

NO CHOICE

e-book

Copyright © 2025 Tamás Bakos

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. No part of this publication may be modified or reproduced for commercial purposes and profit without the written permission of the author.

However, **sharing this e-book freely and respectfully is encouraged** – especially if you believe its message may help or inspire others. Please keep the content intact and always credit the author. Let this book support awareness, love, and the protection of innocent lives.

I dedicate this book to my beloved wife, Ági.

The emotional state that inspired this story was born from the peaceful and loving life I am fortunate to share
with you.

I love you, my Life!

I am deeply grateful to everyone who offered thoughtful and constructive advice,
helping this book come to life.

Respect to every mindful person who understands the gravity of protecting children and actively works to
support the defenseless.

May this book offer spiritual strength and support in this beautiful mission.

**Warning: This book may be disturbing for some readers.
Not recommended for readers under the age of 18.**

Intellectual Property National Office registration number: 0014015

Chapters

Foreword.....	page 4
Chapter 1 - Spring, 1992 – Rider Farm, Kansas (30 km from Dodge City).....	page 5
Chapter 2 - Morning at the Rider Farm.....	page 12
Chapter 3 -Two days earlier - Mr. Calett’s Interrogation.....	page 14
Chapter 4 - The Rider Farm - one Week Later.....	page 21
Chapter 5 - A ceremony for Samantha.....-.....	page 24
Chapter 6 - The 4th of July.....	page 37
Chapter 7 - Calett's Trial.....	page 43
Chapter 8 - Two years later.....	page 47
Chapter 9 - Wichita Police Department.....	page 49
Chapter 10 - Earlier that day - Dave Says Goodbye to Anne.....	page 52
Chapter 11 - Dave’s trial.....	page 54
Chapter 12 - 25 Years Later.....	page 58
Epilogue.....	page 67
The World Lives in Me	page 68

Foreword

When you read this book, I believe it's important to know how and why it was born. People often ask, - *What was the author thinking?* — and, in this case, it's truly a strange, almost mystical story.

I never thought I would write a book. I've always loved to read, but I never felt the urge to share a story in such written form.

Then something changed in the spring of 2025. During a routine occupational health screening, I was told I had high blood pressure and would need medication. But one thing was certain: **I wasn't going to take pills.** I accepted that something wasn't right and needed fixing, but masking the symptoms wasn't a solution — just procrastination.

I was referred to my general practitioner, and I had to keep a blood pressure journal for two weeks. I didn't want to risk a stroke — nor did I want to take medications whose side effects, ironically, included heart attack. That, to me, was incomprehensible.

So I needed a third path. I had to make a radical change.

With one bold decision, I gave up alcohol, started exercising again, and began intermittent fasting on an 8–16 schedule. Alongside that came small but intentional habits: hawthorn tea, cold showers, breathing exercises.

Almost immediately, my blood pressure improved, and I started consistently getting much better readings.

I felt my body beginning to cleanse itself. I had more energy — even though I was eating less. Then I decided to go even deeper and attempted a longer fast.

I started with a 40-hour water fast — drinking only water, hawthorn, and lemon grass tea. That fast opened something inside me that's hard to put into words. Though I later did a 48-hour and even a 72-hour fast, it was during the 40-hour one that something extraordinary happened — something that sparked this book.

On a sunny day in May I was doing some gardening when suddenly...the story appeared before my inner eyes. So vividly, as if I were watching a movie.

It was breathtaking. The images just kept flowing — clear, sharp. I was so taken by the *film* I saw that I ran into the house and began writing it down as best I could. I tried to capture as many details as possible so I wouldn't lose any part of it.

And that's how this book came to be. It was a few months hard work to finish but still, I didn't invent it, it found me. My only merit was not letting it slip away and with some personal touch shaping it so others could experience it too.

Since I saw it as a *film*, my ultimate goal is to turn it into one — a film that can deliver this message to millions of people.

The physical and spiritual cleansing I went through — and I truly believe it affected even the function of my pineal gland — allowed me to – *download* - this information from somewhere and bring it into our three-dimensional world.

I believe many great creators throughout history have gone through similar purification processes when giving birth to their masterpieces. I don't think we *invent* anything new.

All information already exists in the form of possibility — we humans are the channels through which it manifests.

Our sensitivity and skills that allow each of us to bring through different things from this infinite universe — whether it be a book, a painting, an artwork or even a child.

