

LAMENTATIONS FOR THE FALLEN

BOOK TWO: RECKONING



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Acknowledgments

All glory, honor, and praise to the King, my Savior, Jesus Christ.

I would like to thank my fantastic editing team, Catherine Goodwin, Sherrill Hesler, Robbie Seal, and Claudine Allison.

CHAPTER 1

Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness.

Psalm 112:4a NKJV

Caleb winced, bracing for the impact as Slice drew back to strike him in the face once more. Dressed like an expensive call girl, Penelope sipped her champagne and cheered on the bald-headed muscular brute. “That’s it. Hit him again!”

Z-Bub, the tattooed drug dealer, laughed and clapped his hands. “We got to come up with another nickname for you, Babyface. Your eye is swolled up like a grapefruit. You’re gonna be flat ugly by the time Slice gets done with you.”

“Caleb,” said a sweet familiar voice.

He awoke, startled from the nightmare. His body jerked as his mind snapped back to reality. He panted, remembering that Z-Bub and Slice were both dead.

Bristol’s hands were on the steering wheel. “Are you okay?” She glanced over at him. “You look upset.”

He wondered for a moment if Penelope would be okay. He shook it off. “I’m alright. Where are we?”

“Ten minutes from Flagstaff. I thought it might be a good spot to stop for the night.”

The dream dissipated and his heart rate slowed. “Sure. What time is it?” He peered out at the dark desert landscape.

“Almost one o’clock. I saw a sign for a Cracker Barrel in Flagstaff. We can get a good breakfast in the morning before we get back on the road.”

“What’s a Cracker Barrel?”

She appeared amused. “Seriously?”

He felt bewildered. “Yeah.”

“Is this your first road trip ever?”

He lowered his gaze. “My mom wasn’t big on vacations.”

“I’m sorry.” She reached over and put her hand on his forearm. “Then we’ll make this the best road trip ever.”

She pointed to a billboard on the side of the interstate that was advertising a cheap motel. “What about that place? It looks decent.”

“Okay.”

“Have you thought about how you’re going to book a room?” Bristol inquired. “The police could be looking for you.”

“I have a fake ID,” said Caleb.

“Of course you do,” said Bristol. “But what about payment? They usually want a credit card.”

“I bought some prepaid cards back in Barstow,” Caleb replied.

“That was smart.” Bristol followed the exit and pulled into the hotel parking lot.

The hotel was middle-of-the-road, neither overly fancy nor hideously dilapidated. Caleb stepped out of the vehicle and inspected the mostly-empty parking lot. “We shouldn’t have any trouble getting a room.”

Bristol closed the door of her Kia. “Should we bring our bags now?”

“Maybe a couple of things. I’ll come back for the rest after the room is booked.”

Bristol retrieved her pillow and a pink backpack from the back seat. “This is all I need.”

Caleb slung his pack over his shoulder and walked toward the hotel. He surveyed the surrounding area. “I’d feel safer bringing everything in.”

“Do you think someone would break in and steal the rest of our luggage?” Bristol followed close behind him.

“I’ve never lived in a place where you could leave things in your car without them being ripped off. I don’t want to take a chance.”

They walked through the door and approached the front desk. The attendant wasn’t present. Bristol rang the bell sitting on the counter.

Soon, a sleepy clerk appeared. He looked a little older than Caleb and Bristol. He wore glasses, had shaggy hair, and patchy razor stubble on his chin. “Can I help you?”

“We’d like a room.” Caleb slid his fake ID across the counter.

The young man began typing information into his computer. “Just one night?”

“Yes,” Bristol answered. “But we need two beds.”

The young man paused from his work. He looked past the top of his glasses at Caleb as if partially expecting him to oppose the curious request. When no contradiction was made, the young man went back to typing. “That will be three hundred and ten dollars. We give a five percent discount if you pay in Fedcoin.”

“Wow,” Bristol said quietly.

“That’s fine.” Caleb handed the attendant a prepaid card.

The man ran the card. “Check out is at ten.” He programmed two room keycards and handed them to Caleb.

“Room 209. The elevator is down the hall on the right.”

“Thanks.” Caleb passed one of the cards to Bristol and led the way toward the elevator, which took them to the second floor. Caleb walked down the hall and opened the door to the room.

Bristol walked in timidly. “It looks clean.”

“I’ll take the bed closest to the door if that’s okay with you,” said Caleb. “In case there’s trouble.”

“Sure.” She tossed her pillow on the farthest bed.

“You’ve gotta be tired,” said Caleb. “I’ll bring up the rest of our things. You can get a shower and get ready for bed if you want.”

“I can help,” she said.

“Let me. I don’t mind.”

“I feel guilty,” she replied. “I brought a lot of stuff.”

“I had a nap,” said Caleb. “Really, it’s no trouble at all.”

“Okay, then.” She unzipped her pink backpack. “Thanks.”

“I’ll be right back.” Caleb placed his bag by the bed and then proceeded to bring in the rest of the bags. He grabbed a luggage cart in the lobby and wheeled it out to the vehicle. He opened the trunk. *She brought a lot of stuff.* He felt a grin coming across his face. *She’s thinking about staying in Tennessee.* The smile faded as he loaded the bags onto the cart. *Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.* Once the trunk was clear, Caleb looked around the parking lot to be sure he wasn’t being watched. Feeling confident that he was alone in the dark lot, he lifted the cover of the spare tire compartment and retrieved his stash of money and gold. He let down the cover and closed the trunk. Next, he pushed the cart back to the hotel, up the elevator, and into the room. He unloaded his haul and returned the cart to the lobby.

When he finally arrived back at the room, he began getting ready for bed. He placed his pistol on the nightstand.

The bathroom door opened and Bristol came out. She was dressed modestly in a pink sweatsuit and was drying her hair with a towel. “Is that the gun you killed Z-Pak with?”

Caleb turned to see her staring at the weapon. “His name was Z-Bub, but yeah.”

“Oh, right.” She continued looking at it.

“Is it bothering you?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’ve never seen a gun in real life before—except in a cop’s holster or something.”

“I could put a t-shirt over it if that helps,” he said. “But I think we need to have it close by. The bad guys have guns. They’re not nervous around firearms, so we can’t afford to be either. At least I can’t.”

She sighed, still looking at the pistol. “No, it’s fine. I guess I’ve been conditioned to be afraid of guns.”

“Do you think holding it would help you get past your fear?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’d be getting my fingerprints on a murder weapon.”

“Technically, it’s a self-defense weapon, and I’ll wipe it down after you handle it. Plus, who’s to say you know anything about that incident? I won’t tell if you don’t.”

She pressed her lips together. “Can you take the bullets out before I hold it?”

“Sure.” Caleb dropped the magazine on the bed then ejected the round in the chamber. He walked the pistol over to where she was standing. “Hold it tightly with your right hand, pressing the side of your thumb up against the back. Hold your left hand straight, bring it up to the trigger guard, then wrap your fingers around the outside of your right hand and press both hands together. Put your left foot forward, lean into it, and raise the pistol until the front sight lines up with the rear. Then, squeeze the trigger—don’t pull it.” The gun clicked. Caleb racked the slide and handed it to Bristol.

She attempted to mimic his actions. “Like that?”

He took the Glock from her. “Good, but did you see how far the barrel moved up when you pulled the trigger?”

He racked the gun again and gave it back to her. Once she held the pistol level, Caleb placed the loose round standing up on the top of the gun near the front sight. “Now, try to squeeze it without making the bullet fall off the top.”

She was much smoother with her motion. The bullet jiggled but remained standing on the flat surface of the slide. “How was that?”

“Way better,” he said. “Good job.”

She handed him the Glock. “That’s enough for today. But we’ve got time. I’ll let you give me some more pointers later on. Who taught you to shoot?”

“YouTube.” He placed the loose round back in the magazine, slapped the mag into the butt of the gun, and racked the slide.

She pulled the covers down on her bed and crawled in. “I’m surprised YouTube allows videos like that.”

“Yeah. I’m sure they’ll pull that type of content at some point. That’s why we have to learn all we can while it’s still available.”

She adjusted her pillow and pulled the covers up to her shoulders. “If you want to take a shower or watch TV, it won’t bother me. But I can’t keep my eyes open any longer. Good night.”

He placed the gun back on the nightstand. “Good night, Bristol. And thanks again.”

“For what?” She rolled over to face him.

“For coming with me.”

“Are you kidding? I’m the one who should be thanking you. I love a good road trip.” She winked and rolled back over. “Besides, you’re paying me to be here.”

“Yeah, right.” He watched her for a moment then went to the bathroom to take a shower.

CHAPTER 2

Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.

Lamentations 5:7

After his shower, Caleb crawled into bed. He looked across the room at Bristol sleeping soundly. He closed his eyes but could not sleep. He considered turning on the television but did not want to risk disturbing Bristol, despite her assurances that it would not wake her.

He picked up his new phone and found the *Word for Today* app. He whispered to himself, “I should download some teachings while I have a connection. It looks like we’ve got a couple of days’ worth of driving with spotty cell service.” Caleb downloaded the remaining chapters of Matthew.

He glanced at his backpack while he waited for the lessons to load. He got up and retrieved the letter that he’d taken from his mother’s effects. He lifted the back flap of the envelope and looked inside. His finger ran along the crease of the paper therein. He felt a sense of hesitancy before extracting the message. Nevertheless, he pulled the note from its tomb where it had laid in repose for untold years.

Caleb swallowed hard, unfolded the letter, and pushed aside his apprehension. His heartbeat quickened. He worried about the unsettling facts the message might reveal. His hand

quivered and he sensed a pang of guilt for reading his mother's private things.

Caleb willed his eyes to read the first line.

Dear Claire,

Your father and I are heartbroken. You're our only child, and we'll always love you. Likewise, you'll always have a home here, and so will your baby. However, we can no longer be willing participants in your self-destructive behavior, especially now that another human being is involved.

We cannot send you any more money. No matter the amount, you always seem to need more. We were so proud of you when you first told us that you were pregnant and that you had determined to get sober for the baby's sake. However, when I spoke to you on the phone last night, it was apparent that you'd started using again. Forgive me for being so upset on the phone, but the disappointment was overwhelming.

Even so, we are not giving up on you, and you should not give up either. You're seven months in and only have another eight weeks until the baby is born. Please, Claire, for the child's sake, get yourself sober. If the baby is born with some kind of handicap because of your drug use, you'll never be able to forgive yourself. You've come so far. I know you can do it.

Your father and I want to reiterate the offer we made to you back when you first told us you were expecting. We'll pay for you to go to a year-long residential rehabilitation program where you can get professional help with your addiction.

Also, once the baby comes, I'll care for the child until you complete the program. I know it will be hard to be away from your newborn, but I'll bring the baby to visit every day if the facility will allow it. It's the best thing for everyone, for you, for the baby, and even for your father and me, both as your parents and as the baby's grandparents.

Then, when you're back on your feet, I'll be here to help you raise the baby while you figure out what you want to do with your life. We'll help with college or vocational training, or you can just be a stay-at-home mom for a while. Whatever you want to do, we'll support you. Just come home, please.

Additionally, we want you to know we don't put all the blame on you. Dad and I accept our part of the responsibility for you having fallen in with the wrong crowd. We took you to church growing up but never read the Bible at home. I suppose we farmed out your spiritual education as well as your secular education. We regret sending you to public school where you picked up your atheistic worldview.

Both of us worked all the time, and you received little attention from either of us. As you grew older, you blossomed into a stunning young woman. God blessed you with a gorgeous face and a beautiful body. Your physical features got you the attention that you were missing at home. Not only were the boys crazy about you, but all the popular girls wanted you in their clique.

You fell in with the wildest girls on the cheerleading squad, and your father and I allowed it. We should have put our foot down then, but we were too busy to see just how destructive of an influence those girls would become.

We regret giving you money to move to California. We regret the thousands and thousands we sent for acting classes, clothes, apartments, and everything else that has enabled you to slip further and further down into your addictive lifestyle. We're sorry that we messed up.

But better late than never. It's time for us to do what we should have done years ago. It's time for us to say "no more." No more money, nor more anything until you come home and get sober. I'm praying to God that you will see the wisdom in this choice and that you'll be calling us very soon.

Once you make that decision, we'll overnight a plane ticket for you and pick you up at the airport. We'll receive you and your baby with open arms. We believe in second chances and

grace, and hope you do too. Because your father and I want the opportunity to start over as well.

We love you, Claire. I pray for you every night, and I pray for your baby from the time I wake up in the morning until I cry myself to sleep at night. Please, come home.

Love,

Mama

Caleb fought to hold down his sobs. He didn't want to awaken Bristol, especially like this. He crumpled the letter as he silently mouthed the words, "Why, why, why?"

Why didn't Mom just go home all those years ago? Why didn't she tell me about these people? Why did she have to die and leave me all alone?

He dried his eyes and pondered the enigma of his predicament. *Maybe she couldn't stand the thought of being away from me after I was born. Maybe after they cut her off, she started doing things for money that she regretted. Maybe she thought she couldn't look them in the eye after she'd done those things.*

He sighed and looked toward heaven. *Oh, God, how did things get so messed up down here? Why do You let people go through so much?*

He smoothed out the crumpled letter. *I wonder if Mom ever called them again after this letter. Do they know I was born? He refolded the letter and put it back in the envelope. Or if I turned out to be a boy or a girl? Or, if so, what my name is?*

He gazed at the address on the envelope. *I guess I'll find out soon enough.*

Caleb tucked the letter back into his pack., turned off the light, and fell asleep.

“Hey sleepyhead,” said Bristol. “I made you coffee.”

He felt her hand resting on his shoulder. He rolled over to see she was sitting on the side of the bed. He smelled the warm coffee and sat up.

Bristol took a sip from her own steaming paper cup and smiled. “Did anyone ever tell you that you’re adorable when you’re sleeping?”

“No.” He blushed and fought a grin. “Adorable, huh?”

Her cheeks reddened, and she turned away. “Don’t read too much into that. Baby birds are adorable also, and as you can see I don’t have any baby birds.”

“But you did bring a lot of luggage.” He took a sip of the freshly brewed coffee.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you complaining about having to lug it up the elevator? I offered to help bring it in.”

“Easy, tiger,” he said. “I’m just pointing out the fact that it’s a lot of stuff for a road trip. It’s more like what one might expect for a permanent relocation.”

She shook her head. “It’s a *cross-country* road trip. Besides, I’ve never been accused of traveling light. I could have told you *that* before we ever agreed to this excursion.”

“Just admit that it’s not completely off the table,” he said.

“I think you need to be happy with *adorable* for the time being.” She slapped his thigh. “Come on, get up. I’m hungry for breakfast.”

Caleb hadn’t won that round, but he hadn’t lost either. He rolled out of bed and got ready with a spring in his step.

Once the car was loaded, Caleb took the wheel. “Do you trust me to drive in town?”

She shrugged. “It’s your car, isn’t it?”

“I guess so.” He turned the ignition switch.

“You did fine yesterday on the highway. Anyway, you don’t want to see how bad of a driver I am when I’m hungry.”

“I’m excited about Cracker Barrel.” He put the Kia into reverse.

“Don’t be.”

He pulled out of the parking lot. “Why? I thought you said it was good.”

“It is—if you’re not expecting too much. Kinda like a summer action movie. If you go into the theater with high expectations, you’ll be disappointed every time. But if you go in not expecting much, sometimes you’re pleasantly surprised. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so. You’ve got me worried about the place now.”

“Good,” she said with an air of satisfaction. “In that case, you’ll like it.”

He furrowed his brow over the convoluted reasoning and pulled onto the road. Caleb looked down to see the red indicator light for the fuel gauge. “Whoa! We better get gas. I’m glad I saw that before we got back on the interstate.”

“Empty? That’s impossible. I filled up in Ash Fork. You were asleep. I didn’t wake you.”

“You filled up?” he inquired. “With what money?”

“I have money. I sold my car to some chump who gave me way more than it was worth.”

Caleb pursed his lips. “You should have woken me up and asked me for cash.”

She shook her head. “Kinda goes back to that adorable thing. I couldn’t bring myself to wake you.”

He smiled as he pulled into the gas station. “Or you could have at least asked me to reimburse you when we got to the hotel. This is supposed to be a job for you. You won’t make a profit if you spend all your money.”

“Still, Ash Fork is only fifty miles from here. We couldn’t have used more than a couple of gallons.”

Caleb exited the vehicle and looked underneath. “I don’t see any drips.” He ran his finger along the side of the Kia, beneath the gas flap. “Looks like gas ran down the side. I think someone siphoned the tank last night while we were asleep.”

She looked up at the filling station’s marquee, which displayed the prices for various grades of fuel. “A dollar fifty per gallon? That can’t be right. I was in middle school the last time gas was that cheap.”

Caleb looked up at the prices. “That’s in Fedcoin, not dollars. It sounds good, like they finally whipped inflation until you consider one and a half Fedcoins equal thirty bucks.”

“Oh, that’s more like it. In that case, I suppose stealing fuel could be a pretty lucrative career.”

Caleb pumped gas into the Kia Soul. “Either that or some college student didn’t have enough money to get home. We’ll look for an auto supply store and buy a locking gas cap. At four hundred bucks per fill-up, we can’t afford to get robbed every time we stop for the night.”

CHAPTER 3

As a fountain casteth out her waters, so she casteth out her wickedness: violence and spoil is heard in her; before me continually is grief and wounds.

Jeremiah 6:7

Caleb drove for the first leg of the day's journey.

"What did you think?" asked Bristol.

"About what?"

"Cracker Barrell."

"I've eaten in worst places. It was clean. The price was fair for what they offered."

"Exactly," said Bristol. "Nothing fancy, but it's a reliable place to stop along most interstates in the country."

Caleb connected the auxiliary cable from his phone to the Kia's radio. "Do you mind if we listen to a Bible study?"

"Wow, you're serious about this quest to find God, aren't you?"

"I feel like I need to get it sorted out, decide what I believe—is that a problem?"

“Not at all.” She motioned toward the radio. “Be my guest—not that you need my permission. It *is* your vehicle, after all.”

The teachings of the late Pastor Chuck Smith going through the book of Matthew occupied the otherwise-monotonous drive along a painfully straight Interstate 40. Silhouettes of distant mountains broke the horizon line but never seemed to get closer, no matter how long they drove. Scrub brush, telephone poles, and antennas appeared to be the only things that could endure the harsh climate of the desert.

“Do you know what it’s like?” Bristol asked.

“What?”

“Tennessee.”

He shook his head. “No idea. But it’s not a desert. That part of the country is all green. At least it is in the pictures I’ve seen.”

Bristol studied her phone. “Del Rio is in the mountains. I bet it’s beautiful. Population 2,000.”

“Are you serious?” He looked over at her. “There were that many kids at my high school. Do they even have stores?”

“They have a post office,” said Bristol.

“Great,” Caleb replied. “We’ll be able to buy stamps.”

“You haven’t done much research on this trip, have you?”

“I kinda had a lot going on with trying to take down Z-Bub and all.”

“Good news,” said Bristol. “The next town over is way bigger. It has restaurants, a hospital, grocery stores, everything you’ll need.”

“You’re scaring me,” Caleb said. “When you say way bigger, what does that mean?”

“Population 6,500.”

“And how far away is it?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Wow. I really *didn't* think this through.”

“You had to know it wasn't going to be like LA.”

“Yeah, but I didn't expect it to be in the middle of nowhere. Why don't people live there?”

“People live there. Your grandparents live there.”

“I hope,” said Caleb.

“Knoxville is only an hour away,” she said.

“With thirty-dollar-a-gallon gas, we won't be making that trip too often.” He waited to see if she'd correct him for saying *we*.

She made no mention of it and instead continued to study her phone. “They have a Walmart just outside of town in Newport. You can make the trip once a week. If Walmart doesn't sell it, then you don't need it.”

Caleb's taste and needs were simple, so he didn't argue against her logic.

Two hours later, Caleb stopped at a filling station in Sanders, Arizona for a restroom break. “We should take turns going to the bathroom so one of us is always with the vehicle.”

“Mind if I go first?” Bristol's face showed a sense of urgency.

“Go ahead. I'll fill up the tank.” Caleb got out and opened the gas flap. He noticed a sign on the pump. “Out of gas?” He looked at the other pumps which had the same signage.

Minutes later, Bristol came out the doors of the gas station mini-mart. “Did you get gas?”

“They’re out,” said Caleb. “I’m going to go inside to ask what’s the problem.”

“Sure.” Bristol got in the Kia and closed her door.

Caleb went into the store and addressed the attendant. “Good morning.”

“Hi,” said a heavy-set, middle-aged woman.

“I noticed you’re out of gas.”

“Yep.”

“Do you know why you’re out?”

“Gas price,” she said.

Caleb looked out at the pumps, trying to make sense of the abbreviated explanation. “We’ve hardly seen anyone else on the road. Seems to me that demand would be way down. I would’ve thought you’d have plenty of gas.”

She shook her head. “Truckers can’t afford to haul it. Most owner-operators have parked their rigs for the time being. They lose money at thirty-five bucks a gallon for diesel.”

“Seems they’d just charge more to haul it,” said Caleb.

“I’d imagine they will at some point, but the shipping rates ain’t keeping up with the price of diesel. It’ll all work itself out. They ought to go ahead and switch everything over to that Fedcoin. I think that’d fix it.”

Caleb understood that the woman had bought the narrative being pushed by the mainstream media. “Is there another gas station in town?”

“Nope.” She paused before expounding. “Place in Holbrook’s got gas.”

“Holbrook.” The name sounded familiar to Caleb. “I think we came through there. Is it west of here?”

“Yep.” She took a drink from a giant plastic cup with the store’s logo on it. “It’s about fifty miles back.”

Not wanting to backtrack, Caleb felt discouraged. “What about east of here? Do you know of any station that might have gas?”

“Ain’t no telling,” she replied. “Albuquerque will have gas.”

“That’s 200 miles from here.”

“Yep.”

“Okay, thanks.” Caleb proceeded to the restroom, then returned to the vehicle.

“What’s up with the gas?” Bristol asked.

Caleb explained the predicament.

“Can we make it to Albuquerque?”

“I don’t know. We’re averaging about 26 miles per gallon. We might make it but will be coasting in on fumes.”

“What if we drive slower? Won’t that help the mileage?”

“Yeah, but it will slow us down.”

Bristol pressed her lips together. “Not as much as running out of gas in the desert.”

“You’re right about that.” Caleb frowned. “We’ll keep it around 60 miles per hour and stop in every town where we might find fuel.”

Caleb drove back to the interstate and continued his quest. The next exit was Lupton, just before the New Mexico state line. He pulled off the interstate but didn’t bother pulling into the truck stop. “They’ve got plastic bags over all the pumps.”

Bristol said, “We’ll waste more gas stopping at every filling station. Maybe we should just try to make it to Albuquerque.”

“Okay,” Caleb agreed. “We’ll keep moving for now and see how we do.”

The next phase of the journey was tense. Caleb gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Neither of them said much. Caleb kept his Bible studies

playing over the radio but had trouble thinking about anything other than getting fuel.

Three hours passed and the fuel gauge was threatening the ominous red E. “What about this place?” Asked Caleb. “It looks like a larger town. They should have more than one gas station.”

Bristol glanced over at the gauge. “Try it and see.”

Caleb exited the interstate at Laguna. Once again, he drove by the filling station and did not stop. “No gas. I can’t believe this!”

Bristol said, “The tank still has about two gallons when it hits the E.”

“That’s roughly fifty miles,” said Caleb. “I hope we can make it.” He returned to the interstate and kept driving.

Minutes later, the red fuel-gauge light came on accompanied by an annoying *ding* sound.

He huffed and gritted his teeth. Caleb counted the mile markers on the side of the road, reworking the math with each subsequent marker.

Bristol said nothing but seemed to be engaged in a similar pastime.

Caleb looked back and forth from the fuel gauge to the road. “Next time we stop, we should stock up on some water and snacks.”

“Why?”

“In case we run out of gas and have to walk. There’s hardly anyone on the road. We could be on our own for a while.”

“Good idea.” Bristol sounded somber.

Due to the reduced travel speed, it took nearly an hour to reach Albuquerque. When Caleb saw the sign for the truck stop, he let out a sigh of relief. “We made it!” He followed the exit and continued to the pumps.

“No!” Bristol exclaimed. “They’re empty. This is impossible.”

Despair overtook Caleb. “I’ll go get some food and bottled water.”

“I’ll stay with the vehicle.” Bristol crossed her arms.

Caleb went inside. Few other travelers were at the truck stop, and the attendant looked bored. Caleb approached the older gentleman behind the counter. “How long have you been out of gas?”

“Just ran out about an hour ago. We get a truck every morning, but we’ve had folks coming from all over to get fuel. Had one fella said he drove all the way from Wagon Wheel.”

“So you’ll get another truck in the morning?”

“Pretty sure,” said the old man.

“Where’s the closest hotel?” Caleb asked.

“You getting a room to wait for gas?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“You’ll find gas in town,” said the man. “Only reason we ran out is ‘cause folks coming in off the highway from all around.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I drive by three stations on the way to work every day. Ain’t none of them been out, as far as I know. Go on down to Route 66 and hang a left. You’ll find gas.”

“How far is Route 66?” Caleb asked.

The old man pointed south. “Right down there at the light. Ain’t even a quarter mile.”

“Thanks.” Caleb paid for the water and snacks, then continued to the Kia.

He got in and started the engine.

“What’s the deal?” asked Bristol.

“The attendant said we’ll find gas in town.”

“I hope so,” she said. “We’re way past the *E*.”

Caleb held his breath, hoping they had enough gas to get out of the parking lot. He followed the road south and took a left onto Route 66. They drove only half a mile when he saw the marquee for a gas station.

“Let’s hope they have fuel,” said Bristol.

“I don’t see any bags over the pumps.” Caleb felt optimistic.

“Look! That guy is pumping!” Bristol said excitedly.

Caleb pulled up to the pump. Both of them got out to stretch their legs. Caleb stuck one of his prepaid cards into the credit card slot.

“Yo, buddy.”

Caleb glanced up to see a couple of rough-looking individuals walking toward him.

“Let me get fifty dollars so me and my boy here can get something to eat.” The guy was young, thin, and wore an oversized t-shirt. He had tattoos on his face. They looked messy and faded, like perhaps he’d gotten them in jail.

The other man also looked to be in his early twenties. He was bald and wore baggy jeans and a hoodie.

“I don’t have it,” said Caleb.

“Well how bout we take your little honey here and turn her out?” asked the tall one. “I know we’d get fifty bucks for her.”

Caleb walked away from the gas pump. “Leave her alone!”

“Just give them the money,” said Bristol.

“If I thought that would work, I would. But for guys like these, it’s never enough.” Caleb carefully managed the distance between himself and the hooligans.

“Oh no, Henry,” said the tall one. “Looks like we got ourselves a hero.”

“Turn around and walk away!” Caleb demanded.

“Or what?” The tall one walked closer.

Caleb turned sideways and kicked the tall one in the stomach. The man fell back but quickly regained his balance and charged at Caleb. Caleb stepped forward and kicked high, striking the tall man in the ear. This time the thug toppled without regaining his balance.

Henry charged at Caleb. He swung at Caleb’s head. Caleb ducked under Henry’s arm and lunged toward him, wrapping his arms around Henry’s waist. Henry tried to push Caleb away. Caleb laced his foot behind Henry’s leg and kicked backward, taking Henry to the ground.

Caleb quickly mounted Henry. The hooligan tried to grab him by the throat. Caleb grabbed the thug’s wrist, spun sideways, pinched Henry’s arm with his knees, and lay back on the ground.

Henry’s elbow made a distinct “Pop!” The bald man screamed in agony.

“Watch out, Caleb!” yelled Bristol. “The other one is coming up behind you.”

Caleb jumped to his feet. The tall man swung at Caleb, striking him in the mouth. Caleb unleashed a left-right-hook combo, making contact with each blow. The tall man closed the distance, bent down, and grabbed Caleb’s midsection to stop the pounding. Caleb locked his right arm over the tall man’s head, grabbing his chin.

“Henry, get him off of me!” called the tall man.

“My arm is broke!” Henry complained.

Caleb fished his left hand under the man’s head and pushed his right hand into the man’s throat. He felt him go limp and let him fall to the ground. Caleb looked to see Henry looking at him as if trying to decide whether or not to launch another assault. Caleb pointed at Henry and began walking in his direction. “If you try me again, I’ll kill you!”

Henry turned and left his sleeping comrade on the ground. He held his injured arm and scurried away.

“Get in the car,” said Caleb.

“We still need gas,” said Bristol.

“We need to stay out of jail, first and foremost.” Caleb got in the Kia and started the engine. “Someone has probably called the cops by now.”

Bristol got in and closed her door. “But it was self-defense. They attacked you.”

“That would be great if I wasn’t already in trouble and cops always believed me, but unfortunately that hasn’t been my experience.” Caleb raced out of the parking lot and turned south onto 86th Street.

“Where are we going to go?”

“We’ll get out of the area then find another filling station.”

CHAPTER 4

Trouble never comes alone.

Russian proverb

The engine sputtered. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Caleb exclaimed. The motor cut off, then on for another second, then off for good. Caleb coasted into the parking lot of a public park.

“Now what?” Bristol inquired.

Caleb looked at his phone. “There’s a gas station a mile and a half from here. We’ll have to get a gas can and bring it back.”

Bristol looked around the area. “We know from experience that this isn’t the safest neighborhood.”

Caleb pulled his backpack from the rear seat. He retrieved his pistol and tucked it into his waistband. “We don’t have any other choice. We have to go, and I think it’s best if we stay together.”

“I agree. Should we take the money in case the vehicle gets broken into?”

Caleb nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.” Caleb loaded his cash and precious metals into the backpack, looking around to make sure he wasn’t being watched.

“It’s dark.” Bristol pressed closely against Caleb and put her hand on his arm. “I don’t like it.”

Caleb looked south. “The store is that way, but all the street lights are out. It could be the city trying to save on electric costs.” He turned toward the north. “I think it would be wiser to walk back to Tower Road. It’s not that far out of the way, and the street lights are on.” He examined the route on his phone.

Bristol looked on. “Snow Vista Boulevard looks like a main thoroughfare. That’s where the gas station is. Hopefully, the lights will be on there also.”

Caleb put his arm around her to comfort her. “We’ll be okay. Let’s get moving.”

“That was pretty impressive back there.” She kept close to him as they walked.

“What was?” Caleb asked.

“The way you handled those guys. It looked like something out of a movie.”

“Those two haven’t had any training.”

“So what was that? Karate?”

“No. The striking was Muay Thai, the take down was Judo, the arm bar and the choke were Jiu Jitsu.”

“Wow,” said Bristol. “I feel a lot safer knowing I’m with a guy who knows multiple martial arts.”

Caleb shook his head. “They taught all of those disciplines at my old gym. I didn’t train that long. I know just enough to give me an edge over someone who knows nothing. Trust me, most of the other people in my old gym could wipe the floor with me.”

“You just saved the damsel in distress. You’re kind of a hero. You don’t have to downplay it so much.” She gave him the lightest kiss on the side of his face. “It’s okay to celebrate a win once in a while.”

His heart fluttered. He felt dizzy. Reddened cheeks and a growing smile overtook his face. “Yeah, okay.” Caleb surveyed his surroundings, careful not to let the flood of emotion distract him from the task at hand.

The two walked hand-in-hand down the street toward the distant marquee of the gas station. When they arrived, Caleb let out a sigh of relief to see the pumps stocked with fuel. He smiled at the attendant as he walked inside. The man behind the counter did not return the good-natured expression. His face was thin as was his hair. He’d not shaved that day, and his eyes were red. He glared at Caleb and Bristol suspiciously.

Caleb ignored the harsh reception. “Pardon me, sir. Do you sell gas cans?”

“Fresh out,” said the attendant with a gruff voice.

“Maybe we could buy a jug of water and a funnel,” Bristol whispered.

The attendant seemed to understand the workaround she was proposing. “I won’t turn on the pump unless you have regulation gas can or a vehicle.”

Caleb felt tired. “Do you know where we can purchase a gas can?”

“Walmart will probably have some.”

“Can you tell us where Walmart is?” Bristol inquired.

“Right up the street. Sage Road.” The man seemed exasperated at having to provide directions.

“Thank you,” Caleb said politely, not wanting to give the man a reason to deny them gas.

Once they were outside, Bristol commented, “What a jerk.”

“Let’s just buy some fuel and get out of here. I’ve seen enough of Albuquerque.” Caleb held her hand and led the way to Walmart.

Street lights illuminated their route, but the side streets were all blacked out. The darkness beyond the dimly lit roadway

seemed heavy, as if it were concealing an element of peril just inside the shadows. Caleb's eyes played tricks on him. He thought he saw would-be thieves and bandits lurking behind every dumpster and around the edge of every parked vehicle.

They arrived at the big box store without incident and Caleb held the door open for Bristol.

Inside, a huge, armed security guard held up his hand. "Stop! No backpacks inside the store." The guard looked rough, as if he might be out looting stores himself were it not for this employment.

Bristol turned to look at Caleb. "What are we going to do? Should we take the bag back to the car?"

Caleb thought about the conundrum. He considered leaving her with the bag by the door, but the idea of having her alone with the nefarious-looking security guard gave him pause. "No. You go buy the gas can. I'll wait here. It'll be okay. We'll stay in contact over the phone. But be aware of your surroundings." He took some cash out of his pocket and gave it to Bristol.

Caleb dialed her number. "Put it on speaker, so I can hear what's happening around you."

She answered his call and activated the speaker. "Be right back."

Caleb felt the large man eyeballing him as he stood by the entrance but said nothing.

Two minutes passed and Caleb had not heard from Bristol. "Are you doing okay?" he asked over the phone.

"I'm in the automotive section. Here they are. They only have two. They're the big ones. Five gallons. Wow, fifty bucks a piece."

"Buy them both," said Caleb. "We have a long way to go and no reason to think fuel availability will improve. I don't want to get stuck like this again."

"Sure," she said. "Be back in a snap."

Caleb waited anxiously until he saw Bristol arrive at the checkout register. He watched her pay then return to the doorway where he was waiting.

“Easy as pie,” she said as she handed off one of the receptacles to Caleb.

“Good.” He gave a final glance to the dubious-looking security guard and held the door open for Bristol.

The two of them walked quickly to the filling station. Caleb bought only two gallons of gas, one gallon for each can. He didn’t want to be slowed down by the weight of the fuel for the return trip to the Kia. The trek back seemed quicker because they were more certain of where they were going. They encountered no further problems and found the vehicle as they’d left it.

Caleb poured the two gallons into the tank, then they continued toward downtown Albuquerque. Bristol pointed out the window. “What about that gas station? It looks well-lit and safe.”

Caleb noticed the police car sitting in the parking lot. “I don’t know. There’s a cop out front.”

“He’s probably off duty—working security.”

Caleb frowned. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“We’ll have to take our chances with either the cops or the hoodlums,” she said.

“I suppose you’re right. We’ll stop at the next place we see, as long as it doesn’t look like a robbery in progress.” Caleb drove slowly up Route 66, crossing the Rio Grande. “Right there!” He pointed at a filling station.

“That’s a cop car.” Bristol looked at the white vehicle with lights mounted on top.

“It’s a private security car.” Caleb pulled up to the pump. “No cops, no thugs, the best of both worlds.”

Bristol looked around. "It looks safe and maybe even clean. I'm going to use the restroom before we get back on the road."

"Okay, but let's stay on the phone together." Caleb dialed her number.

"Fine, but no speaker phone," she said.

He grinned. "I'll wait until you get back to fill up. That way, I won't have anything else going on if something happens."

"I'm sure I'll be alright."

"Me, too," he replied. "But just to be safe."

"Thanks." She hurried off to the restroom.

Caleb kept watch until she returned. Then he filled the tank and the two large gas cans. He got in the vehicle, started the engine, and followed the signs to Interstate 40.

"That was quite an adventure," said Bristol. "I'm happy to be back on the road."

"Same here, but I'm getting tired. All that *adventure* wore me out."

"Think you can make it to Amarillo?" Bristol consulted the map on her phone.

"I don't know. Is there anything closer?"

"Santa Rosa, it's a small town. It's only about an hour and a half from here. They have hotels, restaurants, and gas stations, although I can't promise they'll have fuel."

He let the tension in his shoulders relax. "That's okay. You had me at *small town*. And we've got our own gas...at least for now."

The next morning, the two of them had breakfast at a local Mexican restaurant, which was the only eatery still open in Santa Rosa. All the others had signs in the doors or windows proclaiming that they'd had to close down because of the ongoing economic crisis. After breakfast, they got back on the road. Caleb found no gas in Santa Rosa, but they had plenty for the time being.

Bristol studied the map on her phone while Caleb drove. "We should find gas in Amarillo. But even if we don't, we have plenty to get us to Oklahoma City."

"What time will we get to Oklahoma City?" Caleb inquired.

"If we stop for lunch, a little after 3:00."

"Local time?"

"Yeah."

"Do you mind if we eat lunch in the car?"

"Not at all. Why?"

"The sooner we get through Oklahoma City, the better. It's got some bad areas, and like everywhere else their police force has been gutted by the crisis."

"So, you're a fan of the police all of a sudden?"

"I appreciate the value they bring to society. That's different than being a fan. They keep the criminal element in check. When the goons no longer have to look over their shoulder to see if a cop is around, they feel free to express their inner evil."

"Like last night," said Bristol.

"Exactly." Caleb considered his various run-ins with the law. "But they're not all bad. Problem is that the good ones don't last long."

Bristol looked at him, as if waiting for him to expound on the statement.

He continued, “Detective Garcia—when he kicked in Z-Bub’s door, his superior told him to stand down. He was supposed to just walk away, leave me and the confidential informant, who was posing as the buyer, with Z-Bub. He could’ve done that. He’d still be alive if he had. But he refused to back down—and it cost him his life.”

Caleb was eager to change the subject. “See if you can locate a small town outside of Little Rock. That will be a good place to stop for the night. Then we can wake up tomorrow and get through Memphis. That’s another place we don’t want to be in after dark.”

“What about Conway? It’s about thirty miles this side of Little Rock. It should have a hotel and a few restaurants, if any of them have managed to stay open.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” Caleb switched on the radio and scanned for a news station. He stopped when he found the local ANC affiliate.

The reporter was in the middle of his segment. “...signed the Inflation Response Act into law this morning, which will infuse another one hundred and fifty billion into the pockets of Americans to help them deal with rising prices until the country can get inflation under control.”

CHAPTER 5

Fiat currency always eventually returns to its intrinsic value—zero.

Voltaire

Caleb rolled his eyes at the naivety of the report.

“A hundred and fifty billion?” Bristol scoffed. “What do they think that’s going to do? Wasn’t the last spending package like seven hundred billion?”

“Yeah, but that was in dollars. This is in Fedcoin.”

“Oh, so how much is that?”

“Twenty to one. So, like three trillion.”

