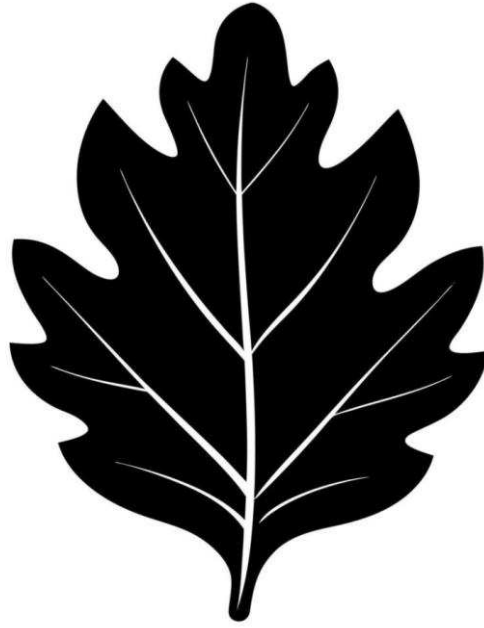




The doors beneath the bookstore

Thanks to my parents and friends who always believed in me.

This one is for you guys.

Chapter 1

The customer from 6:07 PM

Rain tapped against the windows of the bookstore, as if someone was trying to send a secret message with their fingertips.

Nova looked up from her homework and sighed. Outside, the streets were nearly empty. The autumn storm that had started earlier that afternoon had only grown worse. Wind tugged at the bare branches of the trees and sent wet leaves swirling through the dark street.

Inside, it was warm.

Old lamps cast a soft yellow glow over the wooden shelves lined with books. The scent of paper, dust and coffee filled the air. Normally Nova loved being there.

Not tonight.

Tonight she was alone.

"I'll be back within an hour" Mr. Holloway had said before leaving "Just close the shop if nobody comes in"

That had been almost two hours ago.

Nova glanced at the clock hanging above the register.

6:01 PM

She stood up and wandered between the shelves. Surely nobody would visit a bookstore in weather like this.

As she straightened a few books, her eyes landed on an old leather ledger lying open on the counter she had noticed it earlier that afternoon.

It was strange.

Between the ordinary sales records, the same entry kept appearing.

No name.

No address.

Only a time.

6:07 PM

Again and again.

Nova turned a few pages.

October 14, 1986 – 6:07 PM

October 21, 1987 – 6:07 PM

November 9, 1988 – 6:07 PM

She flipped farther ahead.

1994

1995

1996

1997

Always the same. Always **6:07 PM**.

And always one book sold.

She frowned, that couldn't be a coincidence.

The shop door suddenly creaked as a gust of wind rattled it.

Nova jumped up and looked up.

Nobody, she let out a nervous laugh.

"Relax"

The clock continued ticking.

6:04 PM

She closed the ledger and turned to walk back to the register when something caught her eye.

At the bottom of the last page was a new line.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Slowly, she leaned closer.

It read:

October 8, 2026 – 6:07 PM

Beneath it was a blank space for a title.

As if someone were waiting to fill it in later.

A cold shiver ran down Nova's spine, she looked back at the clock.

6:05 PM

Two minutes left. Lightning flashed outside.

For a brief second, the entire bookstore was illuminated. And in that instant, in the white light, Nova thought she saw someone standing outside the window.

A tall, dark figure. Completely still.

Watching the store, then darkness turned.

Nova walked over to the window. Her breath fogged the window. The street was empty, no one was there.

Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched.

Slowly she turned around. The clock kept ticking.

6:06 PM

And at that exact moment, a dull thud echoed from the back of the bookstore. As if a book had fallen from the shelf.

But Nova knew she had never heard a sound quite like it before.

It didn't sound like book hitting the floor.

It sounded like something had been opened.

And it came from the section of the store where customers were never allowed to go.

Nova froze.

Nobody was allowed in there.

Not customers.

Not delivery workers.

Not even Nova.

Whenever she asked about it, Mr. Holloway would simply say "*Old inventory, nothing interesting*"

But his expression always suggested otherwise.

Another gust of wind rattled the windows.

Nova stared down the narrow aisle leading towards the back of the bookstore.

Darkness filled the space between the shelves.

For a moment she considered ignoring it.

She could stay at the register. Wait for Mr. Holloway.

Pretend she didn't hear anything.

Then the sound came again.

Thunk.

