

## PROLOGUE

September 1, 1992

**O**n his knees, the seven-year-old prayed for his family. For his mom and dad. The little dog next door pacing outside the doghouse. The red roosters with fat muscular legs tied to rusty rebar stakes in the ground. He prayed for the city of Savannah and all the barrier islands. He prayed they would survive this black, swirling mass.

Speaking over the eerily robotic intonations of the weather radio, he chanted the verse. It was his mantra during times like these. The air lit up around him, tiny pixels of strange light that only he could see. He swore to others they were there. He saw them plain as day. The visions, his mom called them. His body grew warm as if steaming bathwater were encircling him.

In his hands, the boy clutched a black Bible. His name glossed the cover: William H. Fordham in gold lettering. It was a Christmas gift from two years prior. Already, the pages showed wear. Highlighted verses and pencil scratches marred the smooth tissue paper. The yellow streaks and graphite marks had made his mother proud.

She hovered above him now, pacing. Turning up the weather

radio. The cold, alien voice grew louder. The syllables didn't connect as they should. The end of each word began promptly with the start of the next. No pause for breath in between. It was unnatural. It sounded like cold metal coming to life. Will imagined the rectangular furnace beside him awakening. Appendages, eyes, teeth, and consciousness as it belched the English language in loud, sober proclamations.

“Saturday-evening. Storm-warning-for-all-in-neighboring counties. Warning extends-to-all-on-the-Georgiacoast. First squall. Thosein-thefollowingcounties. Find shelter. Stayinyourhomes. Second-squall-forecasted-for7:30.”

That word. It terrified him. It sounded like the noise something makes before it kills you. “Mommy, what’s squall?”

The light flickered above them, a single bulb dangling over the dank crawlspace. The winds picked up outside. The sound of a tree cracking somewhere nearby like a muffled gunshot. There was a dull tumbling above them. “Shh—” the woman said. “Pray for daddy now. Say your verse.”

With sweaty palms, he clutched at the Bible. In the face of the storm, it felt small to him. Devoid of power. Squeezing his eyes shut, he chanted the words that calmed him. William Fordham prayed for the wellbeing of his father, who was up on the roof, grappling with a puzzle of big blue tarps, stepping with practiced dexterity across the shingles, strategically placing bricks to weigh them down.

“Peace, be still. Peace, be still. Peace, be still. Peace, be still. Peace, be still.”

On the news earlier that night, they'd said it was coming. They'd been saying it for days, but the boy had known about it long before. He could sense it. He could taste it and smell it. The air carried an odor. A red-pulsing warning, which he'd once tried to describe to his mother

and father. The couple had looked at each other, not saying a word.

“Peace be still peace be still peace be still peace be still peace be still.”

The words ran together now, losing familiarity in the repetition. Each syllable came unhinged to birth a scary, sprawling phonetic marvel. He said the words until he ran out of breath, pausing, looking up at his mother. She shook her head. “He’s been up there too long.” Then, glancing down at Will: “You wait here.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“You just keep saying your verse.”

“No, Mommy. Please don’t.”

Will shut his eyes as the crawlspace door slammed shut. He bent low, crouching, imagining God: a tall, white-haired man in the sky watching the storm brew. God created hurricanes because men were wicked, his mom had told him. It was during times when Satan moved unchecked in this world that God unleashed his fury. It was a cleansing of sorts. But the storm did not feel like something holy. It felt impersonal. Scary. An explosion of thunder rocked the home’s foundation as tears streamed down the boy’s face.

“Peace-be-still-peace-be-still-peace-be-still-peace-be-still-peace-be-still.”