

# **SOLITARY** MAN



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# Solitary Man

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For my mother, Joyce Ann  
1950-2010  
Always and Forever My Biggest Fan



## CHAPTER ONE.

I CAN BARELY REMEMBER THE end of the world.

It's not that it happened that long ago; it's more that as this new, dangerous world becomes the norm, it becomes difficult to recall the old one. As time passes, the images in my head grow fuzzy, the edges of the memories fading like old photographs until the memory feels more like a dream than something I remember.

Of course, it doesn't all fade immediately. Small, minor details tend to disappear first: the sounds, the smells, the colors. But then the rest of it also starts to go until all that's left is the emotion of the moment and maybe some fleeting images.

I hate that memories fade. Sure, there are things I'd like to forget. Who doesn't have those? But there are so many more things I want to keep—comforting and beautiful things I want to be able to recall.

I never want to forget the soft kiss and gentle touch of my wife greeting me after a hard day's work. I cherish that tiny piece of information as if it were gold, but day by day it becomes harder to remember the lines of her face, the deep blue of her eyes, the warmth of her breath on my neck. She died with the old world, and these memories are all I have left of her. But now . . . even they're dying.

I admit I've sometimes taken my Glock and just stared at it for long periods of time, holding it up to my face, taking in the smells of gun oil and the faint residue of gunpowder. Sometimes I'll eject the magazine and stare at the top bullet, its brass casing gleaming, beckoning. In those moments, I sometimes have a fleeting temptation to put the barrel in my mouth and squeeze the trigger, to end my time in this world. It would be the easiest, quickest way to escape this hardscrabble existence.

But I can't do that. Suicide is a coward's journey, the exact opposite of me. I'm alive, and I'll stay that way for as long as I can. If I have to fight for every breath I take, then so be it.

And so, I press on, never sure where I'm going, only aware of where I've been.

\* \* \*

It's nearly time to refuel the bus.

The gas gauge shows a quarter tank left, meaning I need to be looking out for a station with diesel, a rare commodity in this day and age. I've got a few gallons left in a can in the back, but I know it won't get me far. If the guy in the last town told me the truth, then I'm about thirty miles from the next city, so I should make it.

The wind rushing through the open windows drowns out my music, so I reach up to the battered boom box sitting on a makeshift shelf and crank the volume until I can hear the wailing sounds of Led Zeppelin over everything else. I find myself craving the rich flavor of a good cigar, so I reach into the humidor by my seat, grabbing my next to last stogie. After a couple of clicks from my Zippo, I soon have a wreath of aromatic smoke hanging around my head.



I point the bus in the direction of the city, slowly weaving through a maze of abandoned and wrecked vehicles surrounded by piles of debris. As I round a burned-out panel van, I spot two old hippies, a man and a woman, walking on the road, both with heavy packs and camp chairs on their backs. Once they hear the combination of diesel roar and bluesy rock, the man turns, waving his arms. They look harmless, but in this world, you take no chances. My sawed-off shotgun slips easily from its holster, and I lay it across my lap, keeping it ready.

As the bus eases to a stop, the couple runs to the door, so I open it and shove the shotgun into their faces. Their hands shoot up into the air.

"You cannibals?" I ask in a gruff voice.

One hippie looks cross-eyed at the shotgun's barrels and says, "No way, dude. We're vegetarians."

I let a few tense seconds pass before I lower the gun.

"Get in," I tell them.

They both board the bus. As the man reaches the top of the steps and looks around inside, his eyes widen with wonder. In the back, I have stores of food and ammo, a small selection of rifles and pistols, one five-gallon gas can, a mismatched set of dumbbells sitting next to a barbell, and a cot piled with heavy blankets. There's also a toolbox under the cot and an antique Gatling gun mounted on a track so it can swing around to fire out the back door. I had to take out the last few rows of seats to make room for everything, but there's still plenty of room up front for them to sit.

"Whoa, man," said the hippie. "Are you a survivalist or something?"

I turn, looking first at the hippies, then at their possessions. "Aren't we all survivalists these days?" I ask, turning back around.

I catch his wan smile in my rearview. "Good point, man," he says.

They plop into the seat behind me as the bus starts rolling.

\* \* \*

Ugh. The stink of these hippies is making me wish I'd taken the seats out of the front instead of the back.

I can tell it's probably somewhere around May, because while the days grow longer, the nights tend to be chilly. The war rendered the calendar meaningless, but I still keep an eye on the seasons; I don't need winter creeping up on me.

Ten miles out from the city, the sun slips behind the horizon, so I pull into the parking lot of an abandoned grocery store to make camp for the night.

"Stay on the bus," I tell the hippies. "I'll be right back."

I strap the shotgun holster around my waist and tuck my Glock into the waistband of my cargo pants. I also take the keys with me as I don't trust anyone these days. The grocery store looks dark inside, so I grab my shake flashlight as well. It comes in handy since batteries are now mostly extinct.

Crossing the short gap between the bus and the store, I keep a sharp eye out for any movement. Cannibals are fond of ambushes.

Once inside, I'm not surprised to find the store ransacked. I will be surprised if I find much of anything, but I peruse the shelves anyway, skipping over the rotted meat and fuzzy loaves of bread. Nearly everything else has been taken. I'm betting most of it ended up in the city we're traveling to;

communities tended to strip these stores, and whatever they didn't claim was probably snapped up by the scavengers, roving packs of drug addicts and other rejects who'd either been kicked out of cities or chosen not to live there in the first place.

I find two cans of pumpkin pie filling and a jar of pickled beets. None of it sounds appealing, but I can't afford to be picky. I drop the items into a plastic shopping basket I grabbed by the entrance.

I check the back room next, but it's been gone over just like the rest of the store. My hopes raise slightly when I spot a forklift, but I'm disappointed to find it's electric, not gas-powered. A stack of wooden pallets sits by the loading dock, and I nod in satisfaction. Yes, these will do nicely.

\* \* \*

My hatchet makes quick work of a pallet, and soon I've got a small fire going out by the bus. The hippies unfold their camp chairs and huddle around the flames, basking in the small amount of warmth.

"Hey, man, we're not far from the city. Why don't we keep driving?"

"Cannibals got their hands on road spikes. They're hard enough to see during the day. I don't risk it at night."

He nods, understanding.

"Man, who woulda thought human flesh would be the most addictive stuff on the planet?"

"It didn't used to be."

"Yeah, I know, man! What do you think caused it? Maybe the radiation? I met a guy once who thought they used chemical weapons and that's how it happened. Might explain that weird yellow smoke those ships dropped on us. And what

was with those ships anyway? Weird looking floating cylinders? No markings or anything, just jet-black paint. I always wondered who it was that attacked us."

The old hippie's chattiness grates on my nerves.

"Why does it matter?" I ask, a little too tersely, "Knowing doesn't help us survive."