Closer this time

Followed by a faint scraping noise.

As if someone heavy was being dragged across the wooden floor.

Nova swallowed.

"Hello?"

The voice sounded much smaller than she intended.

No answer.

Only silence.

She grabbed a small flashlight that hung beneath the counter.

The beam flickered as she switched it on.

Great.

The batteries were almost dead.

"Of course they are" Taking a deep breath she stepped into the aisle.

The bookstore suddenly felt different.

The warm, cozy atmosphere had vanished. Now the towering shelves seemed taller.

The shadows deeper. Every creak of the old wooden floorboards sounded unnaturally loud.

Step.

Creak.

Step.

Creak.

She moved slowly toward the back of the store, the flashlight beam danced across rows of dusty books.

History. Poetry. Travel guides. A collection of old encyclopedias.

Everything appeared normal.

Until she noticed something strange.

One book was sticking out from a shelf.

Only slightly.

As if someone had pulled it halfway out.

Nova frowned.

She was certain it hadn't been like that before.

The book was bound in dark green leather.

No title. No author's name.

Just a faded symbol pressed into the cover.

A leaf.

A black leaf.

The same symbol she had seen earlier on one of the old pages in the ledger.

A chill ran through her.

Slowly, she reached out and touched the spine.

The instant her fingers made contact, a loud click echoed through the room.

Nova jumped backward.

"What was that?"

The bookshelf trembled.

Not much, just enough for her to notice.

Her heartbeat quickened.

The shelf was moving, very slowly, very quietly.

A thin gap appeared between the bookshelf and the wall behind it.

Cold air drifted out.

Nova stared.

Behind the shelf was a hidden passage.

A narrow staircase descended into darkness.

For several seconds she couldn't move.

Her mind raced.

Mr. Holloway lied.

There was something back there.

Something important enough to hide.

Then she heard it.

A sound from below.

A single footstep.

Not hers.

Someone else's.

The noise echoed up from the darkness beneath the bookstore.

One step. Then another. Slow. Deliberate.

As if someone was climbing the stairs.

Coming toward her.

Nova backed away.

The flashlight shook in her hand.

The footsteps stopped.

Silence filled the hidden passage.

Then, from somewhere below a voice whispered.

"You're early"

Nova's blood turned to ice.

Because she knew one thing for certain. The voice hadn't come from a person.

It had come from the darkness itself...

Chapter 2

The hidden staircase

Nova couldn't move.

The flashlight trembled in her hand, its weak beam shaking across the opening behind the bookshelf.

The voice was gone.

Only silence remained.

"You're early"

The words echoed in her mind. Who had said them.

And how had they know she was there.

For several long seconds, she stood frozen. Staring into the darkness below.

Nothing moved, nothing made a sound.

Then-

Ding

The bell above the bookstore's front door rang.

Nova nearly screamed.

Someone had entered the shop.

She spun around so quickly that the flashlight slipped from her fingers and clattered onto the floor.

The bell rang again as the door slowly swung shut.

A rush of cold autumn air swept through the store.

"Hello?" A voice called from the front.

A familiar voice.

Mr. Holloway.

Nova let out a shaky breath.

Relief flooded through her body.

"Mr. Holloway!"

She hurried down the aisle toward the front of the store.

The old bookseller was standing by the entrance, rain dripping from his dark coat. He carried a small paper bag under one arm and looked slightly surprised to see her.

"Nova" He said "You look like you've seen a ghost"

Nova opened her mouth. The words rushed forward.

"There is a secret staircase, something spoke to me, someone is down there"

But when she turned to point toward the back of the bookstore she froze.

The bookshelf was exactly where it had always been.

No opening.

No staircase.

No gap in the wall.

Nothing.

The hidden passage had vanished, Mr. Holloway followed her gaze.

For a moment his expression changed.

Just for a moment, a flash of concern.

Then it disappeared.

"What happened?" he asked calmly

Nova hesitated.

"I... I thought I heard something"

Mr. Holloway looked at her for a long moment.

The rain tapped against the windows, the clock above the register ticked.

6:07 PM

Both of them glanced toward it at the exact same time.

And that was when it happened.

A book fell from the shelf near the front of the store.

Not from high up, not by accident.

It slid on it's own, and landed neatly on the floor.

Neither of them moved.

The title was written in faded gold letters.

The lost customers.

Nova looked at the clock again.

6:07 PM

Then at the book, then at Mr. Holloway.

