, I'm leaving Harry for good, and I don't intend to become someone else's victim."

"Point taken. You're right to be wary of strangers."

Wind-driven snow speckled the windshield under the drive-through portico. "Do you have access to a bank account or other funds?"

Her eyes widened.

"You won't need money at the ranch, but you will need an attorney, and Cody should see a doctor. You'll have to prove ongoing abuse."

Her posture eased. "We have medical insurance, but Harry can trace us if we use it. I also have credit cards, but he'll cancel them before morning. He always cancels the cards when I leave."

"Half of everything he has belongs to you and Cody. But you'll have to file for a divorce to get it."

Her jaw set in an oddly vulnerable way. "Like I would ever do that. Stand alone against Harry in Hebron. He would have Dr. Saunders as a witness. It would be my word against two highly respected professionals. Taking him to court would be the mother of lost causes."

"I'd be there for you, and I know a good attorney. The sooner you take legal action against your husband, the sooner you'll be free of him."

The young woman at the window passed two cups out. I handed one to Rachel, took a sip from mine, and placed it in the console holder. "Do you guys have passports?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Just in case I need to move you into Canada."

She unsheathed the straw and punched it into her drink. "They're in a safe at home along with a large amount of cash. Harry brags there is more than a \$100,000 dollars inside." She shook her head. "But I can't get my part of the money, or the passports. I don't have the combination."

Not surprising Harry denied her access. Money meant freedom, and abusers liked to keep their victims dependent.

"Does he open the safe often?"

She considered the question for a moment before she answered. "He opens it every Monday before he goes to work to pulls cash for the week. And probably other times I'm not aware of."

"Where's the safe?"

"In the library, behind an ugly modern painting." She lifted an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you crack safes in your spare time."

I shook my head and chuckled. "I can barely crack

an egg.”

“Too bad. I was getting ready to hand you my house key.”

“No promises, but there’s a good chance I can help you get access to the passports and money when you need them.”

She twisted the straw but didn’t drink from it. “As hard as I’ve tried, I haven’t been able to start a life for Cody away from his father. I’m a miserable failure as a mother. Cody has lived a nightmare every day of his life—thanks to me.”

“How did you reach that conclusion?”

“I married his father, didn’t I?”

“You can’t change the past, Rachel. You can change what comes next. The blame for Cody’s abuse lies squarely on Harry London’s shoulders. Not yours. Just keep repeating your promise to never again be a victim.”



Hand Me Down Ranch

We reached the ranch just before midnight. The sheep farm lay in a valley surrounded by mountains and a few scattered pines. Next to a nearby barn stood a water tower and large corral, the landscape covered in snow. A low, rambling structure glowed in the distance like a beacon guiding us to a safe haven.

Emma must have heard the car pull in. The front door opened, and a welcoming smile wreathed her face. She swung the door wide for us to enter.

Cold wind nipped at my face and stung my eyes. With Cody in my arms, I hurried inside, making hasty introductions as we crossed the threshold.