

The drive west felt like a slow unraveling, the city peeling away in layers.

First the dense, gray grid of Omaha, then the long strips of gas stations and chain restaurants clinging to the interstate, then finally, nothing but an endless stretch of land—flat and patient, waiting.

Oliver sat in the back seat, forehead pressed to the window, the glass warm against his temple. He watched as the world dissolved into fields, into thin barbed wire fences, into rusted barns swaying in the wind. His mother had been talking for the last two hours. Something about arrangements, the service, who would be staying where.

His father hadn't spoken since they'd left Omaha.

The funeral was in a town so small it barely existed. A single road cut through the middle of it, lined with low, peeling buildings: a post office, a hardware store, a diner with a rusted sign swinging in the wind.

Oliver had only met his grandfather a handful of times. A stiff old man with hands like rawhide and a voice like gravel in a dry creek bed. The sort of man who measured people in how much they could endure.

It was strange, now, to stand in a room full of strangers who shared his blood.

The church smelled of old wood and dying flowers. Across the room, a voice called his name.

He turned. An older man leaned against a pew, a glass and amber-colored drink in his hand. He had the same weathered look as all the men in Oliver's family. Skin creased like old leather, eyes sharp and knowing.

"C'mere a second, boy." His great-uncle—Harlan? Henry?—motioned him over. "Belonged to your granddaddy. And his daddy before him. Reckoned you ought to have it." He pressed a

small object into Oliver's palm—a pocket watch. Heavy, gold, ornately carved. The back was cool and smooth against his skin.

“He carried that every day of his life,” the old man said. “Said time wasn't just time. Said it was—” He paused, squinting, as if searching for the exact words. “Said it was a promise.”

Oliver turned the watch over. The hands ticked steadily forward. “A promise of what?”

But the man only shook his head and shuffled away.

He sat with the pocket watch for a while.

The reception swelled around him—hushed voices, the clink of dishes, the occasional dry laugh that sounded out of place in the dim church hall. Plates of half-eaten casseroles and sweating glasses of sweet tea littered the tables. People he barely knew came and went, their voices full of things they expected him to feel.

He didn't.

Instead, his fingers moved absently over the watch's surface, tracing the delicate engravings. It was intricate in a way that felt out of place with the rest of his grandfather's life, practically all dust and sweat. He pressed the latch, and the cover flipped open with a soft click. The face was ivory, the hands thin and precise, ticking steadily forward. It felt too heavy in his palm.

“Oliver,” his mother called, gathering her coat. It was time to go.

They drove in silence, gravel crackling beneath tires as they wound down the road leading to his aunt's farmhouse.

The house loomed up from the land like it had grown there. Two stories, peeling white paint, and a sloping wraparound porch that sagged slightly at the edges.

Oliver let his bag slump to the floor of the guest room and set the pocket watch on the nightstand, nudging the door shut with his foot. He plopped down on the bed, waiting for the moment his body could finally relax. The moment never came. He shifted. The sheets were stiff, the mattress too firm. The pocket watch chirped from beside him.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

It was the only sound in the room, and sleep did not come easily. He rolled onto his side, staring at the nightstand. The pocket watch gleamed in the dark. Even with his eyes half-lidded, he could see the hands moving.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

His gaze flicked to the envelope beside the watch. At the funeral, his aunt had pressed it into his hands. A card, handwritten, with a crisp 50 dollar bill tucked inside. “For your parents,” she’d said. “Gas, snacks on the way home.”

Tick. Tick. Tick.

But Oliver was sure his parents had plenty of money in their accounts. And back home, his friends were already planning a trip for the next weekend.

It wasn’t like his parents would ever ask about it.

He slid the money from the envelope, folding it into his pocket. He told himself he’d make it up later.

Then—*Tick. Tick.*

The watch faltered.

A sound. Low, groaning, distant, but deep. It didn't belong to the house, didn't belong to anything Oliver could name. It was the sound of shifting, of something heavy stirring after a long, long sleep.