His face had gone pale.

And for the first time since she had known him, he looked afraid.

"Don't touch that book" he whispered.

But before Nova could answer, the bookstore lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then every light in the store went out.

And somewhere in the darkness a page turned.

Darkness swallowed the store.

For a moment, neither Nova nor Mr. Holloway spoke.

The only sounds were the rain against the windows and the slow ticking of the clock somewhere in the dark.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Then another sound drifted through the silence.

Flip.

A page turning.

Nova's stomach tightened.

The sound had come from the book on the floor.

The lost customer.

The flashlight.

She dropped it near the hidden staircase.

Or where the hidden staircase had been.

Her pulse hammered in her ears.

"Mr. Holloway?" she whispered.

No answer.

"Mr. Holloway?"

Still nothing

A sudden burst of panic shot through her. The bookstore wasn't large enough for him to simply disappear.

Yet she couldn't hear him breathing.

couldn't hear him moving.

couldn't hear anything at all.

Then a mean of light cut through the darkness.

Nova flinched.

Mr. Holloway stood near the register, holding an old brass flashlight.

Its yellow beam swept across the shelves. Across the ceiling, across the floor.

Until it stopped on the fallen book.

Neither of them moved. The book was open now, nova was certain it had been closed before. Mr. Holloway's face tightened.

"Stay where you are"

Nova ignored him. *"What is that book?"*

Mr. Holloway didn't answer.

Instead he slowly walked toward it. Each footstep seemed unnaturally loud, when he reached the book, he crouched beside it.

The flashlight illuminated the open pages.

Nova couldn't see the words.

But she saw something else.

Mr. Holloway's hand was shaking.

Not a little... A lot.

As though he were looking at something he had hoped never to see again.

"What does it say?" Nova asked

For a long moment her remained silent.

Then he looked up, his face had gone white. *"It, shouldn't be open"*
The lights flickered back on, the sudden brightness made Nova blink.
Everything looked normal again.
The shelves, the counter, the rain outside.
Everything, except the book....
Because now nova could see the page.
At the top was a date.

October 8, 2026

Today's date.
Below it was a short paragraph written in neat black ink.
Nova stepped closer despite Mr. Holloway's warning.
The paragraph read:
At 6:07 PM, the customer returned.
At 6:18 PM, the door beneath the bookstore opened.
At 6:31 PM, on of them entered.
At 6:32 PM, the bookstore lost another customer.

Nova stared.
"What does it mean?"
Mr. Holloway slowly stood up.
"I don't know"

The answer came too quickly. Too smoothly.
A lie.
Nova could see it in his eyes.
Before she could say anything, a sharp knocking echoed through the bookstore.
Three knocks. Slow...

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Both of them turned toward the front door.

Outside stood a figure. Tall. Motionless.

Its face hidden beneath a dark hat. Rain poured around it.

Yet the stranger wasn't carrying an umbrella. wasn't moving. wasn't leaving. Just standing there... watching...

Nova glanced at the clock.

6:18 PM

The exact time mentioned in the book.

Beside her, Mr. Holloway whispered something under his breath.

But she was certain of the words.

"No..."

The stranger lifted one hand and pointed toward the back of the bookstore.

Toward the place where the hidden staircase had appeared.

Then the lights went out again.

This time, the scream came from beneath the floorboards...

Chapter 3

The door beneath the bookstore

The scream only lasted a second.

It rose from somewhere beneath the floorboards, sharp and distant, before being swallowed by silence. For a moment Nova wondered if she had imagined it. The sound had been so sudden and so unnatural that her mind struggled to make sense of it.

The bookstore fell completely still.

The lights remained out, leaving the room drenched in darkness. Outside the storm continued to rage. Rain hammered against the windows while the wind howled through the narrow street, rattling the old building and making the shelves creak softly.

Nova stood frozen where she was.

Her heart pounded so hard she could hear it in her ears. Beside her Mr. Holloway didn't move either. For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Then, finally she heard him draw a slot breath.

"Don't move" his voice sounded different, not calm, not reassuring. Afraid. That frightened Nova more than the scream itself.

Mr. Holloway was never afraid. At least, not that she has ever seen.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the bookstore through the front windows. For a split second, white light filled the room, revealing rows of shelves, stacks of book, and the rain soaked glass of the front door.

Nova immediately looked outside.

The stranger was gone.

