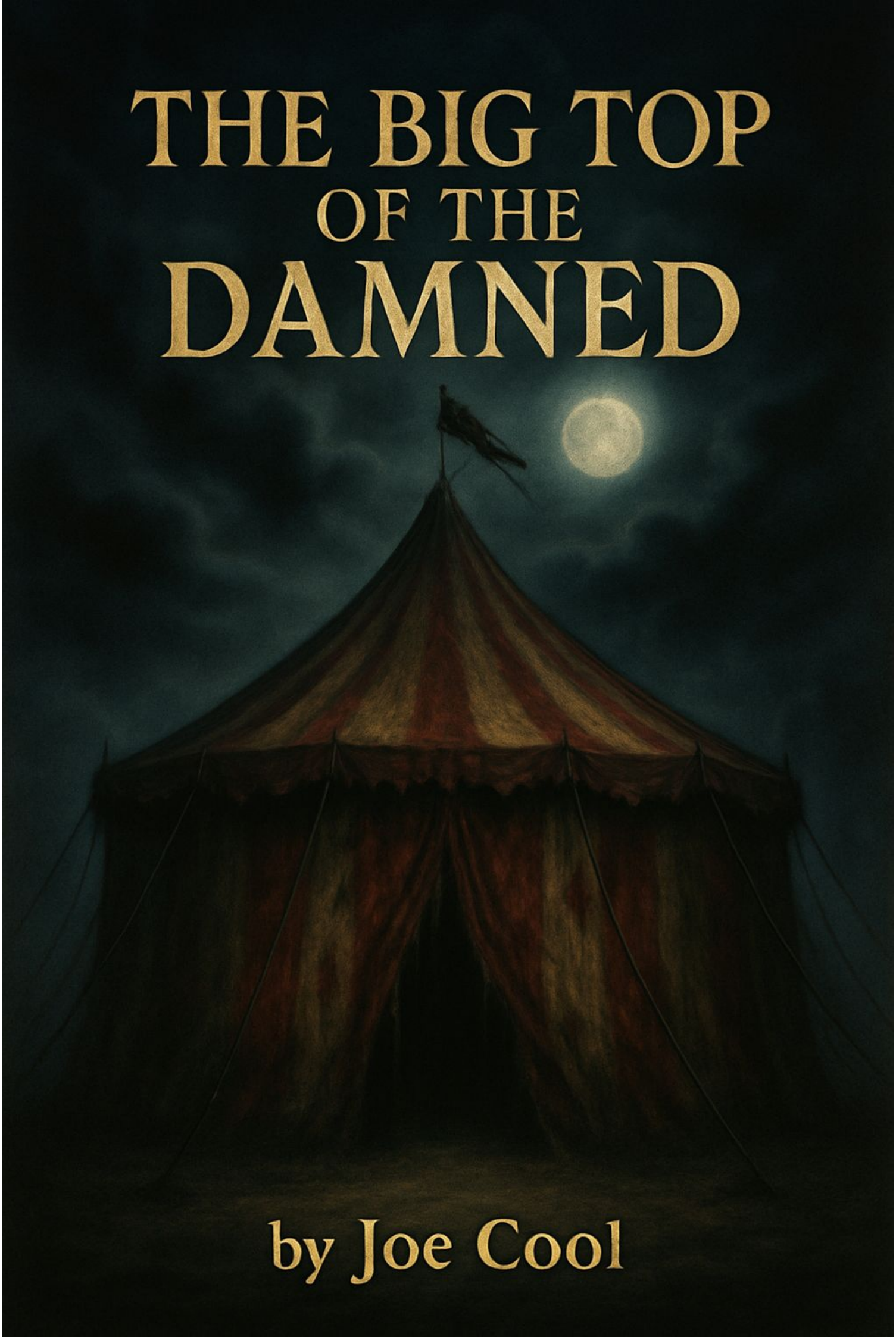
THE BIG TOP
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