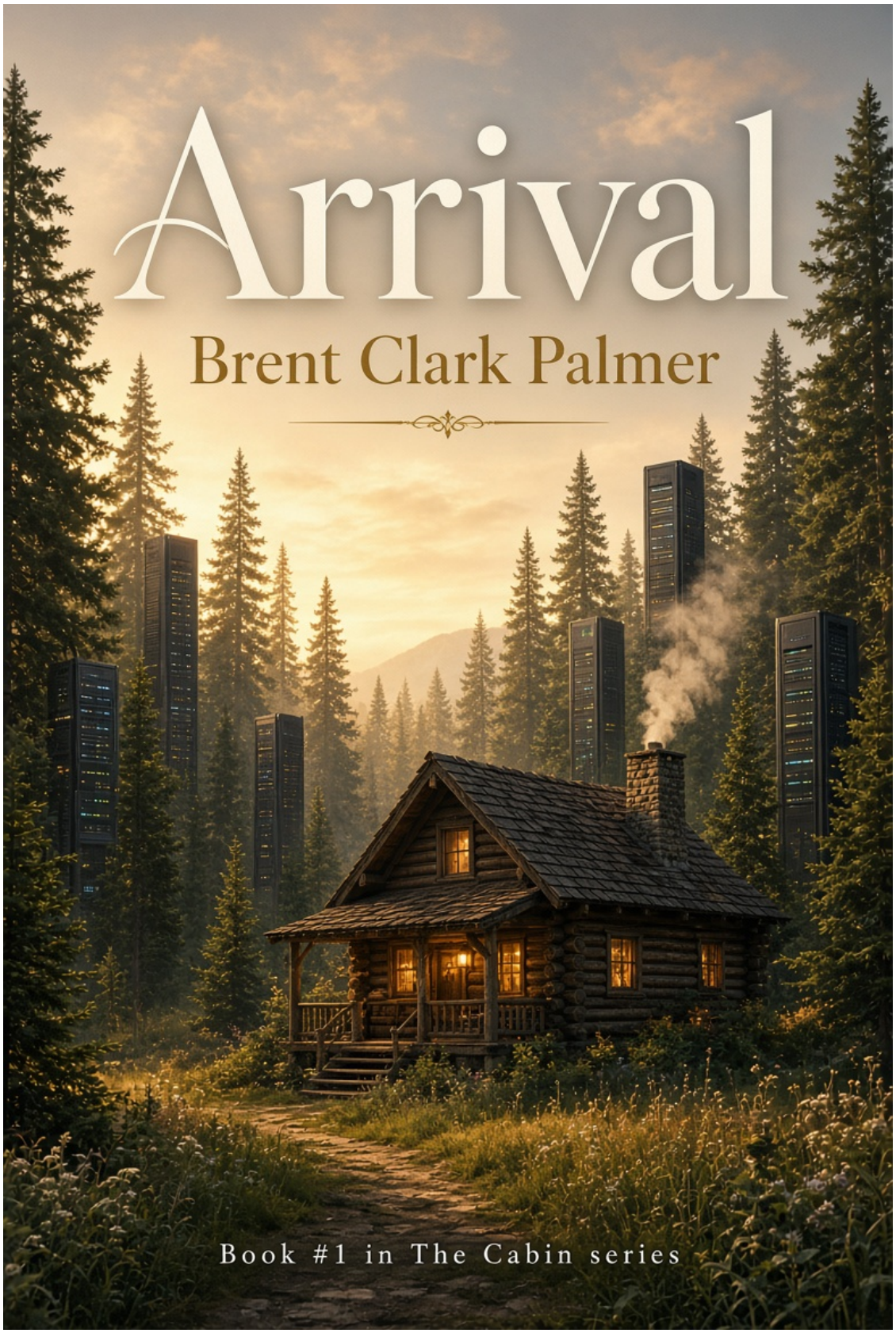

Arrival
Brent Clark Palmer
Book #1 in The Cabin series

Arrival

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Cabin, Book 1

I.

