

Part 1-- Awakenings

Chapter 1-- Benjamin "Cliff" Woods

From the old, dusty baseball field, it was impossible not to notice it. From our seats in the bleachers, we had a perfect view of the hills, north of New Haven, and so a perfect view of the abandoned house. It sat on the hill, looming over us. But by the time it got scary, I'd already gotten used to the view.

I was there for Nate's baseball game, like any other weekend. His middle-school team did have fewer games over the summer, but they were hotter and harder to get through. Even when it's my own son, I'll admit it can get unbearable. But the game that day —and all the events after it— were anything but boring.

I didn't see the smoke right away. It rose to our right, from Main Street, a trail of grayish-brown spreading into the blue sky, but I was staring straight ahead at the game. Even as that huge omen grew larger with each minute, I'd blocked out everything but the game. Like I said, it wasn't even close to boring on that particular day.

The man sitting to my left —Jeremy Adams, also a farmer, my oldest friend— noticed the smoke first. But he didn't have a rooting interest in the game. Also unlike me, he took the tragedy over on Main really serious from the start. He was more than just right.

We were both sitting on those old, rickety bleachers where my own dad spectated years ago. Now it was my turn to watch. My son, Nathaniel, was standing out at second base. I watched intently, focused only on the dirt triangle, waiting for that resounding clang of a metal bat against ball.

Most of the crowd around us were equally focused. When games are actually good and competitive, people around here get crazier. The opposing team's next batter stepped to the plate. It was the top of the last inning, so this kid from out of town would either take the lead or lose the game. So you understand why we all studied the diamond, the players in their dirt-streaked, white pants, with so much focus.

Down the row from me and Jeremy, there was a quiet family, made up of a single mother with a young child on either side. They were all sitting very quiet. She wore a light-colored dress and her children were in khaki shorts and button-ups, which I found odd. The mom was as focused on the game as anyone else, but I didn't know her kid. I assumed they were from the opposing team, out-of-town. They were the quietest people in the whole crowd and they stood out like a sore thumb, so I kept my eye on them.

One fellow who was *definitely* from out-of-town: a few rows down from me, one of the opposing fathers. He muttered, "If he gets a nice crack at it, game over," and reached for his potato chips. He was a big guy, loud, and he'd spent the whole game living or dying with every pitch, every throw. Spilled half his potato chips yelling at the umpire. That was my first clue he

wasn't from around here: Nobody in this town would lose their cool if one singular thing didn't go their way. We knew how to handle adversity.

This man spent the whole game chomping incessantly to his wife, who didn't give a damn. Maybe it was their kid at the plate. I didn't know or care. I'd seen my share of annoying baseball-dads and I savored the opportunity to root against them. I just needed Nathaniel's team—the home team—to come out on top. It would wipe that greasy grin off his pudgy face.

"Hey, Cliff..." Jeremy nudged me, uttered the nickname he'd given me back as friends in grade school. "Look at that, over on Main Street."

I shooed away his hand and leaned forward. The smell of hot dogs and sweaty uniforms rose to my nostrils. There was dust in the air, a faint cloud of it, kicked up from the baseball field or brought into town by the relentless, east-facing winds. It seemed everyone in the crowd held their breaths, because all I could hear were the two coaches jabbering to their players, the concession stand conversations, and the distant sound of sirens.

A runner on third. Two outs. New Haven's middle school team led by one. The three most important players were right in a row. The batter (probably that big guy's son), the pitcher, and Nathaniel on second base.

"He's been making plays all game," I said to Jeremy, but mainly to myself.

The pitcher threw one, called a ball. I tried to grin, but my stomach had twisted itself into a knot and I couldn't sit up straight. Instead, I hunched over, gripping my knees, feeling sweat trickle from my shoulders to my underwear. It felt like an eternity between each pitch. Then came the next.

The pitcher wound up and threw. Nathaniel crouched down, his glove extended, ready.

"Strike one!" the umpire called. His call drowned out Jeremy's voice, as he again prodded my sides. I didn't look over, even to see what he wanted.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe Nathaniel didn't need to make a game-saving play. He'd certainly had his share of good ones throughout the game. In my nightmare, the ball would fly right over his head. Even if I'd pretended not to care for most of the afternoon, like the other parents in the crowd, I lived on every variable and possibility. I would love a stress-free strikeout.