The tall figure that had been standing in the storm only moments earlier had vanished without a trace.

The sidewalk was empty.

The street beyond was deserted.

Nothing remained except swirling leaves and rainwater rushing along the curb.

The darkness returned.

A second later, the lights flickered back to life.

The warm glow of the lamps filled the bookstore once more.

Everything looked normal again.

Too normal. Nova glanced toward the front door, no footprints, no sign that anyone had ever been standing there.

She swallowed hard.

For a brief moment, she wondered whether the figure had been real at all.

Then she remembered the book.

The prediction.

The exact time.

Slowly, her eyes moved toward the clock above the register.

6:19 PM

One minute had passed since the time written in *'the lost customers'*

One minute since the door beneath the bookstore was supposed to open.

Mr. Holloway was already moving.

Without saying a word he crossed the room and picked up the fallen book from the floor.

The moment his finger touched the cover the book snapped shut.

The sound echoed through the store like a gunshot.

Nova flinched.

At the same instant, another noise rose from beneath them.

A deep crack.

Like ancient wood splitting under pressure.

Both of them heard it. This time there was no room for doubt. Far below. From somewhere underneath the bookstore, nova slowly looked down at the floorboards.

The old wood appeared unchanged.

Yet she could feel it, a faint vibration. Something was moving beneath them. Something large, something old.

Mr. Holloway stared at the floor for several seconds.

His face became pale.

The color seemed to drain from it with every passing moment.

When he finally closed his eyes, Nova noticed how exhausted he suddenly looked.

The confident bookstore owner she had known for years seemed to disappear.

In his place stood a tired old man carrying the weight of a secret far larger than she had ever imagined.

When he opened his eyes again. There was a look of resignation in them.

As though something he had feared for years had finally happened.

"We have to leave" he said.

Nova stared at him.

"What?"

"We. Leave. Right. Now"

His tone left little room for argument.

But Nova wasn't going anywhere. Not anymore. Too many strange things had happened. Too many questions remained unanswered.

"What about the door?" She asked.

Mr. Holloway froze.

For a brief moment, neither of them said anything.

"What door?" He said.

Nova narrowed her eyes.

"The one beneath the bookstore"

The silence that followed told her everything she needed to know.

He knew.

Of course he knew.

Mr. Holloway looked away.

"You don't want to know that's down there"

"Then why does that book know about it?"

No answer.

"Why was there a hidden staircase"

Still nothing.

"Who was that person outside?"

Mr. Holloway slowly rubbed a hand across his face.

For the first time ever, he looked trapped.

Like someone trying to choose between two terrible options.

Finally, he turned and walked behind the register.

Nova followed him.

The old floorboards creaked beneath their feet.

Mr. Holloway knelt beside a cabinet and unlocked the lowest drawer.

Inside were dozens of papers, maps and notebooks.

Nova had never seen them before.

He pushed everything aside until he found what he was looking for.

A small brass key.

The metal was dark with age.

Its surface was scratched and worn from years of use.

Yet one detail caught Nova's eye.

The same symbol she had seen on the strange green book.

The same symbol she had seen in the ledger.

The same symbol connected to every strange thing that happened that evening.

Mr. Holloway held the key tightly in his hand.

For several moments, he simply stared at it.

The expression on his face suggested that the key carried memories that he would rather forget.

Finally he spoke.

"The customer has come back"

Nova blinked.

"The customer?"

Mr. Holloway nodded slowly.

"The one from the ledger"

A chill spread through her chest.

The entries, the missing name, the impossible purchases.

All of them suddenly felt much more real.

"What do you mean?" She asked.

Mr. Holloway lifted his eyes toward her.

Fear filled them.

Real fear.

The kind that cannot be hidden.

"The customer isn't buying books" he said quietly.

Nova felt her stomach tighten.

"What are they buying then?"

Before he could answer, a deep rumble shook the building.

Books tumbled onto the floor.

The hanging lamps swayed overhead.

Somewhere in the distance glass shattered.

Nova grabbed the counter to steady herself.

The vibration grew stronger. The floor beneath her feet trembled.

Then came the sound.

A long slow creak. Ancient, heavy.

As though a massive door that had remained closed for decades was finally opening.

The noise echoed upward through the foundations of the bookstore.

And for the first time ever, Nova realized something terrifying.

Whatever was beneath the bookstore had not just awakened.

It had been waiting.

And now it knew they were there...