The cabin stood where the gravel drive ended and the trees took over. Its logs had silvered on the south side and stayed darker under the eaves. A thin line of smoke rose from the stone chimney and drifted east, the same direction the clouds were moving. The porch held two chairs, a low table, and a woven mat that had been shaken out after lunch. The front door was open. Warm air came through the screen.

Inside, the main room ran the length of the house. A long table sat under the windows that faced the clearing. Four chairs were pushed in; two more stood against the wall. The hearth was black stone and held a low fire that had been fed an hour ago. A braided rug covered the floor in front of it. On the rug the dog lay on his side, one foreleg stretched, the other bent under his chest. His coat was long and uneven, darker along the spine and pale at the muzzle. The cat sat upright near his shoulder, tail curled once around her feet, watching the doorway.

Sarah stood at the counter with her back to the room. She had a bowl in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other. She was not stirring. Tom sat at the near end of the table with a pencil and a short list. He had written three lines and crossed out the middle one. Mia and Jake were on the floor between the table and the hearth, sorting a pile of smooth stones into two groups. Mia kept the larger stones. Jake kept the flatter ones. Neither of them spoke while they worked.

The calendar hung on the wall beside the kitchen doorway. It was a single sheet of heavy paper with a metal clip at the top. The month was November. Across the upper margin the year was printed in the same plain type as the days: 2825. Sarah reached up without looking and tore the previous month free. She folded it once and set it on the counter beside the bowl. The new page showed the first week already crossed through. Thanksgiving fell on the twenty-seventh.

Tom looked up from the list. “They’ll want the table extended. We still have the leaves in the loft.”

Sarah set the spoon down. “I’ll bring them down after they go out. The dog’s been watching the door since three.”

The dog’s ear moved at the sound of his name, but he did not lift his head. The cat turned her face toward Sarah, then back toward the screen.

Mia placed a stone on her pile and sat back on her heels. “Can we take the net out?”

Jake added two stones to his group before he answered. “It’s still by the woodpile. The stakes are with it.”

Tom nodded. “Take both. Stay where we can see the clearing. If the ball goes into the trees, leave it. We’ll walk the edge before dark.”

Sarah wiped her hands on a cloth and came around the counter. She stopped beside the rug. The dog rolled onto his chest and looked up. She rested her palm on the top of his head, then ran it once down the length of his neck. The cat rose, stretched her forelegs, and stepped onto the hearthstone where the heat was steady.

“Go on, then,” Sarah said. “We’ll have the bath ready when you come in. Don’t track the whole clearing through the door.”

The dog stood. He shook once, the long coat lifting and settling. The cat was already at the screen, one paw against the lower panel. Mia and Jake left the stones where they were and went to the porch for their shoes. Tom folded the list and put it in his shirt pocket. Outside, the light had moved lower on the trunks. The clearing was still open enough to hold a net and two players who knew the boundaries.

II.

The net was already staked at the edge of the clearing where the ground stayed level. Mia and Jake carried the ball and the two short rackets between them. The dog walked ahead until he reached the center line Tom had scratched into the dirt that morning, then stopped and waited. The cat followed at her own pace and sat just inside the far boundary, tail tip moving once across the leaves.

Tom came as far as the porch step and stayed there. Sarah remained in the doorway with one hand on the frame. The late light lay across the open ground in a wide band; beyond it the trees stood close enough that their lower branches nearly met.

Jake bounced the ball once against the packed dirt. “Same rules. First to eleven. Cat serves.”

Mia held out the smaller racket. The cat rose, took the handle in her mouth, and carried it to the service side. She set it down, placed one paw on the grip, and looked at the dog. He lowered himself until his chest nearly touched the ground, eyes on the ball Jake still held.

Sarah spoke from the doorway. “If either of you sends it into the brush, call out. We’ll mark the spot.”