—It didn't matter how good Nathaniel had been, how spectacular his throws and base-running. If he made the game-losing play it would wreck him. And by extension, me.

"He's been working hard," I said again to Jeremy. "Looks like a new player..."

Jeremy murmured something beside me, but the second pitch flew and the batter missed with his swing. "Strike two!" the umpire roared and I clapped enthusiastically. The opposing dad didn't turn around, but part of me wished he would.

"Get lost, ump!" he roared, smacking the bleachers with his chip-free hand. "That was way outside!" Other people shouted similar things, but I didn't care, 'cause the call was already made.

This time, Jeremy nudged me hard in the ribs, hissing something that was lost in the crowd noise. I again shooed him away.

"What, Jeremy. What is it?" I didn't take my focus off the diamond for even a second. Pitch three was coming any moment.

"Look at that smoke... is that George's shop?"

I turned just a hair. "What are you talking—?"

A collective gasp as he pitched. It didn't move as quick as the first. I knew right away it would be a hit. I almost hid my eyes, afraid to see the play unfold.

Crack! The violent sound of the bat. That kid really got a hold of it.

"Whoo!" the dad in front of me cheered, rising to his feet. I jumped to my own and stared, peeling with anxiety.

In unison, the crowd around us also stood. The ball sped off like a bullet, barely missing the pitcher's torso. It whizzed through the air, and my eyes flashed directly to Nathaniel, even before the ball reached him. Everything moved so fast, but I could see his reaction, so automatic.

He stuck one foot in the ground and leapt into the air. One, sweat-slickened arm reaching up, stretching out. His feet were off the ground, his body lurched, and Nathaniel collapsed to the ground. In his mitt, he clutched the dirty baseball.

"Out!" someone roared. Half of the crowd leapt into the air. I high-fived a few people, noticed the dad in front of me seething. There were potato chips on the ground at his feet, and he made a show of stomping on them. The third-base runner dropped his head and the batter spat on the ground. But nothing gave me the feeling of ecstasy quite like Nathaniel's reaction.

He glanced up, straight at me, and smiled, waving his glove in the air. His eyes were wide, brown skin glistening in the sun, his uniform streaked with dirt. And then his team mobbed him, and I at last turned to Jeremy, beaming wide.

It'd been a good hit. Straight on in a dead heat, almost over his head. But Nathaniel moved impossibly fast for a middle-schooler. He made the play, overcoming all the odds and my fears.

"You see all that?" I asked, turning to Jeremy, but my smile quickly fell away.

He was staring in the direction of Main Street, where a thick, dark cloud had gathered over one of the buildings. Jeremy's face was ashen, and his bearded jaw had fallen open. Through the gaps between buildings, I could make out a crowd of people, two fire trucks. The smoke continued to billow into the sky, and I wondered how far the flames could spread. If they were contained already, or if the whole, distant block was in danger.

"Isn't that George's?" he repeated the question, pointing.

That ball of smoke overwhelmed me now. There weren't any flames visible, not from this far away, but the cloud appeared to be growing, even now. It reached up toward the pure sky and spread over top of Main Street like it wanted to block the sun altogether.

The smoke didn't really matter. I just wanted to know how bad the damage was, if anyone had been injured. But the smoke was a harbinger of far worse fates. How did a fire like that even start? Nothing extreme ever happened in New Haven.

"I think so..." I shook my head and felt dizzy, swaying a bit. "Oh, god. That poor guy."

"I'm gonna run over and see what's going on, see if I can help." Jeremy started to descend the bleachers, pushing between strangers and friends. He threw one look back at me, nodded solemnly. "I'll come find you later."

"I'll be at the house," I called, unsure if he'd heard.

Jeremy raced off without another glance or word in my direction. As soon as his heels struck the ground, he broke into a brisk jog, weaving around the bleachers and back toward Main Street. While I watched him leave, I noticed others were turning in that direction. A handful of men ran to catch up with Jeremy. New Haven did have a fire department, but they hadn't been tested in years. I swear, nothing ever happened around town, especially not big ass fires in a family-owned shop.