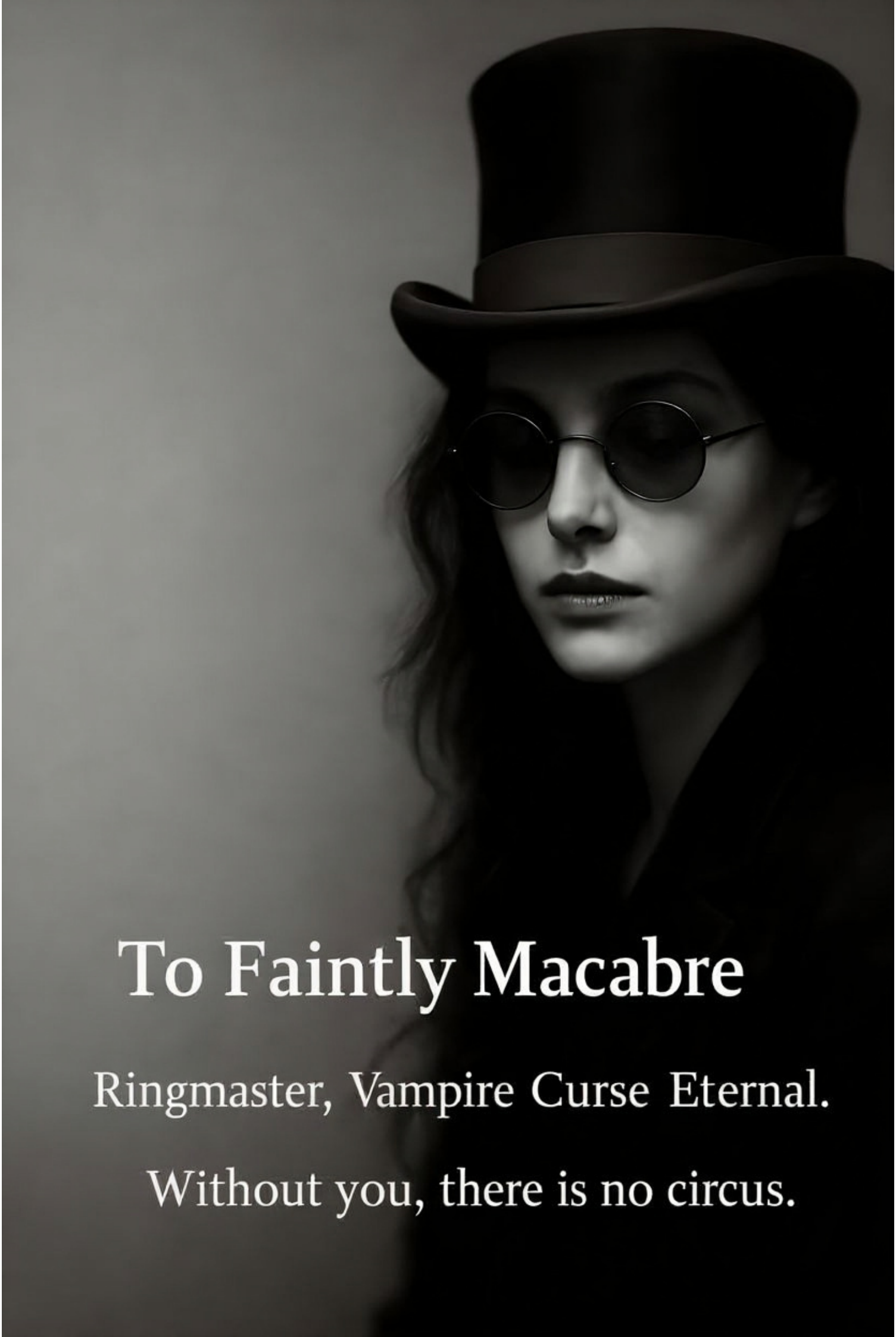
To Faintly Macabre
Ringmaster, Vampire Curse Eternal.
Without you, there is no circus.

