

THE
MISERY
HOUSE

PART 1
AWAKENINGS

CHAPTER 1

BENJAMIN “CLIFF” WOODS

From the old, dusty baseball field, it was impossible not to notice the Donnelly house. From our seats in the bleachers, we had a perfect view of the hills. North of New Haven, those unremarkable hills held one remarkable thing: the abandoned house. It waited, looming over us. But by the time it woke up, I'd already gotten used to the view.

I was at the baseball field for Nate's game, like any other weekend. Over the summer, his middle-school team had a game every ten days, but they were blazing hot and sometimes hard to sit through. Even when it was my own son, I had to admit the games weren't thrilling. 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. I was staring straight ahead at the action on the field. While that omen grew with each minute, I'd blocked out everything but the game. A close contest, enough to hold my attention.

Jeremy Adams – a farmer like myself, my oldest friend – noticed the smoke first. He was sitting beside me, without as much interest in the game. He never had any kids to root for or

raise. I think he watched our town the same way I watched my children.

Maybe that's why he took the tragedy so seriously from the jump. What happened over on Main that day was just the beginning. Unlike most of us, Jeremy somehow knew. A parent's sixth sense, you might call it.

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

The opposing team's next batter stepped to the plate. It was the top of the last inning, and this kid from out of town would either take the lead or lose the game. So you understand why we all watched the diamond, the players in their dirt-streaked pants, with so much focus.

Down the row from me and Jeremy, there was a quiet family, a single mother bookended by young children. They were all sitting stiff and silent. She wore a light-colored dress and her children were in khaki shorts and button-ups, which I found odd. Maybe if it'd been Sunday, their church clothes would've made sense.

The mom was as focused on the game as anyone else, so I assumed she had a kid playing but I didn't know which team. I guessed they were from the opposing team, out-of-town, since I'd never seen them before. 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 — 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 face.

"Hey, Cliff..." Jeremy nudged me, using 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 meet me. 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 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. From my seat, 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. "Just need one more..."

The pitcher threw one, and umpire signaled "ball." I tried to laugh, 'cause it was a bad call, but my stomach had twisted 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, glove extended, ready.

“Strike one!” the umpire called. The crowd cheering drowned out Jeremy’s voice, as he again prodded my sides. I didn’t look over.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe Nathaniel didn’t need to make a game-saving play. He’d had his share of good moments 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 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. It always hurt to see that.

“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 sink as quick as the first. I knew right away it would be a hit. I almost hid my eyes as the play unfolded.

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 up and stared, dripping with anxiety.

In unison, the crowd around me 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.

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. With a thud, 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. He made a show of stomping the potato chips under his feet. 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 had moved impossibly fast for a middle-schooler. He’d made the play, and I could breathe easy now.

What a rush.

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

He was also standing, gazing 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 and 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 block over there 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 an omen of far worse things to come.

"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, nodding 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 gravel, 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. 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, five 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 was happening over there.

The coach of the middle-school team—these days, I knew him 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. All three of them wore blank expressions and huddled close to her.

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. They didn't

usually 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. He 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 grip 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... I was boring, bland, and white. Very New Haven.

Coach Baggs eyed me with a mixture of pity and disdain. There was understanding in his eyes. He'd known me for a long time. We both grew up in this backward, middle-of-nowhere town.

Back then, I knew him by a less official name. Our school days were filled with sports, farming, and just 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. Baseball and foball were the most common, played in the evening, while the sun sank behind a distant line of oak trees.

One key difference: he was always the first picked, and I was the last.

But we went through it all together and turned into men.

The past few years, sure, I'd put on some weight — more than

I cared to think about. 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 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 toward the parking lot, where they were climbing into a dingy minivan. He chewed on his lip as he watched. "Yeah, their kid's a bit... different. They just moved here a week ago. Last name something like Dawes."

"Different can be good." I paused and scratched my head, turning back to Baggs just as their minivan shifted into gear and rolled away. "You know where they moved into? I didn't think we had many vacant places around here. Decent ones, anyway."

"Couldn't tell ya. Maybe somewhere on Main? I doubt they got a farmhouse." 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?"

Again with that phrase.

Coach Baggs clasped me on the shoulder—I tried not to

wince — and started to stroll by. His vision flicked to the looming tragedy. “See ya around, Cliff. Keep on Nate for me. He’s got real potential. Don’t wanna waste it.” He offered a 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 called her that 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 backward way of life. Naomi was perfect in a way they’d never understand.

The ballpark was empty now, except for Nathaniel, who appeared by the dugout and started toward the exit gate. He walked slowly, like he was sore, and smiled quietly to himself.

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, nostalgic. Even the scoreboard hadn’t changed, not one bit, since I played here. Not that I’d 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 sank 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 smile was radiant as he held out a baseball, resting on his palm. "Coach Baggs said I could have today's game ball."

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

As I stood from the hard seat, Nathaniel looked past me to 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.

"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 rugged, 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. I knew who it was right away from the uniform and the sheriff's hat that his father also wore back when we were both kids. Wheeler had 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 shoved 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 not super smart, but he's really 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 he stared, unfocused, 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 doesn'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. And when I find out who done this..." 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 fetch you. 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 had 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.