The human being is the channel, and the divine spark is the blessing through which the design comes to life.

Be still. Listen to the universe. When inspiration appears — don't let it slip away. Believe in yourselves.

There is no such thing as –*just* - human.

We are all creators.

Chapter 1 – Spring, 1992 – Rider Farm, Kansas (30 km from Dodge City)

The spring sun had already started warming the land. As its rays grew stronger, they slipped through the tiniest cracks of the small wooden farmhouse. Just like on any other morning — but this day was different. A horrifying event had cast a dark shadow over the peaceful life of its residents.

- Did you see the paper? Dave asked his wife. His voice carried something unusual — a deep sorrow.

- I did... It's awful - Anne replied, visibly shaken.

- But here? In this area nothing like this has ever happened! Dave said anxiously.

- Maybe... maybe something similar happened fifteen or twenty years ago, somewhere near Montezuma. But that girl got away. Or at least she escaped during the attack, and no one's heard from her since - Anne said, staring out the window, struggling with tears.

- You can't recover from something like that. And imagine what her family must be going through! The Torstens... This has scarred them for life.

- I don't even want to think about it - Dave muttered.

He angrily tossed the newspaper onto the small kitchen table. His face sank with grief, and he let out a deep sigh.

- They've arrested a guy - he added. - A witness reported him. His name is Calett, but they won't release more details until the trial.

- That's good. Let's hope he gets convicted. And maybe we can bury this in the furthest drawer of our memory.

- Are you going? - Anne asked, her voice trembling.

- Going where? - Dave looked up at her, puzzled.

- To the trial. I heard it's going to be open to the public. Judge Edwards made that decision.

- You sure know a lot about all this - Dave said, raising an eyebrow.

- Well, you know how fast word spreads in the hospital... It happened three days ago. I just couldn't bring myself to tell you. I know how deeply this kind of thing affects you. That strong sense of justice of yours...

- Oh, the hospital... I honestly don't get how you tolerate all those gossiping hens. Christy, and that other overly bleached blonde one...

- Chloe?

- Probably. I don't know her. Don't want to either. That's not gonna change.

- I get it. But I don't get to choose my coworkers. Anyway they're good people... just young. Do you remember how we were at twenty? - she walked over and hugged Dave from behind, planting a kiss on his cheek. Dave smiled. He loved it when Anne touched him.

- So? Are you going? - Anne asked, nudging him again.

- I don't know... I haven't thought about it.

- You were friends with the Torstens, weren't you? I'm sure they could use support right now.

- That's a stretch. I barely ever talked to him. He's at least ten years younger, runs with a different crowd.

- You don't even have a crowd Dave - Anne teased.

- Exactly! That's how I know his is different - Dave grinned, and they both laughed.

- But seriously... Don't you want to know who the accused is? What the verdict will be? - Anne asked with concern.

- Who? Not really. Probably a damaged, broken soul. Someone whose parents didn't love him — or did it in a sick way. From what I've read, most people who do things like this... had the same horrors done to them.

- Dave, don't say that. Just thinking about it makes my heart ache... So? Will you go? Because I can't. I have to work that day. There's no way I could get time off.

- I'll see... Dave muttered.

- You could go for John, at least. I'm sure he'll be there.

John Bradfield was a neighbor who lived a bit farther down the road. He occasionally hired Dave for car repairs — but he never called. He was too lazy for that. Still, whenever they ran into each other somewhere, he'd ask Dave to fix something on the tractor or one of his tools, and always paid him on the spot.

- Yeah, John loves these open trials. He's got that same strong sense of justice. You know what? Maybe I will go. But wait! I don't even have anything formal to wear. The last decent outfit I had was from our wedding, and that doesn't fit anymore... Pretty sure the moths threw a party in that closet.

- After work, the girls and I can swing by a clothing store and grab you a shirt. What size are you now? XL? XXL? - Anne mused aloud.

Dave was clearly struggling with the weight on his heart. Anne suddenly imagined themselves in the Torstens' shoes.

- What are we supposed to do, Dave?

- What do you mean?

- From today on... everything will be different. You can't just forget something like this.

Dave didn't answer. He just let out a heavy sigh. His silence said it all: he knew Anne was right. This tragedy had changed everything, not just for the Torstens, but for the whole community. Anne was the more anxious of them two.

- And what about our daughters? Sarah is the same age as...