The dog’s tail moved once. The cat lifted the racket, adjusted her grip with both paws, and waited. Jake tossed the ball underhand. It rose, dropped, and the cat met it cleanly. The return came low and soft. The dog pushed off his hind legs, stretched, and sent it back with the edge of his forepaw. The ball stayed inside the lines.

They played without speaking. Mia kept the score on her fingers. Jake retrieved when the ball rolled past either end and returned it to the server. After the fourth point the dog trotted to the sideline, drank from the shallow pan Sarah had set out earlier, and came back still wet at the muzzle. The cat remained where she was, racket resting across her forelegs, watching him.

Tom shifted his weight on the step. “They’re staying in longer than yesterday.”

Sarah nodded. “The light’s better. And the ground’s dry.”

At nine–seven the cat sent a higher ball that the dog had to leap for. He caught it against his chest, dropped it, and nosed it back across. Mia called the point. The dog shook his coat again and returned to position. The cat picked up the racket and served once more.

When the game ended the ball lay still near the center. Jake collected the rackets. Mia folded the net while the dog and cat waited at the edge of the porch. Their sides moved with even breaths. The clearing had gone gray at the far end;

only the cabin windows still held the last of the sun.

Sarah opened the screen. “Rinse the pans first. Then straight to the tub. I’ll have the towels on the rail.”

The dog stepped inside ahead of the others. The cat followed, pausing only long enough to let Mia pass with the folded net. Tom came last and pulled the door shut behind them. The fire had settled to a steady bed of coals. The rug was still warm.

III.

The tub stood in the small room off the kitchen. Sarah had already run the water until it held a steady warmth and set two thick towels over the heated rail. The dog entered first and stepped into the water without hesitation, lowering himself until it reached the middle of his chest. The cat waited on the mat until Mia closed the door, then jumped to the wide rim and sat with her tail hanging clear of the surface.

Sarah rolled her sleeves once and knelt beside the tub. She cupped water in both hands and poured it slowly along the dog’s spine. He closed his eyes. She worked the soap into the longer coat at his neck and shoulders, fingers moving in short, even strokes that reached the skin. When she reached the base of his ears she lifted each one and cleaned beneath it, then rinsed with a second pour that ran clear. The dog shifted his weight to give her the other side. His breathing stayed slow.

Jake stood at the counter with a second cloth. “Do you want the brush for his legs?”

“Not tonight,” Sarah said. “The coat was dry. Just the cloth for his feet when I’m done.”

She moved to the cat. The cat rose, turned, and presented her back. Sarah wet a smaller cloth and drew it from the crown of the head down the length of the spine, lifting the fur so the water reached the undercoat. The cat’s eyes narrowed to slits. When Sarah cleaned between the toes the cat extended one forepaw fully, then the other, claws sheathed. Sarah rinsed with care around the face, thumb steady under the chin, and the cat leaned into the pressure for a moment before she stepped down onto the towel Mia held open.

Tom appeared in the doorway with the dog’s pan refilled. He set it on the floor near the hearth and stayed to watch Sarah lift the dog from the tub. Water streamed from the coat onto the mat. She wrapped the first towel around him and rubbed in long passes from shoulders to haunches, pausing where the muscle lay close under the skin. The dog stood quiet under her hands. When the outer layer was no longer dripping she exchanged the towel for the second, warmer one and continued until the coat lay smooth and separate.

Mia carried the cat to the rug. The cat settled against the stones, still damp along her chest, and began to wash one foreleg with slow attention. Sarah led the dog to the same place. He circled once, then lowered himself so that his side rested along the cat’s back. Sarah sat on the hearth edge and rested her palm on the dog’s ribs. The heat from the coals reached them both. The dog’s eyes closed again. Under her hand his heartbeat was even and unhurried.

Tom spoke from the kitchen. “I’ll set the bowls. They can stay where they are until the food’s ready.”