“The last spending package didn’t do much to cool off inflation. I can’t imagine this one will be any different.” Bristol furrowed her brow as if perturbed. “But this is all nonsense. The Fed is hiking rates to try to get inflation under control, and at the same time Congress and the president are throwing around money like drunken sailors.”

“If I were a drunken sailor, I’d take offense to that comparison.”

She shook her head. “Is it just me? Am I the only one who thinks those two actions are juxtaposed with one another?”

“Plenty of people know it, but they’re not allowed to talk about it.”

“Then why are they doing it? Why aren’t the Fed and the government on the same page?”

Caleb lifted his shoulders. “This is the end of the dollar. The Fed and the federal government have been acting recklessly for decades. They threw money out of helicopters after the 2009 crisis, they did it again after COVID. It’s the only thing they know how to do.”

Bristol contended, “But why even bother raising interest rates? They’ll never get a handle on inflation as long as they keep giving away money hand over fist.”

“It’s the only tool in the Fed’s tool kit to fight inflation. If they don’t keep raising rates, they’ll be accused of doing too little.”

Bristol huffed. “Then why can’t Congress just let the Fed do its job? Why do they keep handing out more cash?”

“Because they won’t get re-elected if they don’t give the people what they want. Schools don’t teach this stuff to people. What little I know about it, I had to learn from the internet, YouTube, and podcasts. Besides, it wouldn’t matter if every American had a PhD in Austrian economics at this point. The ship has already struck the iceberg. We’re going down.”

“That’s a rosy analogy.” Bristol stared out the window at the stark desert landscape. “But don’t you think we’d have a softer landing if they’d quit jerking the economy back and forth?”

“Absolutely. They’re pouring gasoline on the fire. But what options do they have?”

“How about doing nothing?”

“They’re politicians, all of ‘em, even Fed Chair Lenoir Hearse. They can’t help themselves. It’s like asking a fish not

to swim. They can't not swim. It's just what a fish does. It's how they operate."

Bristol crossed her arms and scowled at the radio.

The reporter continued. "Protests have turned into riots in several US cities over the past forty-eight hours. Los Angeles, Detroit, and St. Louis are among the largest cities where violence and looting have taken the place of peaceful demonstrations. The chaos comes on the heels of rising food and energy costs.

"In all the cities mentioned, unruly crowds have looted grocery stores and vandalized utility companies. Representatives of the movement being called *Need Over Greed* are demanding that legislators implement price freezes on necessities such as food, electricity, and gasoline.

"The *Need Over Greed* leadership is calling for citizens to blockade city streets and major Interstate thoroughfares, picket gas stations and grocery stores, and burn utility bills in protests at power companies. Their stated aim is to bring about a complete shutdown of all commerce until their demands are met."

Caleb wrinkled his forehead. "Sounds like a communist revolution."

"Sounds like we should start looking for more gas cans," said Bristol. "The unrest could spread rapidly and affect cities we have to travel through."

"Good idea," said Caleb. "We should work up alternate routes also. Why don't you start monitoring the websites of local news channels in cities we have to drive through?"

"I'll do that." Bristol quietly studied her phone for several minutes. "I'm not seeing anything concerning in Amarillo."

"That's good," Caleb said. "What about Oklahoma City?"

She checked her phone for a while then shook her head. “Grocery store robbery, a Walmart was looted flash mob style, but nothing about blockades or large-scale riots.”

“Good.” Caleb watched the road. “Check out Little Rock and Memphis.”

“Okay.” Bristol pecked away at her phone. She huffed. “Great! I just lost the signal.” She tossed her phone in the center console and crossed her arms.

“That’s alright,” Caleb said. “We’ll have plenty of cell towers when we get to Amarillo. In the meantime, we’ll keep listening to the various news channels to learn what we can about the situation.”

Bristol scrolled through the radio stations. “How can people blame the utility companies and the grocery stores for inflation? Don’t they realize this is the government’s fault?”

“Easy there, comrade,” Caleb jested. “You can’t foment a communist revolution talking like that. You wouldn’t want anyone in the party to hear you saying those kinds of things, would you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Seriously, how does the general public fall for this narrative?”

“It’s hard for them to blame the government because members of the general public are the ones responsible for the government we have. They’d have to accept the fact that it was either their own political action or in-action that got us in this fix.”

“So, you’ll accept your share of the responsibility?”

“I just turned eighteen. I haven’t been able to participate in the elections.”

“Eighteen? Wow! You *are* a baby.”

He felt insulted, tightened his jaw, lowered his brow, said nothing.

Bristol put her hand on his arm. “I’m kidding. Relax. It’s just that I thought you were my age.”

“Why? How old are you?” He felt embarrassed by her comment.

“Twenty.”

“Did you vote in the last election?”

“No. I didn’t have any clue about this stuff—until I met you. I accept my part of the responsibility. I should have educated myself—like you did.”

His feeling of being offended faded. “So, would you ever date someone younger?”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “It’s not your age, Caleb. You’re a great guy. Cute, smart, you know how to handle your business—any girl would be lucky to have a guy like you.”

“Any girl except you.”

“Caleb, don’t make this harder than it already is. I told you...”

“You might not have a Los Angeles to go back to, from the sound of things.”

“You’re traveling cross country to look for your grandparents. This is your quest, not mine. They’re *your* family.”

“Why can’t it be *our* quest? Especially if all those things you said are true, about me being a hero, being cute, smart, and all that. Unless you’re just shining me on.”

“I’m not.” She gazed out the window. “But it’s your grandparents’ home. You can’t invite me to stay. It’s not your place.”

“What if *they* invite you to stay?”

“Caleb, please—can’t we just have fun and enjoy the time we have together?”

“Sure.” He swallowed the knot of disappointment forming in his throat. “I’m sorry for being so pushy. It won’t happen again.”

She was quiet for a while then broke the awkward silence. “Back to what we were talking about before—voting and all of that.”

“Yeah?”

“In my defense,” she said. “And in the defense of the rest of the general public whose fault this debacle is, we were never educated about monetary policy, inflation, any of this. And unless someone opens our eyes to it, we don’t know what we don’t know. I never even thought about researching this stuff. It’s like everything else they taught us in school, atheism, all that gender nonsense, you assume they’re not going to purposely *lie* to you.”

“Unless they have an agenda,” said Caleb.

“Yeah, well, like I said, unless someone opens your eyes to it, you don’t see a reason to question it. I never did—until they killed my mom with that stupid shot.”

“That’s true. I never thought anything of it until my old boss taught me to question what I was being told.”

She gazed at the passing desert scenery. “Even so, it takes a complete lack of critical thinking to believe the grocery stores and power companies are responsible for the currency collapsing.”

They reached the outskirts of Amarillo at 10:30 Friday morning. Caleb looked over to see Bristol checking her phone. “Do you have a signal?”

“Yeah. There’s a home improvement store right off the interstate about five miles from here. Should we pick up a

couple more gas cans?”

“The back is getting pretty tight. You brought a lot of stuff for someone planning to take a bus back to LA.”

“Caleb, can we stop talking about that?”

“Just an observation—and a statement about the available space in the trunk.”

“I can put one of the smaller bags under my feet. Plus, I can stack up some things in the back seat. If we run out of gas, I’ll have to abandon everything on the side of the road anyway.”

“Okay, then. What exit?”

“68.”

Caleb watched for the exit and turned off when it came. Bristol directed him to the big box store.

“Should I stay with the vehicle?” she asked when they arrived at the parking lot.

“Sure. I’ll leave the gun with you. It’s loaded with one in the pipe. Just point and shoot if you have trouble.” Caleb passed her the backpack containing the pistol.

She held her hands back as if afraid to touch the backpack. “Why don’t I go get the gas cans?”

Caleb weighed the options. “I don’t like it. I don’t want to split up.” He pulled several ounces of gold out of the backpack and stuffed them into his pockets. He also took a wad of cash and shoved it into his last remaining pocket.

“What about the gun?” she asked.

He shook his head and opened the door. “We’ll leave it here. It’s not worth the risk of getting caught carrying without a permit.”

Caleb looked around the area and saw no cause for concern. The two of them hurried into the store, bought the additional gas cans, and returned to the vehicle. Caleb breathed easier

once they were back in the Kia. “Maybe I’m being too paranoid.”

She locked her door. “Two guys were going to trick me out to the highest bidder last night if you hadn’t kicked their tails. I don’t think it’s considered being paranoid at this point.”

“Thank God it turned out okay.” Caleb started the engine and continued to the nearest filling station. They topped off the tank, filled the two additional gas cans, and got back on the interstate.

“We have enough fuel to get to Memphis now,” said Caleb.

Bristol checked her phone. “That would be a bad place to run out of gas.”

“Why?” Caleb stitched his brows together.

She held up a picture of burning piles of tires on the road. “Riots.” She looked back at her phone. “That image is from Interstate 40. We’ll have to take a detour.”

“Which means more gas.” Caleb frowned. “What about Oklahoma City? Any new developments?”

She typed away on her phone. “Nothing yet, but the day is still young.”

CHAPTER 6

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.

Isaiah 43:2

Caleb tapped the brakes. “Traffic is slowing down. I don’t see any vehicles in the west-bound lane. Check the map app.”

Bristol frowned at her phone. “I should have been checking the map before we got this close to Oklahoma City. It’s a solid red line all the way through the city.”

Caleb pulled onto the shoulder. “How far are we from the next exit?”

“Two miles, give or take.”

Caleb turned around. “Maybe I can back up to the last exit. We just passed it.”

“If you’re trying to avoid the cops, driving backward on the interstate may not be your best course of action.”

Caleb put the Kia in reverse and drove slowly toward the last exit. “I know, but it seems like our least bad option at the

moment.”

“Be careful.” Bristol unfastened her seatbelt and turned to look behind them.

Caleb reached the interchange. “Concrete barriers are blocking the shoulder going beneath the underpass. It’s too narrow. I can’t make it to the exit without getting back into traffic.”

“Can’t you back up to the on-ramp?”

“I don’t have any other option.” Caleb slowly inched backward up the on-ramp.

A police car was coming down the ramp toward the interstate. The officer put his lights on.

“Oh no,” said Caleb.

“What are we going to do?” Bristol asked.

“Put the pistol beneath the seat,” said Caleb. “Maybe he’ll just give us a ticket and not search the vehicle.”

Bristol hurried to stuff the pack containing the gun under her seat. “Unless there’s a warrant out for your arrest.”

“In that case, it was nice meeting you. I’ve had fun.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Bristol scolded.

“I’m serious,” said Caleb. “If they’re looking for me, I’m done for.”

He watched the officer get out of the patrol car and start toward him. Caleb swallowed hard and took out his learner’s permit.

“Maybe you can drive around him, just take off,” Bristol suggested.

“We’re not going to outrun a cop in a city where the main thoroughfare is in gridlock, especially in a Kia Soul.”

“So that’s it? You’re giving up?”

“What choice do I have? I’m not going to get into a shootout with him.” Caleb watched the cop press his thumb against the Kia’s tail light.

“Why did he do that?” Bristol asked.

“In case he gets killed and the vehicle is located later. They can identify it as the killer’s car.”

“It must suck to have a job where you have to think about that all of the time.”

Caleb rolled down his window.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?” asked the officer.

“Driving backward,” said Caleb. “But traffic is completely stopped on the interstate.”

“That doesn’t give you permission to make up your own rules,” said the cop. “License and registration.”

Caleb handed over his learner’s permit and the registration that was still in Bristol’s name.

The officer inspected the permit, furrowed his brow, and looked over to Bristol. “I need yours too if you’re the licensed driver.”

“Yes, sir.” Bristol dug out her license. “It’s my fault, officer. I have to use the restroom and I was afraid I’d pee myself if we got stuck in that traffic.”

The officer pursed his lips and took her ID. His radio came to life. “All units, be advised, protestors are throwing Molotov cocktails off of the Interstate 40 overpass onto Interstate 44. Any available officers in the area should respond. OCFD has been alerted and is en route.”

The cop pressed the talk key. “Dispatch, this is patrol 402, I’m in the vicinity and responding to the call.”

The officer handed Caleb the two IDs. “I’ll have to speed up the shoulder to get to this call, which is why you don’t drive backward. It puts both of our lives in danger.” He glared at Bristol. “There are worse things than peeing your pants.”

“Yes, sir,” said the two of them, almost in unison.

The cop hurried back to his car, got in, and sped off.

Caleb let out a long sigh. “That was close.”

Color began to return to Bristol’s face. “Do you think maybe it was God watching over you?”

Caleb nodded. “Yeah, maybe it was.” He started the engine, put the Kia in reverse, and backed up the rest of the way to the on-ramp entrance. “Is it a shorter drive to go around Oklahoma City by going north or south?”

Bristol studied her phone. “Six of one, half a dozen of the other. But Morgan Road dead ends if you go north.”

Caleb raced to get in the turning lane. “South it is then.”

Bristol dictated directions to Caleb, which took them on a detour that kept south of the I-240 beltway and far from the chaos that was breaking out in Oklahoma City. It was dark when they finally reached Conway, Arkansas. The detour had added several hours to the day’s journey, and the two of them were tired.

That night in the hotel, they ordered a pizza from the only remaining restaurant in town. They watched the local news coming out of Little Rock while they ate.

Caleb finished his food and wiped his mouth. “Little Rock looks just as bad as Oklahoma City. We should look for an alternate route.”

Bristol showed him her phone. “We can follow 64 until we get to Beebe. From there we can head south and pick up I-40 well outside of Little Rock. We’ll need to go around Memphis too. It’s as bad as Los Angeles, riots, looters, blackouts, the whole nine.

“We’ll have to go all the way to Caruthersville to cross the Mississippi River. The detours are going to add a couple of hundred miles.”

“Even so, it’s the wise choice.” Caleb pulled down the covers on his bed. “It’s going to be a long day tomorrow. We better get some sleep.”

Bristol placed the empty pizza box on the desk then got in her bed. She turned out the light on the side table. “Good night, Caleb. I’m glad the cops didn’t drag you away today.”

He smiled, wishing they were more than friends. “Me too.” He switched off his bedside lamp. “Goodnight, Bristol.”

The next morning, Caleb opened the door to the hotel room as quietly as possible.

“Hey,” said Bristol in a sleepy voice. “I smell coffee.”

“Yeah.” He placed a cup on her nightstand. “I wanted to hit the breakfast bar before they closed it.”

She sat up. “What time is it?”

“Almost ten.”

“Wow! You shouldn’t have let me sleep so late.”

“It’s been a long trip. You needed the rest.” He placed a muffin on a napkin next to her coffee.

She picked it up to examine it. “Blueberry, my favorite. How did you know?”

“It’s all they had. No bagels, cereal, or any of the stuff they usually have. The front desk clerk apologized. He said we could check out late if we wanted. Evidently, it’s been super slow.”

“Yeah, not many people travel when gas is thirty bucks a gallon.” She bit into the muffin, chewed, and took a sip of coffee. “But didn’t you want to get an early start?”

“I was thinking of stopping in Murfreesboro tonight. I don’t want to chance getting stuck in a bad spot around Knoxville

after dark. We'll have to go around Nashville anyway. Murfreesboro is a small enough town that we shouldn't get caught up in any riots, but big enough to hopefully have a hotel that's still open—maybe even a restaurant.”

“Okay, sure.” She held up the muffin. “If times are so tough that you can only have one breakfast item on the buffet, this is the thing you want to have.”

Caleb smiled, happy that she was so easy to please. He sipped his coffee and watched the news while she got ready.

Half an hour later, she emerged from the bathroom fully dressed with a towel around her hair. “A hot shower and a blueberry muffin. I feel like a new woman!”

“Great.” Caleb got up from his bed. The two of them gathered their bags, took them to the Kia, and got back on the road.

The detours took them down narrow country roads and through beautiful picturesque landscapes. Caleb took in the magnificent fall colors. “I've never seen anything like this, have you?”

“Only in pictures.” Bristol gazed out the window at the brilliant reds, warm oranges, and glistening golds covering the tree tops along the road.

“It's a much more scenic drive than the desert,” said Caleb. “I think I'm going to like this part of the country.”

“It's like a completely different world,” said Bristol.

Caleb opened the *Word for Today* app on his phone. He played a teaching from Pastor Chuck on the Book of Luke, and the two of them listened quietly while admiring the Creator's handiwork displayed in the autumn hues.

CHAPTER 7

And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

Luke 11:2-4

Saturday evening, Caleb turned into the parking lot of the only remaining hotel in Murfreesboro.

“What are we going to do about gas?” Bristol inquired.

Caleb stared at the fuel gauge indicator leaning against the red E. “Skirting the troubled spots also included going around every major metropolitan area where we could have bought gas. We’ll get checked in, find someplace to eat, and worry about it in the morning.”

“We can ask the attendant,” said Bristol. “I’m sure the folks around here are getting gas from somewhere.”

“Good idea.” Caleb gathered his bags and locked the vehicle.

The two of them entered the small hotel and walked up to the front desk. They could hear a television playing in the back room. Caleb rang the bell. The attendant came out from the room where the TV was playing. He was in his late fifties, had somewhat of a pot belly, and thinning hair, which was combed over from the left side of his head in a futile attempt to cover his bald spot. The man wore comfortable jeans and a button-up plaid shirt, which was tucked between his jeans and the spillover of his pot belly. His smile and tone were genial. “Can I help y’all?”

“Yes, please. We’d like a room.” Caleb presented his fake ID and a prepaid card.

The man picked up the card. “It’s two twenty a night plus tax. I give a ten percent discount for cash. We could call it two hundred even.”

“Even better.” Caleb retrieved his wallet and paid the man.

The man handed the ID and prepaid card back to Caleb without recording any information. He placed a key on the counter. “Room 110. It’s our honeymoon suite. It has a jacuzzi.”

Bristol slid the key back toward the attendant. “Thanks, but we need two beds.”

The man lifted his eyebrows at Caleb as if to say *I tried*. He swapped out the room keys. “214, it has two queens—mattresses are brand new.”

“Thank you.” Caleb picked up the key. “Are any of the restaurants in Murfreesboro still open?”

“Mammy’s, up 41 apiece. Ain’t no tellin’ what they’ll have available, but they’ll be open. Rich folk comin’ down from Nashville to get out of the madness has kept them in business—me too, although, not as much. A lot of them come down in their big fancy campers and stay over at the RV park.”

“Great,” said Bristol. “What about gas? Do any of the filling stations have fuel around here?”

“No, ma’am.” The attendant shook his head. “You’d have to drive pert near to Nashville to find gas.”

Caleb frowned. “But it’s sketchy, isn’t it?”

“Naw.” The attendant waved his hand dismissively. “Sure, downtown might be sort of dangerous. But you’ll find gas before you get into the city. I’ve been going up 24 to Antioch. There’s a couple of places right off the exit. If one of ‘em don’t have it, the other’n will.”

“Have you run into any trouble going there?” Bristol asked.

“Not yet,” said the attendant. “Antioch ain’t but thirty minutes from here.”

“Thank you for your help,” said Caleb. “Are you the owner?”

The man nodded. “Afraid so. I had to let most of my staff go. Doing everything myself is about the only way I can keep the business operating.”

“We’re glad you’re here.” Bristol waved as she followed Caleb out the door.

“And I’m glad to have y’all,” said the attendant. “Come see me if you need anything.”

“He’s nice.” Caleb led the way to the room.

“In a slippery sort of way,” Bristol replied.

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t know. That whole thing about the cash discount. I have a feeling our stay is completely off the books. Your money went straight into his pocket.”

“That works out great for us. It’s his place. He can do what he wants. I’m not offended about the government not getting its cut. They just waste it anyway. Besides, they’ve got a

printing press. Spend it all, we'll make more. Which is why we're in this mess." Caleb opened the door to the room.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I suppose I've just been conditioned to view people like that attendant as being seedy." Bristol placed her bags on the bed farthest from the door. "The room looks clean."

"No jacuzzi," said Caleb. "That would have been nice after a stressful cross-country road trip."

She put her hands on her hips. "Are you serious right now?"

"What?" He furrowed his brow. "It's the same thing as a swimming pool. I'm sure you have a bathing suit in all that luggage you brought."

"It's *nothing* like a swimming pool." She rolled her eyes.

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"For one, a swimming pool doesn't have a *bed* right beside it." She grabbed her purse. "Can we go eat and talk about something else?"

Caleb thought she was making a big deal out of nothing, but kept his opinion to himself. "Sure. Let's go." He closed the door behind them.

"Should we drive up to Antioch and get gas before we eat?" Bristol asked.

Caleb shook his head. "I don't want to get anywhere close to Nashville this late in the evening. We'll go look for fuel first thing in the morning."

They proceeded to the restaurant, which was open but was out of most items on the menu. They offered only fried chicken and hamburgers. Caleb got the chicken, and Bristol had a burger. Afterward, they returned to the hotel room, where Bristol took her shower first. She came out of the bathroom fully dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, which served as her pajamas.

Caleb was next in the shower. He relaxed under the steady stream of hot water. *That jacuzzi sure would have been nice. Even so, I'm clean, my belly is full, and I'm going to sleep like a baby. Not even the apprehension of meeting my grandparents is going to keep me awake tonight.*

Caleb exited the bathroom wearing basketball shorts, which served as his pajamas. He found Bristol lying on the bed watching the Nashville local news broadcast. He sat next to her. "What is all that garbage everywhere?"

"The city cut back on trash pickup to twice a month to save on fuel. Now people pile it up in front of their homes. They still have only one trash can, like they had when they were getting pickups twice a week, so it just gets tossed out in the bag. Raccoons, cats, possums, and stray dogs tear open the bags and make a mess."

She seemed to suddenly notice that he was sitting on her bed. "What are you doing?"

"Watching the news—same as you."

"Yeah, except you're doing it on *my* bed."

"I didn't realize you were so territorial." He stood up.

"You heard what the preacher said in the lesson today. Don't blame God for leading you into temptation if you put yourself into a compromising situation."

Caleb sighed. "Nothing's going to happen."

"That's right, because I'll be on my bed and you'll be on yours."

"Haven't I been a gentleman for the whole trip?"

"Yes, you have. And I've expressed my appreciation for that."

"Then what are you so worried about? I'm not going to try anything."

"Maybe you're not the one I'm worried about."

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re not attracted to me.”

“I never said that. I never said anything like that.” She studied his bare shoulders and chest. “Just stay on your side and we’ll be fine.” She stared at the lines defining his abdominal muscles. “And put a shirt on while you’re at it.”

Caleb pulled a wrinkled but clean shirt and pulled it over his head. He found the exchange with Bristol to be confusing. He wondered if she truly thought he was attractive or if she was amusing herself by toying with his emotions. He plopped down on his bed and watched the troubling news coming out of Nashville.

Then the lights went out.

“What happened?” Bristol’s voice came out of the darkness.

“I don’t know.” Caleb reached for his phone. He swiped the screen to unlock it and activated the flashlight app.

Bristol grabbed her phone. “The hotel’s internet is out.”

“It would be if there’s no electricity to the router,” said Caleb. “Turn off the Wi-Fi. You might get lucky and find a cell signal.” He looked out the window. “Wow. The power company is already here. That was fast.”

Bristol stood beside him and gazed out at the bucket truck. “Unless they’re the reason the power went out. Maybe sketchy Sam, the hotel owner, didn’t pay his power bill.”

Caleb grabbed his shoes. “I’m going to go find out what happened.”

Bristol slipped on her pink fuzzy flip-flop house shoes. “I’m coming with you.”

Caleb locked the door behind them and used the light from his phone to navigate down to the office. He walked in to find the attendant lighting a candle. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” said the attendant. “There must be some mistake. Do y’all have a flashlight or something?”

“Just my phone,” said Caleb. “But the battery won’t last long if I can’t recharge it.”

“Here, take a candle and a book of matches. Just make sure you blow it out before you fall asleep.”

“Can we have two?” Bristol asked. “In case one of us has to go to the bathroom.”

The man reached behind the counter and gave her another candle.

A burly man in a hard hat walked in carrying a clipboard. He tore off a piece of paper and handed it to the attendant. “You can go to jail for illegally tapping into a powerline. For now, you only get a fine. But you’ll have to pay it plus a reconnection fee to get your power turned back on.”

The attendant looked at the piece of paper. “Five thousand dollars?”

“You’ve probably siphoned off twice that much electricity. Consider yourself lucky. If it happens again, we’ll call the cops and you’ll go to jail.” The electrical worker scowled at the attendant and walked out the door.

Bristol watched him go back to his truck. “So what does that mean? We don’t have electricity?”

Caleb looked at the attendant. “Is there any way to pay the fine tonight and have it back on in a couple of hours?”

The attendant gazed at the flickering candle. “No. I’ll have to shut down completely. I’d have to charge over three hundred a night to cover electricity at these prices. That was my last strategy to try staying open.”

Bristol wrinkled her brow. “You’re not going to charge us full price to stay in a room with no power.”

“I gave you a discount,” he replied.

“For paying cash!” she argued. “Not for camping off-grid!”

“You still have a roof and a clean bed, sweetheart.” The man lost his easy-going demeanor.

“Don’t call me sweet...”

“Hey, hey,” Caleb interrupted. “How about you give us the room for half price? Give us back a hundred bucks and we’ll make do.”

The attendant begrudgingly pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of his pocket. “Check-out is at eleven.”

Bristol angrily walked out the door with the candle in her hand. Caleb followed behind her.

She complained, “I knew that guy was shady. He could have burned this whole place down by running a fake electric line to the hotel. How do you even do that?”

“I’m sure he had an electrician make the connection.” Caleb opened the door when they arrived back at the room.

She kicked off her fuzzy slippers and lit the candle. “Yeah, licensed and insured.”

Caleb tried to console her. “The trip is almost over.” He locked the door, took off his shoes, and got into his bed. He watched the flickering flame of the candle.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Bristol broke the silence. “It is kind of nice being quiet.”

“Yeah,” Caleb replied.

She added, “And the candle is sort of romantic—even if we’re in separate beds.”

His heartbeat quickened. He didn’t know what to say. He said nothing.

“I like being with you, Caleb.”

“Me too.” His voice quivered. “I mean, I like being with *you*.”

Bristol giggled. “Goodnight, Caleb.” She blew out the candle.

“Goodnight.” He rolled over, let himself wonder what it would be like if Bristol stayed in Tennessee with him, then

eventually drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

When the people find that they can vote themselves money, that will herald the end of the republic.

Benjamin Franklin

Sunday morning, Caleb said a silent prayer before getting off the Antioch exit. *Please, God, let us find some gas.* The fuel gauge indicator needle was well passed the red E, and all the cans were empty.

“Do you have a plan B if we can’t find gas?” Bristol inquired.

“Nope.” He drove up to the filling station to see plastic baggies hanging on the pumps. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Fresh out,” said Bristol.

“The hotel attendant said there were two stations.” Caleb looked around.

“It’s probably on the other side of the interstate,” said Bristol.

Caleb pulled out of the station and drove beneath the overpass.

She pointed. “There it is. I see it.”

Caleb nodded and continued to the filling station. Cars were lined up to get gas. “At least we know they have fuel.”

Bristol replied, “Hopefully they’ll still have some by the time we get there.”

Caleb counted the vehicles. “Eight cars in front of us. It could be worse.”

The sound of horns beeping and the clangor of metal crunching caught their attention. Caleb looked up to see that an old Honda Accord had tried to sneak in front of a Mercedes. The two drivers got out of their vehicles and began yelling at one another. The driver of the Honda was a young man and the driver of the Mercedes was an older woman.

Caleb put the vehicle in park and shut off the engine.

“What are you doing?” Bristol inquired.

“I’m going to make sure this guy doesn’t give her a hard time.”

“That’s an admirable thought,” said Bristol. “But you don’t need any more trouble.”

Caleb took hold of the door handle and watched the scene play out. The woman badgered the young man back into his car. She kept yelling as the Honda drove away.

“I got the license number.” Bristol took a sharpie out of the glove compartment and wrote down the number on a napkin. “I’m going to give it to her. I’ll be right back.”

Caleb watched Bristol take the napkin to the woman who was now pulling up to the pump. Caleb advanced his position in the queue while Bristol returned to the vehicle.

Nearly half an hour had passed by the time Caleb reached the pump. He got out, slid the prepaid card, and began filling the tank. Bristol opened the back hatch and brought two of the large red cans over to Caleb.

A man stepped out of the four-wheel-drive Chevy behind them. “Naw, you ain’t fillin’ up them gas cans. Fill your tank

and move on.”

Bristol looked at Caleb. “What do we do?”

Caleb shook his head. “You just said we don’t need any more trouble. We’ll have plenty of fuel to get to Del Rio.”

“I hate caving in to bullies,” she huffed.

“I feel the same way,” said Caleb. “But sometimes discretion is the better part of valor.”

Bristol returned the empty cans to the cargo compartment, closed the hatch, and got back in the vehicle.

Caleb kept watch of his surroundings while he topped off the tank. Once done, he hung the pump, closed the flap, and got back into the Kia. He started the engine and drove away. “That was a volatile situation. I’m glad we got out of there without anything worse happening.”

“Me too,” said Bristol. “You handled it well.”

Bristol drove for the last leg of the trip. Caleb served as navigator, using his phone to negotiate a path around Knoxville and into the Appalachian Mountains. The closer they came to Del Rio, the quieter Caleb became, speaking only to provide directions for the route.

Bristol smiled warmly at him. “Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“You’re awfully quiet.”

“Just thinking.”

“Are you nervous?”

“No.”

“I would be—after a cross-country road trip to find my long-lost relatives. I’d be thinking about what it would be like

if they weren't there. I'd be just as apprehensive thinking about what if they *were* there. I'd be wondering what they'd think of me—showing up on their doorstep like that.”

Caleb glanced over at her, wishing she'd quit prying, but said nothing.

Bristol continued, “But I'd also think about my grandparents, what it'd be like for them. If you find them, they'll be so happy to meet you. You're an incredible person, Caleb. Any grandparent would be thrilled to have a grandson like you.”

Caleb smiled briefly, then continued worrying about everything Bristol had just mentioned.

“Here we are. This is Newport, the big city.” Bristol slowed down to get a better look at the small town.

Caleb watched the passing scenery.

Bristol read the signs posted on the strip mall marquee. “Golden Chopsticks Chinese restaurant, a Mexican grocery store—and to think I was worried that you wouldn't be exposed to any culture.”

Caleb remembered the selection of restaurants he'd tried in LA's Chinatown. “I doubt it's a *real* Chinese restaurant.”

“What makes a real Chinese restaurant in your book?”

“Handmade noodles and wantons, soup stock made from scratch, no MSG, no canned sauces...”

“You might want to temper your expectations for the Golden Chopsticks,” Bristol laughed.

“The local pawn shop looks like it's still in business,” she added.

Caleb read the sign over another establishment. “Koontz Kash, payday and title loans. Cash is spelled with a *K*.”

“I like it,” said Bristol. “Nothing like misspelled words to let the public know you're a legitimate business.”

Caleb muttered, “And nothing like predator loan stores and pawn shops to let you know you’re in an impoverished area.”

Bristol waved her hand. “Oh, I could have told you that when we passed the daycare center back there. Did you see it? The playground was just a chain-link fence around the asphalt parking lot with some worn-out tricycles and pedal cars. It looked like a prison rec yard.”

Caleb frowned. “That was the kind of thing I was hoping to get away from.”

“Turns out, Los Angeles doesn’t have a monopoly on poverty,” Bristol said.

Caleb replied, “Seems the government has successfully implemented it across the nation.”

“But the people are partially responsible, don’t you think?” Bristol inquired.

“I don’t know,” said Caleb. “You and I were both working hard to provide for ourselves when we first met. You were working at the diner and I had my roofing job. Then, the rug got jerked out from beneath us—and from under millions of other people just like you and me. That was no fault of our own. It all goes back to the government spending money they didn’t have and the Federal Reserve printing money like they could get away with it forever.”

“I suppose the reckoning has begun,” Bristol commented. She pumped the brakes. “Hey, look at that grocery store. The parking lot is overflowing, and people are lined up out the door. They must be doing something right.”

Caleb read the sign. “Food City, at least we know of one grocery store that’s still in business.”

They soon reached the end of the small, blighted settlement. The rundown shops and half-vacant strip malls that lined the roadside were replaced by rolling hills, serene mountains, weathered barns, and pastoral scenery, worthy subjects of a master painter.

“That was it? That was the whole town?” Caleb said.

“You were hoping for more rural blight?” Bristol quizzed.

“No.” He slumped down in his seat. “But if Newport was that small, I can’t imagine how tiny Del Rio will be.”

“How much farther is Del Rio, anyway?” she asked.

Caleb checked his phone. “Eight miles.”

Bristol slowed as they passed another business. “Here’s a fine example of mountain entrepreneurship.”

Caleb found the structure curious. “Koon Dawg’s Roadhouse.” It was a sprawling barn-like building with a humongous dirt parking lot. “Coon is spelled with a K. I wonder if it’s connected to the predatory lender.”

Bristol replied, “Dog is misspelled also, D, A, W, G. I wouldn’t read too much into it. It may be a cultural thing around here.”

“What is that place, like a nightclub or something?” Caleb watched as they drove by.

“I saw a sign for a wet t-shirt contest next Saturday night. I think the technical term is *honkytonk*.”

“Are we allowed to say that?” Caleb asked.

“I guess so.” She lifted her shoulders. “I don’t remember it being listed as a hate term in ninth-grade diversity class.”

“How would they ever fill up a parking lot that large?” Caleb inquired. “I mean, I doubt you’d find that many people in Newport and Del Rio put together.”

Bristol feigned a country accent. “Oh, you’d be surprised, darlin’. Folk come from miles around, three different counties, to cut the rug at Koon Dawg’s on Saturday nights.”

Caleb fought back a smile. “That was pretty good.” His grin faded as he noticed how close they were getting to the address on the envelope. “It should be the next left. Dry Fork Road.”

Bristol slowed down and turned to cross a bridge. “Wait, weren’t we supposed to go through a town?”

“That was it.” Caleb looked back at the intersection they’d just passed. “Post Office, Dollar General, and a hair salon.”

“Oh, that’s good. I wouldn’t get caught dead going to Koon Dawg’s with my hair the way it is.” Bristol rolled her eyes. “What about a gas station? I mean, even if it’s closed, you can’t call it a town without a gas station, right?”

“I’m not familiar with the rules on what constitutes an official town.” Caleb’s heartbeat quickened as they approached the property. “This is it—on the right.”

“I don’t see a house,” said Bristol. “It’s just a gravel road that disappears into the woods.”

Caleb consulted his phone. “Yeah, that sounds about right. The house is way back there, according to the satellite image.”

Bristol let the engine idle as she turned into the gravel drive. “Didn’t I see a movie about this once? A couple makes a wrong turn off a country road and no one ever hears from them again?”

Caleb’s concerns were different than hers. “Let’s just see what happens.”

“Was that Hansel’s line or Gretel’s?”

“Who?”

“The fairy tale?”

“I’m not familiar with it. My mom never told me fairy tales. She mostly watched Oprah and Maury Povich.”

“Okay, so, it’s not as scary as Maury, but basically two kids find a house in the woods made of candy. But the house belongs to a witch, and she eats them.” Bristol coasted along the bumpy gravel road. “I’m not the best storyteller. There’s a longer version.”

Caleb was glad Bristol was there to distract him from his emotions but didn’t reply.

Bristol surveyed the grounds. “This place looks abandoned.”

The road was washboarded and more dirt than gravel. Caleb pointed to a broken tree limb. “Look, that fell in the road and someone has moved it. If the property was abandoned, the road would’ve still been blocked.”

Bristol continued driving for another three hundred yards through the woods then finally came into a clearing. “Are you sure about that? This field is completely overgrown.”

“There’s the house.” Caleb pointed to a huge, two-story, rough-hewn log cabin.

“Wow. It looks fancy, like it doesn’t belong on this neglected property.”

Caleb sighed. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it is abandoned. It could have been someone from the county or the power company that came out to check on the place and cleared the dirt road. What do you think we should do?”

Bristol shrugged. “Turn around and go back to LA, I guess.”

“Really?”

She slapped his arm playfully. “No, silly! You’ve come all this way. Go to the door and knock. You’ll hate yourself forever if you don’t.”

Caleb tightened his jaw. “Will you come with me?”

“I should stay with the car. That way, if they try to stick you in a pot and eat you, I can run and get the sheriff.”

He was unamused by the jest. “Please? I could use the support.”

“Okay.” Bristol pressed the button to release her seat belt. “It wouldn’t be Hansel and Gretel if the witch didn’t eat them both.”

Caleb exited the vehicle and waited for Bristol to come around to his side. She took his hand and held it as they

walked up to the foreboding, lifeless cabin.

Caleb stepped onto the wooden porch. The boards creaked like those of a haunted house. He swallowed hard and knocked.

CHAPTER 9

God sets the deserted in families; he brings out prisoners into prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.

Psalm 68:6 MEV

The door opened and Caleb stepped in front of Bristol. He pushed her back two steps.

An old man holding a pump action shotgun peered out suspiciously. He had a shaggy gray beard, unkept hair to his shoulders, his clothing was disheveled and smelled of soured sweat. The man was as thin as a rail, like a late-stage cancer patient, only with more hair. His eyes were numb with pain, glazed with regret like cataracts. “What do you want? Didn’t you see the no trespassing sign?”

Caleb looked behind him. “No, sir. I’m sorry. I didn’t see it.”

“Everything is kind of overgrown. Do you think vines could be covering your sign?” Bristol asked.

“Sign or no sign, I’m telling you, no trespassing.”

“Yes, sir,” said Caleb. “We’ll leave right away.”

“But we’re looking for some people,” said Bristol. “If you know them, maybe you can help us out. If not, we’ll be on our

way.”

The old man growled at her. “This isn’t the town information desk. If someone is missing, I suggest you report it to the sheriff in Newport. If you’re still here in ten minutes, you can ask him on your way to jail. I’m going to call him now.”

Caleb turned to leave. “Come on, Bristol. Let’s go.”

She held his hand tightly and would not be pulled away. “Sir, please, this will just take a moment. Then we’ll leave you alone.”

“State your business. And make it quick.” His bushy gray eyebrows knitted together.

Bristol said, “We’re looking for Mr. and Mrs. Webb.”

Caleb added, “Stanley and Evelyn—Webb.”

The man froze. He looked like he’d stopped breathing. “Who are you people?”

“I’m Bristol.” She put her arm around Caleb. “And this is Caleb—Caleb Webb.”

“My mother’s name was Claire,” said Caleb.

The old man’s lip quivered. His eyes became glassy. He looked away, swallowed, and cleared his throat. He looked back, hardened his expression into a glare. “What do you want? Are you looking for money? Because I don’t have any.”

Caleb wanted to cry, wanted to leave. “No, sir. I just wanted to meet my grandparents, that’s all. I’m sorry we disturbed you.” He pulled Bristol’s hand once more, this time more insistently.

Caleb hurried down the stairs and opened the car door. The old man yelled, “Hold on.”

Tears were streaming down Caleb’s face. He was too embarrassed to turn around. He paused, staring out at the overgrown lawn, and listened to what the old man would say.

