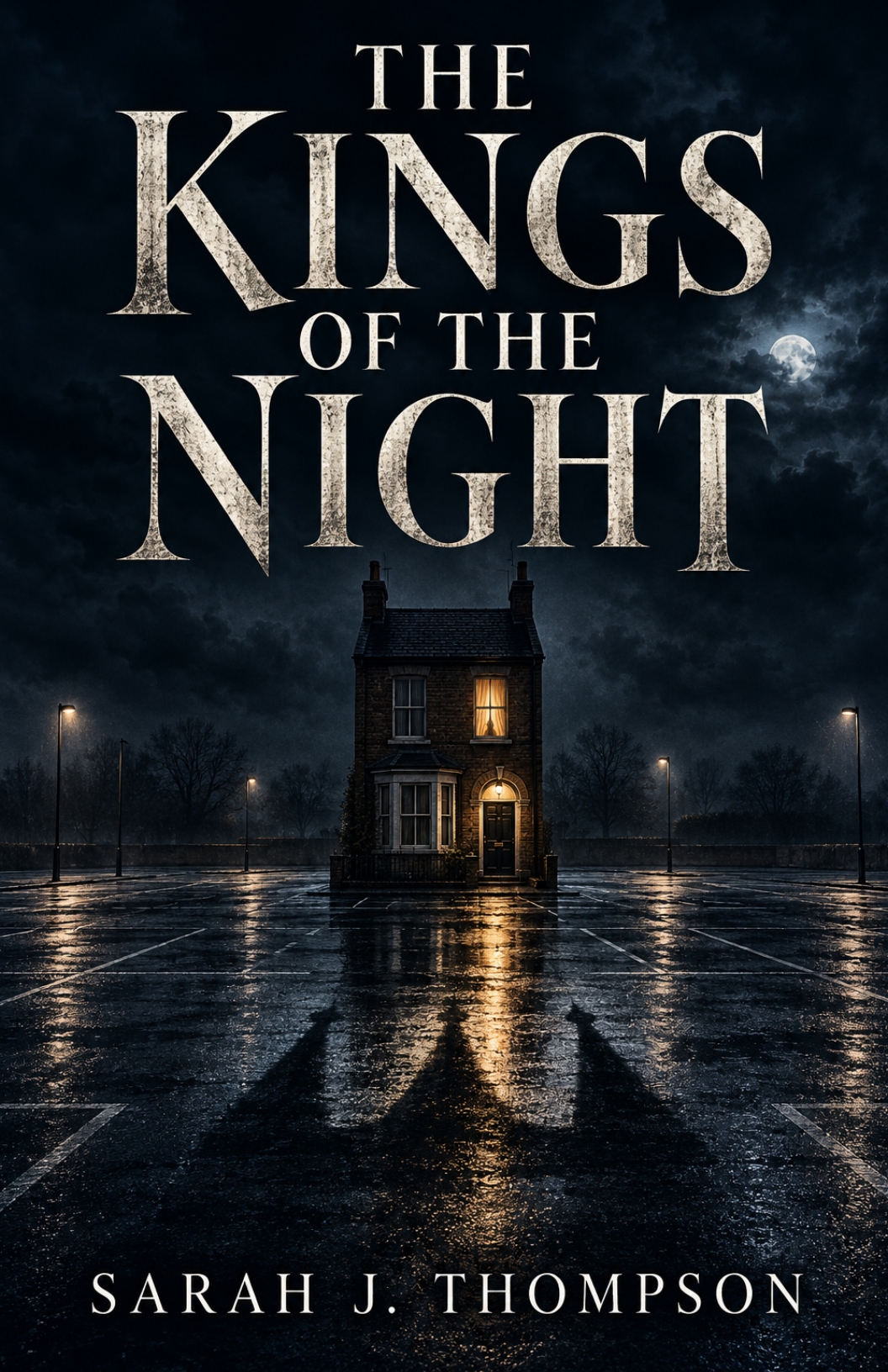

THE KINGS OF THE NIGHT
SARAH J. THOMPSON

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Sarah J. Thompson

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The spiritual world depicted in this novel is fictional.

CHAPTER ONE

Fourteen Bell Street

The address came through while Thomas was cleaning blood from a stretcher wheel.

A woman from the care home had cut her hand trying to stop them taking her husband. She had apologised afterwards, standing in the corridor with a towel wrapped around her palm, as though the inconvenience of her blood was the worst thing that had happened that afternoon. Thomas had told her not to worry. He had told her husband they were going now, although he knew the man could no longer hear him.

He still did that. Martin said it was a useful habit because it stopped you becoming the sort of person who ate a sandwich over an occupied stretcher.

The telephone rang again.

