**The Tithing House**

The dust of Harmony Creek tasted different. Ethan hadn’t been back in fifteen years, not since he’d left for college with a sigh of relief that felt less like freedom and more like parole. Now, rolling down the single paved road that cleaved the small Utah town in two, the familiar red dust coating his rental car felt heavier, grittier, clinging with an unwelcome intimacy. It wasn’t just dust; it was memory, settling thick and suffocating.

His parents’ sudden deaths – a mundane highway accident miles away from this isolated valley – had necessitated his return. He was the sole heir, the reluctant custodian of a small, sturdy house and a legacy he’d tried his best to shed. Harmony Creek wasn't just a place; it was an identity, woven tightly with the threads of faith, community, and a particular brand of unwavering obedience that had always prickled Ethan’s skin.

The town looked much the same. Neat houses with manicured lawns sat under the judgmental gaze of the imposing brick meetinghouse, its white steeple piercing the impossibly blue sky. Cottonwood trees lined the creek that gave the town its deceptively peaceful name. But even under the bright afternoon sun, shadows seemed to pool in the corners, clinging to the undersides of porches and the spaces between the perfectly aligned fence posts. There was a stillness here, an unnatural quiet that went beyond mere rural tranquility. It was the quiet of held breath.

His parents’ house smelled of lemon polish, old paper, and the faint, persistent scent of his mother’s rosewater sachets. It was achingly familiar and utterly alien. He spent the first few days sorting through belongings, boxing up memories, trying to maintain a clinical detachment. But the house, like the town, seemed resistant to his efforts. It held its secrets close.

It was in his father’s study, tucked away in a locked drawer Ethan had to pry open, that he found the journals. Not personal diaries, but meticulous records, bound in worn leather, dating back generations. They chronicled births, deaths, marriages, baptisms – the expected annals of a devout family in a devout town. But interspersed were entries that struck a discordant note.

“The allotment falls to the Barlows this cycle. May the Lord strengthen them.”

“Sister Agnes bore her burden with grace. The harvest was plentiful.”

“Brother Jedediah’s contribution ensures another season of peace. His name is added to the Remembrance.”

Allotment? Burden? Contribution? The language was coded, veiled in pious ambiguity. He cross-referenced names and dates with old town records and family group sheets stored in dusty boxes. A pattern emerged, subtle but undeniable. Certain families, often those who had experienced unusual hardship or misfortune in preceding years, were mentioned in connection with these cryptic entries. And often, shortly after such an entry, a member of that family would either move away suddenly, citing vague reasons, or suffer an “unfortunate accident.” The frequency was low – perhaps one every few years – but consistent.

He remembered fragments from his childhood: hushed conversations between his parents that ceased the moment he entered the room; a particular tension that would grip the town periodically, usually around late autumn; whispers about the “Old Tithing House.”

Unlike the main meetinghouse, the Old Tithing House wasn't a place of regular worship. It stood on a small rise at the edge of town, partially obscured by a grove of gnarled junipers. Built from dark, locally quarried stone, it was older than any other structure, predating even the pioneer settlement, according to local lore – though that seemed impossible. It had no steeple, no large windows, only narrow slits high up under the eaves. Its heavy wooden door was perpetually locked, reinforced with black iron bands. No one went there, except perhaps the Bishop, and even then, rarely. As kids, they’d dared each other to touch the door, but an unspoken dread, heavier than any parental warning, kept them away. It wasn’t consecrated ground in the usual sense, yet it held a palpable, unnerving reverence.

His father’s journals mentioned it specifically:

“Met with Bishop Albright at the House. Preparations are in order.”

“The foundation requires tending. The old ways must be honored.”

“Ethan asked about the House today. Told him it was for storage. May the Lord forgive the necessary deception.”

A cold knot formed in Ethan’s stomach. Necessary deception? Foundation tending? It sounded less like building maintenance and more like… feeding something.