But she couldn't bring herself to say Samantha's name. She didn't want to finish the sentence. She didn't even want the thought to exist. Like some impulsive mistake you try to erase by burying it in silence. But they both knew — she was right.

The few seconds of silence that followed were heavy as lead. The little house, normally buzzing with warmth and love, now felt frozen in thought. Each of them was locked in their own storm, their minds flooded with unbearable images. Every second stretched into eternity.

Out of nowhere, Anne was struck by a memory — that night in the hospital. She had been on shift when Marie — Samantha's mother — was rushed into the ER,

completely unconscious. She had lost a massive amount of blood. She was already five months pregnant.

When the detective came to deliver the news of what had happened to her daughter, Samantha, Marie went into immediate shock. Within minutes, she miscarried. Only luck — and the medics' quick action — kept her alive. Her husband, Peter, was in a state of total collapse. He writhed beside his bleeding wife like a rabid animal, screaming uncontrollably. He couldn't even register that his wife was about to die. His mind had shattered. They had fallen into the deepest pits of hell — and it seemed like they would never escape.

And that was before anyone even knew the details. No one did. Only the detectives — Trevor and Dalton — who were first on the scene.

They had arrived quickly. But nothing could have prepared them for what they found.

- Oh my God...- Dalton gasped, his voice heavy with bitterness.

- Was this done by a pack of wolves? - Trevor asked horrified.

- If it were wolves, there'd be bite marks. Scratch wounds...- Dalton replied, shaking his head at the absurdity of the question.

- No way, man... No animal does this. This is the most vile thing a human can do.

- How much evil does it take to do something like this? - Trevor muttered.

They could only bear to stand by Samantha's lifeless body for a few seconds. Then they stepped back, letting the forensics team take over.

They didn't need a coroner or any kind of expert to tell them what had happened.

Samantha lay in the mud, soaked in her own blood. What remained of her dress lay torn in shreds around her — like the tattered corpses on a medieval battlefield.

But this wasn't war. It was something far worse.

This was brutality in its wildest form. This was the soul of an innocent little girl, shattered into fragments. It felt as if Satan himself had come for her — and poured every ounce of hate into his act gathered for two thousand years in the name of revenge for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Back at the house, a sudden crash broke the silence — a teacup shattered on the kitchen floor. Anne had knocked it over with a careless movement.

- Damn it! That was part of the set! Now there are only five left - she sighed.

Dave didn't really care for such things. To him, it was just a cup — an object. He gave a playful smile.

- Sweetheart... when was the last time that six of *us* had coffee in the same time? - he teased.

Anne forced a smile. She knew Dave was right. Still, it bugged her that the set was now incomplete. But more than that, it bothered her how carelessly she had knocked it over — how her dark thoughts had pulled her out of her calm, harmonious world.

She quietly cleaned up the broken pieces and turned to Dave.

- I was on shift when they brought Marie in - Anne said softly.

- You didn't tell me - Dave replied, surprised.

- I know... But it really shook me. I need to let it out now.

- Tell me. What happened? - Dave asked, gently but with urgency in his voice.

- She was lucky the paramedics arrived on time and rushed her in. She was five months pregnant... When one of the detectives came to deliver the bad news about what had happened to Samantha... Marie went into such shock that she immediately miscarried. Her husband collapsed next to her, sobbing and screaming, not even realizing his wife was bleeding out. His mind just... broke - Anne said, tears gathering in her eyes.

Dave was silent for a moment. Then asked:

- What happened to them after that?

- They survived. But only physically.

- God... Just hearing this is awful. I can't even imagine what they're going through.

- You should teach the girls some selfdefense! - Anne said suddenly - It wouldn't hurt — and I'd feel better. We can't be with them all the time. Sometimes Sarah walks Lucie home from the Davies' place. They're on that road alone! You were in the military - you must know some basic techniques.

- That was a long time ago - Dave said with a small, reflective smile.

But Anne's words stirred something in him. Maybe there was something he could do to help prepare their girls - some piece of wisdom or strength he could pass on.

His memories of the military rose to the surface. He had joined young, with fierce patriotism in his heart. He'd admired the old heroes, always stood for justice, and protected the weak - even as a kid on the playground.

He'd been taller than most of the other boys and couldn't stand bullies. He was like a gentle guardian - though not always so gentle. He wasn't afraid to hit back when he had to. Enough that his parents were regularly summoned to school over it.