Sarah nodded without lifting her hand. The children’s voices moved between the table and the counter, ordinary and low. Outside the windows the clearing had gone fully dark. Inside, the only sound for a while was the fire and the soft, repeated motion of the cat’s tongue against her own fur.

IV.

Sarah rose from the hearth only when the bowls were on the mat. The dog stood, shook the last loose warmth from his coat, and crossed to his place. The cat followed and sat beside her own dish, tail laid neatly along her feet. Sarah set the larger bowl in front of the dog and the smaller in front of the cat. Both were still warm from the pot. The dog ate with steady attention, pausing once to lift his head and check the room before he continued. The cat ate more slowly, lifting her face between bites to wash her muzzle clean.

Tom carried the serving dishes to the table. Mia and Jake had already pulled their chairs out. The plates held roasted squash, a loaf that had been cut at one end, and a bowl of late greens dressed with oil. Sarah took her seat last. For a while the only sounds were the fire and the quiet work of eating. Jake reached for the loaf and tore a piece; Mia passed him the small dish of salt without being asked.

Tom glanced toward the mat. “They finished faster tonight.”

Sarah nodded. “The game ran long. They’ll sleep early.”

When the plates were cleared Mia carried the pets’ bowls to the sink and rinsed them. Jake added a short log to the fire and brushed the hearth clean. The dog had returned to the rug and lay with his back against the warm stone. The cat climbed onto the low bench beside Sarah’s chair and curled there, one paw tucked under her chest. Sarah rested her hand on the cat’s side for a moment, then reached for the cloth that still hung on the oven rail and folded it.

Outside, the wind moved once through the upper branches and fell quiet again. Tom locked the screen and left the inner door open so the heat could reach the porch. Mia and Jake said good night from the doorway of their room. Their voices were already lower. Sarah checked the stove, turned the lamp above the table down to its smallest flame, and crossed back to the hearth.

The dog shifted to make room when she sat on the rug beside him. She drew her knees up and let her shoulder rest against his. The cat watched from the bench, eyes half-closed. Tom stood at the counter finishing the last of the list he had started that afternoon. He crossed out one more line, folded the paper, and set it under the calendar clip. The year at the top of the page caught the lowered light and held it.

No one spoke. The coals settled with a soft sound. The dog’s breathing lengthened. Under Sarah’s hand the rise and fall of his side matched the slow rhythm of the room. The cat’s ears stayed forward a moment longer, then relaxed. Beyond the windows the clearing was only a darker shape against the trees. Inside, the cabin held its warmth in a steady band from the hearth to the

table, and the four of them remained where they were while the fire burned lower.

V.

Morning light came through the east windows and lay in a clean rectangle across the table. The fire had been rebuilt; the coals from the night before were still bright underneath the new logs. The dog stood at the screen door, nose lifted to the gap at the bottom, while the cat sat on the wide sill and watched the clearing. Frost had settled on the grass in a thin, even layer that would be gone by midmorning.

Sarah moved between the counter and the stove. She had two pans going. In the smaller one, strips of ordinary bacon curled and released their fat. In the larger pan she turned two pale, oblong pieces that had been split and filled. The filling was a dense blue-green that held its shape when she pressed it with the edge of the spoon. She sprinkled a pinch of coarse salt over both and lowered the heat.

Tom came in from the porch with an armload of kindling. He set it in the box and brushed his hands. “The path to the spring is still clear. I checked the cover. No tracks overnight.”

Sarah nodded without turning. “Good. Mia wanted to walk it later if the frost lifts.”

Mia appeared in the doorway of the children’s room, already dressed, hair still loose. She crossed to the table and began setting out plates. “Jake’s tying his boots. He says the net stakes shifted. He wants to reset them before we eat.”

Jake’s voice carried from the porch. “Only the north one. The ground froze under it. I’ll have it straight in a minute.”