"Well, you know, man, maybe if we knew, we could figure out a cure for the cannibals. Know what I mean?"

I pull the Glock from my waistband, and for a second, he looks nervous. I pop out the magazine and show him the top bullet.

"See that? That's the cure. It's the only cure I need."

"But . . . they're people, man. I used to know some of them."

He speaks softly, frightened by my aggressiveness. Good.

"No. Once you feed on your own kind, you stop being a person. You can't reason with that, not when they're that far gone. They're all rabid dogs that need to be put down."

I can tell he's done with the conversation, because he changes the subject.

"Um, so, what's for dinner, man?"

I take a can of baked beans out of my stores for myself and offer them the beets and pumpkin pie filling. I can tell they haven't eaten in a while from the way they take the food and greedily gobble it down, their hands scooping the pie filling right out of the cans and shoving it into their mouths. Once they finish off the beets, they both sit back in their chairs, and the guy belches.

"Man, I used to hate pumpkin pie, but now it tastes like the greatest thing ever."

"Hunger is the best seasoning," the woman says quietly.

It's the first time I've heard her voice, and the newness of that sound startles me. It also makes me realize I haven't been as vigilant as I usually am. I get up and stroll around the bus, surveying the parking lot, watching for signs of movement.

"Hey, man, everything okay?" the guy calls.

I ignore him as I scan the roof of the grocery store. The flickering of the fire has shadows dancing around me, making it difficult to see if there's anything or anyone up there. For safety's sake, I decide to get back on the bus just as the old hippie comes strolling up next to me.

"You see something, man? We need to scoot?"

"Get your things and get back on the bus."

As we both turn back to the fire, I pick up the movement. A dark figure appears at the edge of the grocery store's roof.

"Get down!" I shout, diving for the blacktop.

"What? What's happening?"

I hear an arrow whistle over my head and land with a sickening thunk in his throat. His hands immediately go to the wound, but it's too late as dark red blood oozes between his fingers, coating his hands. He cries out in a gurgling scream and collapses next to me.

"Melvin? What was that noise?"

I hear the woman coming around the bus as the archer nocks another arrow.

"Don't come over here!" I shout as I lift my Glock to get a bead on our sniper.

Before I can get off a shot, he sends another arrow flying, and the woman goes down with a shriek, the arrow embedded in her chest. I fire but miss as the shot chips at the edge of the roof. It's enough to startle the cannibal, though, and

he turns, losing his balance in the process. He tumbles off the roof with a scream and slams into the asphalt below, the solid thump echoing across the empty parking lot.

I rise into a crouch, heart racing, adrenaline pumping. Five cannibals round the corner of the store where they've been waiting and race towards me, snarling with hunger and desperation. The one in front swings an axe menacingly over his head as he runs. I take him down easy with one shot, but the one behind him points an M4 carbine at me, so I drop to the ground and roll under the bus as he peppers its armor with a short burst.

As I roll out the other side and jump to my feet, one of the cannibals appears from around the corner of the bus, trying to outflank me, swinging a machete as he runs. I duck under his clumsy backhand swing and land a solid uppercut to his jaw. As he staggers back, I put two rounds in his chest and one in his head. Without stopping to admire my handiwork, I jump onto the bus and go to close the door, but the cannibal with the M4 shoves his gun inside and fires another burst that takes out my boom box as the door closes on the gun's barrel. I angrily open the door and shoot him in the head.

Another cannibal with an axe comes in behind him, but instead of attacking me, he turns and buries the axe head in the bus's tire. There's a loud whoosh of air, and as the bus sags a bit, intense anger pumps through my entire body. Boiling with rage, I pull out the shotgun, lean out the door, and empty both barrels into his chest.

The last cannibal stands back, staring at me, holding only a small hatchet and a hunting knife. I holster the empty shotgun but make sure he sees the Glock in my other hand.

“Go on. Make your move.”

It takes only a second before he turns and makes a mad dash across the parking lot. I decide to conserve ammo and let him go. After making sure the others are dead, I take a look at the ruined tire. I hate to drive on the rim, but this spot isn't safe anymore. The escaping cannibal could come back with an army that I'm incapable of handling. I quickly strip the dead cannibals of their weapons and toss them on the bus. After I use a couple more of the pallets to build a crude funeral pyre, I burn the bodies of the hippie couple. They were annoying, but they're also human beings, and they deserve a proper send-off. I don't concern myself with the bodies of the cannibals; they can rot.

As I start up the bus and head for the city, I realize something that didn't come to mind in the heat of the action. The cannibals have always attacked in roving, chaotic packs, haphazardly charging, making themselves easy targets. A single cannibal isn't that threatening; they're definitely more dangerous when they're looking to overpower you with sheer numbers. But tonight was different; there was order in their attack. I could see it in the way they took the high ground and also in how they tried to outflank me. They used techniques I learned a long time ago in my SEAL training. There's also the M4, a military grade rifle that wasn't available to the public. I can't help but wonder how the cannibals got their hands on one. It disturbs me, so I drive a little faster, hoping the rim doesn't give out.

\* \* \*

“My name is Jonathan Willoughby, and I am a child of God.”

The thin, fortyish-aged man in the wire-rimmed glasses spoke to no one in particular. He'd made it a daily habit to make this statement when he

awoke for the day. With the harshness and brutality of this post-war world, he determined to never lose sight of who he was, and Who he belonged to.

Jonathan looked over his shoulder at his sleeping family. Little Gracie, eight years old, had left her cot sometime in the night and crawled into bed between him and his wife, Mia. His son Derek, nearly seventeen and looking more man than boy, snored softly from his own cot, leg hanging over the edge, blanket bunched up over his chest.

Somehow, certainly by the grace of God, they'd managed to stay together, even through the chaos of the old world ending and the new one beginning. Jonathan kept the family together as much as possible, even having the kids sleep in his and Mia's bedroom despite the fact they had a second bedroom in their tiny apartment. He couldn't get enough of any of them.

Their apartment wasn't much, especially compared to their home in the old world, but Jonathan was grateful that God had used the war to strip away the materialism that had held him back in his spiritual walk. And he was most grateful that God had not only spared his family but had added to it with Gracie; it was wonderful to know the certainty of God's blessings in a new world full of uncertainty. New world or old world, it didn't matter; there was always something to complain about, and there was always something to be thankful for. Jonathan had learned long ago which choice brought him the most joy.

His wife stirred in her sleep, and he stared lovingly at her face. His wonderful Mia. He was still taken by her beauty, even after twenty-two years of marriage. Crow's feet and gray streaks meant nothing to him; she was beautiful, and he thanked God every day for putting them together.

As Mia stirred, she gently bumped Gracie, waking her.

The little girl sat up and smiled sleepily. "Good morning, Daddy."

Jonathan smiled back. "Good morning, little love."

"Is it time to get up?"

"Not just yet. You can sleep a little more."