Chapter One — Weather That Walks

The first morning of December arrived with a pale, hesitant sun that barely managed to break through the low-hanging clouds. Flint Creek had always been a town of quiet rhythms: a ribbon of streets bordered by brick-and-wood buildings, a diner that smelled perpetually of frying bacon and old coffee, and a tiny 7-Eleven at the corner where everyone picked up last-minute essentials.

It was 1999, the last year of the millennium, and a subtle excitement had begun to hum beneath the usual hum of prairie life. Children scuttled through snow-flecked sidewalks, bundled in scarves and coats too large for their small frames, and the town prepared for Christmas with a slow, familiar cadence.

Sarah Weaver watched from the window of their modest two-story home on Praire Road as Macy, her three-year-old daughter, toddled with uneven steps over the frost-stiffened grass. The girl wore a knitted red hat with a bobble that swayed with every uncertain step, her mittens slipping off constantly. Sarah, twenty-seven, had lived in Flint Creek all her life and knew everyone's routines better than they did themselves. She was a librarian at the small town library, a place that smelled of paper, varnish, and dust—oddly comforting in these early winter mornings.

At first, the weather seemed merely capricious. A wind that whispered too sharply through the streets, a sudden shift of temperature that left frost lingering on the edges of windows where no frost should cling. On the first day of December, there was a faint, unsettling chill in the air, though the thermometer barely dipped below zero. Sarah noted it with mild concern, but the townsfolk brushed it off as ordinary winter quirks.

By **December 2nd**, Flint Creek began to show subtle signs of disarray. The morning paper had blown down Main Street, pages flapping like captive birds against lampposts and the diner's neon sign. The diner, a small community hub, filled quickly with murmurs and nervous laughter as locals tried to make sense of the sudden gusts that roared through the town at seemingly random intervals. Tom Brackett, the diner's long-standing cook, shook his head, flipping pancakes with unusual force to prevent the batter from spilling. "Wind's a strange one," he muttered, his voice barely audible over the clatter of silverware.

The town's three police officers patrolled in circles, noting that the small fleet of patrol cars refused to start in cold spells one day and overheated inexplicably the next. Sheriff Harlan Greaves, a

rotund man with a ruddy face that matched his temper, called it “technical malfunctions, nothing more.” Still, the townsfolk exchanged wary glances. Children no longer played freely in the snow; the older ones lingered in doorways, shivering and telling tales of shapes glimpsed in the clouds—figures that seemed too deliberate to be mere trickery of the wind.

Sarah began keeping a mental log of these anomalies, noting their increasing frequency, the oddities of timing, the almost intelligent selection of the town’s most familiar corners for the disturbances. Her life, usually compartmentalized into work, home, and the library, began to unravel in small ways. Her routines became punctuated with unease. Macy would reach for her hand suddenly, eyes wide, pointing at shadows that Sarah could not see, and the girl’s small body would tremble as though sensing an invisible predator.

December 3rd brought the first real shock. A murder of crows, blacker than the midnight sky, swirled over Flint Creek and then plummeted in unison to the ground, their bodies striking cars, roofs, and fences. For a moment, the town froze; the diner emptied as patrons spilled onto the street. Animals within the town reacted in terror: dogs whimpered incessantly, cats disappeared from porches, and livestock in the outskirts of Flint Creek refused to eat. Mr. Latham, the towns butcher and slaughterman, spent half the day coaxing his animals back into the barn. “Never seen the likes,” he muttered, shaking his head.

As the days progressed, the disturbances grew stranger. **December 4th** brought a fog that crept through the town in sharp lines, not dissipating but clinging to the streets like skeletal hands. It muffled sound, and even familiar voices—whether a mother calling from her kitchen or the diner’s bell, everything sounded as though they were underwater.

Mail delivery faltered, as roads slick with frost that did not melt even in the mid-afternoon sun created impasses on the local highway. Communication with the outside world began to fray. Cell phones, still a novelty in Flint Creek, refused to hold a signal. Sarah tried calling her sister in Wichita; the line buzzed and hissed, as if the town itself had walled her off.

By **December 5th**, the town had begun to fracture socially. Regular greetings exchanged on sidewalks grew scarce. People looked at each other with suspicion; even casual touches—a pat on the shoulder, a handshake—elicited brief flinches. Sarah, ever the observer, noted how strangers seemed to grow more peculiar, their movements too calculated, their glances lingering. The library saw fewer visitors, the books untouched except by her careful hand. Macy’s laughter, usually a bright punctuation to the long winter days, became rare.