He tried asking around, casually at first. He stopped by the Bishop’s office – Bishop Davies now, a man whose smile seemed permanently affixed, never quite reaching his watchful eyes.

“The Old Tithing House?” Bishop Davies steepled his fingers, his gaze placid but intense. “Ah, yes. A relic of the past, Brother Tanner. Used for storage mostly, historical documents, some pioneer artifacts. Needs significant repair, really. We keep it locked for preservation.”

“My father’s journals mention it,” Ethan pressed gently. “Something about… tending the foundation?”

The Bishop’s smile tightened fractionally. “Your father was a meticulous record-keeper, dedicated to the town’s history. Sometimes, older buildings require specialized upkeep. Settling, you know. Nothing more.” His tone brooked no further inquiry.

He tried Sister Marple, the elderly town historian and Relief Society President emeritus, whose mind was supposedly sharper than the needles she constantly employed on her quilting projects.

“Oh, that old place?” She peered at him over her spectacles, her fingers momentarily stilling on a calico square. “Built by the first settlers, they say. Solid stone. They brought their tithing there, in the early days. Grain, livestock, produce. Before the chapel was built proper.” She paused, her eyes clouding with something that might have been memory, or perhaps caution. “A place of… significance. Best left undisturbed, dear. Some histories carry a weight.”

Undisturbed. The word echoed the feeling the building exuded.

Ethan began to watch, to listen more intently. He noticed the subtle hierarchies, the unspoken rules that governed Harmony Creek. Prosperity seemed almost unnaturally distributed. Crops flourished even in dry years, businesses thrived despite the town’s isolation, and serious illness or tragedy, apart from the periodic “accidents,” was rare. It was Stepford Wives meets the Book of Mormon, and the perfection was beginning to feel monstrous.

He noticed the way people deferred to certain families – the descendants of the town’s founders, including, he realized with a jolt, his own. His Tanners, the Barlows, the Hendricksons, the Lees. These families seemed to form an inner circle, their members often holding leadership positions in the ward.

He spent hours poring over the journals, the town records, the brittle pages of local newspapers stored in the small library annex. He found gaps, missing death certificates, land transfers that didn’t quite add up. And he kept coming back to the Tithing House, the silent stone edifice at the edge of town.

One evening, driven by a gnawing unease, he walked out towards it as dusk bled purple and orange across the sky. The air grew colder near the grove of junipers, the silence more profound. The building loomed, absorbing the fading light. He circled it slowly. The stonework was incredibly precise, ancient-looking. The narrow slits high up were dark, revealing nothing. The heavy door looked impregnable.

As he neared the back, hidden from the road, he saw it: a smaller, secondary door, almost completely obscured by overgrown brambles. It looked newer than the main entrance, made of weathered timber, with a simple iron latch but no visible lock. Heart pounding, he pushed through the thorny branches, scratching his arms. He tried the latch. It didn't budge. Locked from the inside, or perhaps just stuck fast.

He knelt, examining the ground. The earth here was disturbed, darker, damper than the surrounding soil, despite the dry weather. It looked like… something had been dug up and refilled. Recently. He scraped at the surface with his fingers. The soil was loose. He dug deeper, his breath catching in his throat. His fingers brushed against something hard and smooth. He pulled it out.

It was a bone. Small, delicate. Possibly animal, he told himself, though a cold dread insisted otherwise. He kept digging. More bones, fragments. Then, something else. A small, tarnished silver locket. He pried it open. Inside were two miniature, faded portraits: a young man and woman, strangers. On the back, faint engraving: “E. & A. Barlow, 1888.”

Barlow. The name from his father’s journal. “The allotment falls to the Barlows this cycle.”

He scrambled back, dropping the locket as if it burned him, the pieces falling into the loose earth. He wiped his hands frantically on his jeans, the scent of damp soil clinging to him. This wasn’t storage. This wasn’t history. This was a grave. An unmarked, unconsecrated grave.