Tom poured two mugs of coffee and set one beside the stove for Sarah. He kept the other and leaned against the counter. “Leave the stakes. We’ll look at them after breakfast. The light’s better then.”

The dog left the door and came to sit beside Sarah’s feet. She reached down once and rested her fingers behind his ear, then returned to the pan. The filled pieces had begun to brown at the edges. She lifted one onto a plate, then the other, and added a small portion of the bacon to each. The blue-green centers remained visible where the casings had split.

Jake came in and shut the door behind him. He looked at the plates. “Those again?”

Tom took his seat. “They’re quick. And we still have the batch from last week. Better to finish them before the holiday.”

Sarah set the plates in front of Tom and herself. She broke a piece of the bacon and held it down for the dog. He took it gently and carried it to the rug. The cat jumped from the sill, crossed the floor, and sat where she could see both plates.

Sarah tore a second small piece and set it on the mat. The cat ate it in two bites and washed her whiskers.

Mia pulled out her chair. “Do we still have the dried berries for the table on Thursday?”

Sarah nodded. “In the blue tin. Top shelf. You can count them after we clear. If we’re short I’ll send your father to the lower cache.”

Tom cut into one of the filled pieces. The blue-green interior steamed faintly. He ate without comment, then reached for his coffee. “The list is under the calendar. Add whatever you think the children will actually finish. No sense putting down dishes no one touches.”

Jake had taken his place. He watched his father eat, then looked at his own ordinary plate of eggs and toast. “Can I have a corner of yours? Just to see.”

Tom considered, then cut a small section free and passed it across. Jake tasted it, chewed once, and set the rest on the edge of his plate. “It’s salty.”

Sarah smiled into her mug. “That’s the point. Eat your eggs. We’ll need the table clear before your numbers.”

• The dog had finished the bacon and returned to Sarah’s side. He rested his chin on her knee. She let her free hand stay on his neck while she ate. Outside, the frost line was already retreating from the gravel. The cabin held the morning heat close around the table, the stove, and the four people seated there, with the dog and the cat settled inside.

VI.

The plates were cleared and the table wiped. Mia and Jake stood at the far end with a single sheet of paper between them. The dog had returned to the rug and lay with his head on his paws. The cat sat on the bench again, cleaning one forepaw with short, exact strokes. Sarah remained in her chair with her coffee. Tom had the Thanksgiving list unfolded beside his mug.

Mia spoke first. “We were up all night while you slept. Checking the Chan. The overnight transfers posted clean. No flags on the secondary routes.”

Jake nodded and took the paper. “Credits came in at one million four hundred twenty-two thousand. Residual yields on the long positions added another six hundred eighty-one thousand. Maintenance offsets ran higher than last cycle—four hundred ninety-three thousand—because of the cold-storage draw and the two new allocation blocks.”

Tom listened without writing. He reached for his coffee, drank, and set the mug down. “The offsets. You have the cold-storage figure broken out?”

Mia answered. “Yes. Three hundred twelve thousand for the primary array. The rest is the auxiliary line and the transfer fees. We logged the fees separately so they wouldn’t sit inside the yield column.”

Sarah turned her cup once on the table. “And the household draw against that?”

Jake looked at the paper. “Twelve thousand four hundred for provisions and fuel. Another two thousand eight hundred for the spring maintenance and the path gravel. Everything else stayed in the residual pool. Net available after offsets is one million five hundred ninety-seven thousand.”

The numbers sat in the quiet room without emphasis. Mia folded the paper once and held it at her side. Jake shifted his weight and waited. The dog lifted his head at the sound of Sarah’s chair, then settled again when she did not stand. The cat finished her paw and tucked it under her chest.

Tom drew the Thanksgiving list closer. “All right. Leave the sheet on the counter. I’ll initial the offsets after I walk the lower cache. If the berries are short we’ll pull from the reserve instead of buying in.”

Sarah nodded. “They can start the table count when you’re back. No need to keep them standing.”