“You said your mother’s name was Claire. Why did you say *was*? Did she change her name?”

Caleb knew this man was his grandfather. He recognized aged and weathered features similar to those on the face he saw in the mirror each morning. He wondered how the man would take the news, but figured it would be best to rip the Band-Aid off quickly. He dried his eyes, turned to face the man. “She died.”

The old man gazed at the creaking wooden porch and nodded. His face contorted and he began to sob. The man cried, trying to restrain the sounds of pain and agony that had been stored up in his soul for the better part of two decades, but the wails pierced the otherwise tranquil mountain air.

Bristol bit her lip and looked compassionately at Caleb. She stood watching the old man for a while. The man leaned the shotgun against the door frame, leaned against the other side, and slowly slid down to the floor. He sat crying in the doorway, between the house and the porch. Bristol returned to the porch and put her hand on his shoulder.

Caleb walked back to the porch as well but stood at a distance from the man.

Fifteen minutes passed before the old man had calmed down enough to ask, “How did she die?”

Caleb was honest. He started with his mother’s overdose, then told of finding the letter, then gave a brief synopsis of his mother’s addiction, going back as far as he could remember.

Still sitting in the doorway, the man looked up at Caleb in horror. He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry you had to grow up like that. I’m sorry your mother was sick. I’m sorry she died. I’m sorry I wasn’t part of your life. I’m sorry I didn’t do more.”

Caleb hadn’t known what to expect, but it wasn’t this. “It’s not your fault.”

“I wish that were true.” The old man stared at his folded hands on his knee. “But I’ve had years to relive my sins, over

and over, day after day. There was a lot I could have done differently and things would have been better.” He gazed off toward the tree line. “I worked all the time when Claire was little. Even when I was home, I was in my study working on something or another that had to do with the practice. I was an attorney. I was a partner in a firm that handled wills, trusts, and probate. We were the only firm in the county. I thought if I worked hard enough, I could keep it that way.

“Evelyn worked also. She was a paralegal for the prosecutor’s office. I met her at the courthouse back when I first started out. She didn’t want to give up her career to be a stay-at-home mom. People just didn’t do that anymore, and Evelyn liked the office.

“We had a nice woman who took care of Claire during the week until Evelyn got off from work. Then Evelyn was home with her on the weekends. I checked in for a couple of hours on Sunday after church but typically started prepping for Monday morning by late Sunday afternoon.

“We took Claire to church on Sundays. That’s just what people do around here. At least they did back then. Seems like even the livestock went to church on Sundays back when Claire was little.

“Then, one day, I noticed that Claire was all grown up. She’d been a handful during her high school years. She was pretty. That got her on the cheerleading squad. Those girls were all bad apples. So, when she said she wanted to move to Los Angeles to study acting, I thought it might be good for her. At least she wouldn’t be around those negative influences anymore.

“But I guess she found new ones. She took her bad habits with her. Found some more, I gather.” He paused, gazing blankly at the trees again.

He shook his head. “We lived in the same house together, but that girl never had a father. She barely had a mother. I bought her a car, gave her money, everything she didn’t need and nothing that she did. It was my fault—all of it.”

He looked at Caleb. “As you can see, there isn’t much left of me. But if I can do anything to atone for the harm I’ve caused you, I’ll do it.”

Caleb shook his head. “I don’t blame you. You shouldn’t blame yourself either. Maybe you weren’t the best dad, but people make their own choices. God knows I didn’t have the best upbringing. I never met my dad. And my mom was right there in the room with me but just as absent as you were.

“I’ve made my share of mistakes. Maybe I would have made less if I’d had better guidance, but then again maybe not. At the end of the day, it’s my life, and I have to choose what I’m going to do with it.”

The old man forced a smile. “Sounds like you have a good head on your shoulders.”

“What about Evelyn?” Caleb looked into the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of his grandmother.

The old man shook his head. “She died twelve years ago. When we cut Claire off financially, we never heard from her again. She wouldn’t answer our calls or respond to our letters. I can’t say that I blame her. We’d never been involved in her life and never served any purpose other than an ATM. So, when that dried up, what use were we?

“Anyway, after that, Evelyn got depressed, started taking medication to treat the depression. That didn’t work, so the doctors just kept prescribing her more and more pills. Then, she just kind of faded away. She got where she wouldn’t get out of bed. Finally, one day, she just never bothered waking up.

“I blame myself for that too.” He ran his hand through his disheveled hair. “I thought about sending Claire an allowance just so she’d communicate with us, but I knew the money would go to drugs. I couldn’t bear to know I was an active participant in her demise any longer.”

Caleb saw his mother through a new set of eyes. He’d never imagined she’d grown up like this. The old man’s daughter

and the mother he'd known seemed like two completely different people. Caleb second-guessed his previous notion that he was, in fact, related to this man.

The old man sighed. "If there's anything I can help you with, I will. But I'm afraid I don't have much to offer. I sold my share of the business back when Evelyn started her decline. I spent quite a bit on psychiatrists and medications. Upkeep on this place wasn't cheap either."

He looked at a screen laying on the porch that had fallen out of the window above. "I sort of let it go. I told myself that I'd clean it up, sell it, find something more manageable. I just never got around to it.

"I get Social Security now. I have some income from the municipal bonds I bought with the proceeds from selling my share of the business. It's barely enough to buy groceries, pay my property taxes, and these crazy electric bills. All that's to say I might not be able to help much, but I'll do whatever I can."

Caleb shook his head. "I don't need money. I just wanted to meet you."

"That's very kind." The old man smiled. "I'd invite you in..." The man's gaze lowered to the fallen screen once more. "...but the place is in shambles, and I don't have anything to offer you."

"How about we all go out for lunch?" Bristol suggested.

Caleb seconded the idea. "Yeah! What do you say?"

The old man examined his attire. "I'm a mess. I'd be embarrassed for you to be seen with me like this."

Bristol said, "Do you want to take a shower? We can wait."

Caleb looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

She caught his glance. "Or just change—whatever you're comfortable with. We came all the way from California. We're not in a rush."

The old man looked at Caleb. “Alright, if you don’t mind waiting. Of course, every restaurant in town has gone out of business, except one.”

“We’re not picky,” said Bristol.

The old man explained. “It used to be a Cracker Barrel, but they shut it down. A local family bought it. It’s a similar menu to what Cracker Barrel had, Koontz Kafé.”

“Let me guess,” said Bristol. “Is it spelled with a K?”

“Yes, have you eaten there already?” The old man looked surprised.

“Nope. Just a lucky guess.” Bristol crossed her arms and glanced at Caleb.

Caleb and Bristol waited on the porch while Stanley Webb got ready. Bristol sat patiently on the stairs while Caleb paced the length of the porch. He replaced the fallen window screen but found little else with which to busy himself.

Forty-five minutes passed, and Stanley Webb came out the door wearing clean pants, a button-down white shirt, and a tweed blazer. His hair was washed and combed and his beard seemed not quite as bushy as it had been before. “Shall I drive?”

Caleb looked at the Kia Soul with the back seat packed full of luggage and pillows. “If you don’t mind.”

“We can clear out some space if it’s a problem,” said Bristol.

“I haven’t been out in a while,” said the old man. “I need to get the fluids moving in my vehicle. The tires dry-rotted a couple of years back, and I had to buy new ones. I’m sure your car has had plenty of activity over the past week. Mine could use a trip out of the garage.”

Stanley led the way to the lower-level drive and pressed the button on his garage door opener. The basement-level retaining wall of the cabin was finished with stacked stone. The stone arched over the garage entrance and the door was solid wood that needed to be re-stained. The door opened revealing a 2001 Escalade. “It’s old but it runs well. I’ve put less than forty thousand miles on it.”

Caleb followed his grandfather into the garage. Bags of garbage lined the walls and the stench was unbearable.

“Why don’t you two wait out here and I’ll pull out?” said Stanley. “The county dump had to shut down over budgeting problems. I’ve been meaning to start a burn pile but haven’t gotten around to it.”

Caleb and Bristol waited for him to pull the Escalade out of the garage and then got in. Caleb rode up front with his grandfather while Bristol sat in the back.

“Wow, the leather looks like it’s brand new!” Bristol exclaimed.

“Like I said,” Stanley replied. “It stays in the garage all the time. It hasn’t gotten much use.”

Caleb asked, “But you still go to the grocery and run errands, right?”

“I do—sometimes. The girl from the adjacent farm helps me out from time to time. She’s got a little girl and runs her own produce business, so she has plenty to worry about without me bothering her. But she insists. Evelyn and I were good friends with her grandmother. They feel sorry for me. I should be ashamed for allowing myself to become a burden on society.” Stanley sighed. “But sometimes life gets hard. It’s difficult to keep moving forward.”

“How about Bristol and I help you burn that trash when we get back from lunch?” Caleb offered. “That might be a good first step toward letting go of the past and living for today.”

“I couldn’t bother you with that,” said Stanley.

“Mr. Webb, we insist,” said Bristol.

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” Stanley replied. “But please, call me Stan.” He glanced over at Caleb. “You’re free to call me grandpa, granddad, or whatever you like. But Stan will be fine if you prefer. I don’t feel like I’ve earned any of those titles.”

“Okay,” said Caleb. “But this can be a fresh start, for both of us.”

“I’d like that very much.” Stanley nodded. “Where will you be staying?”

“We haven’t found a place yet,” said Caleb. “What’s the closest hotel to your place?”

“Newport is the closest hotel. It’s not very nice. It will take some straightening up on my part, but you’re both welcome to stay with me.”

Caleb felt happy that his grandfather was receiving him so readily. “Okay, thank you. I’ll help out around the house as much as possible.”

“How long were you planning to visit Tennessee?” Stanley inquired.

“I hadn’t decided yet.” Caleb did not want to impose himself into a permanent living situation. Plus, he’d just met the man. He wanted to see how things would go.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you like,” Stanley said. “The guest room is the way it was when Evelyn was alive. The sheets were clean, but that was over a decade ago. They might be a tad musty. We’ll put them in the wash when we get back. The two of you will have plenty of room. It’s almost as big as the master.”

“Thanks,” said Bristol. “But we don’t—sleep in the same bed.”

Stanley glanced up at the rearview mirror. “Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed...”

She leaned forward. “No. I’m not offended or anything. It’s just that, right now, you know...”

“Claire’s room is still...” Stanley paused. “Like it was. One of you can sleep there. I’ll let you decide. There’s a huge bedroom in the basement, but no bed.”

“We’ll figure it out, thank you,” said Caleb.

They arrived at the restaurant to find very few other patrons. Their server informed them that they had only meatloaf or grilled cheese with tomato soup. They took their time in the mostly-empty restaurant and got to know each other over the meal.

CHAPTER 10

For among my people are found wicked men: they lay wait, as he that setteth snares; they set a trap, they catch men. As a cage is full of birds, so are their houses full of deceit: therefore they are become great, and waxen rich. They are waxen fat, they shine: yea, they overpass the deeds of the wicked: they judge not the cause, the cause of the fatherless, yet they prosper; and the right of the needy do they not judge. Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?

Jeremiah 5:26-29

Caleb woke up early on Monday morning. He tapped lightly on Bristol's bedroom door.

"Come in," she called from inside.

He opened the door. "Hey, I was thinking of making a grocery run. I need a designated driver."

Bristol sat up in the bed. “Why? Are you stopping at Koon Dawg’s for a drink on the way back?”

“No, because of my permit,” he said.

“I know. I’m just teasing. But I think it’s called a chaperone when you need a fully-licensed individual in the car with you.”

Caleb squinted his eyes. “I don’t think it is. At least, I don’t want it to be. *Chaperone* sounds demeaning. I like designated driver better, despite the connotations of drunkenness.”

She got out of bed and flung her pillow at him playfully. “Because you don’t want a *girl* telling you what to do.”

He caught the pillow and bopped her on the head. “I don’t want *anyone* telling me what to do.”

She retaliated with the other pillow. “Well, if I’m the designated driver, you’ll obey my rules in the car, mister.”

The pillows flew until it turned into a wrestling match. Caleb instinctively employed his jiu-jitsu techniques. When the smoke cleared, he was on top of her. The two of them stared into one another’s eyes for a moment. Caleb felt his heart pounding. He wanted to kiss her.

She turned away. “We should get going.”

Caleb got up from the bed and calmed his emotions. “Sure.”

Bristol grabbed a change of clothing from her bag. “I’m going to wash up and change. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.” She walked to the bathroom and closed the door.

Caleb looked around the room that had once been his mother’s. A faded black-and-white poster of Kurt Cobain smoking a cigarette hung over the bed. An old radio with a CD player and twin cassette tape decks sat upon a wooden crate that was filled with CDs. A Doc Marten’s shoe box sat atop a white vanity in front of the mirror. The box served as an organizer for a jumble of mascara bottles, lipstick tubes, eyeliner pencils, and bottles of nail polish. A long silver chain attached to a black wallet hung from the side of the mirror. Wire-rim sunglasses with various color lenses hung from the

links of the chain. Caleb picked up a pair with blue lenses and tried them on. He felt like he'd learned more about his mother in this brief viewing of her room than he had in his entire life prior.

Bristol came into the room, disrupting his deep pondering. She noticed the sunglasses Caleb was wearing. "Those are funky."

Caleb removed them and hung the glasses back on the chain. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, let's go. I was thinking we could pick up some cleaning supplies also. This house could use a good scrubbing."

"Sure." Caleb led the way down the stairs. He heard people talking in the kitchen and walked in that direction.

His grandfather saw him approaching. "Good morning." He turned to the young woman he'd been speaking with. "This is Caleb, my grandson, and his friend Bristol." He turned to Caleb. "This is Dolly. She lives on the farm next to my property. She's been looking in on me for the past few years."

"Nice to meet you." Dolly shook hands with Caleb and Bristol. She looked to be in her early twenties. She was stout, but her girth seemed to be more from heavy manual labor than from overeating. Her reddish-brown hair was pulled back into a single braided ponytail. She wore a blue plaid shirt tucked into denim jeans and rubber muck boots.

Stanley pointed to a plastic bag on the counter. "Dolly brought us some eggs, a jar of honey, a pot of cabbage stew, and some bread that she baked herself." Stanley took out his wallet.

Dolly held up her hand. "I didn't bring all this to sell it to you, Mr. Webb."

"I know, but I insist. It's bad enough that I've put myself in a position to need looking in on. I won't have you doing it for free." He stuffed a twenty-dollar bill into the woman's hand.

Caleb figured his grandfather had not been to the grocery store in some time. Eggs were nearly ten dollars a dozen, and that was for the cheapest non-organic selection.

“I’m going to town,” said Dolly. “Would you like me to get you anything, Mr. Webb?”

Caleb interjected, “We’re getting ready to go to the store to stock up. We can pick up anything he needs. But thanks for offering.”

Dolly replied, “Where are you going?”

Caleb lifted his shoulders. “Food City, I guess. Is there anywhere better?”

“Not unless you’re up for a road trip. But stocking up may be a relative term. Food City has quantity limits on all staple goods. Even so, it’s hard to say what they’ll have in stock. If you see anything that you think you might use in the near future, go ahead and buy it. They may not have it in a week or two. How long will you be staying?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Caleb answered. “Maybe a while. What kinds of things are *you* stocking up on?”

“Everything. Flour, baking powder, pasta, dried beans—when I can find them. It’s rare to find white rice on the shelves, but if I see it, I buy as much as the quantity limit permits.”

Caleb looked at Bristol. “I don’t cook much. Do you know how to make anything with flour?”

“I can cook rice and beans.” She looked at the freshly baked loaf of bread in the bag. “But I wouldn’t be able to pull off something like this.”

“Bread is easy,” Dolly waved her hand. “My grandmother taught me. She’s actually the one who made this loaf.”

“The only baking I’ve ever done was a mix that came in a box,” Bristol said.

“It’s the same thing. They’ve just mixed the sugar, salt, and baking powder and printed the directions on the box so they can charge you more money. You can make anything from scratch that you can make from a box.” Dolly retrieved a knife from the kitchen drawer. “But the end product turns out *so* much better.” She sliced the bread and handed thick pieces to Caleb and Bristol.

“This is fabulous,” Bristol said before she’d finished chewing.

“I’ll show you how to make it if you want,” Dolly offered.

“Yeah, okay!” Bristol said excitedly.

Dolly looked at Caleb. “If you’re planning to stay long term, you might want to start thinking about setting up a garden, some chickens, and other ways to provide for yourselves. I’m afraid things are going to get worse before they get better.”

Caleb was still considering all the things that needed to be done just to get his grandfather’s house clean enough to live in. “Yeah, I’ll give it some thought.”

Dolly seemed to realize that he was getting overwhelmed. “But you just got here. Take your time. Get settled in. Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be happy to give you some pointers. I have a pretty big operation. I can always use the help, and it would be a good way for you to learn.”

Caleb looked at Bristol and nodded. “Alright, thank you.”

“What about the bread baking?” Bristol quizzed. “When can we do that?”

“I’ll have most of my chores done by six this evening. You can come over then. We’ll still have some light, so I’ll show you my setup if you want.”

“That sounds great,” Caleb replied. “We’ll see you around six.”

“It was great meeting you both.” Dolly turned to Stanley before walking out the door. “You look good, Mr. Webb.

Better than I've seen in a long, long time.”

Stanley waved at the young woman. “Thanks, Dolly. And tell your grandmother I said *hi*.”

“You should come over with Caleb and Bristol this evening. You can tell her yourself.”

Stanley smiled. “I might just do that.”

Caleb watched Dolly get in her old farm truck then turned back to his grandfather. “Is there anything specific you'd like us to get for you?”

Stanley took out his wallet. “I'm not picky. Maybe some fresh fruit, apples, oranges, bananas, that sort of thing.”

Caleb held up his hand to refuse the cash Stanley was offering. “I have money.”

“You're welcome to come with us,” said Bristol.

“If you're sure I won't be a bother.” Stanley put his wallet back in his pocket.

“Not at all.” Caleb motioned for his grandfather to follow. “Come along. We'd be happy to have you.”

The three of them got into the Kia, and Caleb drove toward Food City.

He'd traveled about five miles when he saw the lights of a sheriff's car behind him. “What did I do? I wasn't speeding.” Caleb felt anxious that a California warrant might pop up for him. He'd not discussed any of his prior exploits with Stanley. Caleb pulled to the side of the road and waited for the deputy to approach the window. He took out his learner's permit. “Bristol, you should have your license ready also.”

Stanley turned around to see the deputy. “Neither one of you should present any ID until he provides a valid reason for pulling you over.”

Caleb put his permit in his lap and rolled down the window.

“License and registration,” said the deputy.

Caleb swallowed hard. He tried to steady his shaking hands.

“Heath, what’s the meaning of this?” Stanley said to the deputy. “What did he do wrong? Why did you pull him over?”

The deputy took off his sunglasses and looked across the seat. “Oh, hey, Stan. I didn’t see you in here. I saw the vehicle had out-of-town plates. We’ve had some trouble in town lately. Burglaries, break-ins, that sort of thing.”

Stanley scolded the middle-aged deputy. “That doesn’t give you the right to pull over a vehicle. That’s harassment.”

“You still practicing law, Stan? I thought you retired.”

“I’m still licensed and in good standing with the Bar. I’m inactive, but I can change that real quick if need be. Furthermore, I’ll put in a call to the sheriff and let him know he has a deputy putting the department in jeopardy of a civil suit.”

The deputy’s expression soured. He glared at Caleb. “We keep a close eye on out-of-towners, especially ones from California.”

Stanley lowered his brow. “If you really wanted to crack down on crime, you’d keep an eye on your own family.”

The deputy tightened his jaw. “You folks best be on your way.” He slapped the side of the Kia firmly. “Drive safe.” The deputy walked away.

“Wow! What a jerk!” Bristol watched him get back in his patrol car.

Stanley shook his head. “Heath Slater. I don’t know how he managed to get a job with the sheriff’s department.”

Caleb took a deep breath and continued driving toward the grocery store. “Is his family notorious for thievery or something?”

“That and every other crime on the books,” said Stanley. “But they never seem to get caught. His mother was a Koontz before she got married. So he’s cousins with that clan.”

“Koontz as in Koontz Kafé?” asked Bristol.

Stanley nodded. “And Koontz Kash, Koon Dawg’s, all those places. They funnel their proceeds from drugs, theft, and insurance scams into legitimate businesses. They’re shifty, but they’re smart about it.”

“And the deputy knows about the nefarious dealings?” Caleb inquired.

“He’s probably in on most of it,” said Stanley. “Folks talk about how nice small towns are, but Newport has a seedy underbelly.”

CHAPTER 11

Son of man, when the land sinneth against me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out mine hand upon it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it: though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God.

Ezekiel 14:13-14

When they arrived, Caleb was relieved to see Food City had no line out the door like the day prior. The three of them exited the Kia and walked into the store.

Bristol whispered to Caleb, "I'll drive back if you want."

He handed off the keys to her. "Maybe that would be better. Thanks."

Caleb took a grocery cart and started toward the produce aisle.

"This place looks half empty," said Bristol.

“You’re right,” Stanley replied. “No bananas, not much lettuce. That entire case is empty.”

Caleb picked up the last two bags of apples. “These still look a little green, but we don’t have much choice. Maybe they’ll ripen up.”

Bristol wrinkled her nose at a bag of celery. “This is all brown.” She flagged down a store employee. “Excuse me, do you have anything else in the back?”

The older gentleman stopped. “No, ma’am. The truck comes in at 3:00. We’ll put out everything we get, but it will be picked over by 5:00.”

Caleb stitched his brows together. “Is that why there was a line out front yesterday?”

The man nodded. “We get a line every day. Last week, people were taking off work to be the first ones in. The manager locks the door when the truck arrives. We put everything on the shelves and then get out of the way when he lets them in. It’s like those old Black Friday videos I used to watch, folks pushing each other and snatching things from one another’s buggies. If you’re planning on coming back at 3:00 I’d recommend wearing a helmet and maybe some shoulder pads.”

“Let’s just try to get what we can,” said Bristol.

Caleb looked for potatoes but found none. He found a bag of red onions and placed them in the cart.

“Nine dollars?” Stanley looked at the price. “When did the prices go up so high?”

“Most of it has happened over the past couple of months.” Caleb found three grapefruits, but one was soft and discolored so he put it back.

“Here’s some minced garlic,” said Bristol. “I don’t know if we’ll find anything to put it on, but they have plenty of it.”

“Buy it,” said Caleb. “They could be out next time we come.”

“Do you eat Napa cabbage?” Stanley held up a head that was a little brown on the edges.

“We can stir fry it with the garlic,” said Bristol.

“It’s slim pickings,” said Caleb. “We have to take what we can get unless we want to come back and fight the crowds.”

The bread aisle was completely empty, as was the meat aisle. Caleb pushed the cart down the baking aisle. “Two bags of flour left. Organic whole wheat.” He took them both.

“Twenty dollars a bag?” Stanley looked at the price tag. “Unbelievable!”

“That’s probably the reason we found any,” said Bristol.

Canned vegetables were completely wiped out. Caleb looked deep into the empty shelves of canned meat. “Here’s a can of lump crab meat.” He placed the crab meat in the cart and picked up a jar with a pale gelatinous substance. “What’s gefilte fish?”

Bristol shivered as if repulsed. “I’m not eating that.”

Caleb put the jar back on the shelf with the others. “What about sardines?”

“I can eat sardines,” said Stanley.

Caleb put several tins in the cart. Bristol walked ahead into the frozen foods section. “Look! Boxes and boxes of perogies! I love these things! I wonder why they still have so many?” She opened the freezer door and inspected one of the boxes. “I hope they’re not expired.”

Stanley looked into the other empty freezers. “Most people around here probably don’t know what a perogy is. They like their pot pies, frozen pizzas, and TV dinners.”

She took a stack of boxes out of the freezer. “How many should we get?”

Caleb looked at his grandfather. “Do you have room in your freezer?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Stanley answered. “I have a full-sized upright freezer in the garage with nothing in it at all except a couple of frozen jugs of water. The refrigerator freezer in the kitchen is empty as well.”

Caleb lifted his shoulders. “Take them all, I guess.”

Bristol loaded up the cart. Caleb looked at his grandfather. “What about the Mexican grocery? I wonder if it might be more well-stocked than Food City.”

“Why would you think that?” Bristol inquired.

Caleb pointed at the perogies. “Because of these. If folks around here aren’t culturally adventurous enough to try perogies, maybe they haven’t figured out the Mexican grocery would have many of the same staples as the regular grocery.”

Bristol looked at Stanley. “What do you think?”

Stanley shrugged. “He might be on to something.”

“It’s right next door,” said Bristol. “It’s worth a shot.”

They hurried through the store, finding little else of value. They went through the checkout line then took their meager purchases to the Kia. Bristol drove the short trip to the Mexican grocery.

Once there, the group exited the vehicle and walked into the tiny store. Caleb immediately noticed that the shelves there were also sparsely stocked. He grabbed a cart and inspected the produce. “Look, avocados! Limes, cilantro...I don’t see any tomatoes, but this is a good start.”

“No way.” Bristol held up several bags. “Flour tortillas, tons of them.”

Caleb pushed the cart to the back of the store where a small display case had a few cuts of meat. A man behind the counter was rinsing something in a sink. Caleb called to the man, “Excuse me, do you have any meat or chicken?”

The man turned around to face him. “Que dijo?”

Caleb's Spanish wasn't great, but he tried to muddle through. "Carne? Pollo?"

"Si, tengo." The man pointed out what he had available in the case.

"I'll take it." Caleb nodded.

"Todo?"

"Yes, please. I'll take whatever you have."

"Okay." The man started wrapping up the few remaining cuts of meat.

Bristol came up from behind Caleb. "Look! Canned tamales! The shelf is full of them."

"Great," said Caleb. "Let's stock up."

Stanley had walked off but met up with Caleb and Bristol. He said, "I was looking for rice and beans, like Dolly suggested. I couldn't find any."

"We'll ask the cashier on the way out," said Caleb.

Caleb got three whole chickens as well as a package of legs and thighs. His total red meat purchases came to ten pounds. He pushed the cart to the dairy case where they found several wheels of queso blanco. Those were loaded into the cart as well. They located a few bags of corn flour and some Goya cookies. The buggy was full and Caleb pushed it to the single checkout.

The cashier was chubby and short. She spoke with a thick Mexican accent. "Do you find everything okay?"

"We found a lot," Caleb said. "But we were hoping to find some rice and beans."

She continued passing the items over the register's sensor. "Ah, yes. The people buy all. The truck only coming once a week now. Maybe Friday we get more."

"Will there be a line of people trying to get in?" Bristol inquired.

The woman seemed to find the question odd. She wrinkled her forehead. “No. We don’t have any line. Maybe a couple of peoples waiting to check out.”

Caleb felt encouraged by her answer. “Oh, that’s great. Then we’ll see you on Friday.”

Once the checkout was complete, Caleb paid the woman and pushed the cart to the vehicle.

“If I had to pick one kind of food to survive on, I’d probably choose Mexican.” Bristol opened the hatch and began loading the bags into the rear.

“I’m glad we were able to find something.” Stanley helped to load the groceries. “I was getting a little worried when we were at Food City.”

Caleb pushed the cart back to the store then returned to the vehicle. He got in the passenger’s seat and fastened his seatbelt. “I think Dolly might be correct. Things are likely to get worse. We should consider making a trip to one of the larger towns to stock up on some long-term storage foods. It’s going to take time to learn to grow our own food.”

Later that evening, Caleb, Bristol, and Stanley walked up to the door of the old, white farmhouse on the property adjacent to Stanley Webb’s. The cement stairs weren’t exactly level, the paint was chipped and peeling, and the screen surrounding the porch seemed to have been added as an afterthought. Caleb opened the screen door to enter the porch. The spring keeping the door shut squeaked when he pulled it open. Bristol and Stanley followed him up the stairs onto the porch.

Caleb knocked. The face of a young girl peeked out the side window and then disappeared. Her surprised voice could be heard inside. “Mommy, Mommy, somebody is here!”

Soon, Dolly opened the door. “Hi, come on in!” The young girl stood close to her mother. Dolly pulled the shy girl close. “This is Coral. She’s six.”

He introduced himself. “I’m Caleb and this is Bristol.”

“And you remember Mr. Webb,” said Dolly.

“Hi,” Coral replied.

An older lady emerged from the kitchen wearing an apron and drying her hands on a towel. She was thinner than Dolly but looked just as strong. Her hair was gray and short. “Stan Webb, I didn’t think you’d ever come to visit me again.”

Stanley smiled. “It’s good to see you, Hellen. This is Caleb. He’s Claire’s son. And this is his friend, Bristol. They’re staying with me for a while.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” said Hellen. “What about Claire?”

“She passed,” said Stanley.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” Hellen put her hand on her chest.

“It’s okay.” Stanley forced a smile. “At least I have closure.” His smile brightened and became more genuine. “And I have a grandson.”

“Well, praise God for that,” said Hellen.

Bristol handed a bag of flour to Dolly. “Whole wheat was all they had.”

“Oh, that will be fine,” said Dolly. “We should be using whole wheat anyway.”

Caleb looked at the apron the older woman was wearing. “But if you’re busy, we could hold off on making bread until another time.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” said Hellen. “We were just putting up the last of the late peas and beans. We’re all cleaned up and ready to do some baking.”

“I’ll give you a tour of the farm before it gets dark. Come on.” Dolly waved for Caleb and Bristol to follow her out the back door.

Caleb immediately noticed that the garden beds were close to the house. And the animal pens were just beyond the gardens. “You still have corn growing?”

Dolly pointed to the field of dried stalks. “This is all dent corn. It’s mostly for animal feed. Although, it would be fine for human consumption. You could grind it up for grits or cornmeal.”

“Do you grow tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and that sort of thing?” Bristol inquired.

“We do. We had a really nice crop this summer. But we just had our first frost last week. The only thing I still have in the ground are a few rows of cabbage, some beets, and butternut squash.” Dolly pointed out the location of the vegetables.

Caleb looked at the chicken enclosure. “Wow! How many birds do you have?”

“About forty,” said Dolly. “I might get two dozen eggs a day. But they’ll start slacking off as the days get shorter.”

Bristol covered her mouth and squealed with glee. “Bunnies! How cute!” She hurried to the hutches.

Caleb and Dolly soon caught up with her. Caleb watched as Dolly handed one of the rabbits to Bristol to hold. He asked, “How many rabbits do you have?”

“Too many,” said Dolly. “Probably fifty or so.”

“Do you sell them for pets?” Bristol cuddled the soft animal.

“If people want them for that, I will, but they’re primarily meat rabbits.”

Bristol appeared amused by the comment. “Meat rabbits? Rabbits don’t eat meat!”

Dolly chuckled. “No. We raise them for meat—to eat.”

Bristol's eyes widened, her jaw hung open, and an expression of horror overtook her face. "No! Oh, no! You're kidding me!"

Dolly glanced at Caleb who was less shocked. "I mean, they're prey animals. Chickens are pretty cute, and we eat them. Even pigs, in their own way."

Bristol appeared sad as she handed the rabbit back to Dolly. "I couldn't ever eat a bunny. What do you tell your daughter?"

"Coral? She helps me butcher them. She understands the cycle of life on a farm."

Bristol turned away from the hutches and waved her hands. "Okay, what else? I need to forget I ever saw the rabbits."

Dolly resumed the tour. "I have bee hives over here at the end of the field."

"Great," said Bristol. "This is close enough to see the bees. I don't want to get stung."

"And I have a small pig pen." Dolly led them to the enclosure where eight pigs cohabitated.

"Oh, they *are* cute," said Bristol.

"They don't smell as bad as people say." Caleb admired the animals.

"It depends on what you feed them. I try to stay as natural and organic as possible." Dolly led the way back to the house.

"It's an impressive setup," said Caleb. "Do you make a lot of money from it?"

Dolly sighed. "It's a labor of love. As a single mom, I wanted to find something I could do that would allow me to homeschool and feed my daughter organic food. The farm does both of those things. Of course, if it wasn't for my grandmother letting me stay with her, helping out with Coral, and allowing me to use her land, I couldn't do it."

"I'm sure she enjoys eating all the great produce," said Bristol.

“Oh, sure. When my grandfather was alive, this was a very productive farm. These days, with the prices of fuel and feed, it’s tough to stay profitable. People could barely afford to pay my prices two years ago. Unfortunately, I have to keep charging more to cover my rising costs. If I don’t, I’ll lose money. Over the last year, it was one farm-to-table restaurant in Greenville keeping me afloat. But they had to close their doors last month.”

“But people have to eat,” said Bristol.

Dolly sighed. “Those who can afford to. If people have any money at all, they’re forced to buy the pesticide-sprayed, hormone-injected, genetically modified, industrial waste produced by the mega-corporations.”

“Or grow their own.” Caleb surveyed Dolly’s extensive operation as they walked toward the house.

“My grandparents taught me the basics of farming. Coral loves the lifestyle as much as I do.” Dolly walked up the back stairs and opened the door.

Caleb walked inside. “I’d love to try producing food on my grandfather’s farm. I just don’t know where to start.”

Dolly closed the door once they were all inside. “If you want to give me a hand with some things around here, I’ll set you up with some chickens and rabbits. That’s a good jumping-off point for now. You can’t really get your hands into gardening until next spring.”

“What did you think about our little farm?” Hellen inquired.

“Impressive!” said Bristol.

“Yes, very nice,” Caleb replied. “It’s inspiring. I’d like to try my hand at farming.”

“Dolly would be more than happy to teach you anything you want to know,” Hellen said.

“Pardon me if I’m being presumptuous,” said Bristol. “But can you recommend a good church around here?”

Hellen looked sad. “I wish I could. Our little church never reopened after the lockdowns.”

Dolly frowned. “We started going to Newport Bible Church. They had a great children’s ministry. That was very important to me.”

“It was pretty good.” Hellen’s voice betrayed her disapproval.

“But?” Bristol inquired.

“Well, they don’t believe in contemporary Christian music, but they’re okay with celebrating Halloween.”

“That’s weird,” Caleb replied. “We just dedicated our lives to Christ on the road trip out here. So, I’m no theologian, but it seems obvious that Halloween is all about the devil and darkness.”

“You’d think.” Hellen rolled her eyes.

“They also don’t believe the gifts of the Spirit are for today,” Dolly added.

“Especially the gift of discernment,” Hellen snarked.

“Sorry—you’re new Christians. You might not know about all of that yet,” said Dolly.

“Actually, we heard a sermon about the gifts of the Spirit,” Bristol replied.

Caleb added, “We’ve been listening to a Bible study app plus streaming past services from Godspcak Calvary Chapel in Thousand Oaks, California. It’s not far from where we’re from.”

“Did you quit attending that church in Newport?” Bristol asked.

“They closed,” Hellen replied. “Someone stole the AC compressors to sell the copper for scrap.”

Dolly glanced at the floor. “The county declared the building unsafe until they could get it fixed. Last we heard, the

insurance company went under, and the church didn't have the money to get the AC fixed on their own."

"Maybe we could start having church—on our own," Bristol suggested.

"You're all welcome to meet at my house," said Stan. "But don't expect me to preach. I haven't been to church since my wife fell ill."

"We could listen to Godspeak's live stream," said Caleb.

"If they're still open," Hellen said. "From what I understand, folks in California have it worse than we do."

"Oh, they'll keep having church even if the building burns down," Caleb declared. "They stayed open all through the lockdowns."

Bristol added, "Even when the pastor thought he might get locked up and the city filed a lawsuit against them, they had church."

"Sounds like my kind of church." Hellen lifted her eyebrows.

Caleb heard a vehicle pull into the drive. "Are you expecting someone?"

CHAPTER 12

My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding: that thou mayest regard discretion, and that thy lips may keep knowledge. For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: but her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.

Proverbs 5:1-5

Caleb peeked out the farmhouse window to see a customized hot pink Jeep.

Hellen was preparing the ingredients to bake bread. “That’s just Shelby dropping off Lexi. We watch her in the evenings when Shelby works.”

“It’s nearly 7:00,” said Bristol. “Where would she be going to work at this time?”

“Shelby is the head bartender at Koon Dawg’s Roadhouse,” said Dolly. “The babysitting money helps us make ends meet.”

A short knock at the front door preceded a young woman walking in with her daughter. Shelby wore lots of makeup, a

tight black t-shirt, denim shorts cut off much shorter than Caleb had ever seen, and pink cowboy boots.

Shelby inspected the visitors. “Oh, hey, I didn’t know you had company.”

“Hi, Mrs. Stevens.” The little girl ran to Hellen and hugged her.

“Hey, sweetie.” Hellen kissed the little girl, then made introductions.

Shelby looked at Stanley. “Hey, Stan. I thought you were dead.”

“Shelby!” Dolly scolded.

“What? No one has seen hide nor hair of him in years. What was I supposed to think?”

Shelby looked Caleb up and down. “So, how long are *you* staying for?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I’ll probably be here for a while.” Caleb replied.

“Where are you visiting from?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Wow! That’s cool. We need a little culture around here. All these good ol’ boys and rednecks in Cocke County talk the same, dress the same, act the same.” Shelby moistened her red lips with her tongue. “A girl can get bored.”

Bristol wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes at Caleb.

Shelby looked at her phone. “It was nice meeting you, Caleb. Stop by Koon Dawg’s sometime and I’ll buy you a drink.” She glanced at Bristol as if obligated to acknowledge her existence. “You can bring your girlfriend. I’ll buy her a drink too.”

“Oh, she’s not my girlfriend.”

Shelby raised her eyebrows. “In that case, don’t wait too long before you come see me. I’ll put *all* your drinks on my

tab.”

Shelby took a mirror and tube of lipstick out of her purse and reapplied the bright red hue. She glanced over the mirror at Dolly. “Bobby Ray said they’re gonna let Frank Tibbs out of prison early. Somethin’ about budget cuts at the Department of Corrections. They’re layin’ off guards, closing a couple of facilities—I guess it’s because of all this commotion with the prices of everything.”

Dolly listened but didn’t reply.

Shelby put the mirror and the lipstick back in her purse. “Have you heard anything about Ricky getting out early?”

Dolly crossed her arms. “No.”

“Well, let me know if you do. I’m sure Coral would like to have her daddy around.” Shelby bent down. “Lexi, come give mama a kiss.”

The little girl ran over to her mother. Shelby hugged her. “You mind Mrs. Stevens.”

“I will.” The girl hugged her mother.

Shelby waved at Caleb. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Yeah, you too.” He waved back.

As soon as Shelby was out the door, Bristol glared at Caleb. “I can’t believe you!”

“What? What did I do?”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Bristol said in a mocking tone as she crossed her arms tightly.

Caleb looked around to see that everyone in the room was waiting for his response. “Can we talk about this later?”

“Don’t even bother. I’m going back to the cabin.” Bristol stormed out the door.

Caleb looked at Dolly and Hellen. “I’m sorry. I might have to take a rain check on the breadmaking class.”

Dolly walked him to the door and said in a low whisper that Lexi couldn't hear, "Don't worry about it. Shelby Koontz has a way of disrupting the peace anytime she walks into a room."