Dave had had a brutal childhood. His father would often beat him with a thick leather belt after coming home drunk. The welts on his back and legs would swell and burn for days. He remembered the nights he spent trembling in fear, watching his father take out his rage on his mother. When he was in that state, his father saw enemies in everything.

Dave hated him with every fiber of his being. Couldn't understand how that man could possibly be his father. Countless times, he imagined killing him - to protect his mother, and maybe the world, from this raging monster.

Dave was twenty when his father died. By then, all the hate had faded. Only pity remained. His mother passed not long after. A vicious cancer ravaged her full body and took her within weeks. At least she didn't suffer long. Dave buried them both. But in separate graves! His heart wouldn't allow it any other way.

- If you'd taken sports more seriously, you could've easily gone pro. Basketball, track — you had the height, the build... - Anne said.

- Nah... I never cared about professional sports. I just wanted to be a soldier. To defend my country. To protect those who couldn't protect themselves - That desire - that fire - had been born from his brutal childhood. He wanted to be everything his father wasn't.

During basic training, out of over two hundred cadets, Dave consistently scored at the top. Back then, it was still his rage that pushed him forward - a burning drive born of the beatings and fear. Whenever things got hard, he'd just think back to his childhood, and it gave him power.

- You looked so good in uniform - Anne smiled. - I remember the first time you walked up to me in town... What was it again?

- I'll never forget. I was shaking like a leaf – Dave laughed.

- But I had to go over. You were so beautiful - that smile, that hair... The way the wind played with your curls when you stepped out of the pharmacy. I saw you laughing with that loud, sporty friend of yours... and I just knew: If I didn't go to you right then, someone else would.

- And what happened next? - Anne grinned.

- I honestly don't remember. Everything blurred. My mind just went blank.

Anne burst out laughing, wiping tears from her eyes.

- I could tell you were there - but only *physically*. You were so adorable! I couldn't resist those beautiful green eyes. Julie even said if I didn't go on a date with you, she would.

- Oh right, Julie... I remember now. She kind of disappeared after that.

- Sadly, yes. I never hurt her or anything like it. She was probably jealous. Some people can't find happiness for themselves, so when others do... it hurts them. She got mad that I didn't invite her to the wedding.

- She called, threw a tantrum, and hung up - but of course, she didn't know we didn't invite anyone. It was just us and the person who married us.

- Yeah... The wedding - Dave let out a breath through his nose - a quiet puff of laughter. No smile, just that - *pfff*- sound.

He never made a big deal about weddings. To him, the proposal was the true moment of commitment. When a man, from the depths of his heart, asks a woman to share a life with him - and she says yes - that was the real promise.

Not a document signed before witnesses, but a divine bond between two souls. Unbreakable. Timeless. A cornerstone of the universe they would build together.

Anne had always agreed with that. Even if deep down, she had a small ache about never wearing a white dress. What mattered most was the love, the care, the way Dave made her feel every day since. As if they were made for each other.

- That dress, though... - Anne began.

- I know - Dave interrupted gently, smiling -The white dress.

Anne looked out the kitchen window, her eyes dreamy but not sad. Just picturing herself in it - for a moment.

Dave stood up from the table and walked behind her. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, and she placed her hand on his head, stroking it gently.

They stood there for a few quiet moments, gazing out together. Then Dave snapped back to reality.

- All right. Time to get moving - nothing's gonna get done on its own - he said, smiling as he adjusted his overall straps and stepped outside.

Dave dove into his daily work, but Anne's words from breakfast echoed in his mind all day. Especially the one sentence:

- *What about our daughters? Sarah is the same age as...*

That sentence repeated in his head at least a thousand times.

They had two medium-sized mixedbreed dogs. Outdoor dogs - not allowed inside the house. Dave and Anne were strict about that, no matter how much the girls begged at first. The girls had to learn: dogs live outside, in their own space.

They had adopted the dogs from a shelter after visiting it with the girls - who had nearly cried, begging to bring the puppies home.

As they grew up, the dogs proved useful around the property - they caught every rat and rodent before the cat could even notice. The girls adored them. The dogs were full of energy, always playing, always running — just like the girls. Though at times, the girls would go days without paying them much attention.

In the evenings, Dave often took the dogs out to the fields for long walks or runs. He loved being in nature - with his family, with the dogs, or even alone.

On quiet nights, he would sit in front of the house and gaze up at the stars. There wasn't much light pollution around that area - you could still see the Milky Way with the naked eye. During those moments, he would reflect on everything. On life, the universe, the big questions.