Thomas dried one hand on his trousers and answered.

“Ward.”

“Collection at fourteen Bell Street.”

The woman spoke quietly. Behind her, cutlery touched a plate.

He looked at the washroom clock. Forty minutes until the end of his shift. His sister would have put

Emily to bed by now, but if he got home before nine she might still be awake, pretending not to be.

“Hospital or private residence?”

“Private.”

“Has a doctor attended?”

“Yes.”

He pulled the collection pad towards him.

“Name of the deceased?”

A pause. Something scraped across the woman's end of the line, then stopped.

“Please come to the house.”

“I need a name for the paperwork.”

“Your office has it.”

“Who am I speaking to?”

The line went dead.

He waited for the click of a second receiver. There wasn't one. The telephone display showed CALL ENDED and a neat row of dashes where the number should have been.

Thomas called dispatch.

Martin answered on the third ring, chewing.

“Did you send me a collection?”

“No.”

“Fourteen Bell Street.”

The chewing stopped.

“Read that again.”

Thomas did.

“Bell Street's a car park.”

“I know where Bell Street is.”

“No, Tom. The houses came down. Council offices use it now.”

He turned the pad over and wrote the address again. He remembered the demolition vaguely: narrow houses, a shop with a green awning, diversions that had made the town centre impossible for weeks.

“I'll report it as a nuisance call.”

“Do that.”

He put the telephone down.

A collection appeared on the computer beside it.

PRIVATE RESIDENCE. FOURTEEN BELL STREET.

Below it were an order number and Martin's staff initials.

Thomas leaned forward. The printer beneath the desk woke, pulled through a sheet, and deposited it in the tray.

He picked up the telephone again.

“I haven't touched anything,” Martin said.

“Your initials are on it.”

“I'm eating my dinner.”

“Come and look.”

A sigh. Thomas heard a plate being set down. Then a woman spoke, very close to Martin's receiver.

“Please don't send anyone else.”

Thomas sat still.

“Who's there with you?”

“Nobody.”

“That woman.”

“What woman?”

The washroom door opened.

Martin stood in the entrance with his dinner plate. His mobile was in his shirt pocket.

“Who are you talking to?” he asked.

Thomas looked at the receiver in his hand.

On the line, Martin's voice said, “Nobody.”

Neither man moved.

Then the woman spoke again.

“Mr Ward, your daughter has already gone upstairs.”

Thomas put the receiver on the desk without hanging up. He took out his mobile and called his sister.

“What's wrong?” Beth asked.

“Is Em there?”

“Of course.”

“Can you check?”

A rustle of bedding. Beth made a small annoyed sound, but she was already moving. Thomas could picture the landing outside her spare room, the laundry basket beneath the window, Emily's shoes left where somebody would trip over them.

“She's asleep, Tom.”

“Let me hear her.”

“What?”

“Please.”

He heard Beth cross the room. A door creaked. The quiet, slightly congested sound of his daughter breathing reached him.

The woman spoke from the desk telephone.

“We didn't say she had left.”

Martin put his plate on the floor. He crossed the washroom, pulled the telephone cable out of the wall, and held up the loose connector.

Thomas ended the call to his sister.

The receiver gave an ordinary, brief click. Its display went blank.

For several seconds he heard only the extractor fan and water moving somewhere inside the building.

“Tell me that was a joke,” he said.

Martin looked down at the cable.

“Someone's got into the system.”

“You were on the telephone.”

“Voice thing. They do it now.”

“Who does?”

“I don't know.”

Martin was still holding the connector as though Thomas might forget what he had done with it. He was fifty-eight, with a bad knee and a habit of taking off his glasses when something worried him. He removed them now.

“You don't go there,” he said.

Thomas picked up the printed sheet.

The patient details were blank. An address, a collection number, a time. Under special instructions someone had typed: REAR ACCESS. ONE ATTENDANT ONLY.

He turned it over.

On the back was a floor plan in thin grey lines. A front room, a kitchen, a narrow stair. An arrow pointed to the smallest bedroom.

He knew the shape of the room before he understood why. He had painted its skirting boards last spring. There was a notch in the wall beside the door where the old chimney breast narrowed it.

The drawing showed Emily's bedroom in his own house.

He handed it to Martin.

His colleague looked from the back of the sheet to Thomas.

“What am I looking at?”

Thomas explained.

“Then you call the police.”

He did. The call handler took his name, his workplace, the details of the threatening call. She asked whether his daughter was safe. He said she was with her aunt. The call handler told him an officer would contact him and advised him not to visit the address.

It was sensible advice. He repeated it aloud to Martin after the call.

Then he called Beth again.