Caleb looked out the front door. "Wait, she's a Koontz?"

"Yeah, have you heard about them?"

"A little."

"You'd be wise to steer clear of them whenever possible." Dolly glanced back at Lexi. "Like I said, we need the babysitting money. And besides that, it's not Lexi's fault. Grandma says we're probably the only positive influence the poor girl has."

Caleb looked back at his grandfather. "I have to go. Are you coming?"

"I'll let you two have the cabin to yourselves for a while. It sounds like you could use it."

"Okay, I'll see you later then." Caleb walked out the door.

He looked down the drive, but Bristol was already long gone. He walked briskly out to the road, then up his grandfather's long drive. He hurried up the stairs and into the cabin. "Bristol?"

She didn't answer. He climbed the stairs and knocked on her door. She said nothing but the door was ajar and swung open when he knocked.

"What are you doing?" His heartbeat quickened when he saw her stuffing a suitcase with clothing.

"Packing! I'd appreciate it if you'd get my ticket booked for first thing in the morning."

"Bristol! What did I do? You've made it abundantly clear that you weren't interested in us being anything more than friends."

She threw a sweater on the open suitcase and turned to reveal reddened eyes. "Friends don't let people disrespect someone like that."

“Like what?”

“Seriously? Did you not see what was going on? She talked about me like I wasn’t even in the room. That entire conversation was contrived to find out if I was going to get in the way of her getting her claws into you.” Bristol began crying again.

Caleb tried to put his arms around her to console her, but she pushed him away. “What a hussy! The only reason she embarrassed Dolly by telling everyone that Coral’s father was in prison was so you’d think Dolly is more trouble than she’s worth. I mean, really—did you not see that?”

Caleb shook his head. “I didn’t. Yeah, the girl seemed a little—friendly, maybe even flirtatious, but I didn’t really feel like she was trying to make a move on me.”

“Oh, she was!” Bristol clarified adamantly. “She was like a cougar ready to pounce— more like a vulture, actually.”

“Even if she was, I’m not interested. I like you Bristol—a lot. Even if you’re not interested in me. And I don’t want you to go. I’m sorry I misread the situation. I never meant to insult you or belittle you in any way. I want you to stay. Whether that means we’re just friends, or if that means we’re just friends for now, and maybe it could grow into something more in the future...even if it means we’re just friends and I’m not allowed to date anyone else. Whatever. I want you in my life.”

“You make me sound like a monster.” Bristol sniffed and dried her eyes with her shirt sleeve. “Maybe I am.”

Caleb slowly put his arms around her. “Not at all. I don’t have to understand you to know that I like you—a lot.”

“Thanks, but that’s not fair to you.” She gently pushed away. “You’ll be better off without me around.”

“That’s not true! Are you leaving because of some silly misunderstanding over a girl that I don’t even like?”

Bristol sighed. “I’m leaving because it’s time for me to go. Nothing has changed. This was the plan all along. Don’t make

me out to be the bad guy here.”

“I know...” He shook his head. “I just thought, I hoped that—you’d change your mind somewhere along the way.”

“This isn’t my home. I don’t belong here, Caleb.”

“It could be. You belong as much as anyone. *More so* than anyone, in my opinion.” He waited for her to respond. But she didn’t. He fought back his own emotional meltdown. He gazed at the wooden floors. “But I’ll respect your decision. I’ll figure up your pay and count out the money.”

Caleb went to his room, lay on his bed, and listen to the Bible app on his phone.

The next morning, Caleb made breakfast burritos with tortillas and cheese from the Mexican grocery and fresh eggs from Dolly’s chickens. Stanley brewed coffee from the cupboard.

Bristol was the last one to arrive in the kitchen. “Good morning.”

Caleb tried to sound positive, but his heart was utterly shattered. He forced a smile. “Good morning.”

Even Stanley appeared sad. “Caleb tells me you’re leaving.”

Bristol nodded. “Yes. I need to get back.”

Stanley sipped his coffee. “It’s meant a lot to me, finding out that I have a grandson, having him in my life, getting another chance at having a family. But you’ve brought a lot of life into this house also. You’ll be sorely missed.”

She pressed her lips together and looked at Caleb as if to ask if he’d put his grandfather up to the heartwarming

statement, but she made no comment. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen counter next to Stanley.

Caleb served her a breakfast burrito with a paper towel for a napkin, a fork, and a knife.

“Thanks.” She cut into the burrito. “Did you book a bus ticket for me?”

“No, taking a bus would be crazy right now.”

“Caleb, we talked about this! You said you’d honor my request.”

“I know, I know, hear me out. I called the airport in Knoxville to book you a flight.”

“A flight? How much is that?”

“About five grand.”

“What? No way! I can fly coach. I don’t need first class.”

“That *is* coach,” said Caleb.

She shook her head. “Just book me a bus ticket. That’s what we agreed on.”

Caleb plated up his own burrito. “Buses aren’t running out west. Too many long stretches where they can’t get fuel. Buses are still running north and south in California, like from San Francisco to San Diego, but nothing cross-country from east to west. You can’t get a ticket past Dallas coming from the east coast.”

“I’m sorry about that. Did you already buy a ticket?”

“No. They only have two carriers still flying. The lady on the phone said one of the flights will cancel because they haven’t sold enough tickets. She said it’s best to just come in and wait to see which carrier ends up actually flying today. Otherwise, I might have to buy two tickets, then wait for a refund on the one that doesn’t fly.”

“That sounds crazy. Why don’t they decide now?”

“I don’t know, some crazy new FAA bailout rule. Supposedly, it forces the carriers to stay competitive. The FAA goes in and buys up enough of the remaining tickets to make sure the carrier can stay profitable for the flight. The lady explained it to me, but I didn’t understand half of it.”

“What time are the flights?” she asked.

“One is at 11:30 this morning. The other is at 2:00.”

“My luck I’ll have to sit around for the 2:00. Is it non-stop?”

Caleb shook his head. “No such thing. Depending on the carrier, you may stop in St. Louis and Salt Lake, or Atlanta and Denver.”

“Two stops?”

“Yeah. Most people can’t afford to fly, so there are very few connecting flights to anywhere.”

“I guess I have to take what I can get.” Bristol ate her breakfast and went upstairs to finish packing.

Caleb cleaned the breakfast dishes and then walked up to Bristol’s room. “Can I take a couple of your suitcases?”

She looked at her four large pieces of luggage. “Did you happen to ask how much for extra bags?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Caleb said.

“You did. How much?”

“You get one checked bag plus your carry-on.”

“Then what?”

“One fifty for the first extra, two fifty for the next, a thousand for everything after that.”

“Ouch. What about shipping the other bags.”

“It’s around four hundred,” said Caleb.

“I’ll pay for the extra bags. I shouldn’t have brought so much stuff.”

“I’ll take care of it. I said I would. If you pay for it, you’ll end up spending more than you made.”

She rolled two suitcases to the doorway. “Then we’ll split it. It’s the least I can do. We’ll ship one of my bags. That saves us six hundred dollars.”

“Okay.” Caleb took two of her bags and followed her down the stairs.

Stanley was at the bottom of the stairs, dressed and ready to go. “Let me take that for you, Bristol.”

“Are you sure?” She handed off the bag.

“My pleasure.” Stanley rolled the large suitcase closer to himself.

“I’m sorry to put you out like this,” she said.

“It’s not trouble at all. Caleb and I are going to stop by a grocery store in Knoxville after you leave. You should stock up your apartment as soon as you get back. Do you have friends or family that you can work with to ride this thing out?”

She didn’t answer. “I’ll go back upstairs and grab the rest.”

Caleb and Stanley took the first load of luggage and put it in the back of the Escalade. Bristol soon emerged from the doorway with the remainder of her luggage. Caleb situated them into the rear of the SUV and closed the hatch.

CHAPTER 13

A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps.

Proverbs 16:9

When they arrived at the airport, Stanley pulled to the curb. "I'll find parking and meet you in the terminal."

"Okay, call me if you don't see us when you get inside." Caleb choked back tears as he unloaded Bristol's luggage.

She was no more chipper than Caleb. "We could have stopped at a UPS store on the way. Are you sure you don't mind shipping the other bag?"

"It's no trouble. I just hope it doesn't get lost."

"They're pretty good about getting stuff to you."

"Yeah, but times are changing." Caleb closed the hatch and pulled the two largest pieces into the terminal and continued to the United desk. Bristol walked next to him with her remaining luggage.

Caleb rolled the bags up to the scale at the desk. "Hi, I called earlier about a flight to Los Angeles."

The female attendant pecked at her keyboard. "I'm sorry, we don't have service to LAX today. The flight out that would have connected you has been canceled."

“Okay, thanks.” Caleb left the counter.

“At least we know which airline isn’t flying.” Bristol followed him.

Caleb walked up to the American counter. “Hi, I’d like a ticket to Los Angeles. I called earlier; you said you had a flight out this afternoon.”

The man was middle-aged. “Yes, I think I spoke with you. That was through Atlanta. You’ve got a three-hour layover there, then Denver—looks like four hours and thirty-five minutes before flight 6253 departs to LAX. Is that okay?”

“Do I have a choice?” Bristol asked.

“Not today, I’m afraid,” answered the attendant.

“Alright, whatever. It’s going to be a long day.”

“Will that be two tickets?” asked the attendant.

Caleb thought about it for a moment. He considered going back, just to be near her. He sighed, knowing that if she wanted to be with him, she’d have stayed. “Just one. For her. I’m paying.”

The man said, “Okay, that’s forty-eight, ninety-seven. And I’ll need your ID, ma’am.”

Bristol handed her license to the man while Caleb counted out the money.

The man took her ID card and looked at Caleb curiously. “Are you paying with cash, sir?”

Caleb looked back at the door. “Uh, my grandfather can probably give you a credit card, if that’s better.”

The attendant looked at the pile of hundred-dollar bills. “No, cash is fine for this amount. Five thousand is our cut-off. It’s just uncommon to see someone with that much physical currency.” He returned to entering information on his computer. “Huh, that’s odd.”

“What?” Bristol asked.

“It’s not letting me complete the sale.”

“Why not?” asked Caleb.

“Let me just check—one—thing...” He pecked away at the keyboard. “Ah, would you look at that!”

“What?” Bristol quizzed impatiently.

“LAX is closed.”

“Why would LAX be closed?” Caleb inquired.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” said the attendant. “It just happened.”

“Okay then, what about Hollywood Burbank?” Bristol inquired.

“That’s okay with you?” the man asked.

“Yes, it’s fine. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have suggested it.”

The man began typing once more. “Looks like Burbank is closed also.”

“That makes no sense,” she complained. “San Bernardino?”

The man entered the information. “SBD is...closed.”

“Is this because we’re trying to pay with cash?” She glared at the attendant. “He told you we’d get you a credit card. His grandfather is just parking, he’ll be here any minute.”

“Ma’am, I assure you, that’s not the problem.” The attendant turned his screen so she could see it. “Notice how SBD is highlighted in red. That means it’s closed. I couldn’t sell you a ticket if you paid me in gold.”

She huffed. “What’s the closest airport to Los Angeles that I can fly into?”

The man turned the monitor back to his side of the desk and entered more information. “You’re not going to like this.”

“Just tell me!” she fumed.

“San Diego.”

“Alright, fine. Send me to San Diego.”

Caleb put his hand on her arm. “Shouldn’t we at least find out why LAX is closed? You’ll have another three hours of travel after you get off the plane.”

“It will be midnight by the time I get in. There won’t be any traffic. An Uber can do it in two hours.”

“Fine.” Caleb looked at the man. “We’ll take it.”

“Oooh.” The attendant stitched his brows together. “Your new total is fifty-five, forty-nine.”

Caleb started to count out the money. “And you need a credit card because it’s over five grand.”

“I’m afraid so,” said the man.

“No problem.” Caleb looked around for Stanley but didn’t see him. “We’ll be back in a minute.” He pulled the two suitcases out of the line.

Bristol followed him. “I’m sorry this is turning into such a nightmare.”

“It’s no bother. Let’s get a coffee while we wait for Stanley.”

“Sure.” She walked beside him to the airport concession stand.

Caleb walked to the counter. “Can we have two coffees please?”

“Twelve dollars,” said the woman behind the counter.

Caleb counted out the money and looked at the television hanging on the wall. He frowned as he looked at the images of burning buildings. “Where is that?”

The woman placed the cups on the counter and took the money. “Los Angeles. They’ve called in the National Guard.”

“For what?” asked Bristol.

“Food riots, they said,” the woman replied. “Grocery stores in LA either closed up or can’t restock. One guy was saying

the dollar is falling so fast that wholesalers are losing money. By the time they reorder, it cost them more to buy new product than what they sold their last shipment for. A bunch of distributors said they are suspending operations until prices stabilize.”

Caleb grabbed Bristol by the shoulders. “You *cannot* go back there. You might not even be able to get back to your apartment. They could have the entire city locked down. Even if you do, you won’t be able to get food!”

She looked away. “I have to go back.”

Caleb lost control of his emotions. His voice grew louder. “Bristol, please. Would you look at the television? Do you see what you’re walking into? What is so bad about me? What did I ever do to you? Why won’t you stay with me? I’m not asking you for anything. We can be just friends, whatever you want. Just please, don’t leave!”

Bristol’s lip quivered, and she started crying.

Caleb pulled her close. “Is there someone back there that you haven’t told me about? An ex-boyfriend? A family member? A kid? Please, help me understand why you are determined to go back to a city that is literally burning to the ground.”

She spoke through the tears. “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it? How can being with me be worse than that?” He pointed at the television.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Caleb.” She dried her eyes. “But I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid—that I’ll fall in love with you. Then you won’t want me anymore. It probably sounds crazy that I’m more afraid of being thrown away than of going back to a city under siege, but it’s happened before. It hurt. I didn’t think I was ever going to get over it.

“This time, it would be worse. I’ll have moved all the way across the country, invested all this time, and had my heart broken all over again. Then I really will be in a fix. My apartment will be gone and, I’ll have nothing.”

Caleb shook his head. “No! That won’t happen. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that, Caleb. You don’t know how you’ll feel about me six months from now, a year from now. You can’t say that.”

“I *do* know, and I *can* promise.” He grabbed her hands. “Marry me.”

She sniffed, dried her eyes, and looked up at him in shock. “What?”

“Marry me. That will prove I’m committed. Till death do us part.”

She stared at him for a moment. “Are you playing chicken with me?”

“What?”

“You know. You’re asking me to marry you because you’re sure I won’t accept.”

“No, I’m saying it because I would.”

“But not because you want to.”

“I want to.”

“You haven’t even told me that you love me.”

“Because you’ve made it pretty clear that you’re not interested in me like that.”

“But do you?” she asked.

He felt dizzy. His mouth was dry. “Yes.”

“Then say it.”

He took a deep breath. “I love you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?” He was confused. “Okay, you’ll marry me?”

“No.”

“So, you won’t marry me. You’re saying *no*?”

“No, I’m not saying *no*. I’m just saying—*not now*.”

“Alright, but why did you say *okay*?”

“*Okay*, I’ll stay.”

“You’ll stay here? In Tennessee? With me?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. That’s good news.” He took a deep breath trying to process the range of emotions he’d just experienced. He looked at the television, then back at Bristol. “Because of what’s happening in Los Angeles?”

She shook her head and took his hands. “No, Caleb Webb.” She pulled him close and put her forehead against his. She whispered, “Because I love you too.”

CHAPTER 14

A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.

Proverbs 22:3

Caleb sat in the backseat of the Escalade holding Bristol's hand.

She leaned forward. "I'm sorry, Mr. Webb, for making you drive me all the way to the airport."

"It's not trouble at all," said Stanley. "I'm thrilled that you're staying. Besides, we needed to make a run to Knoxville anyway. And please, call me Stan."

She turned to Caleb. "But we would've had a lot more space for supplies if I hadn't hauled all of my luggage."

"You could sit in my lap on the way home." He grinned. "That would make more space."

"Easy, tiger." She pursed her lips.

"I've got plenty of cargo space," said Stan. "The two of you could sit side by side in the front, we can squeeze all of the luggage in the back seat, then we'll have the entire cargo area for supplies."

Caleb smiled at her. "It's a sacrifice we'll have to make."

She batted her eyes at him. "I suppose."

Stan pulled into the Walmart parking lot. "Wow. It's busy."

Bristol looked out the window. "People from other small towns are probably having to drive into Knoxville to stock up like we are."

Caleb looked at a young couple with two small children getting out of their family car. "Plus, I think people are realizing that prices are never going back down."

Stan had to park in the rear of the parking lot. They got out and walked toward the store. Caleb took an empty cart that had been parked up on a curb. Two police cars were parked in the fire lane. Both cars had their red and blue lights spinning.

"I hope there's no trouble," said Bristol.

"I think they're here to deter trouble," said Caleb. "Hopefully people will think twice before doing something crazy."

Stan looked around before entering. "Desperation will drive people to do some nutty stuff."

Once inside, tension among shoppers was apparent, but the customers behaved in an orderly fashion. "Let's look for beans and rice first." Caleb scanned the large signs hanging above the aisles, then proceeded toward his objective.

He frowned when he saw the empty shelves.

Bristol sighed. "All the store-brand rice is gone."

"So are all the large, bulk-size bags." Caleb looked at the few options.

Stan picked up several bags. "I guess organic basmati rice will store as well as anything else."

Caleb scooped up the remaining bags. "At eleven bucks a pound, it better."

Bristol searched the dried bean area. “All I see is split peas. All the other beans are out of stock.”

“Have either of you ever had split peas?” Caleb asked.

“Yeah, in soup,” Bristol replied. “We used to serve it at the diner.”

“Oh, yeah, split pea soup is great,” said Stan.

“What else goes in it?” Caleb counted the bags.

“Bay leaf, onion, carrot, ham, it’s pretty simple to make,” said Bristol.

Caleb thought about the recipe. “It might be a good way to use the scrap meat when Dolly butchers a pig.”

“Where to next?” Bristol inquired.

Caleb raised his shoulders. “Let’s see what we can find.”

“I vote we hit the toilet paper aisle,” said Stan. “I made the mistake of not being stocked up on that back during the pandemic. It’s a bad thing to be out of.”

“Okay, it’s in the back,” said Caleb. “We’ll work our way there.”

Bristol picked up a box of macaroni. “What about pasta? That should store well, right?”

Caleb paused to look at the package. “I suppose. What’s the expiration date?”

“I’ve eaten pasta that had expired three years prior,” said Stan. “It tasted the same as the day I bought it.”

“Three years?” Caleb thought that was an awfully long time.

Stan sighed. “I went through a pretty deep depression after your grandmother died. I quit shopping. I cleaned out the cupboards, ate stuff that had been in there a while.”

“I’m sorry you went through that,” said Bristol. “Is there anything else you can remember eating that was old? It might be helpful information for us now.”

“Expired crackers and old flour aren’t worth eating. They get sort of a varnish taste to them.” Stan’s eyes brightened. “On the other hand, I ate some grits that must have been ten years old. They seemed fine.”

“Good to know.” Caleb put more pasta in the cart. “We’ll look for grits. Maybe that’s something people haven’t thought of yet.”

“What about pasta sauce?” Bristol inquired.

Stan pointed at the jars. “Past-date goods in jars taste better than expired cans. I’ve eaten both. The food in cans gets a metallic flavor.”

“Jars are more fragile,” said Caleb. “But maybe we can reuse them.”

“I’m sure Dolly and Hellen know all about canning.” Bristol helped to load the cart with jars of pasta sauce.

“The cart is filling up,” said Caleb.

“How about I go to the front and get another buggy,” Stan offered. “I can meet the two of you in the paper aisle.”

“Let’s stick together,” Caleb recommended. “I haven’t seen any trouble yet, but tensions are high. I’d feel better if we kept in our group.”

Stan agreed, and they went back to the front of the store. Stan got another cart and so did Bristol. They made their way back through the crowded store and gathered the available goods that would help see them through the coming storm.

Once they finished loading their goods into the SUV, Stan asked, “Where to next?”

“Let’s try to find a gas station with no line.” Caleb closed the rear hatch. “We’ve learned from experience that people get perturbed if they’re waiting in line and the person in front of them tries to fill up a gas can.”

Bristol got in the back seat. “But if we’re going to hunker down at Stan’s, why do we need gas?”

Caleb pointed at the filling station marquee across the street. “Because gas is never going to be cheaper than it is right now. It was about thirty bucks a gallon when we came out. It’s already over thirty-five. Even if we don’t use it, we can trade it for other goods. I think the entire supply chain is completely collapsing.”

“We may need to make another run to Knoxville,” said Stan. “And we don’t know if fuel will be available next time we come.”

Bristol tightened her jaw. “We still have space in the back. If we think we’re going to need more stuff, we should get it now rather than planning on coming back.”

Caleb got in beside her and closed the door. “We bought most everything I could think of. At least we took as much as they had available.”

Stan started the engine. “Or bought the maximum quantity we were allowed to purchase.”

“What about garden tools and things like that?” Bristol quizzed. “If we’re going to try growing our own food, we’ll need equipment.”

“You’re right about that.” Caleb asked Stan, “Do you have shovels, hoes, a wheelbarrow, a tiller, any of that kind of stuff?”

“No. Afraid not,” the old man replied. “When I cared what the place looked like, I paid someone else to handle all the maintenance.”

“Okay, Bristol, check your phone for the nearest home improvement store. We’ll go there after we buy fuel,” said Caleb.

Stan drove out to the main road. “If we’re going to keep animals, we’ll need cages. We can build our own if we have wood, roofing panels, and chicken wire.”

Bristol added, “We’ll need screen material smaller than chicken wire if we’re going to keep rabbits. Their little paws

will fall right through the holes if we put chicken wire on the bottom of the cage.”

“This is getting to be a lot,” said Caleb. “Stocking up food, building cages, planting gardens.”

Stan pointed to the filling station across the street. “Let’s start with filling up the tank. This place doesn’t seem too busy.”

Caleb was starting to feel overwhelmed. “Yeah, but we have to get all these things done, or—we’re not going to make it.”

Bristol put her hand on his back and stroked him gently. “We’ll get there. The only thing we really need to focus on at the moment is getting the supplies. We don’t know how long we’ll be able to buy things. But we’ve got plenty of time to build cages and prepare gardens.”

Her caress calmed his nerves. “Yeah, you’re right. We’ll just focus on stocking up for now.”

When they arrived at the gas station, Caleb filled the tank of the Escalade and then put fuel in each of the red containers. He thought about what else the gasoline could be used for. “Stan, do you have a chainsaw?”

“No. I had a guy who I called anytime a tree fell or a branch dropped on the road. I never needed one.”

“But your fireplace works, right?” Bristol quizzed.

“If birds haven’t made a nest in there, I suppose so,” replied Stan. “It’s been a long, long time since I built a fire. But I’ll be honest, it doesn’t produce that much heat.”

“Yeah, but if we lose power, it might keep us from freezing,” said Caleb.

“Why would we lose power?” Bristol quizzed.

Caleb answered, “Electricity requires energy inputs, oil, coal, gas, nuclear. It requires huge plants that are built and maintained with expensive parts that aren’t easily substituted. Even the transmission lines, substations, and transformers

require complex supply chains to run flawlessly. We're taking a big bet if we put all our trust in a supply chain that has to operate without any hiccups."

"Particularly in this economic environment," said Stan.

"What about those little camping stoves?" said Bristol. "Do you think they'd be more efficient than a fireplace? I mean, at least all the heat can't go straight out the chimney."

"It's a good idea," Stan said. "But how would we vent it?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe cut a hole the size of the pipe in a piece of plywood and stick it in a window."

Caleb suggested, "We could probably run it straight up the chimney."

"Wouldn't it be too tall to fit in the chimney?" Stan inquired.

"They're made to be portable. I think the legs come off," Caleb answered. "Plus, we'd be able to take it outside and cook on it in the summertime without heating up the house."

"Great," said Stan. "We'll add an outdoor store as a stopping point."

"We should buy some more ammunition if we go to an outdoor store," said Bristol. "On the way here from California, Caleb and I got a lesson in how ruthless people can get when the fabric of society starts to unravel."

"I only have two boxes of shells for my shotgun," said Stan. "I could use a little more also."

They found high prices and few other shoppers at the home improvement store. They were able to secure a chainsaw as well as the gardening tools and building materials on their list. The outdoor store also had a very limited number of patrons. However, the shelves were sparsely stocked. They could not find a stove, but Stan was able to purchase several boxes of shotgun shells. 9mm ammunition was completely sold out, so Caleb was not able to resupply his cache.

They stopped at one of the few restaurants that were still open in Knoxville, ate dinner, then headed home. They'd spent many hours and lots of money, but the Escalade's cargo area was stacked to the ceiling with goods and supplies that would help them navigate the uncertain future.

"I'll sleep well tonight." Stan followed the Newport exit off of the interstate.

"So will I." Bristol put her head on Caleb's shoulder.

Caleb felt content knowing that Bristol was staying in Tennessee. He'd been on an emotional roller coaster since leaving Los Angeles, mostly due to his aspirations of being with Bristol and her insistence on returning to California. Despite the troubles of the world, he too would sleep like a baby.

Caleb was roused from his state of bliss by a disquieting scene. A sheriff's patrol car and three fire trucks were parked in a lot filled where smoke trailed toward the sky above smoldering debris. "Isn't that where Koontz Kafé used to be?"

CHAPTER 15

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

Caleb looked at the disastrous scene outside the SUV's window as Stan slowed the vehicle to a crawl to get a better look.

Caleb saw a man in a sheriff's uniform waving at them. "I think that deputy is trying to get your attention."

"That's Sheriff Green." Stan stopped the Escalade and backed up. He rolled down his window.

The sheriff approached the SUV. "Stan Webb, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Hey, Tom." Stan smiled. "It's good to see you."

"I've been meaning to check in on you. I've just been so busy. How are you?"

"Good." Stan nodded. "Better, I should say."

The sheriff looked in the back seat and waved at Caleb and Bristol.

“That’s my grandson, Caleb.” Stan turned around. “And his friend, Bristol.”

“His girlfriend,” Bristol corrected. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Caleb’s cheeks turned red. “Hi.”

Sheriff Green looked curiously at Stan. “Is that…”

“He’s Claire’s son.” Stan swallowed hard. “She passed.”

“I’m sorry.” The sheriff lowered his gaze.

“I lost her long ago,” said Stan. “But I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed having Caleb and Bristol around.”

The sheriff lifted his eyebrows. “I can tell. You look completely different than the last time I saw you. I should let you go. I didn’t mean to hold y’all up. It’s just that I hadn’t seen you in so long and I’d been wondering about how you were doing. I’m glad to see you getting along so well.”

“What happened over there?” Stan inquired.

The sheriff looked back to the hazy ruins. “Grease fire—supposedly.”

“You’re not buying it?” Stan asked.

The sheriff shook his head. “I don’t know. The fire marshal said it looks like most of the kitchen equipment was gone. No food in any of the walk-ins.”

“That’s curious. We just ate here on Sunday,” said Stan.

“Didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary?” asked Sheriff Green.

“Seemed like a really light crowd for a Sunday,” Stan replied. “Prices were sky high, but so was the place where we just ate in Knoxville.”

“Yeah, that’s the same story all around,” Green said. “Businesses are having a hard time staying afloat. But folks can’t pay these astronomical prices.

“And Ma Koontz isn’t the type to operate a business that’s bleeding cash,” said the sheriff.

Stan started to ask, “So you think...”

“Can’t say what I think.” The sheriff cut him off. “What I can prove is all that matters. I’ve said too much about it already. You’re a lawyer, you know the drill.”

Stan nodded “I understand. I’ll let you get back to it.”

“Good seeing you.” The sheriff waved.

“You too.” Stan paused before he finished rolling up the window. “Hey, Tom, one more thing.”

“Sure, how can I help?”

“I stopped by the outdoor store in Knoxville. They were about out of ammunition. Do you know of anywhere that might have some in stock?”

Green shook his head. “I can’t even find target rounds for my deputies to train with.”

“Thanks anyway,” said Stan.

“Take care,” The sheriff started to turn around then stopped. “Stan, hold on.”

Stan rolled the window back down. “Yeah?”

“Scooter McAlvany might have some. He sells at all the gun shows.”

“Oh, okay. Does he have a shop?”

“No. He just sells at gun shows and out of his house. He does a different show every weekend. At least he did before all this started.”

“Do you have a number for him?”

“Nope. But I bet your neighbor does.”

“Who?”

“Dolly Stevens. They were pals back in high school—ran with the same group.”

“Thanks for the recommendation.”

Green held up his hands. "I just said he might have ammo. It's not an official endorsement."

"But he's on the level, this Scooter guy, right?"

"He might have ammo."

"But you don't like him."

Green pursed his lips. "He sells gun parts also."

"So?"

"Parts that can be used to build ghost guns."

Bristol interjected, "Why would a ghost need a gun?"

The sheriff fought back a grin. "Ghost guns refer to guns that people build at home. They don't have serial numbers, they can't be traced."

"Is that illegal?" Stan inquired.

"It's easy for criminals to get a hold of them," Sheriff Green replied.

"The same could be said for computers," said Stan. "Cybercrime and credit card fraud cases committed online with nothing but laptops far outstrip illegal gun cases. Should we rewrite the Bill of Rights so that people have to ask the government for permission to own a computer?"

"Always the libertarian, aren't you, Stan?" The sheriff smiled.

"Like you said, I'm a lawyer. My allegiance is to the law. I just call it the way I see it," Stan replied.

"At any rate, I'm glad to see you're back to your old self. Stop by the department and say hello sometime." The sheriff waved goodbye.

"I will," said Stan. "Thanks for your help."

The next morning, Caleb was up before Stan and Bristol. He made coffee and checked the news on his phone. Caleb frowned as he read about the latest sell-off in US treasuries.

Bristol came down the stairs and poured herself a cup of coffee. “Good morning.”

He glanced up for a second. “Hey, good morning.”

She looked at his phone over his shoulder. “Why so grim?”

“International currencies are collapsing.”

“Welcome to the club,” she said.

“It’s accelerating the dollar’s fall,” he replied. “The yen and the pound are both in free fall. Japan and the UK are both dumping US treasuries in an attempt to prop up their own currencies.”

“How is that going to help?”

“They’ll buy their own currencies with the proceeds from the sale. It pulls it out of circulation and increases demand for the respective currency.”

“What does that have to do with the dollar?”

“Treasuries are dollar-denominated debt instruments. They serve as part of the less liquid or L money supply. They’re not included in M3, but not far off.”

Bristol shook her head. “You’re gonna have to pretend I don’t have a PhD in economics.”

“All these treasuries getting dumped on the market are creating a panic. Most countries and institutions have been quietly trying to sell off their US treasuries little by little. But with this morning’s activity, they’re all suddenly rushing for the exits. It’s a stampede. No one is buying, interest rates are skyrocketing, and treasuries are sinking like a boat with a screen door in the bottom.”

She wrinkled her brow. “But treasuries are backed by the government. How can they fall? If you buy a thirty-year,

thousand-dollar treasury bond, it's always going to be worth a thousand dollars, regardless of the interest rate, right?"

"If you want to hold it for thirty years, it will be," Caleb replied. "But a thousand dollars today will fill up your gas tank. Thirty years from now, it probably won't buy you a stick of gum. When treasuries are sold before they mature, they're traded at a discount or a premium, depending on whether the interest rate of the treasury is higher or lower than the current market rate. When no buyers are in the market, rates soar and treasuries are traded at extreme discounts."

"Can't the Fed step in and buy them?"

"They can, but then they've effectively converted less-liquid assets into cash, the most liquid asset. That will have a worse effect on inflation than the sell-off."

Bristol stared at her cup. "So they're danged if they do and danged if they don't."

"Exactly."

"What about the other sellers? Those who aren't trying to prop up a currency—what are they buying?"

Caleb showed her his phone.

"Gold?" She read the price. "Four hundred, that's low."

"Four hundred Fedcoin," said Caleb.

"So that's..."

"Eight thousand dollars an ounce," he answered.

She narrowed her eyes. "How much gold do you have?"

"A little, but that's not what I'm concerned about. I've still got quite a bit of paper. I want to get rid of it—while it will still buy something more than a stick of gum."

"So what are you thinking? Do you want to go back to Knoxville?"

"Yeah. But we should really think about what else we're going to need to survive long term."

She sipped her coffee. “Your grandfather didn’t say anything, but he gave you a funny look every time you pulled out another wad of cash. I think he knows you didn’t save that much from your roofing job.”

Caleb sighed. “Maybe I should just tell him what happened.”

“What if he doesn’t take it well?”

“I don’t know. I guess we could still find somewhere else and start over.” Caleb’s heart felt heavy.

“But he’s your family,” she touched his hand tenderly.

He put his arm around her and pulled her close. “*You* are my family.”

Her lip quivered, and she said nothing.

“Coffee smells good.” Stan entered the room, dressed and ready for the day. He looked at Caleb and Bristol. “You two got awful quiet when I walked into the room.” Stan’s upbeat demeanor faded. “You aren’t leaving, are you?”

“No,” said Caleb. “Not unless you want us to, that is.”

“Why would I want that?”

Caleb took a deep breath. “There’s something I need to tell you.” Caleb proceeded to explain how he’d gotten involved with Z-Bub back in Los Angeles. He told of how the gangster had murdered Detective Garcia and how Caleb had shot Z-Bub and Slice to keep from being killed, himself. Caleb laid out his premeditated scheme to rip off Z-Bub so he’d have the financial means to get out of town and start over.”

Stan listened quietly. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?” Caleb asked.

“Okay, you’ve made some mistakes. You’re not planning on doing anything like that again, are you?”

“No, sir,” Caleb said. “But if that changes the way you feel about us living here, I’d understand.”

“Son, I’ve failed you as a grandfather.” Stan got choked up, began crying. He regained his composure. “By not being the father I should have been, I ruined your mother and thereby ruined your life. Everything that’s happened to you, every bad situation, every poor choice, it all comes back to me.” Stan pecked his chest with his index finger. “If anyone in this room is unworthy of a second chance, it’s me.”

Caleb felt horrible that Stan was blaming himself. He wanted to hug the man, but he barely knew him. Yet, something inside compelled him. He embraced his grandfather and wrapped his arms tightly around the elderly gentleman. The two held each other for a long time. Afterward, they gave one another a knowing nod. It was the nod between men that spoke without words, a nod that said *everything is going to work out*.

CHAPTER 16

Then said he unto them, But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.

Luke 22:36

After breakfast Wednesday morning, Caleb explained to Stan what was happening with the treasury market. “Bristol and I think we should make another run to Knoxville while we can still find stuff on the shelves and while our dollars will still buy something.”

“It’s a good idea,” said Stan. “But I’d like to look up this Scooter guy first. Your ordeal in Los Angeles reiterates the importance of being able to defend ourselves. I’d also like to locate one of those camping stoves. It’s okay if we have to take a drive to pick it up. I don’t want to get caught flatfooted if we lose power.”

“So maybe we take care of all that today and go back to Knoxville tomorrow,” Bristol suggested.

“We could probably find Scooter and be done by noon,” said Stan. “We can go to Knoxville after lunch.”

Caleb relayed the encounter they’d had with the two goons in Albuquerque. “We got lucky and didn’t have any trouble

yesterday, but I'd rather not push it. Let's find Scooter today, then we can spend the afternoon making a wish list and planning out where we'll go to find the things we need. Then, tomorrow, we can leave for Knoxville first thing."

"If that's okay with you," said Stan. "I didn't mean to throw a wrench in your plans."

Caleb replied, "Not at all. You're right about defense needing to be a priority. I agree one hundred percent." He looked at the piles of supplies that had been dumped on the living room floor the prior night. "Besides, I think a little planning will go a long way in making our supply run more effective."

"Agreed," said Stan with a smile.

Bristol stood with her hands on her hips staring at the hodgepodge of purchases. "Aren't you worried that we could end up getting bugs in our food?"

"Maybe we could get some buckets and lids from the home improvement store," Stan said.

"That's a great idea," Caleb said. "Plus, we can stack the buckets, which helps to alleviate some of our organizational challenges."

"For now, we need to go see Dolly and ask her where to find Scooter." Stan sat on the chair by the door and put on his shoes.

The three of them walked to the adjacent farm rather than drive. The early November air was cool, but the sun was shining, and it was a beautiful day for a walk.

Caleb knocked on the door when they arrived. Dolly soon answered, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. "Hi, come on in."

"We're not interrupting you, are we?" Caleb wiped his feet on the mat.

"No, not at all. I was just putting up some butternut squash soup. What can I do for your folks?"

Stan said, "I ran into the sheriff yesterday. He said you might know how to get a hold of Scooter McAlvany."

"I might." Dolly's face betrayed her lack of confidence. "I haven't seen Scooter in a long time." She pulled her phone out of her back pocket. "I don't have his number in my phone." She held up a finger and glanced toward the ceiling. "But I might have it written down somewhere. Mind if I ask why you're trying to get a hold of Scooter?"

"We stopped by the outdoor store in Knoxville yesterday," said Caleb. "We were looking for ammunition. The store was sold out of 9mm. The sheriff said Scooter sells ammo at gun shows and thought he might have some on hand."

"Yeah, if anyone has ammo, it'd be Scooter. I'll be right back." Dolly walked into the other room and returned shortly thereafter. "Here's his number." She passed a slip of paper to Caleb. "As a matter of fact, I'm going to put it in my phone while I'm thinking about it."

Caleb folded the paper. "Thanks so much. Would it be too much to ask for you to give him a call? Maybe let him know we'll be contacting him, so he won't think we're the ATF trying to set him up in a sting operation or something."

"Sure," she chuckled. "I'd be glad to. I guess I sort of benefit by having well-armed neighbors, especially if the social order of things continues to deteriorate." She dialed the number. "Scooter, hey, it's Dolly."

She paused. "I'm good. I know, it's been too long. Listen, my neighbors were looking for some pistol ammunition, 9mm."

She listened for a while. "Nothing is these days, right?" She laughed. "Okay, I'll have them text you for directions. And you have my number now so don't be a stranger." She nodded. "I will. You too. Bye."

"He has ammo but warned me that nothing is cheap."

"We didn't expect it to be," said Caleb. "Thanks for that."

“My pleasure, let me know if I can do anything else for you.”

Bristol said, “Since you’re offering, you can let us know if you decide to sell any livestock.”

“We’re not looking for a discount or anything,” Caleb added. “We have money. We’re happy to pay whatever.”

“Okay,” Dolly replied. “What do you think you’d like to start with?”

Bristol said, “Chickens and rabbits, I guess.”

“Those are probably the most manageable,” said Dolly. “Where will you keep them?”

“We bought supplies to build cages,” said Stan.

“What about bees?” Caleb inquired. “How hard is that?”

“Not too hard if you know what you’re doing,” Dolly said. “I’d be happy to teach you. I won’t be doing any splits until spring though. But if it’s something you want to get into, you should order all your supplies now.”

“Yeah, okay. Would you mind telling us what we need?” Bristol asked.