"Okay," she said with a yawn before curling up again beside her mother.

Jonathan marveled at her spirit. She'd been born two years after the war, so this ugly world was all she'd ever known. And yet, sweetness and kindness flowed from her. He knew better than to take credit for that; the only thing he could take credit for was that he hadn't passed on to her any of his glaring flaws: his impatience, his blunt insensitivity, his occasional tactlessness. Thank God she took after her mother more than him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Derek stirring on his cot. The boy sat up and stood as he yawned and scratched his head, grumbling, "Morning, Dad."

"Morning, son. Did you sleep okay?"

Derek nodded and continued on, no doubt headed for the kitchen to feed his ravenous, teenage appetite.

Derek's birthday was in a few months, or at least Jonathan thought it was. There didn't seem to be any accurate calendars anymore, so the exact date was always a bit of a question mark.

Where Gracie was practically a young carbon copy of Mia, Derek was the spitting image of his father, physically, mentally, and emotionally. He had an impetuous nature and was often confrontational simply for the sake of confrontation; he soaked up ideas and craved debate. But Jonathan wasn't that worried about him; he knew the Lord had a hold on Derek's heart, had seen the fruit of the Spirit for himself. So, he let Derek ask his controversial questions, because he trusted the Lord would lead Derek to the right answers.

Even still, he prayed that his son would find those right answers and thanked the Lord that Derek always examined new ideas, never allowing himself to be spoon-fed anything without holding it up to the light of God's truth. But even then, a part of him, the fatherly part, worried about his son and prayed daily that God would protect him along with the rest of the family.

Mia opened her eyes. When she saw Jonathan staring at her, she smiled.

"You're doing it again," she said, her voice thick with sleep.

"And I'll do it again and again until I go blind," Jonathan replied.

“And what will you do after that?”

“I suppose I’ll just have to touch your face and ‘see’ it with my fingers.”

“Well, that’s not creepy at all.”

He dropped to both knees, leaned over and placed a soft, gentle kiss on her lips. She returned it, and just before he stood up, he glanced over and noticed Gracie watching them. When her eyes connected with her father’s, she blushed and smiled.

“Are you awake for good now?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Then we’d better get some breakfast before Derek eats it all.” He turned, offering her his back. “Need a ride?”

“Yes, please.”

Gracie climbed over her mother and hopped onto Jonathan’s back, wrapping her arms and legs around him. Jonathan stood, looking back at Mia.

“You coming?”

Mia stretched. “I’ll be right there.”

Jonathan began a bouncing gallop out of the bedroom, and Gracie let out a giggling squeal of joy. He loved that sound so much.

\* \* \*

“Loved your sermon, Jonathan. You really have a gift.”

Jonathan accepted the compliment with a smile and took Ray Larson’s warm, meaty hand in a vigorous shake.

“Thanks, Ray. But the glory goes to God. He gave me that gift.”

Ray nodded, his smile beaming through his bushy beard. “Absolutely. Praise the Lord for His blessings.”

Jonathan turned, surveying the small room, watching as his church family chatted and socialized with one another. His heart swelled with gratitude for such a wonderful church body.

“I love our little church. And I love everyone in it.”

Ray nodded. "Me too. All my life I've been in churches where it was just a place you went on Sunday morning; it never felt like a family. Until now, that is. You've done some good work here, Jonathan."

Gracie came running up and grabbed her father's leg.

"Daddy! Can I play in the courtyard with Emma?"

"Yes, if you'll promise to *stay* in the courtyard."

"I will!" she called over her shoulder, already headed outside.

Ray chuckled. "That little girl is a happy life personified."

"Mia gets all the credit for that. I'm way too much of a cynic."

"I believe it. Say, we still having that elders meeting?"

"Yeah. Grab Mike and Carl, and we'll go ahead and get started."

Ray gave a nod and a smile before lumbering off.

\* \* \*

"We've accomplished so much, but we've got to do more to get the Gospel out there."

"I agree, Jonathan. Do you have some ideas?"

"Well, I had this crazy thought. What if we started another church?"

The other three men shook their heads at this suggestion.

"Jon, there's only about five hundred of us in this community. There's just not enough people to support a second church."

"I agree with Mike," said Ray. "We average sixty people on Sunday mornings. There's plenty of room to grow the church we have."

Jonathan smiled and shook his head. "I'm not talking about another church here. I'm talking about in another city."

The three men stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Jon, I love you," said Carl, "but have you lost your mind?"

"No, not at all . . . and I love you, too, Carl."

The offhand comment made the other three men chuckle, breaking the ice as Jonathan had hoped it would. He continued.

"I've been reading through Acts, picturing Paul traveling through Asia and Europe, preaching the Gospel, starting churches, and . . . well, it's inspired me. We all know the war devastated the church, but we really have no way of knowing just how far that devastation has spread. Is it nationwide? Is it worldwide? Maybe it's limited only to this area, but regardless, I really feel like a concerted effort needs to be made to rebuild the church, to give believers a place to congregate and come together for fellowship and worship and building each other up. I'm sure there are other cities like ours out there, and it's important to make sure the Gospel is being preached in each one like it is here."

Ray shrugged. "Jonathan, none of us are disagreeing with you. It's a noble ambition, but you know the cannibals make that impossible."

"Ray's right," continued Mike. "They'd cut down any of us on the road before we even reached another city."

Jonathan nodded in agreement. "I know the cannibals are the big problem with this idea, but I also can't help but feel for those poor people. To be trapped in such intense bondage like that."

"So why bring it up if you know it's a pipe dream?" asked Carl.

"Look, guys, I know it seems impossible, but we worship the one true God who parted the seas, who raised the dead, who spoke the world into existence. If He wants His Gospel spread, and I believe He does, then He'll show us opportunities. I just want us to be praying and searching for those opportunities."

The other three nodded, understanding.

"You're right, Jon. If God wills it, then it will be," said Mike. "We can definitely be praying for that. But in the meantime, what can we do here at home to reach out to the folks here in our backyard?"

"What about another hymn sing?" asked Ray. "We got a pretty good response from the one a couple months ago."

“That’s a great idea, but let’s encourage our members to come early to this one so we can pray for the people coming to hear the music,” said Carl.

Jonathan smiled and leaned back in his chair. “You guys are awesome.”

\* \* \*

I can tell from the way the bus hobbles along that the rim on the flat tire has bent. I move along slowly, steering through the streets of a ruined city that stands as a testament of man’s capability for destruction. Skyscrapers, once reaching proudly to the clouds, now sit in piles of rubble with their tops and sides blasted away.

Two buildings across the street from one another serve as a perfect picture of the chaos of war. One is just a pile of broken and shattered concrete with twisted pieces of rebar poking out like gnarled, arthritic fingers while the other building stands proudly, looking completely untouched.