This time he told her enough to make her turn on the landing light. He heard her wake Emily gently, the child's irritated little voice, then the scrape of a chair as Beth sat beside the bed.

“She's right here,” Beth said. “You can talk to her.”

“Daddy?”

“Hello, love.”

“Are you coming?”

“Soon.”

“Auntie Beth says you had a funny telephone call.”

“Just someone being silly.”

“Was it the woman who wanted to know how many?”

His fingers tightened around the phone.

“What woman?”

“The one at the gate.”

Beth took the telephone.

“What woman at the gate, Em?”

Their voices moved away from the microphone. Thomas could hear his daughter explaining with the patience she used when adults had missed something obvious.

“Before tea. She had the paper.”

He waited. Martin watched his face.

Beth came back on the line.

“A woman rang the bell. Some sort of council survey. I told her we weren't interested.”

“What did she ask?”

“Whether the house was occupied. I thought she was selling something.”

“Did you give her Emily's name?”

“No. Tom, what is happening?”

“Did you tell her how many people were there?”

A pause.

“Beth.”

“She asked whether it was just me. I said my niece was staying. That's all.”

He looked at the printed plan.

“Lock the doors. Don't answer again.”

“They're locked.”

“And keep her downstairs with you.”

“Why?”

“I'll explain when I get there.”

He ended the call and put the sheet in his jacket.

Martin followed him into the garage.

“Tom.”

“I'm going to Beth's.”

“Take your car.”

“My keys are in the locker.”

“So get them.”

Thomas stopped beside the collection vehicle. It was a dark grey estate, unmarked except for the funeral company's name in small silver letters beneath the rear window. Its keys were hanging on the board by his shoulder.

He could have walked back to the lockers. Later he would return to that moment more often than to the telephone, the printed room, or anything he saw in Bell Street. There had been an ordinary choice available to him. A few extra steps. His own car.

Instead he took the keys from the board.

“I'm bringing it straight back.”

Martin put a hand on his arm.

“You're frightened. That doesn't make every thought in your head a good one.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

He did not answer.

Martin let go.

Thomas drove out through the garage doors. The road outside was wet, although he did not remember rain. His mobile connected to the vehicle's hands-free system with a bright electronic note.

The map on the dashboard offered him a destination.

FOURTEEN BELL STREET.

He cancelled it.

At the end of the road he turned towards his sister's house.

The dashboard went dark. The heater continued blowing cold air across his hands. He reached to turn it down, and the screen returned with Beth's number displayed.

He pressed the answer button.

“Tom?”

“I'm on my way.”

“There's someone in the garden.”

He sat forward.

“Call the police.”

“I did. They said stay inside.”

“What does she look like?”

“It isn't a woman.”

The traffic lights ahead changed to amber. He went through them.

“Beth?”

“He's standing with his back to the house.”

“Don't go near the windows.”

“He's wearing your coat.”

Thomas took the next left too fast. Something struck the side of the vehicle with a hollow metallic sound. A bin, he thought, but he did not stop.

Beth's voice broke apart in static.

He said her name again. The call ended.

A minute later he realised he had turned onto the riverside approach rather than the road to Beth's estate. The council building stood ahead, its upper windows dark. Beyond it, the car park floodlights lit a low mist.

He braked at the entrance.

The old gate was open.

He knew it was old because it belonged to the demolished street. Two brick pillars, one with a white-painted cap, and a bent iron gate hung between them. The modern parking-payment machine stood immediately behind it, lit and working.

Thomas stopped with the engine running.

His mobile had no signal. He put it on the passenger seat and checked the doors were locked.

Across the car park, a narrow brick house stood in the space marked RESERVED FOR MAYOR.

It was not a grand house. A net curtain hung crookedly in a downstairs window. A black wheelie bin leaned against the side passage. The paint on the front door had peeled around the letterbox.

Light moved behind the curtains.

Thomas checked the camera on his mobile. He took a photograph through the windscreen.

In the photograph there was a car park and a council building. Nothing stood in the mayor's space.

He lowered the phone.

The front door of the house opened.

The woman who stepped out wore a navy cardigan over a pale blouse. She was perhaps sixty. She had the tired, composed expression of someone receiving visitors after a long illness in the family.

She did not approach the car. She stood on the little square of paving outside the door and looked at him.

His mobile vibrated.

Beth had sent a photograph.

Her garden, taken from upstairs. A man stood beside the washing line with his back to the house. Thomas recognised his own old coat, the one with the repaired seam above the left pocket.

Below the photograph was a message.

WHY DOES HE LOOK LIKE YOU?

Thomas looked up.

The woman outside the impossible house raised one hand. Between two fingers she held the small red mitten Emily had lost on the way home from school that afternoon.

He switched off the engine.