“I could just put everything into an online cart and text you the link to check out if you want. How many hives do you want to start with?”

“How many can you sell us next year?” Caleb inquired.

“I sold ten nucs this year. A nuc is a laying queen, five frames of honey and brood, and a healthy starter colony of bees. Ten would be a lot. I’d recommend starting with five.”

“Let’s do six,” said Caleb.

“Okay, but that’s going to add up. You’ll need boxes, lids, bases, and frames for each colony to grow. It’s probably going to be close to a thousand dollars per hive. That doesn’t include the nucs.”

“How much are they?” Caleb asked.

“I sold them for two hundred each this spring. I can’t say what they’ll go for by next spring. Two hundred dollars might not even buy a gallon of gas by then.”

“I understand,” Caleb replied.

Dolly sighed, “But I was hoping to make a trip to Knoxville myself. I have a few things I’d like to get while they’re still available. If you’d be willing to pay me now and trust me to give you the nucs in the spring, I’ll sell them to you for two fifty each. Plus, I’ll teach you how to take care of them.”

“Sold.” Caleb took a wad of cash out of his pocket. “Would I be able to split those the following spring, like you do?”

“You might lose a hive or two over the winter, but yes. The ones that survive, you should be able to split.”

“Great.” Caleb counted out the cash. “Put enough supplies for twelve hives in the cart for me, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay.” Dolly eyed the cash as Caleb counted it out. “And just let me know when you’re ready for those chickens and rabbits.”

“I can give you the cash for them now, so you’ll have the money for whenever you go to Knoxville,” said Caleb. “I guess we’ll start with six rabbits and a dozen chickens. I can pay you now and wait until you breed more if you want.”

“That’s very generous of you,” said Dolly. “I should be able to give you at least half of them when you get your cages built.”

They agreed on a price, and Caleb paid her for the livestock. Afterward, Caleb, Bristol, and Stan headed back to the cabin.

Later that morning, Stan slowed down in front of a small brick house on Newport’s eighth street. “Is this it?”

“It looks like it.” Caleb inspected the large three-car detached garage that was roughly the same size as the house.

Stan pulled into the drive and cut the engine. All three of them got out of the car and walked up to the front door. Caleb knocked.

A young man opened the door. He had short dark hair and was smoking a cigarette.

“Hi,” said Caleb. “We’re Dolly’s friends.” He introduced himself as well as Bristol and Stan.

“Come on in,” said the young man. “I’m Scooter.”

Caleb looked around the house. The walls were yellow with cigarette smoke stains, the furniture looked like it was all second-hand or had been found on the street. A Styrofoam fast-food container sat on a glass coffee table in front of a television that was playing a reality show about commercial fishermen. Behind the couch hung a huge, yellow Gadsden flag with a coiled snake and the words *Don’t tread on me* below.

“You’re looking for 9mm?” asked Scooter.

“Yeah,” said Caleb.

“I’ve got ball ammo, two seventy-five for a box of a hundred. And I’ve got hollow point, two fifty for a box of fifty.”

Caleb had never purchased ammunition before, so he was not surprised by the price. “Okay, I guess I’ll take two boxes of each.”

“Do you sell guns?” Stan asked.

“I do, but the NICS is taking almost a week to clear a background check.”

“Maybe some rifles,” said Stan.

“I only sell one firearm at a time.” Scooter shook his head. “If I do more than that, the ATF starts sniffing around. And in case you’re wondering, I don’t much like the ATF.”

“Oh, okay,” Stan replied. “Then I guess I want to buy the gun with the most bang for my buck. Do you have any AR-15s?”

“Yep. What are you looking to spend?”

“What’s the price range?” Stan inquired.

“Between two and five thousand,” said Scooter.

“Do you take credit cards?” Stan asked.

“Yes, but I add ten percent. Inflation will probably eat that much or more by the time the bank processes the payment into my account.”

“I totally understand.” Stan nodded. “I guess I don’t want the cheapest. What can I get for around three grand?”

“I’ll be right back.” Scooter walked down the hall to a spare bedroom. He returned moments later with a black rifle and handed it to Stan. “This is from Palmetto State Armory. You can’t buy a better gun for less money. That’s just the gun. If you want optics, a sling, weapon-mounted flashlight, more magazines, all that costs extra.”

“Okay. I guess I need all the upgrades.” Stan inspected the rifle.

Scooter replied, “Fill out the NICS form. I’ll go see what I have. Do you want ammo?”

Bristol asked, “Should we wait for the background check to clear before we spend money on ammo and accessories?”

“Suit yourself,” said Scooter. “But it’s not going to get any cheaper. Plus, I’ve got people stopping by all the time, and I’m selling out of a lot of stuff. As it is, the only 5.56 ammo I have is high-end hollow point. Most of the gun shops are out of everything. I’ve even been selling stuff to some of the deputies.”

Stan nodded. “I’m sure. Sheriff Green is the one who recommended we look for you. We don’t want to wait. I’ll

take your recommendation for optics, a sling, and some ammunition.”

“When did you talk to the sheriff?” Scooter inquired.

“Yesterday evening,” said Stan.

“He’s missing, you know.”

“Really?” Stan furrowed his brow.

“Yep. Never came home last night. Deputy Smith stopped by to purchase some .45 ammo right before you came. The sheriff’s wife is used to him working late, so she went to sleep last night not thinking anything of him not being home yet. But she woke up this morning and he still wasn’t there. Did he say anything to you?”

“He was investigating the fire at Koontz Kafé.” Stan looked grimly at Caleb. “He thought something was fishy about it.”

Scooter stitched his brows together. “Yeah, getting involved with that bunch can be bad for your health.”

Bristol narrowed her eyes. “You think they could be responsible for the sheriff’s disappearance?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think,” said Scooter. “And if they were involved, they covered their tracks. No one will be able to prove anything. So it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks either.”

Scooter lit another cigarette. “How much ammo do you want?”

“What’s the price?” Stan seemed preoccupied with the sheriff’s well-being.

“I’ve got Black Hills for five bucks a round. I might have one box of green tip for three bucks a round.”

Stan closed his eyes as if trying to focus on the issue at hand. “I’ll take that box if you have it. Three hundred rounds of the other, I guess. And a few extra magazines. Mind if I ask what green tip is?”

“Penetrator rounds,” said Scooter.

“You mean like armor piercing?” Caleb wrinkled his brow.

Scooter laughed. “It’ll go through soft armor, like any other rifle round. But nothing from an AR-15 is going to pierce steel-plate body armor. Penetrator rounds will perform better if your target is behind thick glass or something like a metal car door. But nine times out of ten, I’d rather have a hollow-point round if I’m in a gunfight, especially if I’m worried about over-penetration.

“I’ll be right back.” He made another trip to the rear bedroom. He soon returned with a metal ammunition box and a small cardboard box filled with goodies. He handed off the ammo box to Bristol and then gave the cardboard box to Stan. “I’ve got you a Holosun reflex sight in here along with a Holosun flip-to-side magnifier. You’ve got a sling, surefire flashlight, flashlight mount, and a bipod. I’ll call you when the background check clears. Bring all this gear back when you come to pick it up, and I’ll help you get the rifle set up.”

“Thanks.” Stan paid Scooter for his purchases with his credit card.

Caleb counted out the money for the pistol ammo. “The sheriff mentioned that you sell components for building rifles.”

Scooter counted the cash and took a drag from his cigarette. He blew out the smoke. “Do you have a drill press and do you know anything about gunsmithing?”

“No,” said Caleb.

“Then it’s probably going to be a bigger project than you want to take on.”

“Could a person buy the parts and pay you to assemble them?”

Scooter narrowed his eyes. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t realize there was anything wrong with that,” Caleb replied.

“In my view, there isn’t. But the ATF has a *very* different opinion.” Scooter gave Caleb the boxes of ammo.

Bristol lifted her shoulders. “But hypothetically, you could do it. For a really close friend—like Dolly. And the ATF wouldn’t be the wiser.”

“I just met you people.” Scooter blew smoke in her direction. “You’re *not* Dolly.”

Stan opened the door and motioned for Caleb and Bristol to follow before they wore out their welcome. “Thank you for your help. Let me know when the background check clears.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Scooter walked them out. “Thanks for the business.”

The three of them returned to the Escalade. They’d spent thousands of dollars and had very little to show for it. At least until Stan could pick up his rifle.

CHAPTER 17

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two days passed since Stan purchased the rifle with no word from Scooter concerning the background check. The group made a second supply run to Knoxville on Thursday and spent most of the day Friday organizing and stowing away the goods they purchased.

Saturday afternoon, Caleb worked diligently on building a hutch for the new rabbits.

Bristol came around the side of the garage where Caleb had set up his workstation. “Wow! The hutch is looking really

nice.”

Caleb sunk another fastener into the stained siding with his screw gun. “Thanks, but I can’t take all the credit. I put together a couple of different designs I found on homesteading and rabbit forums.”

“You could hand me a set of blueprints and I wouldn’t know where to start. You’re very handy when it comes to tools.”

“Thanks. I had a good teacher.”

“At your roofing job?”

“Yeah.”

Bristol inspected the corrugated metal roof attached to hinges on the top of the hutch. “These little bunnies are going to stay safe and dry in here.”

Caleb picked up another handful of wood screws. “Let’s not forget these little bunnies are for us to eat.”

Bristol frowned. “Don’t remind me.” She took her phone out of her back pocket, swiped the screen, and showed it to Caleb.

He stopped his work to look at the screen. “What’s this?”

“I found one of those camping stoves online. I looked everywhere. Most stores are out of them.”

“Great!” said Caleb. “Ask Stan if you can use his credit card. I’ll give him the cash for it.”

She pressed her lips together. “You know he won’t take the money. Plus, I think it would mean a lot to him if you quit calling him *Stan*.”

“About the money, it’s communal property at this point. We’re all throwing in whatever we have for mutual benefit. About his name, what would you suggest, Mr. Webb? He specifically said he didn’t want to be called that.”

“No, no, no. I mean like grandpa or grandad.”

Caleb smiled. “I appreciate your concern, but it would feel contrived on my part. I just met the guy. But if you want to call him grandpa or grandad, go right ahead.”

“When we get married, I will, but for now I think it would be presumptuous on my part.”

Caleb’s eyes widened, his mouth hung open, and his heart thumped in his chest. “Oh, so is that a definite, *yes*?”

She furrowed her brow. “What are you talking about?”

“To my proposal—you never actually said *yes*.”

“We were talking about your grandfather.” She crossed her arms. “How did you interpret that as being an acceptance of a marriage proposal?”

“You said *when we get married*. How am I supposed to interpret that?”

Her cheeks reddened. “I said *if we get married*.”

He put his arms around her waist. “You said *when*.”

“I did not!” She squealed and playfully pulled away from his embrace.

“Yes, you did!” He grabbed her even tighter. She struggled to get away and they fell into the grass. He kissed her. She let him. The kiss continued and grew more passionate.

Minutes into the heavy make-out session, Bristol broke it off. “Regardless of whether it was an *if* or a *when*, we’re not married now, so you better get up.”

He bit his lower lip. “But we can kiss.”

“We can do a lot of things, but you’re the one who said you want to honor God.”

“But you do too, right?”

“Of course!” She ran her hand along his chest and stomach. “I’m just saying, you’re the one who got me started on this whole Bible thing.”

“So, then, let’s talk about dates.”

“Going on a date?”

“No, a date to get married.”

“I haven’t even seen a ring yet. I’m not talking about dates.”

He felt foolish. “Oh, right. Of course.”

She saw his expression. “Caleb, no. I don’t care about a ring. But we’re still getting to know each other. Let’s take it slow, okay?”

He hugged her. “Sure.”

Stan came around the side of the garage. “Oh, hey, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No, it’s fine,” said Caleb. “We were just—talking.”

Bristol brushed grass off of Caleb’s shirt. “Maybe not *just talking*, but you’re not interrupting.”

Stan continued, “Scooter called. My background check came in. I can go pick up the rifle. Do you two want to come?”

Caleb looked at his unfinished project. “We will if you need us to.”

Stan shook his head. “It’s twenty minutes away. I’ll be fine. Stay. Finish your hutch. It looks fantastic, by the way.”

“Thanks,” said Caleb. “Are you sure you’re okay by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine,” said Stan.

“I have something for you to look at before you go.” Bristol showed Stan the stove on her phone. “It’s exactly what we were looking for. We have money but no credit card.”

Stan took out his card and handed it to her. “Use mine.”

“We can pay you,” said Caleb.

“I won’t hear it of it.” Stan waved his hand.

“It’s a lot of money,” said Bristol. “It’s over a thousand dollars.”

Stan shook his head. “Like Caleb said, that might not buy a loaf of bread a month from now. Let’s spend what we have on things we’re likely to need.”

“Shipping is high also,” she said. “It’s three hundred for five-to-eight-day shipping. Seven hundred for forty-eight-hour shipping.”

Stan nodded. “Whatever you think is best.”

Bristol glanced at Caleb. “Should we go with the cheapest?”

“Normally, that would be the wise thing to do,” he replied.

“But?” She waited for him to continue.

He proceeded, “These aren’t normal times. The entire supply chain could collapse in eight days.”

“I agree,” said Stan. “Let’s not be penny wise and pound foolish. Get the fastest shipping possible. I don’t want to freeze this winter because we tried to save money that’s going to be worthless anyway.”

“Okay.” She glanced at the credit card. “Thank you.”

“And thank you for finding the stove.” Stan started to walk away.

Bristol put her hand on his arm and spoke with an authoritative tone. “There and back. Don’t stop anywhere else. It’s dangerous.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Stan grinned at her. “I’ll be straight home after.” He waved and walked back to the house.

An hour later, Caleb inspected his work. He tugged at the wire mesh that made the front windows of the hutch. *Seems strong.* He pressed on the tighter mesh of the floor. *That should hold a few rabbits.* He closed the lid and peered

through the window at the dividers which separated the two enclosures. *Looks like less than a one-inch gap between the divider and the roof. I don't think the buck will be able to get over to the doe's side without an invitation.*

Bristol brought him a glass of water. "Fabulous work!"

He took the glass and drank deeply. "Thanks. But this won't hold very many rabbits. I'll need to build a couple more of them if we're going to depend on these animals as a primary food source."

"You have to take more breaks. You're working yourself to death." She examined the strip of metal roofing supported by wooden cross bars running beneath the length of the hutch. "Is this to keep foxes and raccoons from bothering the rabbits from under the cage?"

"It might help do that also, but I planned for this panel to catch their droppings. I have it sloped to one side hoping the manure will roll into one of those heavy-duty totes."

"Brilliant," Bristol exclaimed.

"Maybe, maybe not," Caleb replied. "The slope isn't that steep. They'll probably just pile up on the metal."

"Even so," she replied. "You can get one of those long snow brushes for windshields and use that to sweep it on down to the tote. The slope will make it easier to get the scat in the bin."

"That's a great idea," said Caleb. "Why don't you order one?"

"Okay." She took out her phone. "The fastest shipping possible?"

"Yeah, and get two of them. Were you able to order the stove?"

"Yes, it should be here Monday or Tuesday."

"Tuesday isn't forty-eight hours."

"Tomorrow is Sunday. It doesn't count."

Caleb heard a vehicle coming up the drive. “I hope that’s Stan.” He walked around the side of the garage to get a better view of the long gravel driveway.

“That’s him.” Bristol waved when the Escalade came into view.

Stan exited the vehicle and opened the back door. He removed a black soft rifle case. “Who wants to shoot up some soda cans?”

“I’m ready!” Caleb was excited to try out the new gun. “Just give me a minute to get my tools put away.”

“Whoa! Hold on. You’re just going to start shooting in your yard?” Bristol asked.

“My yard is sixty-seven acres,” said Stan. “This is the country. People shoot all the time out here.”

“I haven’t heard anyone shooting since we got here,” said Bristol.

“Probably because ammo is so expensive.” Caleb rolled up the extension cord he’d been using for the circular saw.

“That’s a good reason not to shoot.” She pointed at the soft case. “The bullets for that thing cost you three bucks every time you pull the trigger.”

“But knowing how to use it and knowing that it’s zeroed in has a lot of value,” Caleb argued.

“I’m afraid I have to side with Caleb on that one,” said Stan.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Bristol said. “For now, you boys need to get cleaned up. Hellen invited us all over for dinner. I took it upon myself to accept—for all of us.” She winked at Stan. “I think she might have the hots for you.”

Stan grimaced and waved her off. “Oh, don’t talk like that. I’m too old for that kind of thing. Besides, Hellen is just a generous soul. She’s only being hospitable.”

“I don’t know,” said Bristol in a sing-song voice. “After all, you *are* one of Cocke County’s most eligible gentlemen.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Stan huffed. “What time are we expected for dinner?”

“Six o’clock sharp,” said Bristol.

Stan glanced at his watch. “Well then, I best start getting ready.”

Caleb shook his head as he watched his grandfather walk away. “The hots? Who says that? And why are you giving him such a hard time?”

“Loosen up. I’m just razzing him.” Bristol rolled her eyes. “Besides, it might be true. You saw how quickly he scampered off to get ready.”

“That’s because he’s trying to escape your incessant teasing,” Caleb said gruffly.

“Okay, but if he wears cologne tonight, you’ll know he’s got a thing for Hellen.”

“Lots of people wear cologne. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yeah, but your grandfather hasn’t worn any since we arrived. Mark my words. I know what I’m talking about when it comes to this stuff.”

CHAPTER 18

All these [environmental] things we talk about wouldn't be a problem if there was the size of population that there was 500 years ago.

Jane Goodall at the World Economic Forum's 2020 Annual Meeting in Davos

Caleb stood on Hellen's porch and knocked.

Dolly opened the door. "Come on in. It's good to see y'all. I'm so glad you could come."

Bristol greeted Dolly with a hug.

"Thank you for having us." Stan walked inside wearing a white button-down shirt, a black sports coat, and matching pants.

The fragrant aroma of a home-cooked meal wafted through the air. Caleb breathed it in. "Something smells delicious."

Hellen walked into the small but tidy living room. She removed her apron, revealing an elegant black dress. "It's my famous rabbit dumplings."

"Rabbit dumplings? That sounds amazing!" Bristol exclaimed. "Please teach me how to make it."

“Anytime,” said Hellen. “It’s a terribly easy dish to make.”

Hellen hugged Stan. “I’m glad you came. Any news about the sheriff?”

“None, I’m afraid.” Stan appeared pained by the admission. “I spoke with Scooter about an hour ago. He said the department doesn’t have any leads.”

“That’s just awful.” Hellen shook her head and reiterated her displeasure with the situation. “Simply awful, I tell you.”

Dolly addressed Coral and Lexi, who were playing on the floor with small, poseable forest animals all dressed in human clothes. “Girls, wash your hands and get to the table. It’s time to eat.”

“Yes, mama,” said Coral.

Everyone took their seats at the big, wooden table. Bristol elbowed Caleb in the arm when Hellen asked Stan to pray for the meal. Caleb furrowed his brow, slightly worried that if she couldn’t prove her case concerning Hellen’s attraction to Stan she might resort to meddling.

Conversation over the meal revolved around the growing economic crisis, soaring prices, the lack of availability for common items, and the preparations the two households were putting together for the inevitable societal breakdown.

Stan took a drink of his iced tea. “Caleb and Bristol have a theory that this is all being done on purpose.”

“On purpose?” Hellen cocked one eyebrow. “Why in the world would anyone want the entire civilized world to come to a screeching halt?”

Caleb raised his shoulders. “Depopulation, maybe. Think about it. Everything that happens these days gets blamed on climate change.”

“What does climate change have to do with depopulation?” Dolly asked.

Bristol replied, “All the globalist leaders say the earth has exceeded its carrying capacity. There are just too darn many of us. That’s what’s causing COVID, supply chain disruptions, and soaring energy prices. Klaus Schaub, George Soros, Bill Gates—according to them, it’s us useless eaters who are mucking up the planet, not their private jets and mega-yachts. You won’t see any of them volunteering to die for the good of Mother Earth.”

“Except that COVID was cooked up in a lab,” said Hellen.

Caleb was happy to know he was talking to someone who was paying attention. “The rest of it too. Supply chain disruptions started during the mandatory lockdowns. And energy prices went haywire as a result of the US sticking its nose in Ukraine’s business. The currency collapse, which is a result of printing too much money, then attempting to stuff the genie back in the bottle with violent interest rate hikes exacerbated the problem.”

“Wait,” said Dolly. “You don’t think we should have intervened in the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Putin is a monster. It’s awful what he did to that country.”

Caleb could see that he’d struck a nerve. “To be sure, Putin is ex-KGB. He’s a mean character by anyone’s standards. But that’s not where it started. Ukraine and Russia got along just fine up until the 2004 Ukrainian revolution. But with a little help from the US government, a very pro-western administration came out on top after the smoke cleared.”

“An administration that George Soros funded to the tune of 181 million dollars,” Bristol added.

Dolly appeared intrigued but unconvinced. “I’ll admit, putting their paws where they don’t belong is sort of a hobby for the US government. And Grandma has shown me enough articles that I won’t debate COVID being a manmade pandemic. But you’re still coming up short on proving this depopulation theory.”

“They admit it!” Bristol said. “Bill Gates said in his 2010 TED talk that if we do a really good job with vaccines, we can reduce the population by ten to fifteen percent.”

Dolly narrowed her eyes and took out her phone for a quick fact check. Seconds later her eyes grew wide. “You’re not kidding.”

“I wish I were,” said Bristol. “That stupid vaccine killed my mom. What’s worse, the government knew all about it. The Department of Health and Human Services keeps track of all vaccine injuries and publishes the data on its Vaccine Adverse Effects Reporting System webpage. The last time I looked, VAERS was reporting over one and a half million deaths and injuries from the COVID vaccine.”

Caleb added, “The spike proteins in the vaccine are especially dangerous to reproductive organs.”

Hellen nodded. “So even if they don’t kill you, they won’t have to worry about you pumping out any more children. Where did you two learn about all of this?”

“Podcasts mostly,” said Caleb. “Certainly not in school. Now that I look back on it, most of my high school curriculum seemed like it was just there to promote a globalist agenda or keep me distracted from doing my own research.”

Stan said, “Which is exactly what you started doing once you got out of the school system.”

“Did you study economics in college?” Dolly asked. “You seem to have a better understanding of that than most people on the financial news networks.”

“No,” said Caleb. “I didn’t even finish high school. I learned all of that from podcasts and YouTube videos.”

“I see what you’re saying,” said Dolly. “But maybe the government just bumbled everything up. I have a hard time believing they are actively trying to kill us.”

“Certainly not everyone in the government is bad,” said Bristol. “But the decision makers, those at the highest levels.

Think about it. Every agency from the FDA to the Department of Education enacts policies that track with a depopulation agenda.”

“How is the FDA trying to kill us off?” Dolly quizzed.

“You’re an organic farmer,” said Bristol. “You must know the dangers of GMO produce and petrochemicals in everything from fertilizers to weed control used in our food supply.”

“I do, obviously,” Dolly said. “But I just chalked that up to the food industrial complex looking for a cheaper way to turn a profit.”

“But you realize it’s killing people.” Bristol sipped her tea.

Dolly paused to wipe a dumpling that had dripped on Coral’s shirt. “I do. Okay, it’s possible.”

“Plus, the drug epidemic.” Bristol took another bite from her plate. “You know if the FBI can track down every person who protested the 2020 election fraud at the Capitol, they could certainly use those resources to stomp out the fentanyl trade. But misdemeanor trespassing is a priority over Class A narcotics distribution.”

Hellen wrinkled her brow. “If you can even call it trespassing. I can’t tell you how much footage I’ve watched of the Capitol Hill Police waving the protesters into the Capitol.”

Dolly checked Lexi for spills also. “Excuse my ignorance. Is fentanyl an epidemic?”

“That’s how my mom died.” Caleb frowned. He saw the pain on Stan’s face and wished he’d not said it.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Dolly put her hand over her mouth.

“It kills close to a hundred thousand people a year.” Caleb felt sad.

“The bottom line,” said Bristol. “It’s planned. Everything lines up perfectly with the globalist depopulation agenda. If

we were talking about the buffoons who run this country, they'd have to get something right once in a while.

“But the globalists never miss. The currency collapse, the energy crisis, the wars, the pandemic, the vaccine, poisoning the food, poisoning the water, the education system, they all move us toward depopulation.”

“I'm on board,” said Hellen. “But how is the education system involved?”

“The LGBTQ agenda,” Caleb replied. “Heterosexuals are the only ones who can procreate without help from a laboratory.”

The conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Who could that be?” Dolly got up from her chair.

Caleb eyed the front door suspiciously.

“We're not expecting anyone.” Hellen got up from her chair and walked to the front door.

Caleb listened for signs of trouble.

Before opening the door, Hellen said, “It's Ricky.”

“Hi, Mrs. Stevens,” said a voice.

“Come on in, Ricky.” Seconds later, Hellen closed the door. “We were just having dinner. I'll make you a plate.” She walked through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Caleb watched as a boy not much older than himself walked into the room. Ricky's head was shaved. He wore a gray hoodie over a white t-shirt and jeans that were either from the Walmart sales rack or had been given to him by the Department of Corrections upon his release. The young man's eyes were wide as if he'd just landed on an unknown planet. He seemed like an alien unable to cope with the atmospheric pressure of Earth. He looked at Lexi and then at Coral.

Dolly was the only person in the room who seemed to be more uncomfortable or more unsettled than Ricky. Her face was pale and she looked like she may have forgotten to

breathe. She appeared to catch his gaze at the two girls, as if he felt embarrassed for not knowing which was his offspring. Dolly's eyes shifted to Coral. She put her arm around her. "Coral, this is Ricky. He's your father."

Coral gazed at the young man with curiosity. "I thought he was in jail."

"Well," said Dolly. "He's out now."

Hellen entered the dining room carrying a bowl of rabbit dumplings, a napkin, and utensils. "You can sit here, Ricky."

Bristol took Caleb's hand and held it tightly. Caleb knew she was probably feeling more awkward than himself. But he knew Ricky was feeling more so than them all.

"Thank you, Mrs. Stevens." Ricky sat down at the empty spot.

Dolly took a long drink of water, as if she thought it might calm her nerves in the way something much stronger could. She forced a smile. "Ricky, these are our neighbors, Caleb, Bristol, and Stan."

Ricky's smile quivered as if he were sitting on a landmine. His voice sounded tense. "It's nice to meet you."

Dolly looked at Caleb, Bristol, and Stan like she was sizing up their possible assessments of the situation. She swallowed hard. She glanced at little Lexi Koontz, who seemed to not be paying attention. "Ricky was pulled over driving a truck to Nashville for Tobias Koontz. The police found a kilo of heroin hidden in the back of the truck."

Caleb looked at Lexi to see if she'd realized her family name had been mentioned. If she had, she offered no commentary. Caleb nodded and nervously took another bite from his plate. He figured that Dolly had provided the abbreviated explanation so they'd at least know Ricky had not been incarcerated for murder or some other heinous crime against humanity.

The remainder of the conversation over dinner was stilted. Caleb felt terrible for Dolly, who looked so embarrassed. But he also felt bad for Ricky. He knew all too well that anyone can make a mistake. But he felt especially sorry for little Coral. Through no fault of her own, she was in a complicated predicament and was faced with the emotional task of getting to know the man who was her father.

CHAPTER 19

“It pounds daily on the nerves: the insanity of numbers, the uncertain future... An epidemic of fear and naked need: lines of shoppers, long since a customary sight, once more form in front of shops, first in front of one, then in front of all... The lines always send the same signal: the city, the big stone city, will be shopped empty again. Rice, 80,000 marks a pound yesterday, costs 160,000 marks today, and tomorrow perhaps twice as much. The day after, the man behind the counter will shrug his shoulders: “No more rice!”

Friedrich Kroner on hyperinflation, August 1923

After breakfast Monday morning, Caleb kissed Bristol on the cheek. “Stan and I are going to run into town. I’ll meet up with you and Dolly when I get back.”

“Oh, okay.” Bristol glanced at Stan who was putting his shoes on. She seemed unhappy with the arrangement. “Does that mean I’m not invited to go to town?”

“No, not at all,” Caleb wrinkled his forehead. “But we promised Dolly that we’d help her get an early start with the fence. She’s being so generous with her time to teach us about homesteading, I don’t want to let her down. I think at least one of us should be there.”

“She has Ricky to help now,” Bristol said.

“I know, but we gave her our word.”

“*You* gave her *your* word.” Bristol put her hands on her hips. “I don’t want to be over there alone with those two. Yesterday was even more awkward than Saturday night when Ricky showed up. Dolly acts like she doesn’t know what to do or say around him. And Ricky—Ricky reminds me of a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Besides, he’s a criminal.”

Caleb replied, “You heard what Dolly told us yesterday. Ricky was working at Koon Dawg’s as a bartender and Tobias Koontz pushed that job on him.”

“He could have said *no*,” Bristol argued.

“He could have, but he didn’t. Dolly was pregnant and he needed the job at Koon Dawg’s.”

Bristol dropped her dispute as if deciding to empathize with Ricky’s situation.

Caleb continued, “As far as the social uneasiness, it’s an adjustment to come out of prison and be thrust into a family environment. He needs a little time to get used to things. He doesn’t seem like a bad guy. He just got caught up with the wrong group of people.”

“Since you have so much in common with him, why don’t *you* go work on the fence? Tell me what you’re looking for and I’ll go with Stan.”

“If I could I would. But we’re going to the pawn shop to look for tools.”

She argued, “I thought we got everything on our list. What else do we need?”

Caleb huffed. “I don’t know yet. If I spot something and it’s a good deal that might be handy, I’ll get it. We have a very slim window to purchase the equipment we need. Once it closes, we’re going to be stuck where we are with what we have.”

She glared at him. “And *who* we’re with!” She stomped toward the door. “I’ll see you when I see you, I guess.”

Stan waited for Bristol to leave before he spoke. “That didn’t go so well.”

Caleb sighed. “I know. But I don’t have any other choice. It has to be this way.”

Stan opened the door and walked outside. “She’ll get over it quick enough when she sees what you’re getting for her.”

“If I can even find what I’m looking for.” Caleb followed his grandfather to the SUV.

“You’ll find one.” Stan got inside the Escalade and started the engine. “People are parting with anything of value to get through the collapse.”

Stan drove toward the pawn shop in Newport. Caleb gazed out the window as they crossed the bridge over the Pigeon River and drove down Broadway Street. “Look at that. A guy is set up on the side of the street selling gas by the gallon.”

“No kidding?” Stan glanced over but had already passed the peddler.

“His sign said *fifty bucks a gallon.*”

“That’s a nice markup. You have to give him credit for being industrious,” said Stan.

“Yeah, I suppose he’s making runs to Knoxville, filling up, and hauling it down here for a small fee. It’s probably good for

folks who can't afford to drive up there and back or only need a little bit of gas." Caleb looked at the roadside stand in the rearview. "He'll do okay as long as he doesn't get robbed."

"Yeah, that's the rub, isn't it?" Stan pulled into the parking lot of the pawn shop. "Would you look at that? They have a guy with a shotgun standing out front. I've never seen anything like that before."

Caleb remembered Chulo back in LA. "I have. Most stores have some type of private security in California. Some are professionals with uniforms, but a lot of them are guys off the street holding a baseball bat or a tire iron."

The two of them got out of the SUV and proceeded toward the front door. The guard looked them over but said nothing as they entered. Caleb went straight to the jewelry counter.

A robust fellow with a bushy, gray beard wearing a plaid, flannel shirt approached him from behind the counter. "Looking for anything in particular?"

"Um, a diamond ring. Something around a carat—and pretty clean. It doesn't look like you have much."

"I might have more in the safe. But what you're talking about is probably in the ballpark of twenty thousand. How are you planning to pay for that?"

Caleb had spent most of his cash and didn't have twenty thousand dollars remaining. But he'd anticipated the price to be high. He felt the gold coins in his pocket. "Do you take gold?"

"Gold what?" asked the man. "I'm not interested in gold teeth or gold-plated necklaces from Walmart."

Caleb placed a one-ounce US gold Eagle on the counter. "What about coins?"

The man picked up the eagle and felt the weight in his hand. "That's nice, but it leaves you a long way from twenty grand."

Caleb took out a gold one-ounce Buffalo. "This should bring me pretty close."

The man picked it up carefully. "Closer."

"Spot was eighty-nine hundred this morning when I left the house."

"I'll give you spot price, but you're still short a couple of grand. I might have something around three-quarters of a carat."

Caleb pressed his lips together. "The premiums on US gold are at least a thousand dollars an ounce. If you're only giving me spot, let's start over." Caleb took out two Krugerrands and a PAMP Suisse gold bar.

The man seemed less impressed with the latter offerings. "I can't give you a thousand over spot for the US gold. I have to be able to make a profit. But I could probably go a little higher than spot for the Eagle and the Buffalo. At any rate, why don't you go to the end of the counter? I'll escort you to my backroom where we can look at some rings. Neither one of us want to attract the wrong kind of attention from onlookers."

"Sure." Caleb waved at Stan, who was inspecting a rifle. "I'll be right back."

Stan nodded. "I'll be here."

Caleb walked to the end of the counter. The attendant followed him down and raised one end of the counter, which was connected by a hinge like a drawbridge. Caleb passed through and the attendant lowered the counter. "This way." The attendant led him through a door, which brought them into a hallway. The attendant opened the first door on the left. "Wait here. I'll get some rings from the safe."

Caleb went inside and took a seat at a small white table. Against the back wall, boxes of toilet paper, paper towels, and Styrofoam coffee cups were stacked on top of each other. A mop hung drying on a hook over top of a large yellow mop bucket. The room felt like a stock room that had recently been converted to a private transaction room. The salesman soon returned with a wooden case. He placed it on the table and opened it. "I have a one-carat princess cut set in white gold,

it's a natural diamond and it's GIA certified. I can give it to you for twenty-five." He handed the ring to Caleb.

He inspected the sparkling square. "It's nice, but I'd like to stay closer to twenty."

"Okay. This one is round, it's super clear, VVS 1, I think. And it's 1.1 carats. It's yours for twenty thousand."

Caleb liked the ring, but it seemed to lack the pizzazz the princess cut possessed. "Why is it cheaper?"

"It's not graded."

"Why does that matter?"

"Some people like the peace of mind. Some people couldn't care less."

Caleb looked at the other rings. "What about those?"

"They're all over thirty grand or way under a carat." The attendant handed him another ring. "This one is three-quarters, it's graded by IGI. I can give it to you for eighteen. That keeps you under twenty."

"No thanks." Caleb frowned. "Am I taking any risks by not getting a graded diamond?"

"When they come in, we test them to make sure they're not fakes. But without a report from a grading lab, we can't tell if they're lab-grown or naturally mined."

Caleb inspected the round diamond once more. "So this one could be man-made."

"It's still a real diamond," said the attendant.

"Can you take twenty-two for the princess cut?" Caleb picked up the square diamond again.

"I'll give it to you for twenty-four."

Caleb handed him the princess cut back. "I'm going to look around. We're going up to Knoxville. I might be back."

"Twenty-three," said the salesman.

Caleb tried not to smile too big. “Okay. Deal.” He handed him the Krugerrands and the bar. “Can you give me twenty-seven for all this?”

“I’d like to get that Buffalo. Swap it out for one of those Krugerrands and I’ll give you the ring plus five thousand.”

“That puts more paper in my pocket,” said Caleb. “Paper that’s losing value by the minute.”

“Okay, store credit. I saw the old man with you looking at some guns out there. We’ll put it toward whatever you want.”

“Background checks are taking forever to go through,” said Caleb. “Can you sell it to us out the back door?”

“I can’t do that,” the salesman replied.

“Alright then. I don’t need anything else. And the end of the world could come and go by the time the background check gets cleared. Let’s just settle up with the Krugerrands.”

The man tightened his jaw. “I’ll make a private sale for the gun. But it has nothing to do with the store. It’s between myself and the buyer. That stays between you and me.”

“Fine, but I’m getting back five thousand dollars. It’s going to be more than one gun.”

The man held out his hand. “Just give me that Buffalo.”

Caleb handed him the bar, the Krugerrand, and finally the Buffalo. The man gave Caleb a black box for the ring, closed the case, and stood up. “When you decide what you want, tap the counter three times. Leave the store and pull your vehicle around to the back. I’ll meet you by the dumpster.”

Caleb got up and returned to the front of the store to find Stan. “Hey, find anything interesting?”

“Maybe.” Stan was holding a stainless-steel revolver. “What about you?”

“Yep.” Caleb grinned as he opened the black box to show Stan.

“Wow. She won’t be able to turn that down.” Stan pointed to a black AR-15 on the wall. “They’re asking five thousand for that one. It’s a lot more than what I paid for the one I bought from Scooter, but they said it’s a Bravo Company custom job. It’s supposed to be really high quality.”

“What about the pistol?”

“Smith and Wesson .357. I’ve always wanted one of these.”

“How much?”

“A thousand. I’d buy them both, but I don’t want to set off any red flags.”

“I think I have a way around that.” Caleb whispered, “The guy is going to make my change in store merchandise. But technically, we’re not buying it from the store.”

Stan narrowed his eyes. “I’m not sure that’s the way the law would see it.”

“The law allows for an individual to sell a firearm to another individual with no background check, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, if we’re not in the store, it’s a private transaction. The law doesn’t discriminate just because the seller happens to work in a pawn shop.”

Stan grimaced. “The less I know about this, the better.”

Caleb figured that was as good as it was going to get. The salesman who’d sold Caleb the ring took over for the attendant who’d been helping Stan. Caleb tapped the counter for the pistol and the AR-15.

The salesman brought the guns out the back door in cardboard boxes and loaded them into the rear of Stan’s SUV. Caleb paid him the extra thousand in cash to make up the difference, thanked him, and closed the hatch. He’d found the most important item and come out ahead on the trade for the remaining gold value.

CHAPTER 20

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

1 Peter 5:8

When he and Stan arrived home late Monday morning, Caleb helped to bring in the guns, stashed the ring in his bedroom, and hurried to the adjacent farm to help out with Dolly's fence. He arrived to find Dolly, Bristol, and even Ricky laughing, working, and talking. The iciness of the previous two days seemed to have melted.

"Hey, Caleb." Dolly waved. "Welcome to the party. Can you grab us another roll of barbed wire from the barn?"

"Sure, I'll be right there." Caleb found the spool of heavy fencing material and hoisted it up on his shoulder, being careful not to get a scrape from one of the barbs.

He brought it to the work site and placed it on the ground. Bristol gave him a smile that said all was forgiven. He felt a great sense of relief to be out of the dog house. The sound of tires on gravel was heard by all.

"Who could that be?" Dolly held her hammer and looked toward the road.

Caleb noticed the hot pink Jeep driving to the old farmhouse.

“It’s that hooker, Shelby Koontz,” said Bristol with a snarl. “What is *she* doing here?”

“Dropping Lexi off, I reckon,” Dolly replied.

“I thought Koon Dawg’s was closed on Mondays.” Caleb found the impromptu visit curious.