Panic clawed at him. He needed to leave. Now. Sell the house, donate the contents, walk away and never look back. But the faces in the locket, the cryptic journal entries, the unnatural prosperity of Harmony Creek – it all coalesced into a horrifying certainty. The town had a secret, a monstrous covenant sealed in blood and faith.

He drove back to the house, the setting sun painting the rearview mirror in apocalyptic hues. He felt watched, not just by the townsfolk, but by the very land itself. That night, sleep offered no refuge. He dreamt of the Tithing House, its stone walls pulsing faintly in the dark. He dreamt of his parents, their faces serene but their eyes filled with an unbearable sorrow, mouthing words he couldn’t hear. He dreamt of shadows moving beneath the earth, drawn towards the foundation.

The next day was Sunday. Ethan hadn’t attended church since his teens, but he felt compelled to go, to observe, to try and understand the faces of the people who upheld this… tradition. The meetinghouse buzzed with quiet reverence. Families sat together, scrubbed and smiling. Hymns were sung with fervent sincerity. Testimonies were borne, speakers expressing gratitude for blessings, for health, for prosperity, for the guiding hand of the Lord in their lives. It was nauseatingly normal.

Except for the eyes. They followed him. Not with overt hostility, but with a calculating assessment. He was an unknown quantity, the prodigal son returned, potentially disrupting the established order. Bishop Davies delivered a sermon on sacrifice, on Abraham and Isaac, on the blessings that come from giving willingly to the Lord, even when the asking seems incomprehensible. The subtext screamed at Ethan.

During the communal lunch after the meetings, Sister Marple approached him, her usual warmth slightly strained. “Ethan, dear. It’s good to have you back among us, even under such sad circumstances.” She patted his arm. “Your parents… they were pillars of this community. They understood the importance of heritage. Of continuity.”

“Continuity?” Ethan echoed, trying to keep his voice steady.

“Harmony Creek has always been blessed,” she said, her voice dropping lower. “From the beginning, the founders sought the Lord’s favor. They made covenants. Covenants that require… upkeep. Diligence. Sometimes, difficult offerings are asked.” Her eyes, magnified by her glasses, seemed to bore into him. “Your father understood. Your mother too. They carried their part of the burden.”

Burden. Allotment. Contribution. Offering. It wasn’t tithing in the conventional sense. It was something far older, far darker. What had the founders covenanted with? And what resided beneath that stone house, demanding periodic payment?

He thought about the prosperity, the lack of serious misfortune. Was the “offering” a life? A sacrifice paid to appease some entity, some primal power dwelling beneath the town, in exchange for its continued blessing and protection? It sounded insane, like something out of a folk horror story. But the journals, the bones, the feeling of watchful dread – it all pointed towards an unthinkable truth.

He realized with dawning horror that the “cycle” his father mentioned might be approaching. The late autumn tension he remembered from childhood… it wasn’t just the harvest season. It was the season of the otherharvest.

He had to find proof, something undeniable. He returned to his father’s study, searching with renewed urgency. Tucked behind a loose brick in the fireplace hearth, he found another small, leather-bound book. This one wasn't a record; it was a personal journal, written in his father’s familiar hand, but the entries were sporadic, filled with anguish and doubt.

“October 12th. The Bishop confirmed it. The signs are present. The foundation weakens.”

“October 18th. Met with the council. The usual families discussed. Tanner, Barlow, Hendrickson, Lee. Prayed it would not fall to us this time.”

“October 25th. It’s the Lees. Young Sarah. So bright. So full of life. Met with her parents. Heartbreak veiled by duty. How long can this continue? How long before the price becomes too much?”

“November 3rd. The offering was made. Attended the Remembrance. Empty platitudes over an empty grave. May God have mercy on us all.”

“November 10th. Ethan called. Asked about coming home for Thanksgiving. Told him we were busy. The lie tasted like ash.”

The last entry was dated shortly before his parents’ accident. Had they finally decided the price was too much? Had they been planning to leave, to expose the secret? Was their death truly an accident?