When he looked down at the pocket watch, the hands remained almost perfectly, terribly still. Almost. The hands slowly crept along, though the sound of the ticking ceased. As he lay back down, the watch's silence gnawed at him.

With a slow exhale, he set it down on the nightstand.

It doesn't matter. It's just a stupid watch.

But still, it took him longer than he wanted to admit to close his eyes.

Morning came pale and sluggish, the light filtering through thin curtains in a dull gray wash.

For a moment, Oliver felt disoriented. Then it settled. The funeral, the drive, the strange house.

The watch.

He turned his head toward the nightstand.

The watch ticked again. Soft and steady as if it had never stopped.

He wandered through the house, past his mother and aunt murmuring in the kitchen, past his father asleep in front of the TV, until he found himself in the hall outside his cousin's room. The door was cracked open.

His cousin had always been the black sheep of the family. Always had things going on the side. And now, with the farm struggling—Oliver knew the man was up to something.

He glanced over his shoulder. No one was watching. And so, he stepped inside.

His cousin's boots were kicked off by the bed, jacket slung over a chair. On the dresser was a small lockbox. The kind people kept valuables in.

Before he could second-guess himself, he reached for it. The lock ticked open, and the watch slowed its ticking.

Inside—a key. He pocketed it.

Oliver left and made his way to the kitchen. His aunt stood by the stove. His mother sat at the table, clutching a cup of coffee, dark circles beneath her eyes.

“Morning,” he mumbled.

His aunt turned, offering a faint smile, “Sleep alright?”

“Yeah.”

His mother sat her mug down. “We’re heading out to the farm after breakfast.”

Oliver bit back a sigh, but he knew better than to argue.

“Strangest thing,” his aunt said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “Did you see the field this morning?”

His mother frowned, “No, why?”

“Corn’s gone black. Whole patch of it. Just overnight. Could be disease, I suppose. But the rest of the field looks fine.”

“Bad timing,” his mother said.

His aunt hummed in agreement, already moving on.

But Oliver couldn't. His fingers twitched in his lap, the 50 dollar bill and key still tucked inside his pockets.

The watch ticked on.

The farm looked smaller than he remembered.

But Oliver had only been there once, years ago.

“Your grandfather loved this land,” Oliver’s aunt exhaled. “He used to say it took care of us because we took care of it. Said it was all about balance. Give and take.”

His father stood beside him, staring out at the ruined field, jaw clenched.

In the fields stretching toward the horizon, a section of corn had turned black. Not brown or withered. Black.

“Is something wrong with the soil?” his mother asked.

His father frowned. “No, this isn’t the soil.”

Oliver’s fingers curled into his sleeves. “I’m gonna look around,” he mumbled, turning before anyone could stop him.

No one did. They were too focused on the field. Oliver took that as permission and walked toward the barn.

The inside smelled like old wood and oil. A few rusted tools leaned against the wall. A workbench sat in the corner, drawers half-open. All except for one. Oliver walked over to it.

Each of the drawers stuck for a moment before giving way with a groan. Inside each were stacks of letters. One drawer remained, one with a lock on it. Oliver fumbled through his pocket for the key—it couldn’t be. He slid the key in the lock and turned it; it gave way with a tick, almost the same sound as the watch. Inside again was a stack of letters, but this time, a journal lay beneath them, bound in cracked leather. On the front was the name of his great-grandfather.

Oliver opened it. The ink inside was faded, but the words were still clear.

There is a balance to all things. The land thrives when we do right by it. And when we fail—when we take too much, when we break the promise—we pay the price.

He turned the page.

It has happened before. It will happen again. Blood is root. And if the root rots, so does everything else.

The next page wasn't writing—it was a drawing. A pocket watch, sketched in dark, deliberate strokes. Beneath it, the words:

The root keeps time. When the hands falter, the debt begins. When they stop, the land dies.
Debt. He didn't like that word—

“Oliver?”