“It is, but she probably has a date,” said Dolly.

“Oh, is that what she calls it?” Bristol seethed. “I bet she has a *date* most every night.”

“Well, it’s not Lexi’s fault. And we can use the money.” Dolly waited for the Jeep to stop at the house. Dolly waved at Shelby when she got out of the Jeep. “Grandma and Coral are down in the hollow burning trash.”

Shelby saw her and waved back. “Hey!” She and Lexi crossed the field to where the group was working. When she arrived, she smiled at Caleb. “Hi, there.” Next, she looked Bristol up and down. “You’re still here?”

“I’ve decided to stick around for a while.” Bristol put her arm around Caleb and stuck her hand in his back pocket.

“Hmm.” Shelby frowned at Bristol’s assertion of rights then turned to address Ricky. “I told Tobias you were home. You can have your old job back anytime. We’ve been slow, but I’ll cut shifts from some of the new people to make sure you have as much work as you want. We’re loyal to those who are loyal to us. I’m sure Tobias will find you some extra work also if you need to hurry up and get some money together.”

“Thanks, Shelby, but Ricky is going to be helping out on the farm,” Dolly said politely.

Shelby gave a saccharin smile to Dolly then looked at Ricky. “Is she your official spokesperson?”

“I’m good, but tell Tobias I said thanks for the offer.” He forced a grin.

“Suit yourself.” Shelby bent down to kiss Lexi. “Mama will be by in the morning to get you.” She stood up and spoke to Ricky once more. “It’s a standing offer if you change your mind.” Shelby sauntered off without another word to anyone else.

“Where’s Mrs. Stevens and Coral?” Lexi asked.

Dolly pointed to the plume of smoke coming up from where Hellen was burning the trash. “They’re making smoke signals right on the other side of the house. Do you think you can find them on your own?”

“Yeah!” Lexi ran off excitedly.

“I can’t stand Shelby!” Bristol growled as soon as Lexi was out of earshot.

“Don’t let her get to you.” Dolly put her hand on Bristol’s shoulder and then quickly redirected the conversation. “Any news on the sheriff’s whereabouts?”

Caleb began unrolling the barbed wire. “Stan called the FBI to file a report. The receptionist said they were short staffed but an agent would get back to him.”

“Get back to him?” Dolly held up a T-post for Ricky to pound into the dirt. “Did she say when?”

“A week or two. She said they were backed up.”

Dolly grumbled. “And a missing sheriff doesn’t get prioritized?”

“I guess not,” said Caleb.

“What about the department? They aren’t coming up with anything?” Dolly spoke loud enough to be heard over the sound of iron striking iron as Ricky hammered the post into the ground.

“Deputy Heath Slater is heading up the investigation, but he hasn’t found anything so far.” Caleb pulled the wire tight while Bristol bent a metal clip to secure the barbed wire to the T-post.

Dolly objected, "Heath is their cousin. He might as well be a Koontz himself!"

"They've got the fox guarding the hen house now." Bristol checked her work.

"The fox has been running the hen house for a long time," Dolly replied. "Eric Koontz, Shelby and Tobias' brother, is a county commissioner. Plus, their money decides who else gets elected, so Eric pretty much runs the whole show."

"That's what Stan told me," Caleb agreed. "What's more, he said Eric Koontz is pushing the rest of the county commissioners for an emergency election to replace the sheriff."

"Let me guess, Eric is going to nominate Heath Slater." Dolly tightened her lips.

Caleb raised his shoulders. "Stan thinks the campaign signs are already printed."

"No, no, no!" Dolly put her hands on her hips and walked around as if blowing off steam. "Somebody has to put a stop to this!"

"But what can we do?" Bristol took another clip from the bag.

Caleb spooled the wire toward the next post. "Ricky could infiltrate their organization. He has a standing invitation."

Ricky held the heavy post driver by his side. "I just got out. I'm not ready for anything like that. I need to get my bearings before I can even think about going back around those people."

Dolly put her arms around Ricky. "No. We're not doing that. We've been given a second chance, and we're going to work things out." She shook her head. "Coral has never known her father. We've managed, but now that he's back in her life it would be worse for her to lose him than if he'd never come home."

Ricky dropped the steel post driver on the ground and hugged Dolly. “I’m not going to do that to her—or you.”

Caleb felt bad for bringing it up. “Of course. Family has to come first.”

The following day, Caleb and Bristol excitedly unboxed the new camping stove.

“Wow, this thing is solid!” Bristol tested the lever that locked the firebox door.

“I know,” said Caleb. “I wasn’t expecting it to be much thicker than a soda can, but this is heavy duty.”

Stan walked into the living room. “It’s a quality item. It should last a good long while.”

“Should we try it out?” Bristol’s eyes were wide. “It’s cold enough—supposed to get into the upper thirties tonight.”

“Yeah, I guess we could.” Caleb examined the length of the stove pipe, considering how much would need to be trimmed off to make it fit in the chimney. “We need to test out the chainsaw anyway.”

Bristol stared out the window toward the tree line. “The woods are full of deadfall. I’m sure a lot of it’s in good enough condition to burn. But it’s going to be a major project hauling it all to the house by hand.”

Caleb peered out at the forest. “Maybe Dolly would lend us her utility vehicle.”

“That’s kind of like asking someone to lend you their car,” said Bristol.

“We can compensate her,” said Stan.

Caleb nodded. “She can use the money. We could offer her fifty bucks a day, plus pay for the gas we use.”

“I suppose,” said Bristol. “It might help if we cut up the trees beforehand. That way all we need to do is haul the wood from the forest to the house.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Stan. “Let’s have some lunch, and we’ll go scope out some firewood.”

“Sure. I’ll make us some sandwiches,” said Bristol.

“I’ll get the table set.” Stan walked to the kitchen and opened the cupboard.

“While you two are doing that, I’ll get the chainsaw gassed up and filled with oil.” Caleb walked down to the basement and prepared the tools for the after-lunch task. Once finished, he returned upstairs.

Stan was sitting at the counter staring at the television. He had a grim expression. Bristol was right beside him, not touching the sandwich on her plate.

“What’s happening?” Caleb turned to see the midday local newscast from Knoxville.

A female reporter provided commentary for a cellphone video. “This footage was sent to our newsroom by a viewer who was at the Kroger on North Broadway this morning shortly after the store opened. What you are seeing is a large-scale looting episode where shoppers are filling up grocery carts and running out the door. No doubt, this action was organized on a social media platform. But you’ll notice the perpetrators of this crime are very different than what we are used to seeing in other flash-mob-style robberies. Offenders are typically in their late teens or early twenties.

“In this video, we’re seeing middle-aged people, older people—look, this woman has her toddler in the cart as she rushes out the door without paying. We’ve crossed a line here socially. These people aren’t thrill seekers or teens looking to steal a pair of sneakers that they can’t afford. We are watching people who have no way of feeding themselves except to steal. It’s a very dire situation. This breaks my heart. I can’t imagine

being so desperate that I'd have to take my child to the store with me while I load up my cart and make a run for the doorway before getting caught.

“Most retail outlets in Knoxville as well as around the country now close at five o'clock to help curb rampant shoplifting. But desperation is now pushing folks to commit these types of crimes in broad daylight. We've started to see a few grocers choose to close their doors permanently. Unfortunately, that's likely to become a growing trend. It's understandable from the company's point of view, but it's difficult to place blame on these desperate people who have no other choice.”

The video ended and a picture of an eighteen-wheeler stopped on the highway shown on the screen behind the reporter. “The Tennessee Highway Patrol reported six tractor-trailer hijackings in the last twenty-four hours. It's the most hijackings reported on Tennessee roadways in a single day. These thefts have gone from being relative outliers to daily occurrences in the past month. They are beginning to have a detrimental impact on our already-strained supply chain. Governor Gibson released a statement this morning pledging to activate the National Guard in helping to secure the state's roadways.”

“We need to stock up more,” said Caleb. “We're getting close to the point where we won't be able to buy anything. All we'll have is what we're able to produce and what we bought before the collapse.”

“Are you suggesting we go to Knoxville again today?” Bristol pushed back her plate.

“No. It's too late in the day. We need to hit it first thing in the morning.” Caleb looked at his grandfather. “We'll stick to the plan for today. We'll get the utility vehicle, cut some wood, and start a fire. That way, if the stove doesn't work the way we hope, we'll be able to come up with a solution and find supplies to rectify the issue while we're in Knoxville.”

Stan nodded. “It’s a wise plan. But this might be our last shopping trip—ever. I suggest we take both vehicles so we can fill them to the brim.”

“That would be smart,” Caleb agreed. “I’ll invite Dolly and Ricky as well. For one thing, there’s strength in numbers. Secondly, once the last store closes, we and the Stevenses are going to be depending on each other to get through whatever comes next.”

“I agree completely,” said Bristol. “But Dolly just went to Knoxville. From what I gather, she’s tight on cash. I doubt she has the resources for another big haul.”

“I have an idea to fix that problem as well,” said Caleb.

Stan shook his head. “I’ve known Hellen for many years. She’s too stubborn to accept charity. She’ll give you her last morsel of bread, but even if she’s starving, she won’t take a handout. And Dolly is just like her.”

“It won’t be a handout,” Caleb assured.

CHAPTER 21

If increased government spending with borrowed or newly created money is a *stimulus*, then the Weimar Republic should have been stimulated to unprecedented prosperity, instead of runaway inflation and widespread economic desperation that ultimately brought Adolf Hitler to power.

Thomas Sowell

Caleb smiled when Hellen came to the door. “Good afternoon.”

“Y’all come on in.” Hellen smiled at Stan first, then Caleb and Bristol. “I just pulled some muffins out of the oven.”

“Sounds delicious, but I needed to speak with Dolly,” Caleb replied.

“She’s out yonder foolin’ with her animals—like she always is. You’ll find her around the barn somewhere.”

“Okay, thank you,” said Caleb.

“If you don’t need me, I might visit with Mrs. Stevens for a while and taste one of those muffins.” Stan chuckled. “The smell is simply irresistible.”

“Sure,” said Caleb. “We’ll see you back at the house.”

As soon as Caleb and Bristol rounded the corner of the house, Bristol began poking him in the ribs. “See? What did I tell you?”

He defended himself from her assault. “About what?”

“Those two.” She batted her eyes and spoke with a deep southern accent that sounded much more like Scarlet O’Hara than Hellen Stevens. “Why Mr. Webb, how *do* you do.”

Her impression of Stan was neither Clark Gable nor Stanley Webb. It could have been that of a plantation owner but more like one from Virginia than the deep south. She made the action of a gentleman kissing a lady’s hand. “It’s such a *pleasure* to see you, my darlin’.”

She switched back to Scarlet’s voice. “Won’t you accompany me into the parlor? I’ve just pulled some muffins from the oven, and the tea is already brewed.”

Bristol lowered her voice. “Most certainly. I’d *be* delighted.”

Caleb rolled his eyes, pretending not to be amused. “This is all some fantasy you’ve cooked up in your head.”

“Oh, yeah? Bet me.”

“For what?”

“A day of chores.”

He laughed. “A day of chores? Who are you supposed to be now? Laura Ingalls?”

“Okay, if I win, you’ll be my slave for a day.”

“And vice versa, right?”

“Sure, okay. Is it a deal?”

Caleb considered the wager, wondered what it might be like, particularly if he could defer collecting his prize until after they were married. But he suspected Bristol might be on

to something concerning his grandfather and Mrs. Stevens. "I'm not taking that bet. It's silly."

"Because you know I'm right!" She poked him in the ribs once more.

Caleb rounded the corner of the barn, stopped, and then backed up. He held up his hand for Bristol to be quiet and halt.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Caleb pointed around the corner. "It's Dolly and Ricky. They're lying in the hay. You didn't see that one coming, did you, Cupid?"

"The chickens and the rabbits saw that one coming. Get real," she snarked. "Are they—naked?"

"No!" He furrowed his brow. "But they weren't taking a nap either."

"Okay, we just have to let them know we're coming—not sneak up on them."

"Wait!" he said in a loud whisper.

It was too late, Bristol was already committed to her plan. "Hellen said they were in the barn," she yelled. "Come on, Caleb. Let's look around here. They must be around here someplace."

Caleb gritted his teeth, but it did nothing to tame Bristol's impulsiveness. He followed her as she walked around the other side of the barn.

"Oh, there you guys are. We were looking all over for you," said Bristol.

When Caleb reached the corner of the barn, he saw Ricky and Dolly sitting upright in the hay holding hands.

Dolly brushed her hair out of her face. "For a girl from LA, you're not that great of an actress."

Caleb pressed his lips together. "You haven't seen her do Scarlet O'Hara."

“That wasn’t supposed to be Scarlet O’Hara.” Bristol frowned.

“Anyway,” said Caleb. “I have a proposal.”

Dolly lifted her hand still intertwined with Ricky’s. “Sorry, I’m taken. What’s the matter? Bristol said *no*? I’m sure Shelby is still interested.”

“Dolly!” Bristol put her hands on her hips.

Caleb held up his hands to put an end to the melee. “Bristol didn’t say *no*.”

“What?” Dolly jumped up excitedly. “You said yes? When’s the date?”

“She didn’t say *yes* either.” Caleb felt like he was wading deeper into the quicksand. “But that’s not why we’re here.”

Bristol buried her face in her hands. Dolly put her arms around her. “Sorry, I was just teasing. I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s okay.” Bristol took a deep breath.

“I’d like to buy your utility vehicle.” Caleb blurted out his proposition before the conversation could get derailed again.

“My Gator? No way. It’s not for sale.” Dolly winked at him. “You had better odds when I thought you were asking me to marry you.”

“What?” Ricky protested.

“I’m teasing!” Dolly nuzzled his hair with her nose.

“You could still use it anytime you want,” said Caleb. “Besides, you have a tractor with a cargo bucket.”

“I’ll lend it to you. You can even borrow the tractor if you need it. But sorry, I use the Gator all the time.”

“And you still could.” Caleb held out four gold coins. “We’ll keep it parked right here. When we need it, I’ll come to get it and bring it right back when we’re finished. The only difference is that you’d be richer.”

Dolly's eyes grew wide. "Is this like pirate treasure?" She picked up one of the coins to inspect.

Bristol commented, "If you knew the whole story, you'd be surprised how accurate that statement is."

"I can't take this." Dolly put the coin back in Caleb's hand with the others.

"Then I can't accept your generosity to let us borrow the Gator," said Caleb. "You've put your whole life into learning to care for these animals, growing healthy foods, and tending this property. It's not fair that we show up and take advantage of your hard work."

"I don't see it like that," said Dolly.

"Have you seen the news?" asked Bristol.

"Yeah," Dolly admitted.

"Things are about to turn south," Bristol explained. "Worse than they have been. Stores in Knoxville are closing down because of the looting. Soon, there may be no stores left. We're making one final run tomorrow with both vehicles. We're going to get as much stuff as we can before it all shuts down. We think you and Ricky should come up with your truck also."

"I'd love to, but I spent every dime I had on my last trip." Dolly held Ricky's hand.

"That's what these are for." Caleb held out the coins. "The pawn shop will give you close to nine grand each for these."

"So it's charity." Dolly appeared dejected.

"Not at all." Caleb shook his head. "It's an investment into your enterprise. You've sunk your blood and treasure into the equipment, the skills, the livestock, and the systems that make this farm run. In a hundred years, we could never catch up to the sweat equity you've built here."

Ricky looked at the coins. He whispered to Dolly, "You were saying you'd like to buy clothes for Coral to have as she

gets older—in case the stores never reopen. You’d have plenty for that and lots left over to stock up all those things on your wish list.”

Dolly shook her head. “I bought the Gator used. I paid like eight grand for it and that was probably five years ago. I’d feel like I’m robbing you if I took even two of those coins.”

“You’ll take four because that’s how many of these coins you could have bought with eight grand five years ago.” Caleb pushed them into her hand.

Dolly looked at Ricky as if asking for his approval. He nodded.

“Does it run on gas?” Caleb inquired.

“Diesel,” said Dolly. “I got it so it’d run on the same fuel as the tractor and the truck.”

“How much fuel is in that tank?” Caleb pointed to the giant red cylinder behind the barn.

“Maybe eighty gallons,” said Dolly.

“How much will it hold?” Bristol asked.

“Five hundred and fifty,” Ricky answered.

“Why don’t you call the delivery service and ask if they’ll take gold?” Caleb handed her two more coins.

“I can buy it with what you’ve already given me.” Dolly stepped away from the offer.

Bristol took the coins from Caleb and forced them into Dolly’s hand. “Take it. There might not be anything to buy with it a week from now. Then they’ll be worth less than that bale of hay.”

“We’ve had some good times on that bale of hay.” Ricky winked at Dolly.

“Too much information,” said Caleb. “Do you mind if we use the Gator for a couple of hours? We’re going to cut up some firewood.”

Dolly tossed him the keys. “Do what you want. It’s yours now.”

Wednesday afternoon, Caleb looked both ways before pushing his loaded grocery cart past the pair of armed private security guards standing out front of the Whole Foods in Knoxville. He waved for Dolly and Bristol to follow him with their carts and hurried through the parking lot.

“I can’t believe they were so well stocked.” Dolly leaned on her cart as she hustled toward the vehicles.

“It helps to have armed guards posted out front.” Bristol sprinted alongside her.

“That’s true.” Caleb slowed down as he reached Stan and Ricky, who’d stayed with the vehicles to guard the purchases made earlier that day from Target. “But their prices help product stay on the shelves also.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t afford to shop there before the currency collapse,” said Dolly. “But I do like eating food that isn’t bathed in rat killer.”

“Growing your own organic food is cheaper than buying it at Whole Foods.” Bristol started loading her cart into the hatch of the Kia.

“That’s debatable.” Dolly handed off her purchases to Ricky, who was standing in the bed of her pickup and placing the groceries closer to the cab. “But at least I managed to make a small income from it.”

“We’re awfully glad you did.” Stan loaded food from Caleb’s cart into the SUV. “I don’t know if any of us would have a prayer if it weren’t for your homesteading skills.”

“What’s the next stop?” Ricky jumped out of the truck bed and closed the tailgate.

“A gourmet market downtown,” Caleb closed the hatch to Stan’s SUV, then walked toward the driver’s side of the Kia Soul. “We bought all the white rice left at Whole Foods. The only reason we found any was because it was top-shelf organic basmati. Most people trying to stock up are minding their pennies.”

“So maybe rice isn’t the best value,” said Ricky.

“Maybe not.” Bristol opened the passenger’s door of the Kia. “But it’s one of the few food items that will last thirty years without canning or freezing.”

The three vehicles pulled out of the Whole Foods parking lot in a convoy. Caleb led the way to the next stop.

The parking lot of the specialty food store was much less full than Whole Foods had been. The convoy was able to park close to the front door. Caleb and Bristol exited the Kia. Ricky got out of the pickup. He said to Caleb, “Dolly is going to stay with the truck.”

“Sure.” Caleb waved at Dolly and his grandfather then entered the gourmet market.

Once inside, Bristol picked up a jar of imported olives. “This place has less than Whole Foods.”

“I know,” Caleb agreed. “But we got everything we needed from Whole Foods. Let’s just hope we can maybe find some rice, pasta, and a few canned goods left on the shelves.”

Mini carts were the only buggies available in the store. Ricky pushed one along behind Bristol and Caleb. “We’ll be lucky to fill up *one* of these tiny carts, much less three.”

Caleb found several jars of imported jams and jellies. “One Fedcoin for an eight-ounce jar. No wonder they’re still on the shelf.”

“I know, but we’re here because you said Fedcoins and dollars alike will be completely worthless by the end of the year.” Bristol loaded her cart with the jars.

Ricky found a few jars of almond butter and cashew butter. “These are sky high also, but Dolly said to be on the lookout for glass jars. There are no canning jars to be had anywhere. We can recycle these.”

“An empty jar might be worth more than a Fedcoin by the end of the week,” said Bristol.

“From a utilitarian standpoint,” Caleb added, “it already is.”

The group found the pasta aisle, which had a few specialty selections like shells and fusilli. Caleb scooped up the front row of boxes revealing empty space behind. “I hope they have a better stock of rice than pasta.”

“Dolly said flour won’t store very long,” said Bristol. “But pasta does. I wonder if we could make our own pasta from the flour so it would last longer.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Ricky. “Pasta is just flour and eggs, right? We have plenty of eggs.”

“I’ll ask her about it when we get back to the truck. It would preserve the protein in the eggs as well.” Caleb pushed his cart down the aisle. “Let’s check to see if they have flour.”

A loud clanging, crashing sound got their attention. Caleb thought someone must have knocked over a metal display rack. He stared in the direction of the commotion. A woman screamed. A man yelled, “Open the register and get on the floor!”

“It’s a robbery!” Bristol cried.

CHAPTER 22

How can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched bellies of his children? You can't scare him—he has known a fear beyond every other.

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

“Shhh!” Caleb put his finger to his lip, abandoned his cart, and herded Bristol and Ricky toward the back of the store.

“Hurry!” the man at the front of the store shouted.

Ricky looked angry. He pointed at Caleb's waist and whispered. “You have a gun. You have to do something.”

Caleb shook his head. “This is for our *defense*. It's the last resort.”

“What if they start shooting?” argued Ricky in a whispered voice. “Dolly is out front. We have to stop them before they leave.”

Caleb held up his hand, signaling for Ricky to stay calm. “They want to get the money and get out of here. They have no reason to bother Dolly.”

Ricky's eyes darted frantically toward the front of the store and back to Caleb. “Give me the gun. I'll stop them.”

“We’re not going to engage them if we can avoid it,” said Caleb. “We don’t know what weapons they have or how many of them there are.”

“I can’t sit by and do nothing while I know Dolly is in danger.” Ricky grew more agitated. “Coral needs her. I need her. We all need her. She’s the only one who knows how to run the farm.”

“Coral needs *both* of her parents,” said Bristol. “So calm down and follow Caleb’s lead, please!”

A woman yelled, “Hurry up, Raffy. A guy is standing out front by a black SUV. I think he knows something is going on.”

“Don’t use my name!” Raffy shouted. “Are you stupid?”

“Drop it! Both of you!” demanded a third assailant. “Stay on task. If the guy comes toward the store, shoot him.”

Caleb closed his eyes. He wished he could communicate with his grandfather via telepathy. *Please, Stan, get back in the truck and stay low.*

“Give me your purse.” A third assailant was shaking down another customer and getting closer to Caleb’s group.

Caleb took out his wad of cash and broke off several hundred dollars. He stuck the larger wad down the front of his pants and returned the smaller stack of bills to his pocket.

“What are you doing?” Bristol asked.

“Getting some cash ready to give the guy,” Caleb whispered.

“You’re kidding! Don’t give them your money!” Ricky furrowed his brow.

“It’s three armed robbers, at least,” said Caleb. “I’ve got one magazine. Our chances of walking away from a gunfight are much worse than the chances of us walking away from a robbery. If they back me into a corner, I’ll fight, but our lives are worth more than a few hundred bucks.”

Ricky snarled and looked toward the end of the aisle.

A man wearing a ski mask and toting a short-barreled shotgun came around the corner. He pointed the weapon at Caleb's group. "Toss your wallets on the ground and kick them over to me."

Caleb took the cash out of his pocket. "I don't carry a wallet. Here, this is all of our money. It's nearly a grand. Just take it." He folded the wad tightly and tossed it to the man.

The bills fell short of the man's feet. The assailant watched the group closely, inched forward, and bent down to pick up the money.

"That guy is calling the cops!" screamed the female burglar.

"Shoot him!" The man in front of Caleb turned toward the woman and stuck the money in his pocket.

Caleb knew that if he didn't intervene, Stan would be dead. He drew the pistol and fired. POW! The man jerked from the impact of the bullet. Caleb fired again, and again, and once more, striking the black ski mask. Ricky raced forward and grabbed the shotgun out of the hands of the deceased assailant. Caleb and Ricky ran toward the front of the store.

Gunfire broke out near the entrance. Caleb grabbed Ricky by the back of his hoodie and pulled him down behind a shelf. "Get down!"

"Caleb, be careful!" Bristol was crouched low right behind them.

Ricky shook loose from Caleb's grip and continued his charge.

Caleb glanced around the side of the shelf to see Stan taking cover behind the hood of the Escalade and firing his .357 revolver at the woman in the front door. She had a semi-automatic pistol and was taking potshots toward the parking lot. Caleb looked around but could not locate the remaining hostile. Ricky racked the shotgun. The woman turned at the sound. Ricky pulled the trigger and shot her in the center of

her upper torso. Blood and tissue splattered outward from the wound, and the woman toppled backward into a display rack of organic veggie chips.

Ricky hurried toward the door. Caleb yelled out to him. “Be careful, there’s still more.”

No sooner had the words left Caleb’s lips than two black-clad bandits with pistols jumped from cover and started shooting. Ricky turned and fired. One of the robbers fell. The other fired his pistol as he raced past him. Caleb aimed, made sure no one else was in the line of fire, then pulled the trigger. But he missed and the bandit kept running. Another shotgun blast pierced the air, but it was not from Ricky’s weapon.

The robber’s head jerked sideways, and he dropped to the ground. Blood oozed from the frayed holes in the black-knit ski mask. Caleb looked around to see who had finished him off. Dolly was using the hood of her old diesel pickup truck as support for a double-barrel shotgun.

Bristol stood behind Caleb. “Should we get the carts?”

“Leave them. We need to get out of here. He looked Ricky over. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” Ricky surveyed the carnage of the battleground.

“Good, let’s go!” Caleb grabbed Bristol’s hand and pulled her toward the Kia.

Bristol tugged his arm. “Wait!”

Caleb turned to see what was the matter.

“Ricky!” Dolly cried out.

Ricky had collapsed on the pavement.

Caleb turned back. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. My leg just gave out on me.” Ricky still carried the pump-action shotgun in one hand.

“You’re bleeding.” Bristol pointed at a hole in Ricky’s pant leg near the center of his shin.

“From what?” Ricky examined the wound.

Dolly bent down to help him. “You’ve been shot.”

Stan hurried over to where Ricky had fallen. “I tried to call 911, but they said the anticipated wait time is twenty minutes.”

“For an ambulance?” Dolly asked.

“No,” said Stan. “For an operator to answer the call. It would be better if we drive him to the hospital.”

“No!” Ricky exclaimed. “I can’t go to the hospital with a gunshot wound. I just got out of prison. The cops will assume the worst.”

Dolly took out a pocket knife and cut Ricky’s pant leg. “Grandma will know what to do. She’s taken care of plenty of injured animals over the years.”

“But we need to stop his bleeding now,” said Bristol.

Dolly inspected the wound. “Help me get him to the truck.”

Caleb lifted one side while Dolly lifted the other. “You didn’t even feel it?” asked Dolly.

Ricky winced. “I feel it now!”

“What about the shotgun?” Bristol stood next to the weapon still on the asphalt.

“Bring it,” said Caleb. “His prints are all over it.”

“Someone needs to wait here for the police,” said Stan.

“No!” Caleb argued. “We all need to get out of here before they arrive! The whole world is caving in on itself right now. The cops can’t do anything except cause us trouble at this point.”

“But I’ve already called 911!” Stan protested.

“Power off your phone,” said Caleb. “They’ll probably never call back, but if they do just say you drove through the

parking lot and saw a suspicious person. The wait time was ridiculous, so you hung up.”

Bristol pointed at the black bubbles mounted near the roof line on the front of the store. “But it’s all on camera.”

“Then we’ll back out of the lot when we leave so they can’t see our plates.” Caleb sat Ricky down in the passenger seat of Dolly’s vehicle. “Worst case scenario, they’ll be looking for a group of people who shot in self-defense. I’m sure the overwhelmed Knoxville PD will have bigger fish to fry with everything else that’s going on.”

“The bullet went in and out.” Dolly grabbed her purse and took out a tampon. She unwrapped it and inserted it into the wound channel.

Ricky squinted his eyes and growled in discomfort.

“It’s still bleeding,” said Caleb. “We need to put pressure on it.”

Dolly looked up at her rearview mirror where a red paisley bandana was hanging. She took it off and quickly wrapped it around Ricky’s leg. “How is that?”

“It hurts!” Ricky complained.

“But it’s certainly bleeding less,” said Bristol.

Caleb looked around the parking lot. “It will have to do for now. We need to get out of here. I’ll lead the way. Dolly, you drive behind me. Flash your lights if you need to pull over and address Ricky’s leg.” The group hurried to their respective vehicles, backed out of the lot, and raced toward Interstate 40.

They returned to Del Rio without incident. Upon their arrival, Caleb, Bristol, and Dolly rushed Ricky out of the truck and into the Stevenses’ old farmhouse where Hellen tended to his wound.

In the days that followed, Stan heard nothing from the Knoxville police concerning his attempted 911 call. The dollar continued to spiral into the abyss. News reports told of absolute chaos in the cities. The National Guard was called up to bring about order in an attempt to keep grocery stores and gas stations open. Nevertheless, the supply chain continued to deteriorate and retailers who remained open had few goods to offer. When gasoline or food was available, strict limits were placed on how much consumers could purchase at a given time. Hijackings and thefts became commonplace as desperate people sought to survive.

The National Guard took over bringing commodities to market via long convoys guarded by heavy guns. These convoys, however, serviced only the largest US metropolitan areas. Cities like Knoxville were not on the list.

CHAPTER 23

Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless! And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory?

Isaiah 10:1-3

Two weeks passed since the incident in Knoxville. The Stevenses invited Caleb, Bristol, and Stanley over for Thanksgiving dinner. They accepted the offer and insisted on bringing a few dishes. On the Wednesday evening before the big feast, Stanley opened a can of jellied cranberry sauce. He extracted the contents, made even slices, arranged them on a crystal serving dish, covered the dish, and placed it into the refrigerator. "I've made my contribution. I'll be in the living room watching the news if you need me."

Bristol stitched her brows together. “Remind me to bring the cranberry sauce next year.” She pressed her lips together, staring at a pumpkin, flour, eggs, sugar, and other ingredients.

Caleb diligently peeled sweet potatoes. “You wanted to make a pie.”

“Me and my big mouth.” She frowned at the recipe.

“I’ll help you as soon as I finish with these.”

“I don’t even know where to start.” She appeared overwhelmed.

“You made a pie with Hellen last week. You can do it.”

“She made it look so easy. And it was apple. They’re so much less—intimidating.”

“How about I cut the top of the pumpkin for you? Then it will already be started.” He exchanged the peeler for a knife and began taking the top off of the small pumpkin. Caleb placed the pumpkin top in a plastic food storage bowl where scraps for the chickens were collected. “You might want to keep a few of these seeds to plant in the spring. Pumpkins make an easy meal for chickens.”

“I know.” Bristol stuck her hand inside and began excavating the inside of the orange-colored gourd. “Plus, Dolly said they’ll store until January if we keep them in a cool, dark place.”

Caleb paused from his work. He watched her carefully as she scooped the seeds from the pumpkin into the bowl.

“Get to work. You have to help me once you’re done with the sweet potato casserole.” She looked back to her task. Bristol paused from her chore and gasped. She covered her mouth and stepped away from the bowl as if she’d seen a snake.

Caleb fought a grin and tried to control his anticipation. “What’s wrong?”

She put her hand into the bowl of stringy, marmalade-colored, goo. “Look!” She retrieved a small object from the bowl.

“What is it?” Caleb feigned ignorance.

“It’s a ring!” Bristol rinsed off the precious piece of jewelry. “It’s a diamond ring! I wonder how it got in there?”

Caleb shrugged.

She speculated. “Maybe Hellen dropped it in the garden and the pumpkin somehow grew over it.”

“It’s—possible.” Caleb tried to keep from laughing.

“What do you think? How did it get in there?” Bristol gazed into his eyes with confusion. “Unless—you put it in there.”

He bit his tongue to keep from laughing hysterically, but he lost the battle against the grin. “Me? Why would I put it in there?”

“*You* put it in there!” She slapped his chest with her still-wet and somewhat gooey hand. “*You* put it in there.” Bristol’s playfulness faded. Her eyes welled up with tears, realizing the implications of the hidden treasure. “*You* put it in there.” She sobbed and wrapped her pumpkin-coated arms around him, pulling him close. She looked up and kissed him.

Caleb let himself enjoy the moment. He still had no answer, but he wasn’t going to let worry ruin the moment. Moments later, Caleb used his shirt tail to dry her eyes. “So?”

“So what?” She sniffed.

“What’s the answer? I’ve already asked the question once.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I mean, look at me. I’m a mess—my eyes are all red, I’m sniffing, I’ve got pumpkin guts from my head to my toes.”

He nodded cluelessly. “It should be. But remember, I’m a guy. My species is notoriously bad at picking up on clues—even the most conspicuous of them.”

She hugged him once more. “Yes, Caleb Webb. I’ll marry you.”

The next day, they were all gathered around Hellen’s long wooden table. “This pie is delicious!” Coral exclaimed.

“Thanks, but your granny taught me how to make a pie. I bet you’ll make better pies than this one in a couple of years.” Bristol smiled at the young girl.

“I helped with the stuffing,” Coral replied.

“And it’s amazing!” Caleb complimented. He gently squeezed Bristol’s hand. “But Coral is right about this pie. I’ve never had anything quite like it.”

“It had a special ingredient.” Bristol winked at Caleb.

Dolly prodded her slice of pumpkin pie. “Oh really! What did you put in it?”

“Well, not actually an ingredient. But when I was pulling the seeds out, I found this!” Bristol held up her hand to show off the ring.

Coral’s eyes lit up and she grasped her mother’s arm. “It’s magic!”

Dolly kissed Coral on the head. “It probably had a little help getting in there.” She looked up at Bristol. “Congratulations! Have you thought about a date?”

“Christmas!” Bristol said excitedly.

“Not Christmas Day,” Caleb corrected.

“Christmas Eve?” Stan inquired.

“We thought about that,” Bristol gushed. “But it seemed so self-important—you know, to take the spotlight off of Jesus and all.”

“Whenever it is, I insist on catering the reception,” said Hellen. “So when, right after Christmas?”

“We thought about that too, but it’s so looooong!” Bristol rolled her eyes. “It’s been such a long time already. You see, our bedrooms are across the hall from each other and we’re trying to...” She blushed slightly. “Never mind. It’s just too long to wait. We’ll get married on the 23rd—right before Christmas.”

“Congratulations,” Ricky said to Caleb. “But you’re making me look like a heel.”

Hellen cleared her voice. “I have a ring I’m not using. Don’t let that be the thing that slows you down. All you have to do is ask.”

“Grandma!” Dolly scolded. She turned to Ricky. “Don’t pay any attention to her.”

Ricky took Dolly’s hand. “No. She’s right. It’s what I wanted to do before I got in trouble. I want to make things right. Unless you don’t want to.”

Dolly’s cheeks reddened as she glanced around the table. Everyone was looking at her. “We can talk about it later.”

“Sure.” Ricky smiled.

Dolly quickly changed the subject. “So, all the leaves are off of the trees. This is a good time to collect them for your compost pile. Or, you can pile them right on top of your garden. If you get the pile high enough, it will kill off a lot of the grass growing underneath. That will make it much easier to till in the spring, especially since this is the first year using that plot.”

“We’ll do that,” said Stan. “Thanks for the suggestion. We’ve got some trails cut through the forest for harvesting firewood with the Gator. We have plenty of leaves to collect.”

Hellen said, “It’s time to get those leaves cleaned out of the gutters also.”

Dolly rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t remind me. I hate getting on ladders.”

Ricky took her hand. “My leg is still on the mend, but starting next year I’ll take over gutter duty. You’ll never have to worry about it again.”

Caleb spoke up. “I’ll clean out your gutters this year. I used to be a roofer. I had to get comfortable with ladders.”

“Thank you, Caleb,” said Dolly. “I appreciate it so much.”

They sat at the table enjoying each other’s company for another two hours before officially ending the meal. The previous weeks had been tough on everyone and Thanksgiving was a much-needed respite to relax and be grateful to God, who had provided them with plenty when so many in the world were going without.

“Look out below!” Standing on a tall ladder, Caleb tossed leaves down from Hellen’s gutters over the porch where everyone else was sitting. He grabbed a second handful and flung them into the yard. He finished the sections that he could reach and descended the ladder to move it over for the subsequent length of gutter. He heard tires on the gravel as he reached the ground. He turned around to see a deputy’s patrol car.

“I hope this isn’t about Knoxville,” said Ricky.

“Yeah, same here,” Dolly echoed his sentiment.

Bristol came to stand by Caleb. “What if it is?”

Caleb brushed leaves off of his hoodie. “They’ve already seen us. It’s not like we can make a run for it now.”

Hellen got up from the swing and walked down the stairs of the porch. Stan came to stand beside her. The patrol car stopped in the front yard, and the doors opened. Eric Koontz

got out of the passenger's side and Sheriff Heath Slater got out of the driver's seat.

Hellen maintained her southern poise. "Hello, Heath, Eric."

"Howdy, Mrs. Stevens," said the sheriff.

She looked over his new uniform with disdain. "I'd congratulate you on the election, but I know you're too much of a gentleman to accept it, considering the regrettable circumstances surrounding your new job."

"Oh, yes, ma'am." Heath crossed his hands and lowered his gaze as if in mourning.

"Any news about Sheriff Green?" Stan inquired.

Heath shook his head. "No, but the Cocke County Sheriff's Department won't close the case until we've gotten to the bottom of it."

"Oh, stop it, Heath," Hellen scolded. "The election is over—not that poor old Deputy Smith had a prayer anyways." She glared at Eric. "Can't nobody around here can compete with your cousin's money when it comes to political campaigns."

Eric shook off the insult. "We try to use the resources we've been blessed with to serve the community."

She laughed. "Eric, I've never voted for you and I never will. So, let's quit pretending and get to the reason behind your visit."

Eric handed her an envelope. "Your property taxes were overdue. The county sold a tax deed for your property in a delinquent property tax sale. As a member of the board of commissioners and since our families have been friendly, I wanted to deliver the notice personally."

"Friendly, indeed." She tore open the envelope. "I watch your niece because ain't no telling what kind of pigsty Shelby would dump her in if I didn't. And I suppose you had your cousin drive you out here so I'd feel safe—nothing to do with intimidation." Hellen frowned as she read the letter. "I was never notified of an auction."

Eric shook his head. “The county mailed you a notice. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“How much is it?” Stan asked. “I’ll write you a check.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Hellen.

He pulled her aside and spoke softly. “I’m not. My family is just as dependent on this farm as yours. Please, Hellen, this is no time to be stubborn.”

Her lip quivered, and she stared at the ground. Stan gently took the letter from her. “I’ll pay it right now, Eric. Just give me a minute to run next door and get my checkbook.”

Eric squinted. “I’m afraid it’s not that easy, Stan. When the auction took place, we were on a completely different currency system. You know what’s happened to the dollar. It wouldn’t be fair to the buyer to get paid back in devalued dollars.”

“And just who is the buyer?” Dolly stormed down the stairs with her hand on her hips.

Eric ignored the question. “The board of commissioners has set up a special trust to hold properties with tax delinquencies.”