He loved the old philosophers and thinkers. Their teachings opened his mind, expanded his awareness. Plato. Socrates. Aristotle. Their thoughts on the unseen, on existence, the human soul had shaped him deeply. He felt as if those men were his true companions. Even if they had lived thousands of years ago. Their words resonated with him completely, like vibrating together across eternity.

That night, he sat again in front of the house. The dogs lay quietly at his feet. The stars lit up the small farm like lanterns. The sound of crickets felt like music. He smiled. It felt like the universe was putting on a private concert, just for him. He was the guest of honor.

And then suddenly - Samantha came to his mind. He had known her. She had been Sarah and Lucie's close friend. They'd played together often. She and Sarah had even been in the same class. Dark thoughts clouded Dave's heart. He could not comprehend the evil. The question burned inside: Why? And no answer came.

The screen door creaked gently. Anne stepped outside and walked toward him with calm, steady steps. One of the dogs lifted its head to greet her, the other stayed, enjoying Dave's hand on its fur.

Anne walked behind her husband, placed her hands on his shoulders, and kissed his cheek.

- Are the girls asleep? - Dave asked.

- Out like a light - Anne smiled.

- What are you thinking about? I can see your mind's racing again...

- I just... I can't stop thinking about Samantha - Dave said quietly, pain in his voice.

Anne didn't answer. She just sighed deeply - and let him speak.

- Just two weeks ago, she was playing with Sarah and Lucie. Now... how could anyone do this? Why?

But it wasn't a real question. Not one that could be answered. He wasn't asking Anne - he was asking the universe.

- You love astrology - he said suddenly, looking at her.

- I do. It's one of the oldest sciences. It's a shame how much it's been suppressed. There's so much truth hidden in the positions of the stars - so many patterns in our lives.

Dave looked up at the countless lights above.

- Do you think our purpose... is written in the stars? - he asked, sincerely as if Anne might actually know.

- I don't know. But I do believe this: When the time comes... you'll know. We'll all know.

Dave loved her answer. He gently took her hand from his shoulder and kissed it. Then stood up slowly and wrapped his arm around her.

Together, they walked back to the house.

- Go on, take your freezing cold shower - Anne teased - I still don't get how you do that.

- It's the Viking blood - Dave laughed.

He always showered cold. It made him feel alive - refreshed, clean, strong. Even spiritually cleansed. And it was a challenge. Mind over body. Not everyone could do it. Whenever the topic came up with his friends, the same phrases always surfaced:

- *If I really wanted to, I could stop drinking.*

- *If I really wanted to, I could quit smoking.*

- *If I wanted to, I could take cold showers too...*

Dave always just smiled. Even now, their voices echoed in his head - but he knew the truth. He wasn't strong because he took cold showers. He took cold showers because he was strong.

And that is a big difference. It had become as natural to him as a morning coffee.

Chapter 2 – Morning at the Rider Farm

Dave was already busy early in the morning, feeding the chickens, watering the vegetables. His movements were so habitual, it was as if every part of his body could carry out the tasks on its own. He loved the farm. It felt like the best place in the world. As if the very atmosphere wrapped them in a divine protective shield, guarding them from the filth of the outside world.

Here, everything was clean, and in order. A reflection of Dave's true nature. Even when he had to leave, he always looked forward to returning.

Anne felt the same, though she was more active around the house. She loved keeping it tidy and couldn't stand it when things were left out of place. It was as if they had an unspoken agreement between them: she kept the inside in order, and Dave took care of everything outside. They had never discussed it - they just instinctively knew their roles.

Of course, Dave kept things tidy inside as well. He helped Anne a lot - always did the dishes and cleaned up when she wasn't home. And Anne often worked in the vegetable garden or on the porch. Together, they maintained their beloved living space. They didn't do it out of duty - they did it because that's how they felt good. Order inside and out. Order and peace.

Dave usually cooked during the weekdays, since he was home more. The farm was their livelihood, and it demanded his full attention. He liked structure and organization. Chaos and confusion deeply bothered him, as if some opposing force were constantly trying to undermine the perfection of creation. Like how the pure hearts of children are twisted and broken by harmful outside influences as they grow up.

Anne was getting the girls ready. One was going to kindergarten, the other to school. Dave was watering and pruning the tomato plants. He always had plenty to do, was never bored.