There was an even thicker cloud of dust choking the bleachers now that people were moving about. I watched as the crowd began to disperse. Many of them collected their athletes, hauling the bags and any remaining concessions back to their vehicles. About half would leave town, never to return, and the others would stick around, some of them heading out to farms just like my own. A handful of men and women made straight for the smoke, while others walked toward the opposite end of town. But as I stared at the gaggle dispersing, ten minutes later, Nathaniel still hadn't emerged from the dugout.

At this point, there were very few people left standing around, so I lumbered down to the bottom row of the bleachers and sat there, waiting. It smelled different now. There were no food aromas, no heavy-breathing, potato chip-eaters. Just the distant sound of commotion, of sirens. Every few minutes, a yell would resound from Main Street. I tried not to think about what had happened, was happening.

The coach of the middle-school team —who I knew only as Coach Baggs from all the stories Nathaniel had told me— headed in my direction. As I huffed to my feet, he said goodbye to the one remaining family. I recognized the single mother with her three children, two of them in church clothes, and the oldest in his baseball uniform. The kid hadn't played a single pitch, not as a batter and not in the field.

But the stranger thing was, I'd never seen that family before. They must've been new to town. In New Haven, we *rarely* had new people, and they didn't stick around long. Then again, they didn't often show up to baseball games. —When I'd moved back with Naomi and started our family, things went smoothly 'cause I'd grown up here. But a new family altogether? Bold choice.

Coach Baggs prowled closer, still wearing his baseball cap and dirty jeans, complete with his official coaching top, which was basically an oddly-designed, adult baseball jersey. Coach Baggs was a broad-shouldered man, deeply tan, with the kind of farm-muscle that only Jeremy could match around here. He approached me and stuck out a hand, curling his lip.

"Nate'll be out in just a sec." His group was rough and firm, like his voice. "That kid'll be a star if he keeps it up, I tell ya."

I smiled and crossed my arms. "He's been working hard, no doubt. He gets all his talent from his mom. I'm no athlete."

In truth, Nathaniel and his sister got a lot from their mom. Appearance, complexion, temperament, skills. It was a good thing, though, because Naomi was radiant, electric, beautiful. Myself... well, I was boring, bland, and white. Nothing much, through and through.

Coach Baggs eyed me with a mixture of pity and disdain. There was understanding in his eyes. He'd known me in a different time, when we grew up in New Haven. Back then, I knew him by a less official name, and our days were filled with sports, farming, and a little bit of school. If

we weren't helping our dads on our respective farms, we tried out every sport possible, anything to pass the time.

Went through all of it together, and turned into men.

The past few years, sure, I'd put on some weight —more than I cared to think about, honestly. And my hair had started thinning, both in volume and color. Coach Baggs had somehow maintained his strapping, broad-shouldered, youthful look. He still had a reputation around town as a man with strong fists. I'd become the overweight tractor-driver who worked long hours for little reward.

"Well, I sure am excited to see him develop," the coach said, scratching at his chin. His eyes moved past me and to the dramatic scene beyond, hovering over and amongst the buildings. "Say, you know what's going on with that smoke funnel?"

"Not a clue." I jerked my thumb back over my shoulder, toward it —whatever *it* was. "Jeremy ran over."

"S'pose I will too, then."

Before he could budge, I spoke up. "Hey, that family you were talking to. They from around here?"

Coach Baggs looked over towards the parking lot, where they were climbing into a dingy minivan. He chewed on his lip as he watched. "Yeah, kid hasn't been to a practice yet. They just moved here a week ago. Last name something like Dawes."

"You know where they're living?" I scratched my head and turned back to Baggs, just as their minivan shifted into gear and started away. "I didn't think we had many empty living places around here. Decent ones, anyway."

"Couldn't tell ya. Maybe somewhere in town?" He shrugged, folded his arms. "Strange, though. We ain't had fresh blood here in years."

"That's what I thought."

He smiled at me. "You never counted as fresh blood. Your wife, maybe, but she's, uh... a bit different, right?" Coach Baggs clasped me on the shoulder —I tried not to wince— and started to stroll by. His vision flicked to that looming tragedy, and I figured he'd head straight for the action. "See ya around, Cliff. Keep on Nate for me. He's got real potential. Don't wanna waste it." He offered a suspiciously chilly wink and then moved on, kicking up dust as he jogged away.

