

THE THIRD COMING  
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# CONTENTS

## BOOK ONE: **The Beginning of the End**

Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	14
Chapter Three	19
Chapter Four	24
Chapter Five	29
Chapter Six	34
Chapter Seven	39
Chapter Eight	44
Chapter Nine	50
Chapter Ten	55
Chapter Eleven	59
Chapter Twelve	65
Chapter Thirteen	71
Chapter Fourteen	77

## BOOK TWO: **The Judgment**

Chapter Fifteen	85
Chapter Sixteen	91
Chapter Seventeen	97
Chapter Eighteen	103
Chapter Nineteen	108

## BOOK THREE: **The End . . . and the Beginning**

Chapter Twenty	115
Chapter Twenty-One	120
Chapter Twenty-Two	124

**BOOK ONE:**  
**THE BEGINNING OF THE END**

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# CHAPTER ONE

A sharp northeast wind scuttled dead leaves around Maddie Gray's feet as she turned her back on the two-bit diner where she worked from ten each evening until six the next morning. Dull, leaden clouds raced across the sky, spitting snow. Maddie hunched her shoulders and pulled the thin wool coat closer, clutching the fabric to her throat. It was March, and in Vermont, spring was coming in like a lion.

The Midway Diner was located on the edge of the town of Pleasant. If it had been much farther out, Maddie would have had to drive her ancient car to work each day and waste her precious gas allowance. As it was, she barely had time to make it home to change her clothes before rushing to her part-time job as a nurse's aid in a nursing home. The ground had thawed briefly before the latest cold snap, but the mud had since frozen into jagged shapes, and Maddie watched her footing carefully as she walked along the edge of the road into town.

To her right was a sloping driveway leading to a large farmhouse with a big front yard that still had a tire swing hanging from a spreading maple tree that shaded the lawn. Her husband, Daniel, had hung that swing for their children many years ago—a lifetime, it seemed. Maddie passed the driveway and hurried on. The house no longer belonged to her. Another family enjoyed its cheery interior, drank cocoa by the glowing fireplace, and breakfasted in the sunny spot near the French doors that looked onto the patio and the large English garden that had taken Maddie five years to plant exactly the way she wanted.

How she missed that garden.

How she missed that life.

The wind carried off her deep sigh, and she picked up her pace. Her daughter, Lyn, who was fifteen, would be off to school by the time she reached home. Maddie prayed that she'd taken the bus and not hitched a ride with her wild friends—especially that boy, Justin. Though Lyn had always been a sweet, compliant child, one who loved Jesus and enjoyed

## THE THIRD COMING

church activities, Maddie had been prepared to experience concern over her daughter's choice of boyfriends. That was only natural. She hadn't expected to be afraid of them. That was not.

Just thinking of Justin Cooper sent a flash of fear coursing through her that temporarily made her forget that her fingers were getting numb and she could no longer feel her toes inside her crepe-soled shoes. Justin was eighteen, which Maddie objected to on principle alone. But that wasn't what scared her. The boy seemed a caricature of evil. He dressed all in black, his favorite garment being a flowing black trench coat. Tattoos of swastikas and barbed wire decorated his shoulders and forearms. He fairly bristled with metal; his eyebrows, ears, nose, tongue, and bellybutton, which he exposed with a strategically ripped T-shirt, were all pierced. His short hair was greased back flat to his head and usually covered, at least in the winter, with a tight-fitting ski cap. Maddie was a relatively tall woman, thin and angular, but Justin towered over her at what she guessed must be at least six foot three. When he looked at her, his eyes full of contempt, she felt like a bug he was about to squash under his Nazi-style jackboots.

"Please, God," Maddie prayed, her breath a whistle in the wind, "please let Lyn have gone to school on the bus. Keep her safe from Justin."

For some reason Maddie couldn't comprehend and Lyn couldn't explain clearly, Justin fascinated her daughter. She treated the nice boys at church who were interested in her as if they were well-meaning younger brothers to be tolerated and endured. But she hung on Justin's every word. If he snapped his fingers, she'd come running. In one of her painfully sarcastic moments, Maddie had asked Lyn if she'd jump off a bridge at Justin's request. Chillingly, Lyn had said Yes.

Maddie was shivering uncontrollably when she finally reached the dilapidated tenement building where she lived. The long, low building used to be white, but most of the color had worn off, leaving the boards a soft gray flecked with peeling paint. Maddie lived on the second floor in an eight-hundred-square-foot apartment. As she climbed the stairs, they creaked beneath her, and the handrail shook under her fingers.