He jolted. His aunt stood in the doorway, framed by the dim afternoon light. Her eyes swept the scene. “How did you get that drawer open—”

“It was already open when I found it,” he lied, cutting her off.

A moment of silence that stretched too long.

She studied him, stepping closer. “That drawer's been locked for decades,” she said softly.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The sound was sluggish now.

Oliver nodded, too quickly. He eased the journal shut. His aunt didn't say anything else, just lingered a moment longer before walking out.

Oliver looked out the barn doors. The blackened cornfield stretched beyond, stalks swaying—*swaying?* But there was no wind.

Deep within the ruined stalks, he saw a shape. Too tall, too still, watching.

The barn door slammed shut. His fingers curled around the edges of the journal as if it might steady him, as if ink and paper could do anything against—against *what?*

The shape in the field was gone. But the feeling remained, that *wrongness*.

Then, slowly, he pulled the pocket watch from his jacket. The hand ticked forward, unbothered. He should just forget it. Burn the journal and toss the watch in the river.

But he wouldn't. He tucked the journal in his pocket. He'd opened a door today that wasn't meant to be opened.

And doors—once opened—didn't always close the way you wanted them to.

Dinner was a silent affair.

Oliver's aunt, stiff and silent, stared at her food as if it had no meaning. Oliver's father chewed mechanically, eyes far away. Only his cousin, Liam, seemed unaffected. He sat at the head of the table, elbows propped on the table, his gaze desperate but deliberate. Oliver pushed his potatoes, mashed but dry, around with his fork.

Liam broke the silence. "I'm selling the farm."

The silverware clinked to a halt. His aunt froze, her fork half-raised to her mouth.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Liam, his face unmoved, repeated it. "I'm selling it. The debts are piling up, and there's nothing left to keep it afloat. I've already got an offer. It's done."

This was it—the moment everything tipped. His hand brushed against his pocket instinctively. The ticking of the watch slowed.

His aunt lowered her fork slowly, hand trembling. “You can’t,” she whispered. “This land—it’s—our family. Liam, *think*. Think of your grandfather. He would never have—”

“It’s not worth anything anymore. You can’t keep this place alive when it’s already dead. And we’ve been living in the past for far too long.”

His aunt’s face crumpled. Her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “You’re making a mistake. This place—this land—its been here longer than any of us. It’s—” She stopped herself, looking to the window, as though searching the fields for something she could no longer see.

“It’s nothing but a pile of dirt,” Liam clenched his jaw. “Just dirt.”

Oliver’s mind raced. The land wasn’t just land. It was the promise, the balance. If they broke it—if they sold it—the watch would know.

He could feel the watch now, almost painfully.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

His aunt stood abruptly, pushing her chair back with a loud screech. She hurried from the room.

Oliver's father didn't speak, didn't even look up. His face was pale, as though he already knew what was coming. And Liam. Liam acted as if nothing happened at all. He scraped his plate clean, sighed about how tired he was, and disappeared without so much as a glance in Oliver's direction.

If the farm was sold—he didn't know what would happen, not exactly. But he knew that the watch *knew*, the land *knew*.

And so he did something he hadn't done since he was a child.

He ran.

He stuffed the watch and journal into his coat pocket, shoved on his boots and slipped out the back door. The sky was vast and black. The fields stretched endlessly into the night. Town wasn't far—only a few miles along the narrow dirt road, winding past dead crops and skeletal tress. It seemed the decay was spreading.

Oliver didn't think about what he'd do once he got there. He only knew he had to leave. Maybe if he left, if he got far enough away, he could escape it. Maybe this *curse* would stop following him. Maybe—

As soon as he stepped past the edge of the property, the watch stopped. Not slowed, not faltered.

Stopped.

Even when the ticking had been faint, struggling, it had always been there.

The temperature dropped. The night itself felt stretched too thin, like something just beneath the surface was waiting to break through. The fields looked different. Rows and rows of brittle crops. And standing there, just at the edge of the field, was a figure.