A deer bounds across the street a block in front of me. For a second, I consider going after it for food, but then a pack of ravenous, feral dogs comes barking and growling after it, far too many for just me to deal with. The dogs have always been more of a nuisance than a problem; most of them started out as house pets left behind by their owners as they fled the destruction of the war, but after ten years of inbreeding and scavenging, they’ve devolved to the wild nature of their ancestors. If you leave them alone, they’ll leave you alone, but if you get between them and their prey, they won’t take it lightly. So, while venison would be a tasty treat right about now, it’s not worth running the risk of being bitten or, even worse, catching rabies from being bitten.

I finally get to the settlement that’s all that’s left of this once bustling metropolis. A crude wall, built from crushed

cars, two by fours, and sheet metal, looms about ten feet over the bus. Armed sentries patrol along the top, no doubt keeping an eye out for the local cannibal population.

I drive the bus up to a gate built out of sheets of aluminum siding nailed to a wooden frame, and step out, my hands raised to the watching sentries. A small panel at eye level in the gate slides open, and an old man with bushy eyebrows and leathery skin peers out at me.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"I need fuel and a new tire. I have things to trade."

"There might be a tire here. Fuel is doubtful, though."

"I'll take whatever I can get."

"You can come in once we search your bus."

"Fine. Just so you know, I have weapons, but I mean no harm."

"We'll have to impound it. You can have everything back once you leave."

I'm not liking these terms.

"And how do I know you won't steal everything on it?"

"You can inventory it with us. We're not thieves. We're just cautious. Cannibals aren't the only bad guys out there."

"All right. Open up."

As the panel closes with a resounding thump, I turn and survey the street, making sure nothing is sneaking up behind me. After a few seconds, the gate slides back, moving smoothly through a groove in the earth beneath it. I jump onto the bus and drive it through, and two men slide the gate back into position once I'm inside. The old man directs me over to the side, and after I'm parked, he boards the bus and takes a look at the back, a low whistle escaping his lips.

"I guess you do have some weapons."

“Can we just get this over with?”

He holds a chipped and battered clipboard and quickly goes through my possessions, writing down everything I own. It doesn't escape me that my entire life fits neatly onto one sheet of paper. A lesser man might struggle with that realization, but I appreciate a simple life, so ultimately, I don't care. Even before the war, I never had much in the way of wealth, and besides that, I never measured my worth by my possessions. After the old man finishes, I check the list and sign the paper.

“Market opens in another hour. Feel free to explore but leave our citizens alone.”

“How many people live here?”

“Around five hundred at our last count.”

I nod. Five hundred isn't a lot, but it leaves me a chance to find what I need.

The shoddily built booths in the marketplace invoke a flashback of the open-air markets I frequented during my Middle East deployment. It's mostly quiet right now as people set up their booths, the only sounds being the low buzz of conversation and the occasional moaning and bleating of farm animals. When the market opens, these sounds will probably become oppressive, voices loudly hawking their wares and animals protesting over the din about being bought and sold. Add to that the body heat of five hundred people as well as the choking dust kicked up by their shuffling feet, and you've got the perfect cocktail for driving me crazy. Hopefully I'll be able to find what I need quickly and get out of here.

I stop at one of the booths and ask the man setting up there who I need to see to get one of my own. He directs me to

Marty, a short, well-dressed man with thick, black glasses and neatly coiffed hair. He's all business, efficient and to the point, and I appreciate it.

"Haven't seen anyone new in a long time. You staying for a while?"

"I'm just passing through. I won't be staying long."

"Well, we have a couple of spare booths we keep in case new citizens come to the city, so I'll have the boys set one up for you. Unfortunately, since you're not a citizen, I have to put you at the edge of the market, so you might not get as much traffic as the booths closer to the center."

"Fine with me; I'm not a big fan of crowds anyway."

"Okay, then, great. Just give me ten minutes to set up your booth."

He shakes my hand, and as I walk back to the bus a few seconds later, I think through all my possessions, wondering what might be worth a tire, a rim, and some diesel.

\* \* \*

Gracie loved the marketplace. She loved the sights and sounds of people bartering and selling, the delicious smells of fresh vegetables and roasting meat, the constant moos, baas, and clucks of the livestock and of course, there was Miss Elsie's booth where you could get dolls made from wool yarn. The dolls were so cute and colorful thanks to the dyes Miss Elsie blended into the yarn, and Gracie had wanted one for quite a while now. What excited Gracie the most this day was that Daddy had said there would be a surprise for her, and she had a pretty good feeling she knew what that was.

\* \* \*

The marketplace always made Jonathan nervous. The entire town usually showed up for it, and with five hundred bodies pressing into the square, he always worried about losing track of loved ones, especially Gracie. She had



the standard attention span of a child, and her senses were easily overloaded by the sights, sounds, and smells. Because of this, he'd made a rule that when they were out in the crowd, she had to hook two fingers through the belt loop of his pants and never let go. He constantly felt her tugging as she turned from one sight to another and took great comfort in knowing she was safe.

Since church had taken up the morning, they arrived in the early afternoon, the marketplace already bustling with activity. Jonathan looked at Gracie and gave her a wink that reminded her to hold on to him. He looked back to Mia and Derek, both of them carrying large baskets of vegetables they'd just harvested from their garden. Behind them, Ray and his son Brandon were pulling a makeshift cart piled with more fresh vegetables and some dry goods they'd found a while back when they had once dared to venture outside the walls. Ray's wife, Wanda, walked alongside the bumping cart, humming a hymn as she made sure nothing fell into the dust. After checking in with Marty, he led them to the last empty booth where they could set up shop.

"You guys realize you miss a lot of business when you show up late, right?" asked Marty.

Jonathan smiled. "It's okay, Marty. We don't mind missing the business. You know, you're always welcome to join us any Sunday."

Marty shrugged. "Maybe some time, but not right now."

Jonathan responded with a friendly smile, and Marty slipped away to check on some other vendors. Mia and Derek dropped their baskets inside the booth, and as they unloaded them onto the counter, Jonathan grabbed a bundle of fresh carrots.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said to Mia, then turned to Gracie and grinned. "Why don't you come with me?"

Gracie beamed, barely able to contain her excitement. He suspected she already knew what he was up to, but he wasn't going to give her any satisfaction in knowing. Not just yet.

Customers approached their booth, holding items to trade, so Mia winked and smiled at her husband, then turned her smile to them. Gracie dutifully grabbed Jonathan's belt loop, and they headed off in the direction of Miss Elsie.

As they walked through the market, Jonathan received plenty of offers for his carrots, but he waved them off.

"Sorry, guys, these have a special purpose."

Up ahead, he could see one booth where a large number of people were gathered. When he saw that he and Gracie would have to push through the crowd just to get past it, he turned and lifted her over his head, letting her sit on his shoulders.

"How's the view up there?" he asked.

She giggled. "It's awesome, Daddy."