- Bye, sweetheart! Love you! Have a great day! - Anne called out.

Dave turned around and rushed over to hug them.

- Daddy, will the kittens be born by the time we get home from kindergarten? - Lucie asked excitedly.

- Maybe, sweetie. That's up to nature. They'll come when the time is right.

- I'll draw them at kindergarten - as if they're already born, okay?

- That's perfect! Draw them, sweetheart! Surprise me - let me know what colors they'll be!

- Okay, Daddy. I'll surprise you! I'll draw one for Mommy too! - Anne smiled and hugged Dave.

- Mom and Dad are coming over this weekend. I cook something delicious for them.

Dave acknowledged it with a kind smile and a nod.

She didn't wait for an answer - she already knew. Whenever she asked for something, with Dave, it was as good as done. She brought the ideas, the requests - and Dave made them happen. Like a fairytale magician.

Sarah was already in the car, reading her book with her seatbelt fastened. Dave walked over, leaned into the car, and kissed her.

- Do your best at school, sweetheart. Show them how smart you are.

Sarah gave a shy smile and blushed a little. Her father's words felt good. She looked up to him - he was her role model.

- I will, Daddy. Love you! - then she returned to her book.

In their family, they didn't hold back from saying - *I love you* - None of them did. But they also didn't overuse it, always knew when it belonged - when it truly mattered.

Anne arrived at the hospital feeling sleepy. She hadn't slept well. Thoughts had been swirling in her head all night, and she'd even had some nightmares. She had already been impatient with the kids on the way there. She sensed it wasn't going to be her day.

Always arrived a little early so she could have a few minutes to mentally prepare for the shift. She loved this work - helping those in trouble, the vulnerable. She saw her role at the hospital as a true calling.

There were five nurses on shift at a time. It was a small hospital. And that's exactly what she liked about it. During her training, she had worked at the county hospital, which was always overcrowded and chaotic. There had been constant rushing and confusion. It often came down to the dedicated work of just a few staff members to prevent disaster. But she knew that kind of pressure and disorganization would wear her down within a few years. She didn't take that path.

Instead, she managed to get into this smaller hospital. Since she lived nearby, she had an advantage during the hiring process. And over time, it became clear that she had made the right choice. The doctors liked her, and patients were always glad when she took care of them. She enjoyed assisting with surgeries, but her favorites were the births. In those moments, she felt like she was part of something magical. The arrival of a new life. A real miracle. Luckily, she rarely had to work night shifts only if a colleague got sick, and even that was rare.

From the beginning, it had been agreed that Anne preferred daytime, and Monica took the night shifts. Monica liked the extra pay, since she and her partner, Leslie, were saving up for a car and a down payment on a house. Leslie worked at the county fire department. They were young - just twenty- five - and still had the energy for the hustle. Their fresh love and shared dreams drove them forward every day toward building their own home. They didn't have kids yet, so the night shifts weren't a problem for Monica.

Just as Anne was putting on her coat, Christy and Dana came in laughing. Two colleagues in their twenties who had joined the hospital a few years earlier. Anne liked them. They reminded her of her younger self. She had been about their age when she became a nurse, and she saw many similarities in their behavior and interests.

- Hi Anne!
 - Hey! - they greeted her.
 - Hi girls! What's all the giggling about? - she smiled at them.
 - Oh, nothing - Dana replied in her sharp voice.
 - Dana met a cute guy at the party on Saturday - Christy added, laughing - And get this, he might be *the one*!
- Dana smiled and gave a little – pfff - laugh, looking bashfully at the floor.
- Yeah sure - she said shyly.

They all had a good laugh. Anne tried to add something thoughtful:

- Well, if he *is* the one, you'll only know that later. Months, even years from now. But when the time comes, you'll feel it.

They liked Anne. She was youthful, and always tried to give good advice. Not in a lecturing way, but honestly, like a friend.

But then the mood shifted when Anne changed the topic.

- What do you think will happen at the trial?

- What trial? - Christy asked.

Dana nudged her with her elbow, she could see that Anne was puzzled Christy didn't get the reference. After all, the whole town was talking about it.

- Ohhh... *that* trial, - Christy finally remembered. It had completely slipped her mind.

Sure, she felt sorry for the little girl but the weight of the tragedy? She didn't really feel it. She had much more important things to focus on in life: guys, parties, her looks, eyelashes, nails, outfits.

What did she care about a little girl that was raped to death, she didn't even know?