The days of **December 6th and 7th** unfolded in subtle horror. Pets had to be put down—dogs, cats, and chickens alike—after inexplicable sickness. Temperatures swung wildly: one minute bitter cold, the next a strange, suffocating warmth that left residents drowsy and irritable. The diner began to feel more like a shelter than a place of community, its walls crowded with uneasy faces and the smell of coffee strong enough to mask fear. By nightfall, streetlights flickered, and the shadows seemed to stretch too long, tangling with the snow in impossible shapes.

Sarah began documenting every oddity in a small notebook, sketching the snow patterns, the bizarre cloud formations, the unnatural behaviors of animals. She watched Macy carefully, noting how the girl’s tiny hand found hers constantly, how the toddler’s gaze lingered on empty spaces with an intensity no child should possess. The Weavers’ neighbors—Harold and Martha Givens, the Parkers, the young Thompsons, Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick—spoke in whispers at doors and win-

dows, sharing theories about magnetic anomalies or secret government experiments. None dared suggest anything supernatural, yet all avoided the long, empty stretches of road that led out of Flint Creek.

The town library became an archive of unease. Sarah cataloged entries of townsfolk, noting their fears, their odd reactions, the creeping psychological strain. People argued over minor issues—traffic, the bakery running out of bread—yet underlying all disputes was a current of terror, subtle and insidious, as if the town itself had grown a consciousness intent on unsettling its residents. The roads to neighboring towns were impassable in ways that seemed almost designed to isolate Flint Creek, not physically but psychologically.

December 8th dawned over Flint Creek with a silence so absolute it felt like a physical weight. The usual calls of morning birds were absent; even the wind seemed cautious, hovering in a low, constant hum. Snow lay across the prairie, but unlike the soft dusting of previous weeks, it had formed in strange, angular drifts that looked almost deliberate, like frozen staircases rising from the ground. Sarah noticed the peculiar patterns through the frost-streaked window of the library. Each step she took along the creaking floorboards of the library echoed unnaturally, as if the walls themselves were amplifying her presence.

Macy toddled behind her, bundled in layers of wool, gripping Sarah's hand tightly. The girl's brown eyes, wide and unblinking, followed the distortions in the snow and the shifting shadows outside. "Mama… the snow… it's moving," she whispered, her small voice trembling. Sarah knelt beside her, brushing strands of hair from the child's face. "It's just the wind, baby. Nothing more," she reassured, though unease prickled her own skin. The snow did not obey the wind, she realized. It shifted too deliberately, forming ridges that seemed almost like footprints, yet when she inspected them, they were not human, nor animal.

That day, traffic across town became nearly impossible. Cars refused to start; the roads, frozen in inconsistent layers, trapped vehicles in place. The occasional truck that managed to move did so with agonizing slowness, its engine coughing against the sudden cold that pressed down like a hand on the engine hood. The 7-Eleven at the corner of Main and Maple reported higher foot traffic than usual, though many shoppers appeared distracted, eyes darting to clouds that hung heavy, gray, and too low to be real.

At the diner, conversations were subdued. Tom Brackett, standing behind the counter, wiped his hands on a towel as he surveyed his patrons. "I don't like this," he muttered, his voice loud enough for a few to hear. "It's… unnatural. Been workin' here thirty years, and I've never seen a winter like this." Sheriff Harlan Greaves nodded, though his hand never left the holster at his belt. Even the normally cheerful waitresses seemed skittish, eyes shifting toward the fog that had begun to curl down from the hills like fingers seeking entrance to every home.

By **December 9th**, communication with the outside world had begun to fail entirely. Telephones crackled with static; long-distance calls never connected. Sarah attempted to dial the library's network in Wichita to verify weather reports or simply to speak with a familiar voice, but each attempt ended in silence or distorted static, like the voice on the other end existed only in a half-world. Newspapers from neighboring towns, which usually arrived by mid-morning, either didn't come at all or were shredded beyond recognition in the wind. The town of Flint Creek felt increasingly isolated, as if the world beyond the county lines had forgotten them.