As he worked his way through the large crowd, he looked to see what all the commotion was about. The booth was manned by a single man, someone Jonathan had never seen before, which in and of itself was very interesting. There hadn't been anyone new in town since the Holbrooks showed up last year. Jonathan wondered how the man had survived out in the cannibal-infested wild.

The stranger was arguing with Rich Dexter, who no doubt was offering some awful trade while acting as if he was doing the guy a favor. Jonathan was all too familiar with Rich's tactics; he'd had to deal with them many times at his own booth. The stranger seemed too smart to fall for Rich's shtick, and based on Rich's expression, he hated it. From what Jonathan could tell, the stranger must have been trying to trade a gun since he could hear words like "automatic" and "magazine" drifting through the crowd noise. His curiosity satisfied, Jonathan continued through the crowd, breaking free of the throng before he headed over to Miss Elsie's booth.

"Hi, Miss Elsie!"

The old woman sat in a rocking chair, her gnarled fingers wrapped around a pair of knitting needles and working feverishly, but her kind, wizened face

looked up when she heard Gracie's greeting. She put down the knitting and stood, a beaming smile dancing on her lips.

"Well, hello, little one! How are you today?"

"I'm fine," Gracie answered as Jonathan set her on the ground.

Gracie rushed to the booth's counter as Jonathan laid the bundle of carrots there.

"Oh, my, don't those look delicious," said Miss Elsie.

"And they're all yours for one doll," smiled Jonathan.

Gracie threw her arms around her father's waist and squeezed as tight as she could.

"Oh, thank you, Daddy! Thank you!"

"That sounds like a good deal to me," said Miss Elsie. "Which one would you like, sweetheart?"

"Do you still have the one in the blue dress with the yellow hair?" Gracie asked with anticipation in her voice.

"Just a second. Let me check."

Miss Elsie rummaged underneath the counter, then produced a doll just as Gracie had described. The little girl squealed with delight.

"What's all the noise here?"

Jonathan looked up as Roger, Miss Elsie's husband, entered the booth with several sheepskin blankets draped over his arms.

"Hey there, Roger, how's the sheep business?"

"Afternoon, Jonathan. Not too bad. I've got some fresh mutton if you've got anything to trade."

"We just might. I'll talk to Mia and we'll get back to you."

Roger nodded, then turned his attention to Gracie.

"And what's got you so excited?"

Gracie proudly showed him the doll. "My daddy just traded for it."

"What? I thought only good girls got dolls!" he said with a sly smile and a wink.

Seeming to miss the joke, Gracie glared at him indignantly. "I *am* a good girl!"

Jonathan patted her shoulder. "Honey, he's teasing you."

"I know, Daddy, I'm just teasing him back."

Roger laughed, and Miss Elsie smiled. Jonathan shook his head and grinned.

"We'd better get back to our booth. It wouldn't be nice to leave all the work to Mommy and Derek."

"Okay, Daddy. Bye, Miss Elsie! Bye, Mr. Roger! Thank you for the doll!"

"Take care, little one," Miss Elsie said as she settled back into her rocking chair.

Clutching the doll in one hand, Gracie slipped two fingers of her other hand through her father's belt loop, and they headed back in the direction they'd come.

\* \* \*

She was such a pretty girl; she had her father's slightly curly brown hair and blue eyes, but the rest of her was like her mother. Her precious, delicate skin was smooth and white, unblemished from age, just the way he liked it. Her light giggle drifted across the square to him, and he relished the sound, reveling in the pure innocence it carried. He felt those urges again, the ones he'd always been told were wrong, but how could they be? He knew he couldn't control them. He'd tried again and again to conform, to give up who he was, only to go back and do it again. Change was hopeless, so he just accepted who he was. But he knew others would not approve, so he kept his secret, hid himself behind the facade of a mild-mannered, plain-looking laborer.

He watched as the girl and her father pushed their way through the crowd and approached Miss Elsie's booth. The father traded some carrots for one of Miss Elsie's yarn dolls, and after the deal and some small talk, they turned to go back the way they came, only this time the girl wasn't on her father's shoulders. She only held onto his belt. He licked his lips in anticipation at the opportunity, then moved forward.

## CHAPTER TWO.

I REALLY CAN'T STAND THIS guy. He's one of those obnoxious know-it-alls who assumes the mind-numbing stupidity of everyone. As far as he's concerned, he's the smartest guy in the room, and apparently that gives him the right to talk down to everyone. I don't understand why people are like that. It's probably rooted in some kind of severe insecurity, but it just makes you instantly unlikable. This guy needs to shut up and go away.

I'm trying to trade the M4 I took from the cannibal, and based on the crowd in front of me, you'd think I was trading the last gun on Earth. I've made it clear that I'm looking for fuel and tires, but this guy, Rich something-or-other, thinks he can talk me into something else.

"Come on, be reasonable! I've got some rabbits. You like rabbit meat? You should take some meat. Everybody has to eat. One rabbit for the gun. Come on! That's a good deal! You're not very good at this are you?"

I glare at this loudmouth, and it's enough to shut him up.

"Get away from me, or I will hurt you," I growl.

"C'mon, buddy! I'm just tryin' to do some business!"

He turns with a huff and walks away, and it feels absolutely joyous to watch him go. The throng of people behind him presses in close around me, and the sound of too many

voices degrades into an incoherent babble. I sigh, remembering why I travel alone.

Stepping back to give myself a quick mental break, I glance to the right and see a man standing by himself. He loiters in the shade, under an awning, trying not to draw attention to himself, but failing miserably as he shuffles anxiously from foot to foot. He stands slightly hunched over, wringing his hands as he stares at a man carrying a small girl on his shoulders. His pointed nose and beady eyes give him an almost rat-like appearance. I can practically read his mind as he stares lustfully at the girl, but as long as he only looks and doesn't touch, he's harmless.

I turn back to the crowd where some guy thinks two heads of lettuce would be a great trade for the M4. Someone get me out of here.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, just as I'm ready to start punching idiots, I hear the distinct, panicked cries of a distressed parent.

"Gracie? Where are you? Gracie?"

I see the man from earlier who was carrying his daughter on his shoulders. He's near the edge of the crowd, turning this way and that, wearing panic and desperation on his face. When I realize he's searching for his daughter, I glance to my right to check on the predator. He's gone.

I don't see a sign of him or the girl anywhere, but it makes sense he would take her away from the marketplace and the bustling crowds to do whatever awful things he's planning. I scan the area behind me where the marketplace ends, and the high-hanging sun reveals shadows dancing, or maybe struggling, between two of the buildings.

I pick up the M4 and move toward those shadows. A few of the idiots protest, but I'm too busy ignoring them.