Anne quietly left the locker room. Dana and Christy didn't even notice. Anne understood. For a young woman, this might not seem like the most important thing in life. It wasn't worth forcing the subject. She didn't take it personally but she knew there was no point in continuing the conversation if Christy wasn't emotionally open to it.

This day, like most, began with the rounds. Anne quickly shifted out of the locker room mindset. Even though she was tired, going over the day's tasks gave her a little energy boost. Her thoughts were already on the patients and she could hardly wait to check on them.

Chapter 3 -Two days earlier - Mr. Calett's Interrogation

Mr. Calett was taken into preliminary custody at the Wichita Police Department based on the statement of the sole eyewitness.

The prosecution assigned him a public defender, but within a few hours, a black Maserati rolled up in front of the station, and out stepped Dr. Frank Golder. *That* Frank Golder - the one who had shown up at trials involving the biggest mafia bosses. He had also successfully defended suspects in several child abuse cases. A true beast! Tall, muscular, and cold-eyed. Always impeccably dressed in outrageously expensive clothes, radiating an unbearable arrogance. His stare alone was intimidating. There was not a trace of love, empathy, or kindness in him - only an insatiable hunger for power and a monstrous ego.

Detectives Trevor and Dalton from the homicide division were assigned to the case. Both decent guys, and they loved nothing more than cracking a murder case - often racing to see who would identify the killer first. But this case was different. Nothing like this had ever happened in the area during their careers. They already knew that from the crime scene.

Trevor was sipping his coffee outside the interrogation room when Dalton arrived - just in time. Neither of them suspected that Frank Golder was already on his way to replace the rookie public defender.

- Ready for this? - asked Dalton.

- For *this*? Can one really be ready? -Trevor blew into his coffee.

- I'm really curious about this guy. Honestly, I've gotten pretty good at reading people. Usually I can tell when someone's got guilt written all over their face. But this one... nothing. Completely neutral. Average, but emotionally... bonedry. Something's definitely off.

- Yeah, I've been watching him for ten minutes now and still nothing. Barely responds to his lawyer. They found nothing in his apartment when he was brought in. And they were thorough.

- Well, standing out here won't get us anywhere. Let's go talk to him!

They entered the room. Mr. Calett slowly raised his head and examined them both. His lawyer was scribbling something in a notepad, barely acknowledging the detectives. A faint, sour smell of sweat lingered in the room.

The 48-year-old accountant looked well-groomed, though his hair was slightly greasy. About 180 cm tall, average-to-slim build, a bit hunched over. His dark brown suit had seen better days. His shoes weren't quite clean - cheap, but not ancient.

Trevor sat across from Calett on a metal chair and looked at him questioningly.

- So, how are you today? - he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Calett just stared at him blankly, as if asking silently, - *What kind of question is that?*

- Looking forward to the trial?

Calett didn't answer, only gave a slight shrug.

Dalton stepped up to the table and slammed down a folder. Photos spilled out—crime scene photos from where little Samantha had been murdered. As the oversized photos scattered, gruesome details of her blood- and mudsoaked remains peeked through.

Calett glanced at them without much interest. His eyes didn't focus on the images; rather, it seemed like he was staring through the table, down toward the floor.

Dalton noticed this distant gaze and waved a hand between the table and Calett's face.

- Hello? Anybody home? No opinion?

- Excuse me - the young, timid defense attorney interjected.

Dalton started to lose his temper. Calett's complete lack of response was infuriating.

- At least tell us - are the pictures in focus? Sharp enough for you?

Finally, Calett looked up and gave a bored sneer, signaling how little he cared. Trevor called Dalton off, sensing his partner was losing his temper.

- Look, I'm seeing nothing here. The guy's completely uninterested. Whether he did it or not, we're not going to get anything out of him. Let's go back to his place. Maybe the neighbors we missed during the arrest are home now and can give us something useful.

- Yeah, you're right. But seriously. How can something this horrific not affect a person at all? He just sat there, completely emotionless... There's something deeply off about him. Some kind of emotional burnout.

Let's talk to the neighbors. I can't sit in a room with him again. And that smell - what was that? Him or the lawyer?

- Could be both. Bring them a deodorant when we get back! - Trevor chuckled.

Dalton didn't laugh. He felt genuinely disturbed by the few minutes spent in that room. On the way down the stairs they were almost knocked over by Frank Golder, storming up like he wanted to save the world. He had a mission.