It was on **December 10th** that the first true panic began to whisper through the streets. The animals, already uneasy, began behaving in terrifyingly unpredictable ways. Mr. Latham's cows pressed against the fences of his pasture, lowing in frantic tones. The Parker's dog growled at nothing, hair standing on end. And Macy, who never hesitated to explore, suddenly recoiled at shadows no one else seemed to notice. Sarah noticed her daughter pointing at the empty library yard and gasping, "The man! The man in the sky!" When Sarah looked up, there was nothing. Only the sky—a dense, bruised gray—looming, heavy with threat.

By **December 11th**, a sense of dread had begun to settle across Flint Creek like soot. The town's religious population, always keen to interpret omens, began holding extended vigils in the small brick church on Elm Street. Pastor McCallum delivered long, trembling sermons about judgment, the wrath of the heavens, and the need for steadfast faith in the face of trials. Yet even he could not explain the erratic swings in temperature, the sudden, unearthly gusts of wind, the inexplicable fog that refused to dissipate.

In her diary that day,

Sarah wrote:

"The town feels hollow. Everyone moves with caution, as if afraid that the air itself may betray them. Macy refuses to leave my side. She clings to my hand with a grip far stronger than a child's should be able to muster. I try to reassure her, but even I am beginning to question the reality of what I see. The sky is a bruised black today, though the sun should have been up hours ago. Something is coming. I can feel it."

December 12th brought rain that fell sideways, not carried by wind but seemingly propelled by some unseen force. Street puddles formed intricate patterns, concentric rings that expanded and contracted in impossible synchrony. Sarah observed them from the library, her brow furrowed. She tried to comfort Macy, but the child's quiet sobs reminded her that her daughter's sense of security was unraveling.

By **December 13th**, townsfolk had begun to adjust to life in fear. Grocery runs became frenzied, as if everyone instinctively knew something worse was coming. The diner's tables were lined with families eating in tense silence, glances cast toward windows as if expecting an unseen visitor. News from the outside world remained absent, radios useless, television signals gone. The library remained one of the few places of continuity, but even it seemed increasingly alien with each flicker of failing electricity.

On **December 14th**, the fog returned, thicker than ever. Sarah noted in her diary that even the normally timid street cats vanished completely. Birds refused to land anywhere, hovering above rooftops, their cries sharp and discordant. Traffic in town was at a standstill; vehicles abandoned mid-street, engines cooling, tires slipping in a frost that returned nightly, inexplicably. The 7-Eleven reported shortages as residents cleared shelves of staples: bread, canned goods, candles. Everyone stocked for survival, though none could articulate why.

Sarah wrote:

"Macy is growing more fearful each day. She whispers about shadows that follow her, figures that stand in the fog. I do not see them, but the hairs on my neck rise at her descriptions. The town is un-

recognizable—not physically, but in spirit. Flint Creek is hollowing out, silently. Every face carries tension, every voice trembles. Tomorrow is another day. Another day of waiting."

By this point, even familiar rituals were tainted. The approaching Christmas season, normally a time of anticipation and decoration, felt eerie. The windows of homes that should have glowed with lights were dim; families avoided elaborate decorations. The town Christmas tree in the square remained undecorated, the star on top trembling in the unnatural wind.

December 15th dawned gray and low-hanging. Flint Creek felt smaller, as if the roads themselves had narrowed overnight. Snowflakes fell erratically, not in the gentle drift that had previously occurred, but in sharp, angular shards that cut through the air, leaving stinging patterns on skin and clothes. The town's few traffic lights flickered intermittently, some refusing to function entirely, forcing drivers to inch their way cautiously through intersections.

Sarah led Macy down Main Street toward the library, noting how many storefronts were shuttered earlier than usual. Tom Brackett's diner had reduced hours, closing at three in the afternoon, claiming that "folk aren't coming out much no more." Inside, the regular crowd—retirees, truckers, and families—huddled over chipped mugs of coffee, faces tight with unease.

Children were particularly affected. At the small elementary school, lessons were punctuated by sudden, inexplicable noises: books falling from shelves, chairs scraping across floors without touch, the school bell ringing long after the day had ended. The teacher, Mrs. Lindley, tried to maintain order, but several children, including Macy's older classmates, refused to enter the classroom, their small hands pressed against doorframes as if warding off some unseen presence.