I sling the rifle over my shoulder and jog the twenty or so yards to the movement I spotted. As I reach the building, I flatten myself against the side and peer carefully around the corner. The predator's there, holding the girl, his dirty hand clamped over her mouth as he struggles to get her under control. She does her best to kick and punch him, but she can't get enough leverage to cause him any real pain. I can tell from the way he holds her that she's not his first. This will be the last time this creep tries to hurt a kid.

"Stop it! Stop it, or I'll kill you!" he hisses at her.

As he turns his back to me, I step out and come up behind him. As soon as I grab his arm, he squeals in terror, and I cut the squeal to a strangled scream by smashing my forearm across his throat and driving him back against the wall. The girl goes racing out into the open, screaming for her father.

Her screams alert the rest of the community, and before long, several people, including the girl's father, come running into the alley. The father approaches us, his eyes, bearing a combination of anger and disappointment, fixed on the kidnapper.

"Anthony, I had answers for you," he says through clenched teeth, "I could have helped you."

The kidnapper can't speak as I'm crushing his throat. The father looks at me.

"Thank you for saving my daughter."

"Yeah, sure."

"You could probably stop choking him. He's not going anywhere."

"Are you the authority around here?"

"No, I'm not."

"Then you don't get to give me orders."

Before the father can speak again, two men, armed with billy clubs, push through the crowd into the alley, one of them dangling a pair of handcuffs. I take my arm off the kidnapper's throat, and he collapses to the ground, gasping for breath.

"We'll take it from here," says one of the men.

They cuff the dirtbag and drag him roughly out into the street, smacking him hard over the head as they go. The father follows them.

"Come on now, Randy. I know Anthony's done a terrible thing, but that doesn't mean we need to give up our civility."

"Sorry, Reverend," says the cop named Randy. "You know the rules; baby rapers get no mercy."

The father bristles and gives Randy an exasperated look. "I told you I'm not a reverend. And I'm as outraged as anybody over what he's done, but he's still a person with God-given rights."

"Hey, take it up with the council. I'm just doing my job."

They drag the dirtbag away as most of the crowd begins to boo and throw things at him. I'm glad to see people can still be morally outraged in this new world.

\* \* \*

Jonathan held Gracie as tight as he could without hurting her. She had her arms wrapped around his neck, her little body still tense with fear.

"Careful, honey," he choked out. "Don't strangle me."

"Sorry, Daddy, but I was *so* scared!"

"I know, but you're safe now."



Jonathan still couldn't shake the terror he'd felt when he'd turned and seen Gracie's doll lying in the dirt. He'd felt that kind of sick panic once before when Derek was little and had disappeared in a department store. But this was different. Derek had only been in the next aisle over while Gracie had been in the hands of Anthony, someone Jonathan had tried to share the Gospel with last year until he'd stopped showing up for his counseling appointments. Regardless of the circumstances, losing one of his children was one of his greatest fears, and he'd come far too close this time.

He saw Derek and Mia sprinting towards them, followed closely behind by Ray. Derek reached them first, then stopped with his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

"Is she okay?" he gasped.

Mia and Ray arrived just as Jonathan answered. "She's fine; he didn't hurt her."

"Oh, thank you, Lord," said Mia.

"We heard it was Anthony Cartwright," said Ray. "Is that true?"

Jonathan nodded. "It is. I could choke him, but at the same time my heart is heavy. I really tried to help him."

"Well, you know how it is. Some people just don't want to be free of their burdens."

"I know, Ray, and it breaks my heart."

"How did she get away?" asked Mia.

Jonathan pointed to the large, muscular stranger with the crewcut who was pushing through the crowd of curious onlookers as he walked back towards his booth.

"It was him. I guess he must've seen Anthony take her."

Mia left and ran after the stranger. Jonathan watched as she caught up to him and put a hand on his arm. The stranger turned, and they exchanged some words. The stranger gave a grim smile and nodded to accept her thanks. They spoke a bit more, then the stranger stood awkwardly as Mia hugged him and let him go on his way.

She came back, picked up Gracie, and hugged her.

“What did the man say, Mommy?”

“His name is Doyle. And he’ll be joining us for dinner.”

“I gotta get back to my booth,” said Ray. “Poor Brandon’s running it by himself.”

“And Wanda’s running ours,” said Mia.

Jonathan took Gracie from Mia and kissed her face, then set her on the ground.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” he said to her, then looked up at his family. “I’m going to go see what happens to Anthony.”

“Can I come too, Dad?” asked Derek.

“Sorry, buddy, but you should stay and help your mom with the booth.”

Derek looked downcast but responded with, “Okay, Dad.”

Jonathan gave his son a hug and said, “Thank you for helping.”

He then headed off to watch the town council decide Anthony’s fate.

\* \* \*

As I head back to my booth, I feel a hand on my arm. From the delicate touch, I know it’s someone harmless, probably a woman, so I resist my jujitsu training to grab the wrist and throw. I turn and look down into the alabaster face of a beautiful woman who looks to be somewhere in her early forties. Her long black hair cascades around her shoulders and down her back, and her chocolate eyes gaze at me with a deep soulfulness. She smiles with a genuine warmth that most people seem to be missing these days.

“I wanted to thank you for saving my daughter.”

I’ve never been the most socially adept person, so I only manage an awkward grimace and a nod. It doesn’t faze her, and she keeps going.

“My name is Mia. Mia Willoughby. What’s yours?”

“Doyle,” I croak. “Call me Doyle.”

"Well, Doyle, I insist you join us for dinner. You know, so we can properly thank you."

I can see in her face that she won't accept anything except a "yes," so I nod.

"Okay."

I stand awkwardly with my arms at my side as she grabs me in a hug.

"We live there," she says, pointing to an apartment building towering over the rest of the town. "Number 604. Come anytime you like."

I nod, and she heads back to her family. I turn back to my booth where a stranger waits for me. He extends his hand to me, so I take it in a firm grip and a shake.

"Name's Dave Lang. And you are?"

"Call me Doyle."

"Okay, Doyle. I'm here on behalf of the town council. You saved the Willoughby girl, right?"

I nod, cursing myself, knowing what's coming next.

"We'd like you to explain to the council what happened. We don't do trials or anything, but the council likes to hear from everyone involved before they make a decision, especially on a charge this serious."

I don't want to go. It ruins any chance of trading the M4 today, and I just want to get back on the road. But I also believe in justice and refusing to tell my story runs the risk of that pervert going free. It kills me, but I tell Dave I'll be there. He flashes a big grin, then points across the marketplace to a run-down public library where the council meets.

"We'll see you shortly," he says before he walks away.

I'm really hating the cannibal who popped my tire right about now. It's a good thing for him that he's dead.

\* \* \*

By the time Jonathan reached the meeting hall, the proceedings had started. Anthony sat handcuffed to a straight-backed chair, slumped with his chin to his chest. The four council members huddled together, whispering. Jonathan walked over to Anthony and stared at him, feeling a conflicting blend of anger and pity.

"Hello, Anthony."

Anthony looked up, then turned away.