A cold dread, deeper than anything he’d felt before, enveloped him. He wasn’t just an observer anymore. He was a Tanner. One of the founding families. One of the families responsible for upholding the covenant. Did his return, unexpected and unplanned, disrupt the selection process? Was he now… eligible?

He needed to get out. But he also felt a crippling sense of responsibility. He couldn’t just leave, knowing what he knew. He thought of Sarah Lee, whoever she was. He thought of the couple in the locket. How many others lay buried in the shadow of the Tithing House?

His investigation became less subtle. He started asking direct questions, referencing the journals, the names, the cycles. The politeness of the townsfolk evaporated, replaced by stony silence or veiled threats. Doors closed in his face. Phone calls went unanswered. The rental car developed a flat tire overnight. Twice.

Bishop Davies summoned him. They met in the sterile quiet of the Bishop’s office, the portrait of Joseph Smith gazing down impassively from the wall.

“Brother Tanner,” Davies began, his voice dangerously soft. “Your inquiries are causing… distress. Harmony Creek is a place of peace, of faith. We honor our heritage. We respect the covenants made by those who came before us, covenants that have ensured our prosperity and protection for generations.”

“Protection from what?” Ethan demanded. “And prosperity at what cost? Bones in the backyard? Missing people? Is that the ‘heritage’ we’re honoring?”

The Bishop’s eyes hardened. “You don’t understand the necessity. The balance. The founders faced unimaginable hardship in this valley. Starvation. Disease. Hostility from the land itself. They sought deliverance. And deliverance was offered… at a price. A tithing, not of coin or crop, but of vitality. Of life essence. Given willingly, periodically, to soothe that which dwells beneath. To keep the darkness dormant and the blessings flowing.”

“That which dwells beneath?” Ethan felt a chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioning.

“An older power. Tied to this land long before our people came. The founders, in their desperation, made a pact. We are merely the stewards of that agreement. The Tithing House is the focal point, the place where the exchange is made.”

“Exchange? You mean sacrifice.”

“A necessary offering,” Davies corrected, his voice sharp. “Made by families chosen by lot, families who understand the sacred duty. A sacrifice that ensures the survival and well-being of the many. Your family, Ethan, has always understood this. Your father, despite his struggles, fulfilled his duty.”

“And now?” Ethan asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“The cycle is upon us again. The foundation groans. The signs are clear. An offering is due.” The Bishop leaned forward, his eyes locking onto Ethan’s. “Your return… it complicates things. You are of the lineage. But you are… untested. Uncommitted.”

The implication hung heavy in the air. He wasn’t just eligible; his outsider status, his lack of faith, his probing questions made him a liability. Perhaps even… the perfect offering. An anomaly to be tidied up.

“When?” Ethan breathed.

“The new moon. Three nights from now.”

Ethan left the office, his legs unsteady. Three nights. He had to expose them, stop them. But how? Go to the county sheriff? They’d think he was crazy, especially with Bishop Davies vouching for the town’s piety. The isolation of Harmony Creek suddenly felt absolute.

He decided his only chance was to disrupt the ritual itself. He needed to get inside the Tithing House duringthe ceremony. He spent the next two days preparing, gathering supplies: a heavy crowbar, flashlight, his father’s old hunting knife, water bottles. He studied the Tithing House from afar, noting the patterns of the few people who approached it – always members of the founding families, delivering supplies perhaps, or making preparations. He focused on the small back door. It was his only way in.

On the night of the new moon, an oppressive darkness settled over Harmony Creek. Clouds obscured the stars, and a low mist coiled up from the creek bed, muffling sound. The usual nighttime chirping of crickets was absent. Ethan dressed in dark clothing, his heart hammering against his ribs. He slipped out of the house and made his way towards the edge of town, sticking to the shadows, the silence amplifying his fear.

As he approached the juniper grove, he could see faint, flickering lights near the Tithing House – lanterns. He heard low chanting, a discordant melody that seemed to vibrate in the very air. He crept closer, using the gnarled trees as cover.