It stood motionless, slouched and slack, outline barely distinguishable against the blackened crops. A shape wrapped in ragged cloth, stitched at the seams. Its head tilted as though it were listening.

Then it moved. Not a step, not a shift. It *lurched*.

Like a puppet pulled forward by invisible strings, jerking into motion, limbs bending at angles that weren't meant to bend.

Oliver ran.

He barely took one step before he was yanked back. The ground beneath him split as something wrapped around his ankle. He hit the ground hard, elbows scraping against dirt.

Gnarled stalks erupted from the ground, twisting as they reached for him. The scarecrow was closer now. But it simply stood, watching. Oliver thrashed and ripped one hand free. His other foot broke loose. He kicked against the roots, twisting, scrambling, dragging himself free.

He didn't stop running.

He didn't stop even when he hit the porch, even when he threw himself against the door, even when he turned the lock with shaking hands and pressed his back against the wood.

Dark stains, rich as old blood, covered his hands, legs, clothes. Soil. But it was warm, and pulsing, *alive*.

He wiped his hands on his jeans, but the feeling wouldn't leave, wouldn't shake. He dragged in a breath. Then another. The walls of the house were solid, still. The ticking of the pocket watch filled the silence between his gasps.

He stumbled to the sink, twisting the faucet on with stiff fingers. Water rushed over his hands, clear at first, then swirling brown as it met his skin. He scrubbed until his knuckles ached, but it didn't stop him from feeling the way the soil had clung to him.

The ticking grew louder. No—it was his pulse. Or both.

“You can't sell the farm.”

Liam let out a dry laugh. “You sound just like your aunt, you know that?”

“I'm serious. You don't understand. This land—there's something old tied to it. If you break the promise—”

“Promise?” Liam leaned against the porch railing, arms crossed. “You’ve been listening to too many of Grandpa’s stories.”

Oliver reached into his pocket and pulled out the journal, shoving it toward Liam. “Read it. It’s real. It’s always been real.”

Liam hesitated. His eyes scanned the pages, expression shifting from skepticism to something quieter. “This is—”

“The truth,” Oliver finished. “You’ve seen it. The land dying overnight. It’s because of what we’ve done,” Oliver shook his head. “What *I’ve* done,” he said, more to himself than Liam.

Liam was silent for a long moment, then he let out a shaky breath, closing the journal. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t make money out of thin air.”

Oliver reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope. The fifty-dollar bill. He held it out. “It’s not much, but it’s a start. And,” Oliver said quietly. “It’s not just about the farm. It’s about what this family stands for,” he echoed what his father—and his father before him—had told him. “When we stray from that, when we take without giving back, the land suffers. And so do we.”

“It’s not that simple,” Liam muttered. “Values don’t pay off debt.”

“They do,” Oliver insisted. “They always have. We survive because we do right by this place. That’s why the farm lasted this long. That’s why—” he pulled out the watch. “That’s why *this* still works.”

Liam rubbed his forehead, “Even if I believed all that, what am I supposed to do? Just hope the land magically saves us?”

“No, *we* save it,” Oliver set the envelope down on the porch railing. “I took this. I made selfish choices, and the land responded. But I’m giving it back now. And if we all do the same, things will change. I know they will.”

Liam’s shoulders sagged, and for the first time since Oliver arrived, he looked tired. “I’ll think about it.”

Oliver nodded, It was enough.

And in his pocket, the watch ticked strong.

Morning came with a change in the air.

Oliver awoke to the glow of dawn, the kind of light that made the world feel new. He sat up and crossed the room to the window. Beneath the creeping decay was something else.

Something green.

Behind him, the floorboards groaned. He turned to find Liam standing in the doorway.

“You see it?” Oliver asked.

Liam nodded. Oliver didn’t push, didn’t need to. They stood in silence, watching the light grow and the land breathe again.

And in Oliver’s palm, the watch ticked on.