Sarah wrote:

"Macy is frightened more often than not now. Her little hands cling to mine, tugging urgently whenever the wind shifts. The adults are subdued, voices hushed in public, as if speaking too loudly might call the storm down upon us. The library is my refuge, though even here I feel eyes watching from the corners of empty rooms. Something waits."

On the **December 16th**, religious observances became both more frequent and more desperate. The small brick church on Elm Street held early morning prayers for protection against the weather, drawing in more townsfolk than usual. Pastor McCallum's sermons grew fevered, his voice trembling as he spoke of the last days and the need for unerring faith. Candlelight flickered across the pews, shadows dancing along the walls in unsettling patterns. Some townspeople left clutching their Bibles, whispering of impending doom.

The snow had begun to take on a peculiar scent, metallic and tangy, like blood on frost. Animals were restless: cats yowled from rooftops, dogs barked incessantly, and livestock refused to leave barns even for feeding. Farmers worried aloud at the feed store, their voices low with fear, while store clerks struggled to keep up with the surging demand for food and supplies.

Sarah noticed a subtle change in herself. Her reflection in the glass of the library windows seemed distorted, features elongated and eyes darker than they should be. Macy laughed at nothing and everything, her small voice shrill and sharp, yet occasionally trembling as she pointed toward empty spaces where Sarah could see nothing.

December 17th brought an almost constant, low rumble in the skies, like distant drums beating in time with some cosmic ritual. Snow fell sporadically, gathering in drifts against doors and fences, but never blocking movement entirely. Cars remained sluggish, reluctant to move even when engines roared. Delivery trucks failed to arrive at all, and Flint Creek slowly began to feel forgotten by the outside world.

Sarah walked past the diner mid-morning. Through the frosted glass, she saw Mrs. Brackett at the counter, whispering fervently to a customer about "voices in the wind" and "faces in the clouds." Tom Brackett, usually stoic, appeared distracted, glancing toward the door every few moments as if expecting a visitor no one else could see.

Sarah wrote:

"The town is unraveling. Small irritations grow into hysteria; quiet whispers become cries in the night. Macy notices more than she should, though she cannot articulate it. I feel it too, in every breath, in every footstep across the library floor. The storm is no longer outside—it is inside us, in the spaces between words, in the shadows of our homes."

By **December 18th**, Christmas preparations were in chaos. Shop windows remained bare; decorations hung half-finished, swaying unnaturally in the gusts that swept the town. Families avoided elaborate festivities, though some tried regardless. At the Weaver home, Sarah and Macy hung a single wreath on the door, its circular form slightly off, and a small strand of colored lights across the mantel. The flickering bulbs cast more shadow than illumination, accentuating the long, twisted shapes the snow left across the yard.

The diner struggled to maintain its role as the town's social hub. Those who did venture out to eat were tense, speaking in clipped sentences, glancing repeatedly at the gray sky. Even Tom Brackett's usual optimism could not mask the growing unease; when a regular customer, Mr. Latham, mentioned the strange patterns in the snow, Brackett's smile faltered.

Macy skittered around the kitchen that evening, muttering about "the man in the clouds" and "the sky spilling red." Sarah tried to reassure her, stroking the child's hair, but even she felt a creeping dread, as if the very walls were listening.

December 19th–20th were days of waiting. Communication with neighboring towns remained impossible. Snow drifted from a sky that now rarely let the sun break through. The few vehicles that moved did so like somnambulists, their headlights weak and faltering, forcing drivers to creep along the streets as though compelled by invisible hands. Dogs whimpered at thresholds; cats vanished into attics. People whispered of strange dreams and inexplicable, immoral urges, only to wake and find objects displaced—or missing entirely.

Sarah observed townsfolk with a new intensity. Mr. Parker, the hardware store owner, avoided streetlights, his eyes darting to every shadow. Mrs. Dalton, who lived alone on Maple Street, refused to open her curtains. Children were kept inside, the few brave enough to venture out returning pale, eyes wide, speaking of things no one else could see.