A procession of figures emerged from the mist, moving towards the main entrance of the Tithing House. Bishop Davies was at the head, holding a large, ancient-looking key. Behind him walked members of the inner circle families – the Barlows, Hendricksons, Lees, and others he recognized. Their faces were grim, set with a terrible resolve. He scanned the group, looking for the chosen offering. He didn’t see anyone who looked like a prisoner or victim. Was the Bishop lying? Or was the offering already inside?

They unlocked the heavy front door and filed in. The chanting grew louder, echoing strangely from within the stone walls. The door closed with a heavy thud.

This was his chance. He raced around to the back, pushing through the brambles. He wedged the crowbar into the seam of the small wooden door and threw his weight against it. The old wood groaned in protest. He heaved again, sweat stinging his eyes. With a crack, the latch splintered, and the door swung inward into pitch darkness.

He flicked on his flashlight, the beam cutting through air thick with the smell of dust, damp earth, and something else… a coppery, metallic tang, like old blood. He was in a narrow passage, rough stone walls pressing close. It sloped downwards. The chanting was clearer now, coming from deeper within.

He moved forward cautiously, the knife clutched in his hand. The passage opened into a larger chamber directly beneath the main structure. It wasn't a basement in the conventional sense; it looked more like a natural cavern that the house had been built over. The stone walls were rough, glistening with moisture. In the center of the cavern floor was a large, circular pit, perhaps twenty feet across. Its depths were lost in shadow.

Around the edge of the pit stood the assembled townsfolk, holding lanterns that cast long, dancing shadows. Bishop Davies stood at the head of the pit, reading from a worn, leather-bound book – not scripture, Ethan realized, but something else entirely. The chanting rose to a fever pitch.

Ethan scanned the faces again. Still no obvious victim. Then he saw it. On a low stone altar near the pit lay a bundle wrapped in white cloth. It was small. Too small. It looked like… an infant.

Nausea surged through him. This wasn't just a sacrifice; it was the sacrifice of a baby. Whose child was it? Had one of the families offered their own newborn? The horror of it was absolute, paralyzing.

Bishop Davies raised his hands, and the chanting stopped. Silence descended, heavy and expectant.

“We come,” the Bishop intoned, his voice echoing in the cavern, “to honor the covenant. To pay the tithing. To ensure the balance. We offer this new life, pure and untainted, that the community might endure.”

He gestured towards the altar. Two figures detached themselves from the circle – a young couple Ethan recognized. Their faces were masks of anguish, tears streaming silently down their cheeks, yet they moved with robotic obedience. It was the Hendricksons, newly married last year. This was their child.

The young father picked up the bundle. His hands trembled violently. The mother stifled a sob, turning her face away.

Ethan couldn’t watch. He had to act. He didn’t know what power resided in that pit, what would happen if the ritual was interrupted, but he couldn’t let this happen.

“STOP!” he yelled, stepping out of the passage, his flashlight beam sweeping across the shocked faces.

For a moment, everyone froze. The young father halted, the bundle clutched to his chest. Bishop Davies whirled around, his face contorted with fury.

“You!” the Bishop snarled. “You trespass! You defile this sacred place!”

“Sacred?” Ethan spat, gesturing towards the pit, the altar. “This is monstrous! You’re killing a baby to appease… what? Some fairy tale? Some local legend?”

“It is no legend, fool!” Davies cried. “It is the price of our survival! The price your own ancestors agreed to pay!”

From the pit, a low sound began to emanate. Not a voice, but a deep, resonant hum, like the vibrating of the earth itself. The air grew colder, and the metallic tang intensified. The shadows in the pit seemed to deepen, to coalesce.

“You’ve angered it!” someone shrieked from the circle.

“He must be silenced!” another voice cried out. “He will ruin us all!”

Several men started towards Ethan, their faces grim. He raised the knife, the flashlight beam wavering. “Stay back! This is madness!”