“You can’t put her property in a trust without her approval!” Stan shouted. “You don’t have to be a lawyer to know that, Eric. This is completely illegal. You also know Hellen is entitled to a one-year redemption period after the delinquent property tax sale.”

“Hear me out.” Eric raised his hand. “These are difficult times and we’re trying to come up with solutions that will be equitable for everyone involved. Hellen will still be allowed to occupy the property indefinitely. In turn, the trust will take thirty percent of the farm’s output and distribute it between the tax deed owner and the country to cover future taxes. Once the currency situation gets rectified, we’ll determine what’s fair, and she can redeem the property.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Stan threw the letter on the ground. “You have no authority to cook up some new law

to suit your purpose.”

“This is in everyone’s best interest, Stan. And getting through this crisis is going to require some sacrifices from all of us. The board of commissioners has deemed these actions necessary to keep county services up and running. In return, we vow to keep local law enforcement, the courts, the county fire department, schools, and the hospital up and running. The products from the farm will help to keep these brave public servants nourished until the federal government can get a functioning currency established.”

Stan wrinkled his forehead. “If the courts are open, you can bet your bottom dollar that I’ll be filing a petition to have this so-called trust dissolved on the grounds that it is completely illegal.”

Eric smiled. “And you know what, Stan? You’ll probably win. This is your wheelhouse. But, as for myself and the rest of the commissioners, our primary objective is making sure Cocke County remains to be a going concern. Many of the counties around us are falling into utter disarray and lawlessness.”

Hellen glared at him. “Cocke County fell into lawlessness the day you were elected, Mr. Commissioner.”

Eric turned to walk back to the patrol car. “It is what it is, Hellen. Don’t fight the county on this. If you’re deemed not to be keeping up your responsibilities to the trust, the county will take it all. Be happy with what you’ve got.”

He opened the door and looked back toward the house. “Hey, Ricky. It’s good to have you home. Shelby told me you hurt your leg. A tractor accident or something like that?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Ricky scowled at Eric.

“As soon as it gets healed up, Tobias would love to have you back at the bar.” He waved his hand at Hellen. “Don’t think all of this puts any bad blood between us. In fact, your coming back to Koon Dawg’s might help earn some goodwill

towards this business with the farm. We've always taken care of our own."

Dolly huffed. "You just admitted that the country has no functioning currency! How are people going to be able to go to a bar?"

Eric got in the car, closed the door, and rolled down the window. "These are stressful times. People need a place where they can socialize, relax, and unwind. It helps the community stay connected to have a local watering hole where folks can congregate. We see it as another way to give back to Coker County."

Heath got in the patrol car and drove off without saying *goodbye*.

CHAPTER 24

The horseleach hath two daughters, crying, Give, give. There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, four things say not, “It is enough”: the grave; and the barren womb; the earth that is not filled with water; and the fire that saith not, “It is enough.”

Proverbs 30:15-16

Caleb waited for the patrol car to drive away. He turned to Ricky and Dolly. “What are we going to do?”

Dolly shook her head. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll have to give them a third of whatever we grow.”

“I ain’t givin’ them devils nothing!” Hellen fussed.

“What choice do we have?” Dolly asked.

“We’ll fight them!” Hellen growled.

Stan wrinkled his forehead but said nothing.

Hellen watched his expression. “You think I won’t?”

“I know you will. But I think you’re upset right now, and I think you’ll be in a better position to come up with a solution once you’ve cooled off.”

“How am I going to cool off?” She pointed to the road. “These heathens are determined to take everything I have. It makes me madder than a wet settin’ hen having them threaten to take my property. There won’t be no coolin’ off.”

Ricky said, “Mrs. Stevens, if you want to fight, I’ll fight. And I bet if it came down to it, Caleb, Bristol, and Stan would be right beside us. But know this, it will cost us all our lives. We’d be going up against the Cocke County Sheriff’s Department as well as the Koontzes’ enforcement arm—Bobby Ray and his boys—they fight dirty.”

Ricky stepped closer to Hellen and whispered to make sure Coral couldn’t hear. “And my daughter, she’d have no one. We have a responsibility to her.”

Hellen’s lip quivered and she turned away. Dolly embraced her. “Oh, Grandma, we’ll figure out something. I promise.”

Caleb crossed his arms. “Ricky’s right. If your opponent is bigger and stronger, you can’t take them head-on. It’s suicide.”

Hellen regained her composure. “If I thought we could give them a third of what we have, and they’d leave us alone, maybe I could find a way to stomach it—for Coral’s sake. But the Koontzs aren’t like that. Their appetite is insatiable—it’s never enough.”

“We can beat them. But we’ll have to take them down from the inside,” Caleb replied.

“How, exactly, do you suggest we do that, Caleb?” Dolly seemed frustrated by his recommendation.

He pointed to Ricky. “The Koontzes are practically begging Ricky to come back.”

“He just got out of prison!” Dolly exclaimed. “They’ll have him right back in there. No way!”

Ricky sighed. “It might be the only way.”

Dolly fought back tears. “No. You can’t.” She glared at Caleb as if the whole thing were his fault. “There’s no *we*. It’s just Ricky. So don’t pretend you’re the one making a sacrifice

here. If you want to try to take down the Koontz family, be my guest. But leave Ricky out of it. Shelby would be more than happy to give you a job at Koon Dawg's. Coral has grown up without a father because of those people. Now that she has him back, I won't stand by and let him be taken away again."

Caleb gave her a minute to be angry, to cry, and to vent. Then, he said, "Okay, that's fair. What if I go in with him? I'd do it alone, but they're not going to let me inside like they will Ricky."

"What?" Bristol's voice was high and loud. "No—you're not getting mixed up in this!"

Caleb remained calm. "Alright, then. Let's weigh our options and put it to a vote."

"It's our farm and our decision," said Dolly. "You don't get a say in what we decide."

Caleb replied, "We've all pledged to work together to get through this crisis, to mutually support one another."

Dolly shook her head. "That was about this economic thing."

"And the societal meltdown," said Caleb. "The only reason Sheriff Green disappeared was that the Koontzes knew they could get away with it. Federal Law Enforcement is too overwhelmed to look into the case. The way I see it, the meltdown and the problem with the Koontzes are one and the same."

"We didn't agree to be a commune," said Dolly. "This is still our property."

"Fair enough," Caleb agreed. "How about each of you get two votes, and those of us from next door get one? Is that equitable?"

Dolly looked at Bristol and Stan as if sizing them up to determine how they might vote. "I suppose."

"Good." Caleb delivered the available options. "Mrs. Stevens has proposed that we make this the Alamo. We'll

barricade the farmhouse as best we can, load up the guns, wait for them to return, and make our final stand here. Who votes for that idea?”

Hellen shook her head. “That’s not what I want.”

“I know,” Caleb said. “But it’s an option, so we have to put it on the ballot.”

No one raised their hand. Caleb paused for a moment. “Second option. We go along to get along. We hand over a third of the farm’s produce as long as the Koontzes are content with that. Then, as Mrs. Stevens pointed out, it will probably go up to half—for the good of the county, of course. Then, perhaps three-quarters, until we begin to waste away from starvation ourselves. Who would like to vote for solution number two?”

Again, none of them raised their hands. Caleb waited, then said, “Our third option is for Ricky and me to take jobs at Koon Dawg’s. We’ll listen for incriminating information. We’ll try to bring in recording devices and expose the Koontz family as a criminal organization to the county. We’ll confront the other county commissioners with their involvement if they don’t take action against Eric and the rest of the Koontz family. And finally, we’ll get the farm declared free and clear.”

Caleb looked around at the long faces. He put his hand in the air. “Who votes for solution number three?”

Ricky was second to put his hand up. Moments later, Stan also raised his hand. Caleb waited. “Okay, my vote and Stan’s are both worth one, so that’s two votes. Ricky has a double vote, so that’s four total. Option number three is the winner.”

Dolly shook her head. “It’s *not* the winner. You have less than half of the total votes.”

“You can abstain from voting,” said Caleb. “But it’s the option with the most votes that get implemented.”

“You’re oversimplifying this!” Dolly scowled.

“Because it’s a simple choice, action or inaction. Both are choices. Inaction just says you’re okay with letting the natural course of events transpire.”

“I’m not okay with that. You’re putting words in my mouth,” she argued.

“If you have a fourth option, let’s hear it. We can put it to a vote. Otherwise, the matter is settled,” Caleb stated.

She stared at him for a while as if trying to come up with a better alternative. “It’s not settled.”

Hellen put her hand up. “I’m casting my vote for option number three. It’s settled now.”

Dolly began crying. She waved for her daughter to follow her. “Come on, Coral. Let’s go inside.”

Bristol appeared dejected. “I’m going back to the house.” She walked off without a word.

Hellen waited for the two girls to be out of earshot. “They’ll come around.”

Stan put his arm around Hellen. “And we’ll get through this—together.”

“Thank you, Stan.” She put her head on his shoulder.

CHAPTER 25

Move not unless you see an advantage; use not your troops unless there is something to be gained; fight not unless the position is critical.

Sun Tzu-The Art of War

Caleb walked up to the bar in Koon Dawg's late Saturday afternoon.

A girl dressed much like Shelby Koontz served a beer to a single man at the end of the bar and then approached Caleb with a smile. "Hey, doll. Can I get you something?"

"Is Shelby here?"

"She's in the office with Tobias. Her shift hasn't started yet. Something I can help you with?"

"No. I really need to speak with Shelby. It's about a job."

"Sorry, hun. We're not hiring right now."

"Thanks, but I still need to speak with her. Tell her it's Caleb."

"Okay, but no promises." The girl sauntered to the end of the bar and picked up the house phone.

Caleb took a seat on a bar stool.

The girl hung up and came back to where Caleb was sitting. “She said she’d be right down. I’m Cassey, by the way.”

Caleb looked up the wooden staircase to the second level. The bar was styled like a wild west saloon. He frowned as he recalled the hookers always had their rooms upstairs in the old western films.

Shelby soon appeared. Her boots clomped loudly coming down the stairs. “I didn’t expect to see you here today. What’s the matter, did your girlfriend finally go back to California?”

“No, she’s still here.”

Shelby pulled up the stool next to him. “That’s okay.” She whispered in his ear, “I won’t tell if you don’t.” She called out to the other bartender. “Cassey, pour us a couple of raspberry lemon drops—with a sugar rim.”

“I’m not drinking, but thank you,” said Caleb.

“Not drinking?” Shelby looked disappointed.

“I actually came to ask for a job.”

“Oh! How’s your girlfriend going to like you spending more time with me than her? She’ll run off back to LA right quick now.”

“Maybe not,” said Caleb.

“I’ll give you a job. Do you know how to mix drinks?”

“No.”

“What about cooking? Mama is expanding the menu here since the restaurant burned down. We just had little appetizers before, but we’re gonna start offerin’ fried chicken, fish and chips, maybe a steak...”

“I’m not much of a cook either.”

“Oh. That doesn’t leave much except washing dishes or being a barback. But at least as a bar back you’ll get to work with me. I’ll start teaching you the drinks when we’re slow. You’ll work up to being a bartender in no time.”

“Actually, I was thinking about security.”

Shelby chuckled. “Oh, baby, no. You don’t want to do that. These old rednecks around here get drunk and then they get rowdy. It’s no job for a pretty boy like you.”

“I can handle myself.”

She put her hand on his arm. “I’m sure you can, but Bobby Ray’s boys are brawlers.”

“I can brawl.”

She bit her lip. “Are you trying to tease me?”

“No. I’m just looking for the best fit, for all of us.”

“Okay, but I’m not the one who hires security.”

“But you can put in a good word?”

“I’ll try. But if not, you’ll be my personal barback. Deal?”

He forced a smile. “Deal.”

She walked to the phone. “Tobias, hey. I have someone I want you to meet. Come on down here.”

Moments later Tobias Koontz came down the stairs. He wore a plaid shirt, jeans, cowboy boots, a reddish-blond beard, and matching shoulder-length hair.

“Tobias, this is my friend Caleb. He’s looking for a job with security.”

Tobias eyed Caleb then his sister. “Is he good people?”

“The best,” she said.

“Can you fight?” Tobias asked.

“Yes, sir. But for full transparency, part of the reason I’m here is that Eric was by our neighbor’s farm yesterday. Their property was sold at a tax sale and it’s been placed into a trust run by the county. Eric said if Ricky Davis came back to work for Koon Dawg’s, he’d see what he could do to make the terms of the trust a little more lenient.”

“Oh, so you’re friends with Ricky.” Tobias looked at Shelby. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I met him when I was dropping Lexi off at Hellen Stevens’.” She pressed her lips together. “But I thought he came here for me.”

“Did Eric offer you a job?” asked Tobias.

Caleb answered, “No, but Ricky is on the mend and can’t be on his feet for a couple more weeks.”

“Right.” Tobias nodded. “What exactly happened to him?”

“Rolled over a piece of rebar with the tractor. Parked the tractor on it so that the end of the rebar not under the wheel was sticking up. That end also happened to be cut at an angle. Ricky stepped off the tractor and the rebar pierced his calf. Went right through. Missed the bone, though.”

“Oh, that’s rough.” Tobias wrinkled his nose. “Let’s see if you can handle yourself.” Tobias cupped his hands over his mouth. “Bobby Ray! Come on down here!”

“We have phones!” Shelby scolded.

“Yeah, but Bobby Ray is a meathead. I don’t know if he can use a phone.” Tobias laughed.

Bobby Ray soon came down the stairs. His head was bald and had a long beard. He also wore jeans, boots, and a plaid flannel shirt. Bobby Ray was over six-feet-tall and roughly two hundred and fifty pounds of equal parts fat and muscle. Caleb did not want to fight him.

Tobias pointed at Bobby Ray. “Alright, Bobby Ray is drunk, acting belligerent, and hitting on the bartenders. If you can drag his sorry tail out the front door, you’ve got a job.”

Bobby Ray walked up to the bar. “Shelby, pour me a shot of Jack.”

“The sun is still up, Bobby Ray!” she argued.

Cassey dried a beer mug with a towel. “Five minutes ago you told me to pour you and pretty boy a ...”

Shelby cut her off. “Shut up, Cassey. Mind your own business.”

“Let’s have it!” Bobby pecked the bar top in front of him. “I gotta act the part.”

Shelby begrudgingly poured him a shot of whiskey. Bobby Ray drank it and slammed the empty shot glass on the bar. He pretended to slur his words as he made catcalls to Cassey. “Hey, little honey, hows about you and me get out of here—go somewheres a lil more private.”

“Get him out of here,” Tobias instructed Caleb.

Caleb looked around. “What about the tables and chairs? Would it be better if we went over to the dance floor so we don’t knock anything over?”

“Hey, lil mama, come give me a kiss,” Bobby Ray continued harassing Cassey.

Tobias shook his head. “Ain’t gonna be no going over to the dance floor tonight when these good ol’ boys start gettin’ liquored up. You have to be able to deal with the situation wherever it presents itself.”

Caleb grabbed Bobby Ray by the shirt collar and his wrist. “Sir, I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to ask you to leave.”

Bobby Ray convulsed, slinging Caleb backward into one of the high-top bar tables. Caleb regained his balance just as Bobby Ray threw a haymaker and popped him in the nose. Blood gushed out instantly.

“Bobby Ray!” Shelby screamed at him. “Stop it!”

“Hey!” Tobias scolded his sister. “The boy wants a job. This is his interview!”

Caleb dropped to his right knee, planting it between Bobby Ray’s legs. He grabbed the large man around his thighs. Stepping behind his opponent with his left leg, Caleb pushed and twisted as he came back up to both feet so that Bobby Ray lost his balance and toppled to the floor, knocking down a bar stool as he fell.

Caleb wasted no time mounting the big man who was laying on his back. He fished his right hand across Bobby Ray's neck, reaching back and grabbing the back of his collar. Caleb reached his left hand across Bobby Ray's neck and grabbed his opposite shoulder so that his forearms were now crisscrossed like a pair of scissors. Caleb put his head on the floor over Bobby Ray's shoulder and squeezed his neck with his forearms. Bobby Ray tried to push Caleb off but soon fell limp.

Caleb jumped up and grabbed the incapacitated man by the pant legs. He pulled him through the rubble of fallen bar furniture.

"Hey!" Tobias pointed at Caleb with surprised eyes. "He's not dead, is he?"

"Just taking a nap." Caleb gasped for air as he exerted himself pulling the listless heap across the barroom floor and out the front door. Caleb breathed heavily and walked back to the bar.

Tobias seemed to not have words for Caleb. He looked at Cassey. "Take a pitcher of ice water outside. Pour it on Bobby Ray and wake him up."

Shelby came out from behind the bar with a clean, damp towel. She blotted the blood off of Caleb's face and nose. "Poor baby."

Cassey filled a pitcher with ice water and went outside.

Caleb took the towel from her and cleaned himself up.

Tobias furrowed his brow. "Poor baby? Bobby Ray is the one unconscious in the parking lot."

"Serves him right!" Shelby barked. "He didn't have to be so rough."

Tobias watched as Bobby Ray walked back inside the bar with water dripping from his beard. The heavy bald man looked as if he was having trouble getting his bearings.

Tobias turned back to Caleb. “I didn’t actually expect you to get Bobby Ray out the door. It’s just our way of hazing the new guys. Anyone with the guts to even try gets a job, normally.”

Tobias offered his hand to Caleb. “But you’re hired. And I’ll tell Eric to do what he can about the terms of that trust.”

CHAPTER 26

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

Edmond Burke

Caleb hated working at Koon Dawg's, but he knew it was the only way to put an end to the Koontz family's reign of intimidation, corruption, and murder. He despised working all night and sleeping all day, leaving the majority of the farm work to Bristol and Stan.

Two weeks had passed since he'd taken the position, and Ricky's leg was finally healed sufficiently for him to return to work at Koon Dawg's, as well.

Ricky drove Dolly's truck to work Saturday evening, and Caleb rode with him. "So, I popped the question to Dolly last night."

Caleb's eyes grew wide. "You did? What did she say?"

"She said yes."

"Congratulations!" Caleb asked, "Are you nervous?"

"About getting married?"

"That, too, but I was mainly talking about returning to Koon Dawg's."

"Yeah. Nothing good comes from being around these people."

“But we’re doing what has to be done, right?”

“Absolutely.” Ricky’s resolve seemed firm.

“Good.” Caleb took out his phone and opened the voice recorder app. “I’m going to ask Tobias to give me a week off for Christmas. If he gives me any flack about Hellen’s farm, I want to catch it on the recording.”

“Be careful,” Ricky warned. “Have you been able to gather any other useful information?”

“Not really,” said Caleb. “I’ve caught Cassey and Shelby selling drugs from behind the bar, but the videos are short, and you can barely tell what they’re doing. I have to make them quick, pretend I’m just checking my messages on my phone while I film them.”

Caleb blacked out his phone and returned it to his pocket. “Although, I’ve seen some pretty interesting items being used in lieu of currency.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Silver coins, like quarters and dimes minted before 1964. Ammunition—bullets are acting as five, ten, and even twenty-dollar bills, depending on the caliber, brand, and whether it’s hollow point or full metal jacket. I’ve been taking my pay in 9mm shells.”

“At least you’re getting something out of it. What about cash?”

Caleb shook his head. “Tobias stopped accepting cash last week. Credit cards are usually still working—although the machines went down three times last week. They’re processing Fedcoin transactions. I guess Tobias can still place orders with Fedcoin. He probably has a warehouse full of liquor that he bought when the dollar was still good. But food is getting hard to come by.”

Ricky turned into the parking lot of Koon Dawg’s. “Unless you’re willing to shake down old widows for a share of their crops and livestock.”

Caleb got out of the truck and closed the door. He and Ricky entered the building to the sound of applause.

“Wow, you’re like a celebrity around here,” said Caleb.

“That’s not necessarily a good thing.” Ricky painted on a smile and waved at his co-workers.

“Hey, there’s my boy!” Bobby Ray patted Ricky on the back. “We’re glad to have you home.”

“Thanks,” said Ricky.

“And this kid.” Bobby Ray pointed to Caleb. “He’s the guy everyone calls over the walkie-talkie when we get a real jerk who needs help finding the door.”

“Oh yeah?” Ricky looked at Caleb curiously. “He hasn’t said anything about that.”

“Well, I’m kinda jealous.” Bobby Ray grinned. “Because they used to call me to handle the drunks.”

“You still get your share of action,” said Caleb. “The one thing I’ve learned about Koon Dawg’s, is we’re never short of drunk jerks.”

Bobby Ray shrugged “We do appeal to the rowdy sort.”

“I need to talk to Tobias about the schedule,” said Caleb.

“I write the security schedule,” said Bobby Ray. “What do you need?”

“A week off for Christmas.”

Bobby Ray laughed. “That ain’t happening. Everyone works either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Seeing how you’re a valuable asset, I’ll make sure you get your pick, even though you’re the new guy.”

“Thanks, but I need the whole week.”

“Why? You ain’t going out of town, are you?” Bobby Ray wrinkled his bald brow.

“He’s getting married,” said Ricky.

“Oh! Okay. In that case, you will need to speak with Tobias.” Bobby Ray pointed up the stairs. “He’s in his office.”

Caleb walked up the wooden staircase. He took out his phone, started recording, blacked out the screen, and returned the device to his pocket. He knocked on Tobias’ office door.

“Come in,” called a voice.

Caleb walked in.

“Hey,” said Tobias. “Bobby Ray has been telling me good things about you. I knew you’d be a good fit.” He pointed to a chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat. How can I help you?”

Caleb explained that he was getting married and needed Christmas week off.

“That’s a big ask. If I do that for you, everyone around here is going to be looking at me crazy for being soft on the new guy.”

Caleb didn’t reply. He was hesitant to issue an ultimatum, but he was determined to get the time off.

Tobias stared at him for a moment. “Maybe I have a way for you to return the favor.”

“Okay, like what?”

“Ricky’s back, right?”

“Yeah, we rode in together.”

Tobias nodded then picked up the phone. “Cassey, send Ricky up here, would you?” He placed the phone back on the cradle.

Moments later, Ricky came through the office door.

“There he is! I was getting worried that you weren’t going to accept my offer.” Tobias grinned from his chair behind a mahogany desk.

Ricky stood by the desk. “I just needed to get settled. Then I had that accident. I appreciate you holding the position for me.”

“Have a seat,” said Tobias. “Sit next to Caleb.”

Ricky sat down.

“I’ve got a gig for you two tonight,” said Tobias. “If you want it. But it would mean a lot to me, and Eric for that matter, if you’d do it.”

“I’m supposed to be behind the bar tonight.” Ricky stitched his brows together.

Tobias waved his hand. “Don’t worry about that. The girls can handle it.”

Ricky looked worried. “What is it?”

“It’s kind of a public service,” said Tobias. “Glen’s Pharmacy is going through a rough patch with everything that’s going on. All the major insurance companies have gone under. Medicare and Medicaid are also out. The government is supposed to be putting together a bailout, but even if they do, inflation will just spike that much higher. In the meantime, most people don’t have enough Fedcoin in their bank accounts to pay for their medications, and it’s killing the pharmacy.

“We’ve worked out a plan to help Glen get through until the government completely takes over the insurance business, passes a bailout, and begins paying for medications.

“I need you two guys to go by there and pick up some prescriptions for me. He’s stuck with a lot of stock that he can’t sell and we—well, we’re having trouble keeping up with demand for some of our behind-the-counter products.”

Ricky narrowed his eyes. “I don’t understand why you’d pull us from our shifts to make a pickup. Why can’t Glen drop it off?”

“It doesn’t work like that. Unfortunately, Glen’s...products are highly regulated. The Feds are in a tizzy right now, but this is the kind of thing they could dig into years from now. We think it’s best for all involved if we cover our tails. You two will park across the street so your vehicle isn’t on camera. Put

on ski masks and take this.” Tobias put a semi-automatic pistol on the table.

“Oh no, I’m not doing that!” said Ricky. “I just got out of prison. I got an early release because I didn’t have a gun and it wasn’t considered a violent crime.”

“No, no, no,” said Tobias. “This isn’t anything like that. The gun isn’t even loaded. Glen knows you’re coming. It’s just a bit of acting—for the cameras in his store.”

“A cop could come by while I’m trying to win my Emmy,” argued Ricky. “I’m not doing it.”

“What cop?” Tobias asked.

“Any cop that happens to be on duty.”

“No cops are going to be anywhere within a mile of the pharmacy. Additionally, no cops are going to be on the road between here and there. I guarantee it.”

“You can’t guarantee that.” Ricky shook his head.

“Do you know who my cousin is?” Tobias asked.

“The sheriff, but he’s not going to stick his neck out if another deputy happens to pick us up during this little skit,” Ricky argued.

“He’s going to make sure none are around. You’re not listening to me. Plus, everyone here will say you were working tonight. Your alibis are rock solid.”

Ricky huffed. “If we do this, Hellen Stevens’ tax lien is paid in full—free and clear.”

“Done.”

“No!” Ricky wrinkled his brow. “I want to hear Eric say it.”

Tobias sighed as if exasperated. He dialed a number and put the phone on speaker.

Eric answered. “What’s up?”

“Ricky and Caleb are going to handle that thing at Glen’s for us.” Tobias sat back in his office chair and put his feet on

the desk.

“Don’t talk about that over the phone!” Eric reprimanded.

“Talk about what? All I said was a thing.”

“You said a name.”

Tobias rolled his eyes. “Relax, they could be going to feed his cat. Besides, who’s going to mess with us? We’re at the top of the food chain. The Feds are chasing their tails.” Tobias chuckled. “We’re the untouchables.”

“Don’t get fast and loose,” warned the eldest brother. “What do you want?”

“Ricky wants to hear it from you. Hellen’s tax problem will be taken care of.”

“Is he there?”

“Yeah.”

“Take care of this, and the property will revert back to Hellen. It will be free and clear,” said Eric.

“In perpetuity,” said Ricky. “I won’t have to worry about this again a year from now or ten years from now?”

Eric laughed. “I’m not paying her tax bill for the rest of her life. It’s up to her to be a good citizen and keep up with her financial obligations. But, yeah, if she stays in good standing with the county, she’ll have no quarrel with me. Are you satisfied?”

“Yeah. We’ll do it.”

“Okay. Don’t make any unnecessary messes over there. And no need to get physical. This is just a show. Tobias will make sure you have everything you need. Talk to you later.” Eric hung up.

Tobias pulled two backpacks from behind the desk. “You’ve got ski masks in here. Ditch them when you’re finished. Work your shift until seven o’clock. Then come up here and get your bags. Go out the back door, do your thing, and come straight

back. Point the gun at Glen and tell him to fill the bags with everything he's got in the opioid and benzodiazepine departments.

“Bobby Ray will let you in the back when you return. Bring the bags up here to my office and go back to work. Finish out your shifts like nothing ever happened.”

“And I get Christmas week off,” said Caleb.

Tobias laughed. “Yeah, New Year's week too if you pull this off.”

CHAPTER 27

Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities... because it is the quality which guarantees all others.

Winston Churchill

Caleb walked out the back door of Koon Dawg's with the dark backpack slung over his shoulder.

Ricky followed him. "Tell me you got all that on the recording."

Caleb approached Ricky's pickup and got inside. "Let's wait until we're off the property to talk."

"Yeah, sure." Ricky entered the vehicle and started the engine.

As soon as they were out of the parking lot, Caleb played the recording.

Ricky nodded as he listened. "It's all there. We've got them dead to rights."

"How about we let these chickens hatch before we celebrate," Caleb warned.

"Okay. Are you going to record the robbery?"

“Yeah. Hopefully, we’ll be able to prove that Glen is complicit in the crime.” Caleb prepped the phone app to start a new recording.

“What if this is a setup?” Ricky said. “What if Tobias has Heath apprehend us on the way back? Heath could claim we tossed the pills out the window and they never found them. If he takes your phone, we’ll have no proof Tobias put us up to this.”

Caleb pressed his lips and pecked away at his phone. “Yeah, they’re dirty enough to pull something like that. I’ll email the file to Bristol, Stan, and Dolly.”

“Good.” Ricky sounded more relaxed. “That makes me feel better.”

Minutes later, they parked across the street from Glen’s Pharmacy. A woman was inside at the counter paying Glen. They waited for her to leave. Once she was gone, they pulled the ski masks over their faces, grabbed the backpacks, and hurried inside. Once through the door, Caleb locked the latch. He brandished his weapon, tossed the empty bag at Glen, and yelled, “Fill it up. I want all your opioids and benzos!”

Ricky pulled his pistol from his waistband and threw the other pack over the counter and shouted, “Fill both of them! And be quick about it!”

Glen held up his hands. “You guys can take it easy with all the screaming. The cameras aren’t recording audio.”

“Oh, okay, sorry about that,” Caleb said for the sake of his own recording. “Still, we want to move fast so someone doesn’t happen upon us.”

Glen carried the backpacks toward the shelves of drugs. “You can come back here with me if you want—so you won’t be visible from the street. But keep the guns up. I’ve got cameras in the back also.”

“Sure.” Caleb jumped over the counter and stood out of view from the glass door. Ricky followed him and did likewise.

Glen soon finished filling both packs. “Okay. That’s everything.”

Caleb and Ricky grabbed their bags and ran out the back door. They circled around to the side of the building, jumped in the pickup, and sped away. On the way home, Caleb emailed the recording of the robbery to Stan, Dolly, and Bristol, then erased both files from his phone.

Once back at Koon Dawg’s, Caleb and Ricky dropped off the pills in Tobias’ office as instructed, then returned to finish their shifts.

In the wee hours of the following morning, Caleb walked into the cabin. He was greeted by a firm embrace from Bristol. She ran her hand over his head. “I was so worried about you!”

Stan stood in line to hug Caleb after Bristol had let him go. “Me too.” He pulled Caleb close to his chest. “Glad to see you made it home safe. You’re very brave.”

“I can’t believe you two stayed up for me.” Caleb asked, “So, did you guys listen to the recordings?”

“Yeah, so did Dolly and Hellen,” Bristol replied.

“What do you think?” Caleb turned to his grandfather. “Will it stick in court?”

“The evidence is solid,” said Stan. “I called an old acquaintance from around the courthouse. I sent her the files and she listened to them—Nora Phelps, from the DA’s office.”

“And?” Caleb waited impatiently for the reply.

“Nora said she’ll bring RICO charges against Tobias and Eric. The problem is staffing. With everything that’s going on, bailiffs, court reporters, and even judges aren’t coming in for work. Government employees are spending their entire paychecks on gas to commute back and forth to work,

particularly those at the lower end of the pay scale. And that's if they can source fuel at all.

"Same goes for state law enforcement. She doesn't even have anyone she can call to make the arrest. The Coker County Sheriff's Department certainly won't do it."

"Obviously." Caleb furrowed his brow. "Speaking of the sheriff's department, what about Heath Slater? Is she going to bring a case against him?"

"We don't have anything on Heath." Stan lifted his shoulders.

"Tobias promised me the sheriff's department would leave us alone during the robbery," Caleb said.

"I could promise you that the IRS will never charge you a nickel in taxes," said Stan. "That doesn't make it true."

Bristol snarled. "Yeah, they say cockroaches can survive a nuclear war. If any government agency makes it through this crisis, it'll be the IRS."

Caleb tightened his jaw. "Then this is all for nothing."

"Even if they aren't arrested, you succeeded in getting Hellen's farm back," said Stan.

Caleb shook his head. "I lived in one of the worst neighborhoods in Los Angeles. It doesn't work that way. Once you show a bully that they have power over you, they don't stop. They'll be back, demanding more from us than last time. One way or another, we have to come up with a plan. This has to stop now."

The next day was Sunday. Dolly, Hellen, Ricky, and Coral came over to Stan's cabin to listen to the weekly live-stream

church service from Godspcak Calvary Chapel. Afterward, they shared a communal meal and discussed how they might take down the Koontz family.

“I say we round them up ourselves.” Ricky scavenged the few morsels of fried chicken left on the leg bone.

“We don’t have the authority.” Stan sipped his iced tea.

“There was a time when folks would band together and run scoundrels out of town.” Hellen took a biscuit from a wicker basket and then offered the last one to Coral. The little girl glanced at her mother for permission as she accepted the fresh-baked treat.

Dolly nodded at Coral. “The problem is that the town folks are the ones who elected people like Eric Koontz and Heath Slater.”

“Maybe they could just disappear.” Bristol dabbed a spoonful of honey on the remaining half of her biscuit. “It happened to Sheriff Green and no one seems overly concerned.”

Caleb liked the idea but knew the motion was unlikely to pass in present company. He watched the expressions of others.

Stan sighed. “I understand your frustration. We’ve all probably dreamed of taking the lot of them behind the barn and shooting them. But we’re a nation of laws. If we sink to their level, we’re no better than the Koontzes.”

Caleb thought his grandfather’s viewpoint was overly simplistic and a little naive, but he didn’t argue with him. “You said we need authority. Couldn’t your DA friend deputize us or something?”

“It doesn’t work like that.” Stan paused for a moment. “Although, you may have given me an idea.” Stan stood up from the table. “If you folks will excuse me, I need to make a phone call.”

Sunday afternoon, Caleb, Bristol, Stan, and Dolly walked into Scooter McAlvany's house in Newport. Dolly hugged her old high school chum. "Thanks for doing this for us, Scooter."

"This is risky business," said Scooter. "You're picking a fight with people who don't play by the rules."

"Which is why something has to be done about it," said Stan.

A sheriff's patrol car pulled into Scooter's driveway. Deputy Greg Smith got out and came to the house. Scooter opened the door and let him in. "Hey, Greg. I think you know everyone here, except for maybe Caleb and Bristol. Caleb is Stan's grandson. Bristol is his girlfriend."

She showed off her ring and corrected Scooter. "*Fiancé.*"

"Nice to meet you." Greg quickly turned to Stan. "What's this all about?"

Stan got straight to the point. "You know Nora Phelps, don't you?"

"Of course, she's the DA," Greg replied.

"She wants you to take a job as a district attorney investigator. You'd have the same powers that you possess as a deputy only you'd be operating under her authority."

"And quit my job with the sheriff's department?"

"It'd be more of a part-time job," said Stan. "You can keep both jobs."

"Why didn't she contact me herself?" Greg looked around. "And why this clandestine meeting at Scooter's?"

"We'll get to all that," said Stan. "We thought it best if no one else at the sheriff's department got wind of what's going on. We don't know who else we can trust."

“What makes you think you can trust me?” Greg seemed a bit put off by all the cloak-and-dagger business.

“Scooter vouched for you,” said Dolly.

Caleb added, “Plus, you’re the only one who had the guts to run against Heath in the race for sheriff.”

“Even though you knew you couldn’t win against him,” Bristol said.

Greg growled his displeasure over Bristol’s comment. “I didn’t like the way any of that went down. Heath was a little too johnny-on-the-spot after Sheriff Green went missing.”

“So you believe Heath had a hand in it or at least knows what happened, right?” Bristol asked.

“Doesn’t matter what I think. It’s about what I can prove.” Greg tightened his jaw.

Stan explained, “Nora has a case against Eric and Tobias. They conspired with Glen to fake the robbery at the pharmacy.”

“And she can prove it?” Greg asked.

“It’s all on tape,” said Dolly.

Greg seemed to be fighting back a smile. “What’s on tape?”

Caleb said, “Eric and Tobias giving the instructions for the crime. The robbery itself. Glen talking during the robbery, instructing me and Ricky how to stay out of sight in case someone walked by during the crime.”

“Wait,” Greg looked at Caleb. “That was you and Ricky Davis?”

“They were acting under duress,” said Dolly. “And only did it to get evidence against the Koontzes.” She explained Eric’s tax scam in trying to take over the farm.

“So,” said Stan. “Will you help us?”

“I can’t take down the Koontz family by myself,” Greg replied.

Stan continued, “Nora said you’ll be her lead investigator. You can appoint as many other investigators as you want.”

“What’s the catch?” Greg asked.

“There’s no money,” said Stan. “It has to be done for the sake of justice.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” said Greg. “I might have another ten guys at the sheriff’s department who aren’t Heath’s lackeys, but we’re in the extreme minority. Even if we pick up Eric and Tobias, we’ve still got Heath to worry about.”

“We thought about that,” said Caleb.

Stan explained, “Nora wants you to pick up Glen first. She wants to offer him a deal to turn states evidence.”

“That might help her case against Tobias and Eric, but how do we know he’ll be able to offer us anything on Heath?” Greg inquired.

“If anyone has dirt on Heath, it’s Shelby,” said Caleb. “I have video of her selling dope from behind the bar at Koon Dawg’s. Send a buyer in there tonight to get your evidence, then arrest her tomorrow morning when she picks up Lexi at Dolly’s farm.”

Dolly nodded. “If you threaten to put her in jail, separate her from Lexi, she’ll tell you anything you want to know. You might even find out what happened to Sheriff Green.”

Greg shook his head. “Shelby knows everyone in town. She won’t sell to any of the deputies that aren’t loyal to the family.”

“Then I’ll do it,” said Caleb. “I’m working tonight. Give me a marked silver coin or something. Stuff like that goes straight in her pocket.”

“I’m fresh out of silver coins,” said Greg.

“I have some,” said Scooter. “Silver and gold are the only things I’ll sell guns or ammo for.” He took a one-ounce silver eagle out of his pocket and handed it to Caleb.

“Thanks,” said Caleb. “Do you have a way to mark it?”

“How about I use a punch to put a dent right under the date?” Scooter looked at Greg.

“That will work,” Greg said.

Scooter took the coin back to one of the bedrooms. A loud clanking sound echoed out to the living area, and he soon returned. He gave the coin to Greg to inspect.

Greg took out his phone and took a close-up picture of the dent, then passed the coin to Caleb. “You people are dangerous. Remind me not to ever get on your bad side.”

Dolly put her hand on his shoulder. “I know you have to eat. I’ll make sure you and the deputies who back you up have food from the farm.”

“Thanks,” said Greg. “But it’s going to take a lot more than food. This is going to be a fight. I need people who can shoot.”

“I’m in,” said Caleb.

“Do you have a record?” Greg asked.

“Not as an adult. And no felonies,” Caleb replied.

Greg waved his hands. “That’s good enough. Don’t tell me anything else. I don’t want to know. I’m not going to have the luxury of being picky.” He shook his head at Dolly. “But not Ricky. He’s a convicted felon. Having him involved could derail the entire thing in court.”

“Sure. He can stay with Coral. I’ll fight,” said Dolly.

Scooter frowned. “Coral needs her mother. You should sit this one out.”

Dolly lifted her eyebrows. “If you’re worried about me, come along. That way you can have my back.”

Scooter huffed. “I guess you can put my name down.”

“Me, too!” Bristol exclaimed.

Stan cleared his throat. “I’m in.”

“Do any of you even know how to shoot?” Greg surveyed the ragtag bunch. “Except for Scooter?”

“You can teach us,” Bristol suggested.

Greg pressed his lips together. “I have a coup to organize. When am I supposed to find time to train you?”

“We all know the basics,” said Dolly. “Scooter could come out to the farm and bring us up to speed.”