Sarah wrote:

"I try to focus on Macy, to keep her safe, to keep myself grounded in normality. But the town is slip-

ping. I see it in the faces of the people, in the way they clutch one another's hands, in the hollow ring of laughter that sounds too loud in the streets. The storm is relentless, though it leaves no mark. It is shaping us, bending our minds. I do not know how much longer we can resist."

By **December 21st**, Flint Creek had become a town of shadows. The snow was relentless, but never truly accumulative; it vanished as quickly as it arrived, leaving footprints that shifted, paths that seemed to fold back on themselves. Traffic was all but nonexistent; most vehicles abandoned. The diner, the library, and the 7-Eleven remained the few places of relative normality, though the people within them were taut with fear.

Sarah noticed Macy pointing toward the horizon, shouting at a cloud that seemed impossibly crimson in the low winter light. No one else reacted; the town was collectively paralyzed, observing the abnormal weather in silent, anxious awe. Even the church bells refused to chime clearly, their tolls slow and distorted.

Sarah wrote:

"Macy is frightened, but curious. She points at the sky and laughs, though the sound is brittle, strained. I try to reassure her, but I am as lost as she. The town seems to have forgotten how to breathe. We move through these days like phantoms, following routines that have no purpose beyond survival. Something waits, something enormous. I can feel it in my chest, in the way the wind pushes against the library door. It is coming, though I do not know what it is."

December 22nd began with an ominous silence. The snow that fell overnight had not accumulated but clung to surfaces in thin, glistening layers, like frost over glass. Flint Creek's streets remained empty, save for the occasional erratic vehicle creeping through with headlights on, as though searching for invisible landmarks. Sarah walked with Macy toward the small 7-Eleven for essentials.

The store, usually bustling, was sparsely attended. Mrs. Kline, the cashier, spoke in hushed tones about animals behaving strangely—her neighbor's horse refusing to eat hay, her cat hissing at shadows. Outside, the wind moaned through the eaves, carrying faint sounds that could have been anything: the scraping of branches, the echo of distant bells, or the whisper of voices not there.

Sarah wrote:

"I do not know how to keep Macy safe. She tugs at my coat, pointing toward shapes in the clouds. I see them too, but they are not shapes I recognize. The town feels smaller, as if the streets have contracted overnight. People do not meet eyes, and when they do, there is panic there, barely restrained. Something waits, something terrible, but no one dares name it."

Even in the homes, Christmas decorations were strange. Lights flickered, not with electricity alone, but with a pulsing that felt alive. Tinsel hung in sharp, jagged angles, ornaments trembled on their hooks, and miniature snowmen seemed to lean toward Sarah and Macy as they passed by.

On **December 23rd**, Flint Creek's residents began hoarding in earnest. Traffic was almost nonexistent; the roads were slippery, not from snow but from the thin, shiny layer of frost that clung unnaturally to asphalt. Delivery trucks from neighboring towns had ceased entirely, leaving shelves in

the 7-Eleven and hardware store thin and patchy.

Inside the diner, Tom Brackett and Mrs. Brackett served fewer patrons than ever. Conversations turned to speculation about the weather, though no one had any answers. People whispered about the strange patterns in the snow, the animal behavior, and the metallic tang that hung faintly in the air.

Sarah watched Macy play near the counter, stacking sugar packets into towers that wobbled precariously. The child's laughter was brittle, echoing strangely in the room, and Sarah found herself tensing at every small sound.

Sarah wrote:

"Even Christmas is tainted. The decorations in homes, in the streets, are unnaturally bright, almost mocking. People leave their doors open as if expecting something to enter, but no one dares step outside. I feel a weight pressing down on the town. Something is coming, though I do not yet know what it is. Macy's small hand is in mine, and I clutch it desperately. I am her only anchor."

Christmas Eve arrived like a slow, suffocating shroud. The town's church held a small service, the few parishioners huddled near the altar as Pastor McCallum's words trembled through the nave. Bells rang faintly, but the sound was distorted, low and vibrating in the chest rather than the ears.