I took a seat on the bleachers again, rubbing the back of my neck. I certainly had never been fresh blood here, he was right about that. But it irked me when people called Naomi "different" in any way. They saw her as different because of her skin, and because our kids were a shade darker than their own. But she was a hell of a lot more normal than people here.

I loved New Haven. It was my home, always had been. But people tended to think *they* were in the right, and not hanging on to some backwards way of life. Naomi was more than they could ever understand.

The ballpark was empty now, except for Nathaniel, who appeared by the dugout and started toward the exit gate. This baseball diamond, separated from two sets of bleachers by a chain-link fence, had looked the exact same for decades. That dusty infield, the way it clung to his white pants, the far fence where I'd never been able to hit a homerun... This place would always be familiar, even nostalgic. The scoreboard hadn't even changed, not one bit, since I

played here. Not that I had any success, like Nathaniel. I was a born benchwarmer, part of the background. Felt like sometimes I still was.

Despite growing up in New Haven, despite owning a farm outside of town like so many others —and like I'd dreamed—, I never felt exactly right. I didn't have something the rest of the people here did, even back as a kid. When I left for college and met Naomi, it only set me apart even more. She was more beautiful than any woman from New Haven, tougher than all of them. It had been the right choice to start a family here, but not an easy one. At least our kids were taking after her in all the best ways.

Obsolete, I thought to myself as Nathaniel approached, grinning from ear to ear. *That's what I've become.*

"Hey, Dad." Nathaniel sunk under the weight of his backpack, with two bats sticking out from the top. His arms and neck were sweaty, caked in dirt, and his dark, curly hair stood wild, unkempt. But his face brightened as he held out a baseball, resting on his palm. "Coach Baggs said I could keep it."

"You deserve it." I reached out and ruffled his hair, feeling grime cling to my hand. "That was a great catch you made."

As I stood from the hard seat, Nathaniel looked past me, at the smoke rising over Main Street, but he didn't comment on it. I assumed that he would just push it from his mind, the strange way that kids can. To him, there were more important things to discuss. Or at least more personally exciting.

"I wanna hit a homerun next game," Nathaniel said, tossing the ball from one hand to the other. "Can we practice later?"

"Maybe... Depends." I turned around now and couldn't tear my eyes away from the smoke as we walked toward the gravel parking lot. My dark blue truck waited just ahead. "Let's see what's going on at home, if your mom's feeling any better. And if Jeremy comes looking for me."

"You mean about the fire?" Nathaniel asked. He heaved the backpack off and carried it the rest of the way to the truck. As he tossed it into the bed, he said, "I hope everyone's okay."

"Me too, buddy." I strolled to the driver's side and had just curled my fingers around the door handle when I noticed a man walking in our direction.

He came down one of the smaller side roads branching off from Main Street, feet moving in a hurried, staccato rhythm. Right away, his uniform gave away his identity, not to mention the firm hat he always wore, complete with a star. He'd been a hat-guy ever since middle school, but back then it was baseball caps. Now he was almost never out of uniform, never bareheaded. Longtime friends are funny like that. You see them change.

"Sheriff, how's it going?" I called out. I motioned for Nathaniel to climb out of the truck and stand by me. With a slight groan and stretching his shoulders, he did as he was told.

Sheriff Wheeler hurried over, casting looks to either side, as if watching for somebody. Behind him, on Main Street, a firetruck roared past and its red frame —sirens screaming through the desolate town— plunged into the cloud of smoke. The street itself was beginning to cloud up, not just the sky, but I assumed things were somewhat under control if the sheriff had come all the way over here. At this point, I figured everybody in town had seen the goings-on, and there were likely a plethora of able-bodied men and women over there to help.

"You all okay?" Sheriff Wheeler asked, hesitating when he saw Nathaniel come around the front of the truck. He studied the boy for a second and then focused on me again. "Where's the girls?"

"Naomi's home, got a bad migraine. And..." I paused, rummaging through my brain. "Not sure about Kaia. She's somewhere in town, safe, but I gotta pick her up on the way home."