But they kept coming. He saw the fanaticism in their eyes, the fear of disrupting the ancient pact overriding any sense of morality.

The humming from the pit grew louder, developing a grating undertone, like stone grinding against stone. A fetid wind gusted up from the depths, extinguishing several lanterns and carrying a charnel stench. Panic began to ripple through the crowd.

Bishop Davies raised his hands again, trying to regain control. “The offering! Complete the offering! Appease it!” he yelled at the young Hendrickson couple.

The young father looked wildly from the Bishop to his child, then to Ethan. For a second, a flicker of defiance lit his eyes. But the humming intensified, and a visible tremor ran through the stone floor. Fear won out. He turned back towards the pit.

Ethan lunged forward, not towards the attacking men, but towards the altar. He swept the book Bishop Davies had been reading from, sending it skittering across the floor. He kicked over the altar itself.

“No!” Davies roared.

The humming ceased abruptly. A profound silence fell, more terrifying than the noise. Then, from the depths of the pit, came a sound like a vast, indrawn breath. The ground beneath their feet shuddered violently. Cracks spiderwebbed across the cavern walls. Dust rained down from the ceiling.

The entity, the presence, whatever it was, had been denied its due. And it was furious.

Chaos erupted. People screamed, stumbling backwards from the pit, their lanterns dropping and shattering. The young Hendrickson couple clutched their child, scrambling away from the edge.

Ethan saw his chance. He turned and sprinted back towards the passage he’d entered through, shouting at the Hendricksons, “Get out! Now!”

He didn’t know if they followed. He plunged into the narrow passage just as a section of the cavern roof collapsed behind him with a deafening roar, sending chunks of rock and debris flying. He scrambled upwards, choking on dust, the sounds of terror and destruction echoing from below.

He burst out of the small back door into the mist-shrouded night. He didn’t stop running. He ran through the juniper grove, across the fields, back towards his parents’ house, his lungs burning. He expected pursuit, but glancing back, he saw only darkness and the silent, looming silhouette of the Tithing House, now seemingly still. Had the collapse trapped them? Or appeased the entity in a different way?

He threw his meager supplies into the rental car – the tire miraculously intact now – not bothering to lock the house. He sped out of Harmony Creek, the red dust swirling in his wake like accusing ghosts. He didn’t slow down until the sun began to rise, painting the distant mountains in shades of bruised purple and faint hope.

He never went back. He sold the house through a lawyer miles away, ignoring the curt, vaguely threatening letters from Bishop Davies demanding his return to “settle matters.” He tried to report what he’d seen, but without concrete evidence – the journals felt flimsy against the united denial of an entire town – and fearing accusations of insanity or worse, his story went nowhere.

Ethan lives on the coast now, as far from the Utah desert as he can get. He carries the weight of Harmony Creek with him, the knowledge a cold stone in his gut. He checks the news obsessively, searching for any mention of the town, any hint of unusual disappearances or unexplained prosperity. So far, there’s been nothing. Silence.

He often wonders what happened after he fled. Did the entity beneath the Tithing House claim its due from those trapped in the collapse? Or did the covenant simply… break? Has Harmony Creek lost its unnatural blessing, forced to face the harsh realities of the world like anywhere else? Or, perhaps worst of all, did they find another way? Did they select a new offering, resume the cycle, ensuring their peace and prosperity continues, built upon a foundation of horror hidden beneath a veneer of faith?

Sometimes, late at night, when the wind sighs around his apartment building, he imagines he can hear a faint humming sound, like the earth itself vibrating. He smells damp soil and old blood. And he remembers the faces in the locket, the anguish of the young Hendrickson couple, and the chilling certainty that some tithes demand a price far greater than anyone should ever be willing to pay. The silence from Harmony Creek isn't comforting; it’s the quiet of a held breath, waiting for the next cycle. And he knows, deep down, that the Tithing House still stands, guarding its ancient, hungry secret.