Sarah walked through the empty streets with Macy, noting the homes dimly lit by candles rather than electric lights. Most families had abandoned lavish preparations, focusing instead on survival. Tiny decorations still clung to windows, but they shivered and flickered in ways that felt almost sentient.

At the diner, a lone couple huddled over coffee, speaking softly of neighbors and relatives they could not reach. The Weavers' home remained modestly decorated: a small tree in the corner, a single strand of colored lights across the mantel. Sarah tried to read to Macy, but the child's eyes kept darting to the window, to the wind, as if expecting it to break through.

Sarah wrote:

"Macy asks about Santa. I tell her he is busy tonight, bringing joy to other towns. But even I feel the lie is hollow. The snow is wrong, the wind is wrong. The town is wrong. Even the stars do not shine as they should. Christmas Eve should be joy, but I feel only a gathering dread, like the dark before a storm too vast to survive."

Christmas Day should have brought warmth, celebration, and small joys. Instead, Flint Creek awoke under a sky the color of bruised metal. Snow fell in slow, jagged flakes, catching in the bare trees like shards of glass. Even within homes, the atmosphere felt heavy, almost viscous, as if the air itself resisted movement.

Sarah observed families cautiously exchanging small gifts. Macy received a simple wooden toy, but even its edges seemed sharper than they should be, its color too bright in the dim light. Across the town, similar gifts were given, though the joy felt muted, forced. Conversations carried a brittle edge, and laughter was scarce.

Animals continued to behave strangely. Dogs whimpered at thresholds, cats remained hidden, and livestock refused to leave stalls. People spoke in whispers, as though loud speech might summon something terrible.

The diner attempted a small Christmas meal, serving turkey and mashed potatoes to a handful of patrons. Tom Brackett's face was drawn, his usual cheer replaced by anxious glances toward the windows. Outside, the snow shifted in unnatural drifts, moving as if with intent.

Sarah wrote:

"Macy is unsettled. She points at the snow and speaks of shadows moving beneath it. I hold her close, feeling the town's pulse in my chest. Flint Creek should be alive with celebration, but we are hollow. I do not know what tomorrow brings, only that the storm is growing, that something waits beyond our understanding, waiting for the moment it can enter."

The days between **December 26th–30th** were worse. Snowstorms fell and vanished within hours, leaving no trace beyond the impressions of boots and tires. Townspeople became increasingly isolated, venturing out only when necessary. Traffic ceased entirely, and communication with neighboring towns remained impossible. The diner and 7-Eleven served as the town's few gathering points, though even there, conversation was strained, fearful, and punctuated by long silences.

Sarah observed the weather's impact on individuals. People grew gaunt, faces pale and drawn. Eyes darted nervously; hands trembled at the smallest noises. Children, including Macy, spoke less and less of ordinary things, instead muttering about shapes in the clouds, voices in the wind, or patterns in the snow.

Sarah Wrote:

"The storm has infected the town. It is in the wind, the snow, in the eyes of every person. Even my own reflection feels strange, distorted. Macy clings to me constantly. I do not know how to protect her, but I must. I see it in neighbors' faces—the same recognition that something is coming, something enormous and terrible, but none know how to name it."

December 31st dawned with a silence unlike any before. Flint Creek seemed to hold its breath. The sky was blood-red, streaked with lightning that hung in the air without crash or sound. Townsfolk gathered in small groups in the streets, on porches, in the diner and 7-Eleven, watching the unnatural spectacle.

Sarah held Macy close, noting the child's wide eyes. Even Pastor McCallum stepped outside from his rectory, face pale and hands clasped in prayer. The metallic tang in the air was stronger, the wind alive with whispers of voices no one could identify.

Then, as the final seconds of the millennium ticked down, the storm ended abruptly. The blood-red sky dissipated as quickly as it had arrived, the clouds receding, leaving Flint Creek bathed in a cold, still light.

In the quiet aftermath, the Big Top appeared on the outskirts of town, a massive tent of black and crimson, flapping gently in the sudden stillness. The townsfolk stared, mouths agape, knowing instinctively that everything had changed. No one spoke. No one moved. Sarah clutched Macy, both

of them drawn to the canvas maw of the circus, unaware that it was the beginning of horrors far beyond anything they could imagine.