"Teenagers, huh?" Sheriff Wheeler didn't smile. His eyes roamed the baseball field, but when he saw nobody left, he locked eyes with me. The man leaned back slightly, sticking out his holster, and stuck both thumbs in his belt loops. "I'm just going around, checking on folks, making sure all's safe." He added, "You seen a new family at the game today?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Yeah, I did. Dawes, right? Why, you looking for them?"

"Not particularly. Not yet..." The sheriff frowned at something behind me, then he looked at Nathaniel. "You win today? I bet you're a good player."

"Yeah, we did." He smirked, meeting the sheriff's eyes with no fear. "And I like Smith. That Dawes kid. He's nice."

The sheriff scoffed and raised an eyebrow. Then he looked back at me.

Before he could go on, I asked, "You got all that under control?" I gestured at the smoke, in case he hadn't understood.

He answered without turning around to face it. "Yeah, got it handled. Can't save the store, though. Real shame..." His eyes glazed over and he looked past me again, but I shook him out of it with a question.

"Any idea what started the fire?" I reached for Nathaniel and held his shoulder, though he squirmed out of my grip.

"Still investigating, working on it..." Sheriff Wheeler lost his determined stance and let his shoulders slump. "Poor George." He shook his head.

"That store's been in his family long as I can remember," I said.

"Longer than either of us have been alive," the sheriff added. "Couldn't have happened to a better guy. It ain't right."

I tried not to imagine what the aftermath would look like. I'd been in that store myself so many times over the years, knew the aisle layout back and forth. One of the few places around here that'd sell you a bucket of nails and a toy truck at the same time. George also had a sweets counter, and he always had the lowest-priced candy in town, like the old days. You could get stuff for a quarter or less. I'd bought it from his dad, when I was a kid, and now my kids bought it from George.

I thought to ask, "Anyone inside when it started?"

The sheriff didn't meet my gaze, nor did he respond right away. His eyes flicked to Nathaniel, just for an instant, and they were filled with agony, worry. And then he looked at my battered, blue truck and rested on it, on the bed, for a solid ten seconds.

At last, he spoke up again, in a deadpan, defeated voice. "Won't know for a bit. But I... I should be going. Finish my sweep of Main Street. Give me a shout if you hear anything 'bout the Dawes, will you?"

He tipped his hat to me, then turned from us and started back the way he'd come. I looked down at Nathaniel and told him to climb back in the truck. In that same moment, I made

the split-second decision to chase after some real answers. The sheriff's response had been noncommittal at best, downright dodgy, and maybe without Nathaniel around he'd give me something more concrete.

"Just a minute," I said to my son, then I jogged to catch up with the other man. It only took a few seconds before I met him, kicking up dust with my toes as I came to a stop. "Sheriff, hey, listen—"

When Sheriff Wheeler turned to me, his face was colorless, forlorn. He cleared his throat and cast his eyes to the heavens, taking a deep breath. Then he touched me on the side of the arm. "I can't tell you much, Cliff."

"Give me something, at least," I persisted. "Stuff like this... this don't happen around here. You know that, I know that."

The sheriff sighed and relented. He cast one glance back at the truck, with Nathaniel inside. If you ignored the smoke, the sky above us was crystal clear, not a cloud in sight, though we might've welcomed them. A rainstorm could put out the fire, strengthen my crops. Or maybe it would only make things worse. And under that endless, blue sky, Sheriff Wheeler said something I'll never forget.

"Something strange is going on, Cliff. Something... not normal. I'll tell ya that much." He started to back away now, though he wasn't finished speaking. "Take your kid home. I'll get back to you later, or send Jeremy to your place. The three of us... we need to talk."

And with that, he disappeared fully, turning his back before I had a chance to respond. I stood there for a moment, scratching at my beard, biding time before I would return to Nathaniel and drive home. The sheriff had given an answer, alright, though it was exactly what I'd feared.

From the moment he glanced at my son with that specific expression, I suspected it. Whatever started the blaze in George's shop, whatever they decided to do with that storefront rubble, something had changed irrevocably in New Haven.

He would only look at Nathaniel like that for one reason, only keep the truth hidden that long for one thing. Somebody had died. And they might not be the last.