"Don't look at me. I know how angry you must be."

A lump rose in Jonathan's throat. He swallowed it down.

"I *am* angry, Anthony, and you deserve whatever punishment the council hands down. But more than anything I'm disappointed. I pointed you to Christ, and you rejected Him for your flesh."

Anthony slowly turned his head, his expression revealing just how much pain he felt.

"I'm so sorry, Jonathan. You were the only person who was a friend to me, and I . . . I tried to hurt your daughter. You should be screaming in my face right now."

"Anthony, I *want* to scream in your face. It's taking a lot for me to control myself right now. But instead, I'm going to remind you that it's not too late. That guilt you're feeling? It's the conviction of your sin. Even in a hopeless moment like this one, Christ can save you. Just repent of your sin and put your faith in Him."

Anthony shook his head.

"I've done terrible things to children . . . a lot of children. There can't possibly be a place for me with God."

Before Jonathan could respond, the door burst open and the stranger, Doyle, walked into the room. He stopped and surveyed the room, then made his way over to the council.

“Can we get this done quickly? I’ve got some business to conduct.”

The council ended their conversation, and they all took seats at a long table.

“Of course, Mr. Doyle,” said Dave Lang. “Let’s get to it. Tell us what happened.”

Doyle nodded, then pointed to Anthony. “I saw that man in the alley, trying to kidnap a little girl. I confronted him and pinned him to the wall until the authorities arrived.”

Each member of the council nodded as they came together again, speaking in more whispers. Jonathan looked at Doyle, who seemed uninterested in the proceedings. After a few moments, the council separated, and Dave spoke to Anthony.

“Anthony, you were up front with us about what you were when you first showed up here. While we appreciate that honesty, it doesn’t justify your actions, especially since you assured us you could keep your impulses in check. I’m sorry, but the council is unanimous that you should be executed.”

Anthony exhaled a sad, whimpering sigh. Jonathan looked at him, then stepped forward.

“Wait a minute, guys. I know what our city laws say, but he doesn’t need to be killed, at least not right away. If he turns to Christ, he can kill these desires, and then he won’t be a danger to anyone anymore. I can give him the Gospel, and it can truly change him.”

“Jonathan, it was your daughter he kidnapped. How can you defend him?”

“I’m not defending him, Dave. Anthony committed a grievous sin, and I’m just as outraged as you are. By the grace of God, Gracie wasn’t hurt, so I’m just asking the council to hold off on execution, so I can talk with Anthony and point him to the Gospel. I know Christ can help him overcome these desires. Let him serve a sentence in our jail where I can meet with him. After all, we didn’t execute pedophiles in the old world.”

"Yeah, but we should have," grumbled one of the other council members.

After shushing the rest of the council, Dave looked at Jonathan and asked, "Haven't you already been counseling him?"

"Well, yeah. I did for a little over a year."

"Did?" asked Dave, "Is he still coming to you?"

"Well, no, he stopped coming. But that doesn't mean—"

"Then it would seem that Anthony has no real desire to be free from whatever you think he has. Jonathan, the council appreciates the work you do here in our town. Your church helps provide a moral center, so we can have a civilized and just society. But there are some who are beyond help, and we on the council all agree that Anthony is one of those people. I'm sorry, but the verdict stands."

Sadness gripped Jonathan's soul even as his sense of justice felt satisfied. He turned to Anthony as the two policemen unlocked his handcuffs and stood him up.

"Anthony, just know that, as hard as it is for me, I forgive you. And God is ready to wipe your sin away once you trust in Christ. Please don't let yourself die without turning to Him."

The two policemen took him away. As Jonathan watched them leave, he sensed Doyle standing next to him.

"What's the method of execution here?" asked Doyle.

"An awful one," answered Jonathan. "They'll break both his legs and then dump him outside the gate for the cannibals to grab. God only knows what terrible things they'll do to him."

"Sounds pretty terrible, but your little girl is safe, and justice has been served, right?"

Jonathan sighed. "Yeah, it has." He looked at Doyle. "Thanks again for saving Gracie," he said. "I'll see you at dinner."

He walked out before Doyle could respond.

I really don't understand this guy's problem. A pervert kidnaps his daughter, and he's trying to save the guy's life? Who does that? Who in their right mind can stand before a pedophile and forgive him for what he's done? He may be a good man, but he seems misguided to me.

After a short nap on my bus, I clean up with a package of baby wipes before heading to the Willoughby's home. I have no trouble finding the apartment thanks to Gracie waiting at the top of the stairs. She grabs me in a fierce hug.

"Hi, Mr. Doyle! I'm so glad you're here!"

I give her an awkward pat on the back and say, "So, where do you live?"

"This way," she answers, grabbing my hand, dragging me down the hallway.

She bursts through a door into a small living room where Jonathan and Derek sit talking. Jonathan stands up and greets me with an outstretched hand and a wide smile.

"Good to see you, Doyle. Welcome to our home."

I shake his hand as well as Derek's, and they lead me into the kitchen where Mia places a steaming pot of stew on the table.

"Hello, Mr. Doyle. You're right on time."

"You're next to me, Mr. Doyle!" says Gracie, pointing at the chair next to hers.

Why am I not surprised?

The four of them sit and join hands around the table, and I reluctantly slip between Jonathan and Gracie, taking their waiting hands. Gracie gives me a fierce squeeze which, coming from her tiny hand, feels more like a pinch.

“Let’s thank the Lord,” says Jonathan, and the rest of the family bows their heads. Jonathan notices me looking around but says nothing and begins to pray.

“Gracious Father, we come before you in a spirit of thankfulness. We’re thankful for many things, such as the food on our table, the clothes on our backs, the roof over our heads. We’re thankful for our new friend Doyle and how You used him to rescue Gracie from certain danger. And most of all, we thank You for the cross. We thank You for loving us despite our sinfulness and giving Your Son who gave up everything so that we might have a place in Your kingdom. You gave us so much then, and You still give to us now. You truly are a gracious and merciful God, and we can never say enough ‘thank yous’ but we say them anyway. Thank You, Lord, for all You have done and continue to do. Amen.”

The rest of family whispers, “Amen,” as they drop hands and take seats at the table.

Mia ladles stew into bowls while Jonathan places a loaf of fresh bread and a ceramic crock of butter on the table. The first bowl comes to me, and the aroma coming up from it makes my mouth water. For a guy who’s been living on MREs and canned goods for several years, a meal like this is a treasure. Derek takes the loaf of bread and passes it to me. I tear off a hunk; it has a crusty outside but a soft and tender inside, telling me just how good it will taste. The butter comes along too, something I haven’t seen in several years.

“You guys have butter?” I ask, unable to hide my surprise.

“A family in town has a few milk cows,” says Mia. “They churn it themselves. Try some. You’ll love it.”