Mia set the paper beside the sink. Jake crossed to the hearth and added a small piece of wood to the fire. The dog watched the motion, then closed his eyes.

VII.

Tom spread the Thanksgiving list flat and turned it so Sarah could see the remaining lines. The dog had shifted closer to the table and lay with his chin on the braided edge of the rug. The cat remained on the bench, eyes half-lidded in the stronger light.

Sarah tapped one entry with her finger. “The squash can stay. We have plenty. I’d rather not open another jar of the late berries if the tin is already low.”

Tom nodded and drew a line through the second item. “Then we keep the roasted roots and the plain loaf. Mia counted the tin while we were outside. She said it will cover the table if we don’t add anything else sweet.”

Jake looked up from the hearth. “What about the dish the dog used to ask for? The one with the dried meat and the little onions.”

Tom glanced at the dog. The dog’s ears moved, but he did not lift his head. Tom set the pencil down. “You remember it. Before they stopped letting us choose the center dishes. What did you used to put on the list when it was still your turn?”

The dog raised his muzzle. He looked at Tom, then at the paper, then back at Tom. His tail moved once against the rug.

Sarah rested her hand on the table edge. “He always asked for the same thing. The small birds, split and filled with the green paste, same as the ones we still make when the cache allows. He liked them cold the next day.”

Tom picked up the pencil again. “We can do a half-dozen if the lower shelf still has the paste. I’ll check when I walk down.” He wrote the line in the space he had cleared. “That keeps the old plate on the table. The children like seeing it there even if most of it comes back to the kitchen.”

Mia crossed from the counter and stood beside her father’s chair. “Does he still want it, or are we only writing it because we always have?”

Tom looked at the dog once more. The dog met his eyes and held the look. After a moment the dog lowered his head to his paws again, the motion unhurried.

“He wants it,” Tom said. “Same as every year. We’ll make enough for the plate and for him to have the rest on Friday.”

Sarah reached down and smoothed the fur between the dog’s shoulders. He leaned a fraction into her palm and stayed there. The cat watched the exchange without moving. Outside, a single bird crossed the clearing and disappeared into the trees.

VIII.

Tom added the final line to the list and set the pencil aside. He looked toward the porch, then back at the table. “There will be one more here by morning. We’ve already cleared the second mat and set an extra pan by the hearth.”

Sarah nodded. She kept her hand on the dog’s shoulder. “They can take the place nearest the fire until they settle. The cat will move if she wants to.”

Mia folded the list and slid it under the calendar clip beside the earlier sheet of numbers. “Does the new one have a name yet?”

Tom shook his head. “Not until they’ve been here a day. Same as the others. We’ll see what they answer to.”

The dog lifted his head at the sound of the door. No one had opened it. He watched the screen for a moment, then lowered his muzzle again to his paws. The cat’s ears turned once toward the same empty space and relaxed. Jake added another small log to the fire. The flames took it without smoke.

Sarah rose and crossed to the counter. She filled the extra water pan and set it where the new mat would lie. The existing dog followed her with his eyes but did not stand. When she returned to the rug she sat beside him once more. Her palm settled on the warm curve of his side. The cat jumped down, stretched, and chose the bench again, leaving the open stretch of rug nearest the hearth clear.

The clearing outside remained bright and empty. The frost was gone. The path to the spring showed only the marks Tom had made that morning. Inside, the cabin held its ordinary heat and the low sound of the fire. The list was finished. The pans were set. The second mat waited, still empty, in the place closest to the stones.

The open place is yours. The account you have just read is the shape of the house, the care, the meals, the unhurried hours on the rug and in the clearing. You arrive when the mat is ready. The dog who has been here longer will shift to make room, and the cat will decide for herself whether to stay near or move to the bench. Thanksgiving falls on the twenty-seventh. There will be a plate of the small birds if the paste is still on the lower shelf. You are expected. The door is the one you have been reading toward, and it remains open.