What she really needed was a long soak in a hot bath, but the water in the apartment was warm at best, no matter how long you ran it. In-

## CHAPTER ONE

stead, she put the kettle on for a cup of tea to warm her up while she shed her coat and took her shoes off to rub some circulation back into her feet.

“Have you got any money, Ma?”

Maddie clutched at her chest and uttered a shriek of surprise. She was so startled that she nearly fell off the wobbly kitchen chair on which she was sitting,

“Whatsa matter? Weren’t you expecting to see me? I still live here, ya know.”

Her son, Brian, who for all intents and purposes had left home three years before, when he turned sixteen, had materialized in the doorway between the kitchen and the hallway that led to the cramped bedrooms. Maddie’s mind raced. If he was asking for money, surely he hadn’t found where she’d hidden it. Or had he found it and hoped for more?

Brian looked even worse than the last time she’d seen him, maybe a month ago. His normally thin frame was gaunt; his cheeks scratchy as sandpaper and hollow as dippers. A shabby sweater hung loosely around him, the tattered sleeves covering his forearms and hiding the recent tracks of needle marks Maddie was certain were there. Brian was a heroin addict and only showed up when he was desperate and needed money for a fix.

Brian’s eyes were bright, and a fine film of sweat stood out on his blanched forehead. “Well? Have you got any money or not? I haven’t got all day.”

“It’s good to see you, Brian,” Maddie said, stalling for time, praying under her breath for the wisdom to know what to do.

“Money, Ma. I need money.” Brian’s voice was rising. Soon he would be hysterical, or, worse, violent. “I know what you’re thinking. It’s not for drugs; not this time. I just need some money so I can get out of this hell-hole.”

“This isn’t hell, son,” Maddie said slowly, gauging his reaction. “This is a fallen, dark place, but here we still have access to God. Hell is the absence of God.”

Brian whimpered, then erupted. “Don’t talk to me about God!”

“But, Brian . . .” Maddie’s voice was soft, tender; her eyes filled suddenly with tears as she remembered her son as a small boy, when their

## THE THIRD COMING

family was intact in happy times. Where had that smiling, joy-filled child gone? Was he still alive inside this shell of a disappointed, bitter man-child? She reached out as if to take him in her arms as she had done when he was small and had skinned his knee, but he snarled and pulled away from her.

"I know you've got a stash of money here, Ma. Give it to me, or so help me, I'll . . ." Brian's words trailed away as a heavy fist pounded on the door.

"Police! Open up!"

"You haven't seen me, Ma," Brian hissed as he dived for the hallway.

Shaken, Maddie made her way to the front door and pulled it open. Two police officers stood on the threshold. Maddie quaked with fear for her son, and she wondered what he had done to bring the law to her door.

"We have an arrest warrant for Brian Gray. Is he here?" The officer fixed her with a cold and merciless eye. Maddie knew she couldn't lie. Not even to save her son, who, God help him, must have done something very, very wrong.

"He's—" she began, but at that moment Brian charged across the room and grabbed her from behind.

"Get back or I'll shoot her," he warned, putting the cold steel barrel of a pistol to her temple and daring the police to challenge him. Maddie closed her eyes. That she could die in the next few moments at the hands of her son didn't concern her half as much as the thought of those she'd leave behind. How would they manage without her? What would become of Lyn, who was being pulled toward the darkness, away from the light? Who would visit her husband, Daniel, in prison? Would the police shoot Brian if he killed her? The thoughts raced through her head like bullets being shot in rapid succession from Brian's gun.

The police officers held up their hands and stepped back from the door. "Easy, son," one said. "Don't do anything foolish."

Brian laughed harshly. "That's rich. You wouldn't be here if I hadn't done anything foolish. Now just get in your little car and make like you were never here."

"You won't get away, son. Turn yourself in now before you get in any worse trouble."

## CHAPTER ONE

“Don’t call me ‘son’!” Brian screamed. Bits of foam spattered against Maddie’s cheek from the force of his words. “Get out of here! Go!”

The officers backed slowly down the stairs, keeping their eyes trained on Brian and Maddie standing in the doorway. When they had gotten into their patrol car and driven away around a corner, Brian bolted past Maddie and clattered down the stairs. The feeble railing splintered and gave way as he careened against it. He fell hard onto the frozen ground below and for a moment lay stunned. Then he picked himself up and limped away. He hadn’t made it halfway across the next lot before Maddie heard the howl of sirens. Lurching around a corner, Brian was lost from sight.

It wasn’t until cruisers screeched into the parking lot and spilled police officers who charged up the stairs to check on her that Maddie realized she was standing like an idiot with the door open in the freezing cold. But she wasn’t dead.