I pick up my knife, grab a large dollop, and smear it across the bread. Gracie takes a hunk of bread as well and drops it into her stew.

"I like to dunk mine," she says.

I nod and follow suit, taking a bite of buttered bread soaked in beef broth. It's fantastic.

Everyone eats, their enjoyment obvious. This woman can cook.

"So, you like the stew, Doyle?" asks Jonathan.

"It's the best thing I've had in a long time," I answer, looking at Mia. "Thank you."

"I'll give the thanks, Mr. Doyle. You gave us back our daughter," she says.

I let the table fall into an awkward silence which Derek breaks when he asks, "What's that tattoo?"

I look down at my left arm where the sleeve of my T-shirt partially covers a faded tattoo of an eagle clutching an anchor, a trident, and an antique pistol in its talons. I haven't really looked at it or thought about it in years.

"Derek," says Jonathan, "we don't need to pry into Mr. Doyle's personal stuff."

"It's all right," I say. "I'm proud of this tattoo. I got it once I completed my SEAL training."

The family looks at me with surprised awe. Confused, Gracie asks, "You trained seals?"

Her question breaks the ice and both Mia and Jonathan chuckle. Even I crack a smile.

"No, honey," says Jonathan. "He was a Navy SEAL. They were special, highly trained soldiers in the old world."

"The best of the best," continues Derek. "You had to be super tough to make it as a SEAL, right, Mr. Doyle?"

"A lot more flunked out than made it," I answer. "But that was a long time ago. A lifetime ago."

"Were you a soldier in the war?" asks Gracie.

Funny how kids always get right to the point.

"No. I'd already retired by then, but I have fought in wars."

She gives me a serious look of concern. "Have you ever killed anybody?"

"Okay, Gracie, that's enough," says Jonathan. "Let's change the subject."

Mia concurs with a nod and asks, "So where did you come from, Mr. Doyle?"

All these questions make me uncomfortable. I've spent the better part of the last decade keeping myself at a distance from people. The less they know about me, the better, but since I don't want to upset these nice people, I make my reply as polite as I can.

"I'm sorry. I don't like to talk about my past, especially not with people I barely know."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Doyle. I didn't mean to pry," she says, and now I feel like a terrible person. These people are way too nice for their own good.

"Our apologies, Mr. Doyle," says Jonathan. "Your business is your business, but we are curious about what brought you into town."

I guess I can answer this one.

"First of all, it's just Doyle, no mister needed. A cannibal buried an axe head in one of my tires. I bent the rim getting

it here, so I need to replace them both. I could also use some diesel, too. My tank's running pretty low."

"So that's why you were trying to trade that gun?"

I nod. "But I've had zero luck. Seems nobody around here has what I need."

"We have some diesel," Derek blurts out, and Jonathan gives him a stern look.

"Derek, remember that we don't know Mr.—I mean, Doyle that well."

"So what? He saved Gracie's life. That makes him a good guy in my book."

"You have diesel?" I ask, surprised.

Jonathan sighs. "Our church has two fifty-gallon drums that we've been sitting on in case the right trade came along. We salvaged them a while back from a trucking company, before the cannibal population started to build up around here."

"Well, that would solve half my problem."

"What about the church bus, dad? It's just sitting there with a busted engine."

Jonathan rolls his eyes. "Derek, you are terrible at keeping secrets."

"Sorry, Dad, but I just want to help Mr. Doyle."

"I know, son. And I think we should if we can."

"I guess I rolled into the right town," I say.

"That's just the Lord at work, Doyle. He brought you right where you needed to be."

I look at him, feeling confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, a cannibal pops your tire, and you end up here. Then you end up saving the life of a little girl who's connected to

everything you need. That's God at work. It's His plan that you're here."

"Oh, really?" I ask, slightly irritated, "So was it God's plan for the cannibals to kill the two people traveling with me, too?"

The room goes dead silent except for the quiet tick-tock of a clock on the wall. Finally, Jonathan sighs and speaks.

"I'm sorry to hear that happened, Doyle. Sometimes I say things without thinking how the other person might feel or what they've been through. I'm sorry. You ask a tough question that has a tough answer for someone who doesn't have faith in Christ."

"Whatever. Apology accepted," I answer, not wanting to go down this path with him. "What can we do to get me back on the road?"

"I have to talk with the church elders. The diesel and the tire belong to the church, not us. We can chat with them tomorrow. I'll be happy to introduce you."

I nod, and we all go back to our bowls of stew. We eat in silence now. My little outburst has broken the conversation. Even Gracie eats quietly. My lack of social graces wins again.

\* \* \*

Jonathan felt terrible for upsetting Doyle. He believed the truth, but sometimes he forgot not everyone shared those beliefs. As a favor, he offered to walk back to the bus with Doyle, so he could check the size of the tire and help speed up Doyle's departure.

They walked in silence until Doyle said, "So, can I ask you a hard question?" "Of course. Ask away."

"Why'd you go to bat for that pervert? He kidnapped your daughter. He would have done terrible things to her."

"I can give you an answer, but I'm not sure you'll accept it."

"Try me."

"Right this second, there's hate in my heart for Anthony. He tried to hurt my little girl and forgiving him for that was one of the hardest things I've ever done. It was also hard to stand up for him, but it was the right thing to do. He needs Jesus, just like everyone else, and I wanted to make that clear to him before he died in his sins."

"So, you don't think he got what he deserved?"

"I'll say this. I don't like the methods of justice used here. They're cruel, barbaric, and pretty much an act of torture. If we have execution as a consequence, it should be quick and easy, like a bullet to the head. But you asked if Anthony got what he deserved, and my answer to that is that I think he got what we all deserve. Death and separation from God is the curse we're all born under."

"Wait, are you saying we're the same as him? That you and I are as bad as that pervert?"

"Well, we've all done bad things. The things Anthony has done are worse than things you or I have done, but in the end, no one will be able to stand before God and claim their own righteousness. We're all guilty from the start."

Doyle fell quiet, seeming to think through Jonathan's words.

"You're wrong," he said finally. "I can't accept that answer."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Doyle."

They arrived at the bus, and Jonathan marveled at Doyle's setup.

"Wow. You're like a Boy Scout with all this gear."

"Yeah, I may not be a SEAL anymore, but I still think like one. I prepare for anything I can think of."

Doyle checked the tire size and scribbled it down on a scrap of paper while Jonathan ran his hand over the bus's aluminum siding armor, imagining how well it must hold off cannibal attacks.

"So, this armor stops bullets?"

“For the most part. Depends on the type of bullet and how much kick the gun has.”

An idea crept into Jonathan’s head, and the more he thought about it, the more excited he felt. He took the scrap of paper from Doyle.

“I’ll talk to the elders tomorrow, then I’ll come find you.”

Doyle nodded, and Jonathan headed back home, his heart and brain bubbling with excitement. He couldn’t wait to tell Mia about his idea.

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—Eric

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