“Are you willing to do that?” Greg looked at Scooter.

“Yeah, why not?” Scooter said. “The world is going to heck in a handbasket anyway. We might as well go out in a blaze of glory. Wait here for me. I need to get some better rifles out of the garage. We’re not going to take on the Koontz family and the Cocks Country Sheriff’s Department with revolvers and pea shooters.”

CHAPTER 28

For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle: thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me.

Psalm 18:39

Monday morning, Caleb was fast asleep when Bristol came into his room to rouse him. She nudged his arm gruffly. “Caleb, wake up. Dolly is downstairs. She needs to talk to you.”

“Now?” He opened his swollen eyes. “I didn’t get home from work until 3:00 AM.”

“I know, but this is important. Get up.”

“Okay.” His body protested, but he forced himself to leave the comfort of the soft bed and warm covers. “I’m going to need coffee—lots of coffee.”

“Sure. I’ll get right on it. Just hurry up and come downstairs.” Bristol left him alone to get dressed.

Caleb’s head was fuzzy from slumber. He pulled on his hoodie and descended the stairs.

“Good morning.” Dolly was sitting at the counter next to Stan.

“Maybe.” Caleb watched Bristol preparing his coffee. “It’s too early to tell.”

“Sorry about that,” said Dolly. “Ricky didn’t like being woken up either. But I’ve got good news.”

“Great,” said Caleb. “Let’s hear it.”

“Greg parked his car behind the barn and was waiting in the house when Shelby picked up Lexi about an hour ago. Sure enough, she had the marked coin. I kept Lexi in the kitchen while he took Shelby to the back bedroom. When they came out, Greg had a signed statement from her saying Heath destroyed the paperwork from the insurance fraud investigation that Sheriff Green had started on the Koontz Kafé fire.”

“That’s great!” Caleb perked up at the news.

Stan was less enthusiastic. “That amounts to obstruction of justice. It’s not exactly conspiracy to commit murder.”

Bristol inquired, “Did she say anything about Sheriff Green?”

Dolly replied, “She heard Tobias tell Bobby Ray to take care of him, but she doesn’t know any of the details. It’s also unlikely that Heath was directly involved in whatever happened to Sheriff Green.”

“What’s next?” Bristol asked.

“Greg is going to pick up Eric today at 5:00 when Koontz Kash closes. Eric always closes up, probably so he can cook the books before saving the files. He won’t be expecting it, so Greg doesn’t think that will be a problem.”

“Then what?” Stan inquired.

“Then he’s going to Koon Dawg’s to bring in Tobias and Bobby Ray.”

Caleb shook his head. “He won’t be able to get an arrest warrant for Bobby Ray simply because of Shelby’s account concerning Sheriff Green.”

“No, but he can take him in for questioning. Shelby gave him a signed statement,” said Dolly.

Caleb got up and poured himself a cup of coffee which was nearly finished brewing. “Koon Dawg’s is their unofficial lair. Something tells me they aren’t going to go quietly.”

“Which is why I’m here,” said Dolly. “Greg wants us all to be there for backup, in case anything goes down.”

Caleb sipped his coffee. “But that’s this evening. Not to be a jerk about it, but I could have used the sleep.”

“We’re not ready.” Dolly shook her head. “What we did with Scooter yesterday afternoon amounts to target practice. Scooter is on his way over right now. He wants us all to practice shooting and moving in teams, magazine changes, and communicating while we’re shooting. We need a lot more than a couple of days of training, but every little bit will improve our odds of surviving if this thing turns south.”

Caleb nodded. “You’re right. Thanks for waking me up.”

“Good.” Dolly smiled. “He’ll be here in a half an hour. Have some breakfast, get your gear, and come on over to the farm.” She walked toward the door. “See you all in a bit.”

The group trained all day. Caleb started out tired from lack of sleep but caught a second wind later that morning. By lunch, however, his second wind had petered out and failed to return for the remainder of the afternoon.

At 4:30, Scooter called out to the group. “Alright, Dolly, Caleb, Bristol, gear up. Let’s get ready to roll out.”

“What about me?” Stan lowered his brow in protest. “I just spent all day training. What was that for if I’m getting relegated to the bench?”

“Ricky trained all day too and he’s not coming,” said Scooter. “You two need to stay here with Hellen and Coral to guard the fort. These are dangerous people. When we kick that hornet’s nest, they’re going to go flying all over the place. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them show up here wanting their pound of flesh.

“While I’m on the subject, you people need to pick one farm or the other and circle the wagons until this thing blows over. You won’t be able to guard two properties twenty-four hours a day.”

“My place has plenty of room,” said Stan. “Everyone is welcome to stay there.”

“What about the animals?” Dolly said.

“We’ll set up temporary enclosures,” Caleb suggested. “We have fencing and T-posts. We can use the workshop garage as a makeshift barn, and we have plenty of storage room in the basement garage for feed or any other supplies you need.”

“We can get started on that now,” said Ricky.

Dolly shook her head. “It’s going to take all week!”

“I’ll pack overnight bags for all of us,” said Hellen. “Then we can go from there.”

Dolly seemed saddened at the thought of abandoning her farm. She looked at her daughter. “I suppose it’s what we have to do. Thanks, Grandma.”

Caleb, Bristol, and Dolly loaded into Scooter’s blacked-out Suburban. Scooter started the engine and drove toward the road. “Stay near my truck. The doors are armored.”

“No kidding?” Caleb was impressed. “Was this a previously-owned law enforcement vehicle? Are the windows bulletproof?”

“No. I did it myself. And it’s just the doors. Putting ballistic panels in the doors wasn’t that expensive, but the glass is high dollar.”

“You’re pretty handy,” said Bristol. “Plus, you built all these guns yourself?”

“Yeah. That’s my thing—tinkering around with anything that has to do with guns,” Scooter replied.

“It’s a good skill set to have, especially in times like these,” Dolly added.

Scooter frowned. “I liked it just fine when it wasn’t such a valuable hobby.”

They arrived at Koon Dawg’s at the same time as Greg Smith’s small force of loyal deputies. Greg exited his patrol car and signaled for Scooter to stay back and watch for trouble. Caleb’s cadre remained in the Suburban.

Koon Dawg’s didn’t open until 6:00 PM, so Greg had to knock on the front door. Bobby Ray stepped out.

Greg’s men drew their weapons. Greg called out to Bobby Ray. “Get on the ground.” Bobby Ray slammed the door shut and locked the door. Greg looked angry. He waved for Scooter to pull up to the front door.

Scooter followed the directive and rolled down his window. “What’s the plan?”

“Go to channel five on your walkie-talkies,” said Greg.

“You’re not using police radio frequencies?” Scooter asked.

“Heath’s guys will hear what’s going on if we use our channels.” Greg shook his head. “We’re going to have to make a forced entry. I need you guys to break into teams and cover the exits. If anyone comes out, tell them to get on the ground.”

“If they don’t comply, what recourse do we have?” asked Scooter.

Greg tightened his jaw. “You’re all deputized. You’ll be between them and the door. If they have a weapon and they continue advancing toward you, then they’re a threat to your safety. Shoot ‘em.”

“What if they don’t have a gun?” Bristol asked.

“Then you’ll have to let them go. We don’t have enough people to chase them down and tackle them.”

“Understood,” said Scooter. “Dolly and I will take the back door. Caleb and Bristol, you two cover the front. I’ll leave the Suburban here. Dolly and I will have a sheriff’s vehicle in the back to use for cover.”

The team rolled out of the SUV. Dolly and Scooter hurried to the rear of the building. Greg inspected Caleb and Bristol’s tactical vests, rifles, and radios. “Scooter set you guys up right.”

“Yeah,” said Caleb. “I’m glad he’s on our side.”

“Me too,” Greg replied. He waved at his deputies. “Alright, time to go to work.”

Caleb and Bristol hunkered behind the opened driver’s side door of the Suburban and watched through the 3X magnifiers mounted on top of their rifles. Greg’s team stacked up by the front door. One deputy with a shotgun blasted the lock on the front door of Koon Dawg’s. The deputy behind him kicked the door open and stormed in. Instantly, Greg’s team began exchanging gunfire with shooters inside Koon Dawg’s.

Bristol’s face went white. “This is bad!”

“Yeah, I know. I think I need to go inside and see what I can do.”

“No! Don’t leave me!” she pleaded.

“I’ve got to. I started this. I need to finish it.”

“The Koontz family started this!” Bristol argued. “You’ve done your part. Besides, Greg told you to stay here.”

Gunfire continued to ring out from the interior of the bar. “I have to.” Caleb kissed her then shouldered his rifle.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“No. Absolutely not. You have to stay here to guard the door.”

She puffed her jaws. “Oh, so the rules apply to me but not to you?”

Caleb abandoned the discussion and darted toward the front door. He peered inside. Gunshots were flying every which way. He glanced at the stairwell toward Tobias’ office. He saw one of the guys he’d worked security with at Koon Dawg’s shooting at Greg who was pinned down behind a retro jukebox. Caleb shot three rounds at the security guard. The man tumbled down the stairs. Caleb scanned the room. Two deputies were lying on the dance floor.

Greg called out to Caleb. “Cover me! I have to get my guys to safety.”

Caleb nodded and watched for more hostiles while Greg ran out to the dance floor and started pulling one of the downed deputies to safety. More gunshots came from upstairs. Caleb quickly located the source of the commotion and returned fire. Greg panted as he rested behind the jukebox for his next run. He looked at Caleb who was still standing by the doorway. “Ready?”

Caleb nodded and aimed at the wall at the top of the stairway where he’d last seen the shooters. Greg sped to the second injured deputy. Once again, the shooter behind the wall fired at Greg. This time, Caleb was ready. He estimated where the assailant’s head was and shot into the wall. The gunfire ceased and the hostile fell to the ground. Another shooter soon took his place and began firing at Greg. Caleb ran inside and toward the stairs. The shooter appeared from around the side of the wall and aimed at Caleb. Both fired their weapons. The other shooter toppled to the ground and discharged his pistol two more times. Then, all was silent.

Caleb looked for additional threats. He saw none. He inspected himself for injuries. *I’m okay. Thank you, Jesus!* He was halfway up the stairwell. He looked back to see an ocean of carnage below. Greg’s deputies and the bar’s security guards littered the floor.

Greg signaled for Caleb to wait for him before advancing farther up the stairs. Caleb watched as Greg quickly applied a tourniquet to one of the men he'd pulled to safety. Afterward, Greg changed magazines in his rifle and rushed up the stairs. Greg took the lead and Caleb ascended the stairway behind him. "Tobias' office is straight ahead," Caleb whispered.

Greg nodded and slowed his pace once he reached the second floor. Full automatic gunfire erupted from the doorway to Tobias' office. Greg pushed Caleb backward. "Get down!"

Caleb backed down the stairs and leveled his rifle on the top step. He saw the shooter. It was Bobby Ray. Caleb fired striking Bobby Ray in the shoulder causing him to drop his weapon. More gunfire came from inside the office. Greg hid behind the wall and got low to the ground.

The gunfire paused and was followed by a clicking sound. Greg signaled to Caleb to get up. "That's it. He's empty!" The two of them charged toward the office with their weapons up and ready to fire. Greg kicked the short-barreled rifle away from Bobby Ray who was laying on the floor bleeding. Caleb saw Tobias attempting to reload his pistol. Greg shouted, "Drop it, Tobias, or you're dead."

Tobias reluctantly placed the pistol on his desk. "I hope you know what you're getting into, Greg. This ain't gonna end well for you." Tobias glared at Caleb. "But it will be worse for you. I took you into my family, and you betrayed me. Ask around. See what happens to people who cross the Koontz family."

Greg kept his rifle aimed at Tobias. "You're talking big for someone under arrest. Put your hands behind your head and get on your knees."

Tobias complied but very slowly.

The sound of police sirens echoed in the distance. Tobias smiled. "We'll see who leaves here in cuffs. I think that might be your boss comin' down the road."

Greg tightened his jaw. “He’s not my boss. I’m working for the DA.”

“Either way,” said Tobias. “Things are about to get interesting.”

The sirens halted and Heath Slater’s voice came over the loudspeaker. “Deputy Greg Smith, I need you to come out with your hands in the air. You have ten seconds to comply, or we’re coming in hot. I won’t be held responsible for what happens after that.”

Caleb felt sick. He knew Heath had probably already restrained Bristol—Dolly and Scooter too for that matter. “What’s our play?”

Greg shook his head. “All my guys are dead or wounded. We can’t shoot our way out of this one.”

Tobias stood back up and walked over to Bobby Ray.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Greg leveled his rifle at Tobias’ head.

“I’m leaving unless you’re willing to shoot an unarmed man.” Tobias gave a sideways smile and helped Bobby Ray to his feet. “Come on, the cavalry is here.”

Caleb watched with despair as the two descended the stairs. Heath’s voice came back over the loudspeaker. “Time’s up! We’re coming in.”

CHAPTER 29

And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.

Psalm 50:15

Caleb felt his heart race as he watched a phalanx of Coker County Sheriff's Deputies flood through the door. Caleb lay down at the top of the stairs and aimed below while waiting for Greg's instruction.

Greg got down beside Caleb and pointed his rifle at the entry door. "I'm ordering all of you to stand down. I'm working as a criminal investigator for the Coker County DA's office. Sheriff Slater is subordinate to the DA and is under arrest for obstruction of justice. You are all under my command as of this moment. If you need to contact the DA to verify my authority, do so now. But once you have, you must take Heath Slater into custody."

Heath Slater called out to his men. "Don't listen to him, boys. The whole world is falling apart. The dollar is melting down and America is coming unglued. The DA and the rest of the county government will cease to be a going concern by Christmas. If you want a job, you better think about who will still be able to provide you with an income once the smoke clears."

Caleb and Greg watched the other deputies. None seemed willing to side with them.

Heath waited a moment then chuckled. “Well, Greg, looks like you and the city boy are in a pickle. Why don’t you put your guns down and make this easy on yourselves? Otherwise, we’ve got body bags in the patrol cars. It don’t make that big of a difference to me. Y’all have already made a mess of the place.”

Suddenly, gunfire erupted outside. Heath turned to look out the door. “What in the...”

Greg called, “Now!” He began firing on his former coworkers.

Caleb’s stomach twisted in a knot at the thought of shooting uniformed officers. However, he knew they’d forsaken their oaths. He killed two before the rogue deputies figured out that he and Greg were shooting. Rifle fire rang out in all directions.

Heath took cover behind an overturned table and tried to keep control of his men. He had shooters targeting his deputies from both directions. They began dropping like flies. Heath yelled to his men, “Focus on Greg and the city boy. We need to get upstairs so we can take cover from whoever is shooting at us from outside!”

Greg looked at Caleb. “We have to fall back.”

Caleb kept shooting. “We can go to Tobias’ office, but we’ll be pinned down!”

“It’s our only choice,” said Greg. “I’ll cover you. Go!”

Caleb got up and ducked down as he retreated to safety. He changed magazines and fired toward the ground level to allow Greg to fall back.

Greg hustled to the office. “Get ready. We can hold them off here until we run out of ammo. I wish I knew who was out there helping us.” Both of them changed magazines.

Caleb aimed at the stairs. He saw a head and fired. Then another and another. The assailants fell as soon as they came

into view.

“Alright! Alright! Cease fire!” Heath screamed.

Greg called back to him. “This ends here and now, Heath. Either you turn yourself in or we keep shooting.”

Heath said nothing for a while. “Fine. We’ll turn ourselves in. It ain’t like the case will ever go to court. Lay down your guns, boys. We’ll all be home by Christmas.”

Greg stood up and signaled for Caleb to follow. “I’ll cover them. I need you to start putting handcuffs on the survivors—and start with Heath.”

“Caleb!” Bristol screamed desperately.

Caleb tightened the cuffs on Heath’s wrists. “Bristol! Are you okay?”

She came through the door with her rifle in hand. “Yes, I’m fine. I was worried about you.”

Caleb cuffed another of the surrendered deputies. “You’re free! I thought for sure Heath would have restrained you.”

“He did!” She snarled at the renegade sheriff. “Stan cut me loose.”

“Stan is here?” Caleb continued securing the other prisoners.

She replied, “Yeah, he went around back to set Scooter and Dolly free. I’m sure Heath had them cuffed up also.”

“But Stan couldn’t have taken out all those deputies by himself.” Caleb felt bewildered.

Bristol glanced at Deputy Greg Smith but said nothing.

Heath Slater wriggled in his cuffs as if trying to get more comfortable. “If it turns out Ricky Davis had a part in this operation, me and my men will be walking free by morning. That boy is a convicted felon.”

Greg nudged Heath toward the door with the butt of his rifle. “Ricky Davis didn’t have anything to do with this. Quit

making up stories in that feeble little brain of yours.” Greg turned to Bristol. “Call an ambulance and check on the two deputies by the jukebox. That’s Barnes and Eubanks. They’re on our team.”

“Sure.” Bristol took out her phone and then hurried to the injured deputies.

Scooter and Dolly entered the bar.

Greg looked at Scooter. “Where are Tobias and Bobby Ray?”

“They jumped in one of the patrol cars and took off,” Scooter replied. “I was kinda tied up at the time, so there wasn’t much I could do to stop them.”

Stan came in carrying his rifle and walking with a limp. Caleb saw blood on Stan’s lower pant leg. “You’re hit!”

“It’s just a scratch.” Stan winced in pain as he grabbed a chair from one of the tables and sat down.

“You need to get to the hospital!” Caleb secured the last prisoner and went to check Stan’s leg.

Bristol rushed over to see about him. “Ambulances are on the way.”

“We have to take him!” Caleb argued.

Greg shook his head. “We’re not finished. We have to find Tobias and Bobby Ray. None of us are safe until those two are off the street.”

“Bobby Ray is bleeding heavily,” said Caleb. “They’ll be at the hospital. We can take my grandfather when we go to look for them. Come on!” Caleb bent down to help Stan get to his feet.

Greg sighed. “They won’t go to the hospital. They’ll go to Ma Koontz. She’ll clean up Bobby Ray’s wound.”

Caleb looked at Stan and said nothing.

Stan waved him away. “Go on. Help Greg see this thing through. He needs you.”

Greg signaled for Dolly to come over.

“What can I do to help?” she inquired.

Greg whispered so Heath couldn’t hear. “Ricky is out in the woods somewhere. I appreciate what he did. We’d all be dead if he and Stan hadn’t shown up. But now I need him to *not* be here. Find him. Take a patrol car and get him home. Besides, with those two maniacs on the loose, Hellen and Coral really do need someone standing guard.”

“My grandmother can shoot a tick off of a possum’s ear. Tobias Koontz will find someone else to pick on if he wants to stay above ground. But I understand.” Dolly hugged Bristol and waved at Caleb. “I’ll see you back at the fort.”

Dolly hurried out the door to the sound of distant sirens getting louder and louder. Caleb walked out to the parking lot and waited for the ambulance to arrive. Once it was in view, he waived to the driver.

The ambulance stopped right outside the front door of Koon Dawg’s and the medics hurried to unload a gurney.

“Where are the other ambulances?” Caleb asked.

“We’re the last one. Everyone else has quit,” said the first medic.

The second medic laughed. “Yeah, everyone else wants to get paid for their services.”

“Imagine that,” snarked the first. “Getting paid. I mean—really!”

Caleb followed them in. “Can I help?”

“Are you a trained EMT or medical professional?” asked the first medic.

“No,” said Caleb.

“Then you better let us handle it,” replied the second medic.

“We have three people who need to go to the hospital,” said Caleb. “Can you fit them all in one ambulance?”

The medics rushed to Barnes and Eubanks, the injured deputies by the jukebox first. “These two are in pretty serious condition,” said the first medic. “Where’s the other one?”

“Over there.” Caleb pointed to Stan.

The second medic nodded. “He can ride in the passenger’s seat. Can you help him out to the vehicle?”

“Sure.” Caleb hurried to Stan’s side. “Come on. There’s only one ambulance. You’ll have to ride up front with the driver.”

Stan winced in agony as he stood to his feet. Caleb hurt for his grandfather with each painful step. But soon, he got him in the vehicle and helped him get the seat belt on.

Caleb held Stan’s hand for a moment. “Thank you—for coming to save us. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t shown up.”

“I wasn’t about to sit around the house and twiddle my thumbs. Ricky wasn’t going to either.” Stan forced a smile.

Caleb nodded. He looked at the ground then up at Stan’s eyes. “I love you, Grandpa.”

Stan’s eyes teared up. “I love you, too, Caleb. And *I* don’t know what *I* would have done if *you* hadn’t shown up.”

Caleb smiled and closed the door.

Greg called out, “Caleb, we have to move. Our work isn’t done.”

Caleb waved bye to Stan and hurried over to Greg’s patrol car. Bristol was already in the back seat. Caleb opened the door and got into the passenger seat. “What about the prisoners?”

“Scooter is going to guard them. District Attorney Nora Phelps is sending deputies from Sevier County to pick them

up. They're short-staffed also, but they're doing better than us."

"Where are we going?" Caleb asked.

"To the Koontz family compound." Greg put the car in gear and drove out of the parking lot.

"Sounds like we're going into the belly of the beast," said Bristol.

"We shook up the organization pretty good," said Greg. "Once they get a chance to regroup, we won't be able to get in. But hopefully we won't encounter much resistance at this stage in the game."

Caleb looked up. "God, You've gotten us through this far. I'm asking that You keep doing whatever You're doing."

Caleb's heart pounded as they drove up the long gravel driveway of the Koontz family property.

Greg pointed at a huge log home. "That's Eric's place." He nodded across the gravel drive toward a sprawling board-and-baton house that looked a little bit like a barn. "That one is Tobias'. They call it the party barn."

"Where are we going?" Bristol inquired.

"Annabelle's. She's the matriarch. They all go crying to mama when things get tough."

"Where is it?" Caleb looked straight ahead.

"Through those trees there," said Greg. "This place is over four hundred acres. I doubt we'll find them, but I want Tobias to know that I'm not going to forget about him anytime soon."

Finally, the huge southern mansion came into view. A long, straight drive flanked by colossal oaks on either side led to a stunning white two-story house with six thick columns capped by Corinthian capitals.

"Wow! It looks like something from a movie," said Bristol. "You see houses that size in California all the time, but I've never seen anything like it around here."

“Nor will you.” Greg parked by the stairs to the giant porch. “You two stay back a few yards.”

They all exited the vehicle and ascended the elaborate staircase to the antebellum structure. Greg knocked on the double doors.

The doors opened faster than Caleb expected. Shelby came outside wearing her signature too-short, too-tight denim cut-offs. “If you people don’t have a warrant, you need to leave!”

“I’m in pursuit of a fugitive from justice,” said Greg. “Lives are at stake. The warrant will have to wait.” He pushed past her.

She protested. “Excuse you! I’m calling our lawyer.”

“Call whoever you need to call.” Greg signaled for Caleb and Bristol to follow him in. “Where is your mother?”

“Mama don’t ask me for permission to go out, nor tell me where she’s going.” Shelby glared at them and snarled at Bristol. “I hope you know you’re marrying a rat.”

Bristol tightened her jaw but didn’t respond to Shelby.

Greg led them through the house, searching for Tobias and Bobby Ray. Shelby called her lawyer and spoke to him, narrating everything that was going on with the search as she followed Greg’s team.

Lexi was sitting on a sofa watching cartoons when they arrived in the family room. “Hi, Bristol!” Her young eyes sparked.

“Hi, sweetie!” Bristol held her rifle low and tried to push it behind her back.

Shelby scolded the little girl. “Don’t talk to these people. They’re not our friends anymore. They tried to hurt mama, and Uncle Toby—and Uncle Eric. They’re bad people.” She turned her attention back to Bristol. “Tell Hellen I won’t need her to babysit for me anymore, won’t you?” She pressed her lips waiting for a response, but none came. Shelby seemed determined to elicit a reaction from Bristol. She whispered,

“And tell Dolly to keep a close eye on Coral. Anything could happen to such a young child.”

Caleb’s blood began to boil. He was afraid if Bristol didn’t explode on her, he’d do it himself. Fortunately, Greg stepped in. “And if anything does happen to Coral, I’ll put you under the jail. That sounded like a direct threat to me.”

“We have a deal. You can’t arrest me,” Shelby gave a wry smile.

“For the dope. That will be a completely new case. And you’ll be charged if any harm comes to that girl.” Greg narrowed his eyes. “If that happens, and you can’t be here to be the *upstanding* mother that you’ve been to that poor girl, I certainly hope Annabelle raises Lexi with more sense than she raised you to have.”

Shelby’s face flushed red, and she frowned. “You’ve seen enough. They’re not here. Now get off of my property!”

Greg stood still for a moment, as if hoping Shelby might try to put her hands on him so he’d have an excuse to bring her in. But neither of them moved. Finally, Greg said, “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

On the way out of the compound, they checked Tobias’s house and Eric’s as well, but to no avail. Tobias and Bobby Ray were in the wind.

CHAPTER 30

We just don't need the vast majority of the population.

World Economic Forum Adviser, Yuval Harari

Caleb watched the guests mingling inside Hellen Stevens' old barn which had been transformed into a reception hall by himself, Bristol, Dolly, and Ricky. He held the hand of his new bride and looked across the table at the other set of newlyweds. Bristol kissed him and then took a bite of her wedding cake. She turned to Dolly and Ricky. "See, what did I tell you? A double wedding is twice the fun."

Dolly grinned. "We didn't have much of a choice, since we're all living under one roof. You'll be moving out of the room we've been sharing and into Caleb's room tonight."

Bristol winked at Caleb. "If he plays his cards right."

Dolly chuckled. "That leaves Ricky with sleeping on the couch or sharing a room with me."

Ricky added, "Plus, I don't think any of us want to set up the barn for another reception, at least not anytime soon."

"Oh, so this is a marriage of convenience?" Dolly narrowed her eyes.

“Yes.” Ricky glanced across the table at Caleb and Bristol. “If it hadn’t been for those foot-draggers, I’d have married you two weeks ago. It’s been pretty inconvenient having to share a room with Caleb when I know my girl is right across the hall.” He gave her a playful kiss.

Coral walked up to the table with a second piece of cake and sat in Dolly’s lap. “Mama, are we still going to have Christmas?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t we?”

The little girl took a bite of cake and said, “Because you and Daddy have been so busy getting ready for your wedding. I didn’t know if you’d still have time for Christmas.”

Dolly hugged her tight and kissed her forehead. “We’ll always make time for Christmas.”

“That’s good.” Coral took another bite of cake. “But you and Daddy getting married would have been Christmas enough for me.”

Caleb swallowed the knot in his throat. He was happy to see the young girl getting the family he’d never known. Yet he was grateful for the people God had put in his life for this season. He smiled at Stan as he walked over, using a cane while his gunshot wound continued to heal. “Hey, Grandpa.”

Stan put his hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you.”

Caleb beamed. No one had ever said they were proud of him.

Stan leaned heavily on his cane and bent over to kiss Bristol on the forehead. “And you too.”

She blushed. “Thank you, Grandpa. And thank you for walking me down the aisle. I know it wasn’t easy with the bum leg.”

Sheriff Greg Smith walked over. “Congratulations are in order all around.” He looked at Coral. “Especially for you. Congratulations on being the cutest flower girl I’ve ever seen.”

Coral looked at her mother with a tremendous smile and icing smeared from nose to chin.

“And to you, Mr. Commissioner,” Greg said to Stan. He turned his attention to the people at the table. “And of course congratulations to all the newlyweds.”

“Congratulations to you, on winning the election, Sheriff.” Caleb stood up to shake Greg’s hand.

“Thank you, but it wouldn’t have happened without all of you.” Greg sighed. “And the way things are going, I don’t know how much difference it’s going to make. Deputy Barnes came back to work last week. Eubanks is home from the hospital finally, but he has another two weeks of recovery at least. Even then, I’ll only have six deputies.”

“What about Scooter?” Dolly asked. “I thought he agreed to take a job with the department.”

“That’s counting Scooter,” Greg replied. “But it’s hard to say if we’ll even be able to put gas in the patrol cars after next week. The tanks at the county motor pool are running on fumes.”

Caleb said, “I know it’s not much, but we’ll make sure you guys get a meal every time you work a shift. Hellen plans for the deputies to show up for dinner every day.”

“Plus, we have plenty of land,” said Dolly. “Come spring, anyone who doesn’t have room for a garden at home can have a plot to grow food at our place.”

“Thanks, Dolly,” Greg answered. “But spring is a long way off. Who knows what the world will look like then. And if there’s no fuel, folks won’t have a way to get back and forth.”

Stan interjected, “If it gets that bad, you, Scooter, and anyone else from the department who needs to can move over here. We have two farms and plenty of room. We’re all holed up at my place now because we don’t have enough guns to defend both places from the Koontzes.”

“Thank you, Stan,” said Greg. “I hope it doesn’t come to that. But I appreciate the offer. I’ll let the others know about your generous proposal. Eubanks and Barnes both have families.”

“I know,” Stan replied. “They’re all welcome.”

“Speaking of the Koontzes,” said Bristol. “Any news on Tobias or Bobby Ray?”

The sheriff shook his head. “Nope. Old man Koontz had hideouts all over these hills back when he used to make moonshine. They could be laying low at any one of them.”

“That was Annabelle’s husband?” Bristol inquired.

“Yeah, he died in a shootout years ago with state law enforcement,” Greg answered. “I guess trouble is in your blood if your last name happens to be Koontz.”

“What do you think about this whole thing with the economy, the fuel shortages, no food at the grocery, and all that?” Dolly asked of the sheriff.

Greg furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

Dolly glanced across the table. “Caleb and Bristol say it’s a planned event.”

“Planned?” Greg appeared confused. “By who?”

“The elites,” said Bristol.

“Why would anybody plan for the world to melt down into chaos?” asked Greg.

“To depopulate the planet,” said Caleb. “A lot of the top dogs, Gates, Soros, Schwab—they’ve been propagating the idea that we have too many people on the planet. It’s the main driver of the green agenda.”

“I’m not trying to be rude, but that makes no sense.” Greg shook his head. “Why would they want to kill us?”

Bristol lifted her shoulders. “Because they’re evil, because they don’t want to share the planet with us filthy little people,

because they can.”

Greg took a deep breath. “I can understand how it might look like that, but I think our leaders just bumbled everything up.”

Caleb frowned. “They’ve done everything exactly wrong. Even a broken clock is right twice a day. Every decision that’s been made about the economy, the lockdowns, stimulus programs, they’ve all led us to this moment. Hundreds and hundreds of decisions, they’ve all been wrong.”

Bristol interjected, “Unless this is what they were trying to do, then they were exactly the right decisions.”

“It’s a fine theory,” said Greg. “But, even if it’s true, you can’t prove it.”

“The collection of choices our fearless leaders have made is proof enough for me,” said Caleb. “But if you need more, just wait, it’s coming.”

Greg pulled up a chair and sat down. “Oh yeah? How?”

Caleb looked across the table at Dolly. “When I was learning to care for chickens, Dolly taught me not to ever give them too much feed. If they’re not hungry, they’re difficult to control. I have to give them just enough feed to keep them dependent on me. If I do that, I can just shake the feed container and they’ll all come running to the coop when it’s time to lock them up at night. If I overfeed them, they’ll make up their own minds about when it’s time to get in the coop at night.”

“Interesting analogy,” said Greg. “But I don’t see the connection.”

“You will,” said Caleb. “When it’s time to cull the flock, kill off some of the hens that aren’t laying so well, just don’t feed them the day before. Then, sprinkle a little feed right by the kill cone. They’ll come right to you.”

“If my theory is right, the globalists are about to set up relief centers in all the big cities. People will flood to the relief

centers from all around the country. Once they're all rounded up, the masses will be ripe for the culling."

Dolly's eyes darted back and forth from Caleb to Greg. "I'm starting to think he's right. If that happens, then we'll know."

"And it will be too late to do anything about it." Greg furrowed his brow.

Stan interrupted. "But today is a celebration. Let's not spoil it with useless rumination."

"You're right, Grandpa." Caleb put his arm around Bristol and pulled her close. "Let's be thankful to God for the time we've been given to prepare. We have God watching over us, we have each other, and we have a plan. We'll get through whatever may come."

Don't Panic!

Inevitably, books like this will wake folks up to the need to be prepared. Or, they cause those of us who are already prepared to take inventory of our preparations. New preppers can find the task of getting prepared for an economic collapse, EMP, or societal breakdown to be a source of great anxiety. It shouldn't be. By following an organized plan and setting a goal of getting a little more prepared each day, you can do it.

I always try to include a few prepper tips in my novels, but they're fiction and not a comprehensive plan. Now that you're motivated to start prepping, the last thing I want to do is leave you frustrated, not knowing what to do next. So, I'd like to offer you a free PDF copy of *The Seven Step Survival Plan*.

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Can't get enough post-apocalyptic chaos? Check out my other heart-stopping tales about the end of the world as we know it.

American Wasteland

It is the common fate of the indolent to see their rights become a prey to the active. The condition upon which

God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt.

John Philpot Curran

Jennifer Martin struggles to keep her small business afloat in the aftermath of a global pandemic. But when a blast from the past informs her of a plan to take down America, she realizes the pandemic was only the opening act. Death and destruction hang like a dark cloud over the horizon. Jennifer must steel herself for the trouble to come.

Government intervention during the pandemic has weakened the economy and the social fabric of the nation. Nevertheless, bureaucrats and lawmakers refuse to change course and double down on the failed policies that have crippled the country. Rising prices and labor shortages are pushing Jennifer Martin's small Atlanta restaurant to the brink of destruction.

After years of being out of touch, Lucas McIntosh shows up at Jennifer's doorstep. He tells her about his dishonorable discharge from the Army and about the purge designed to cleanse the military of patriots and conservatives. New laws serve to exacerbate the growing food shortage in America. Paired with crippling inflation, the scarcity triggers food riots across the country.

Shortly after the riots are brought under control, a cyber-attack brings down the electrical grid sending the country into total chaos. The assault is blamed on a group of malcontents who believe the last US election was rigged. But Lucas believes this narrative is only a ruse intended to further divide the fractured nation.

With so many already in dire straits, the power outage pushes people to the edge. The crisis brings out the worst in humanity, turning average citizens into desperate savages. Jennifer and her small group of friends will have to stick together and be smart if they have any hope of surviving the turmoil.

The Beginning of Sorrows

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows.

Mark 13:8

When Agent Joshua Stone is called to a high-level meeting at the Department of Homeland Security, he learns about a new global order which will be transitioning into power. Stone is read in on the plan for a single planetary government and a world-wide, cashless currency, which will step in to fill the void left by the failing monetary system. To win wide acceptance by the nations of the world, the old system must first be allowed to fail, bringing about a state of global chaos never before seen by mankind. Once desperation has taken the place of pride and hubris, humanity will beg for the proposed one-world empire led by the charismatic tech guru Lucius Alexander.

The Days of Noah

A hidden conspiracy. A shadow government. The CIA analyst who uncovers it all.

In an off-site CIA facility outside of Langley, rookie analyst Everett Carroll discovers he's not being told the whole truth. He's instructed to disregard troubling information uncovered by his research. Everett ignores his directive and keeps digging. What he finds goes against everything he's been taught to believe. Unfortunately, his curiosity doesn't escape the attention of his superiors, and it may cost him his life.

Meanwhile, Tennessee public school teacher, Noah Parker, like many in the United States, has been asleep at the wheel. During his complacency, the founding precepts of America have been systematically destroyed by a conspiracy that dates back hundreds of years.

Cassandra Parker, Noah's wife, has diligently followed end-times prophecy and the shifting tide against freedom in America. Noah has tried to avoid the subject, but when charges are filed against him for deviating from the approved curriculum in his school, he quickly understands the seriousness of the situation. The signs can no longer be ignored, and Noah is forced to prepare for the cataclysmic period of financial and political upheaval ahead.

Watch through the eyes of Noah Parker and Everett Carroll as the world descends into chaos, a global empire takes shape, ancient writings are fulfilled, and the last days fall upon the once-great United States of America.

Black Swan: A Novel of America's Coming Financial Nightmare

**America's financial doomsday. A
wayward son.**

The epic struggle to survive.

Country music icon Shane Black is this year's headliner for the New Year's Eve bash in Times Square, but when violent riots break out, he'll need more than a six-string to escape the maelstrom.

After decades of abuse as the world's reserve currency, the US dollar's day of reckoning is at hand. Without a functioning monetary system to purchase basic goods, society rapidly descends into abject chaos. Protests, looting, and bloodletting take the place of civility in a country that is coming unhinged.

Thrust into an apocalyptic gauntlet of terror, Shane must resort to savage brutality to get out of Manhattan alive.

Cyber Armageddon: A Post-Apocalyptic Techno-Thriller

Cyber Security Analyst Kate McCarthy knows something ominous is about to happen in the US banking system. She has a place to go if things get hectic, but it's far from the perfect retreat.

When a new breed of computer virus takes down America's financial network, chaos, and violence erupt. Access to cash

disappears and credit cards become worthless. Desperate consumers are left with no means to purchase food, fuel, and basic necessities. Society melts down instantly and the threat of starvation brings out the absolute worst humanity has to offer.

In the midst of the mayhem, Kate will face a post-apocalyptic nightmare that she never could have imagined. Her only reward for survival is to live another day in the gruesome new reality that has eradicated the world she once knew.

Ava's Crucible

The Second American Civil War Has Begun!

The deck is stacked against twenty-nine-year-old Ava. She's a fighter, but she's got trust issues and doesn't always make the best decisions. Her personal complications aren't without merit, but America is on the verge of a second civil war, and Ava must pull it together if she wants to survive.

The tentacles of the deep state have infiltrated every facet of American culture. The public education system, entertainment industry, and mainstream media have all been hijacked by a shadow government intent on fomenting a communist revolution in the United States. The antagonistic message of this agenda has poisoned the minds of America's youth who are convinced that capitalism and conservatism are responsible for all the ills of the world. Violent protest, widespread destruction, and politicians who insist on letting the disassociated vent their rage will bring America to her knees, threatening to decapitate the laws, principles, and values on which the country was founded. The revolution has

been well-planned, but the socialists may have underestimated America's true patriots who refuse to give up without a fight.

Ava refuses to give in to fear, but she simply cannot survive on her own. She must deal with her crisis of faith and learn to trust others, or she'll never make it through the bloodiest period of America's history.

Behold, Darkness, and Sorrow

A Prophetic Dream. An EMP Attack. The Ultimate Contest for Survival!

Danny and Alisa's lives are turned upside down when Danny begins having prophetic dreams about the judgment coming upon America. Through one of Danny's dreams, they learn about the imminent threat of an EMP attack which will wipe out America's electric grid, sending the country into a technological dark age.

Living in a nation where life-sustaining systems of support are completely dependent on electricity and computers, the odds of survival are dismal. Municipal water services, retail food distribution, police, fire, EMS, and emergency services will come to a screeching halt.

If they want to live through the most catastrophic period in American history, Danny and Alisa will have to race against time to get prepared, before the lights go out.