Dalton could not stand this and felt to say something to him:

- Who the hell are you? Shall I step aside?

Frank Golder did not say a word, but his ego did not let him go ahead without checking out who dares to talk to him like that. He looked at Dalton and rushed away.

- This is *that* lawyer. You know. Always defending seriously bad people. I can not remember his name.

- I don't give a damn how big a lawyer he is, f*ck him! He does not own this staircase.

Mr. Calett lived in a two-storey house on the outskirts of Dodge City. It was built back in the 1950s. It had been the first home of his parents, where he himself had grown up. After their deaths, he inherited it and never moved out. It took Trevor and Dalton about two and a half hours to get there.

Calett lived at house number 1013. They canvassed the neighborhood thoroughly, but with little success. Most of the current residents didn't even recognize the name or the late parents. The occupants of houses 1011 and 1015 had only moved in a few years ago, replacing older residents who had passed away.

As they approached the end of the street, Dalton almost didn't bother to ring the final doorbell, but something nudged him: *Just this one more.*

The bell made a soft, pleasant - ding-ding - sound - more like a gentle voice saying - hello - than a loud chime. Dalton liked it so much he pressed it again, just for fun. As the second - ding - echoed, the door opened.

Dalton stepped back sheepishly with a half-smile.

- Sorry, the sound was just... really nice.

An elderly woman had opened the door. Petite, gray-haired, and with a stern expression. She wore thick-lensed glasses with a chain and looked like a retired schoolteacher. Dalton guessed she was around eighty.

- Yes? Who are you? - she asked, her voice raspy and a bit too loud.

Dalton realized she was hard of hearing and instantly regretted ringing. There was no way they were getting anything useful from this poor old woman. But Trevor stepped forward and gently extended his hand. His handshake was delicate and reassuring. Then he pulled out his badge and held it up.

- Trevor and Dalton, detectives from the Wichita Police Department's homicide division. Do you have five minutes for us?

- Ahh, alright! Come on in - she motioned, shuffling back into the small home.

The apartment had a stale, musty smell. It reminded Dalton of a nursing home. He mentally labeled it as - old person smell - A bit sour, a bit unpleasant. He didn't like it, but brushed it off - glad they were finally talking to someone who'd lived in the neighborhood a long time and might know something helpful.

Inside, Mr. Fritz sat in an armchair, watching TV. An old cowboy-and-Indian Western played softly. He didn't even notice the two detectives walk in until his wife nudged him.

- John! Turn that off! The police are here.

John Fritz slowly looked up and clicked off the TV. He gave the detectives a lazy hand wave that said *howdy*.

- Would you like some tea or coffee? - asked Mrs. Fritz in her loud, raspy voice.

- No, thank you - Trevor replied for both of them - We'd just like to ask you a few questions.

- You're here about Paul, aren't you? - she asked.
(That was Mr. Calett's first name.)

- Yes, we'd like to talk about him. How did you know?

- Why else would you be here? Everyone saw when they took Paul. There were so many police cars out front, I thought the whole county force was having a reunion.

- Did you know him? Or his parents? - Trevor asked.

- Of course. We moved here shortly after they did. We're the last of the old folks still living on this street. But we're not long for this world either, and then the young ones can move in - she said flatly, as if death didn't faze her in the least.

- What were they like?

- The parents? Nothing special. They rarely left the house, kept to themselves. The wife worked in an accounting office, the husband at the car factory. Day jobs, evenings at home. Occasionally we saw them at church, but we never really talked. They were just... private people - she repeated.

- And Paul? What was he like? - asked Dalton.

- As a kid? A bit nasty, if you ask me. Always fighting. I think the other kids avoided him. After a while, I only ever saw him alone, head down, walking. I never liked that boy. He once threw rocks at my cat. Eventually, I barely saw him outside at all. Odd, since back then all the kids were always out playing, especially in spring and summer. The really wild ones even played in the rain! - she chuckled at the memory - I remember once the rain was so bad, the water came right through our doorstep, and...

- Excuse me! - Trevor gently interrupted, touching her hand.

- Ah, yes, Paul - she refocused. - Not much else comes to mind. They were... gray people. But now that I think about it, I never saw them smile. Really - do you remember that, John? she turned to her husband.

- What? - asked the old man, clearly not following the conversation.

- The Caletts! You never saw them smile, right?

- The Caletts? No.

But it was a - *no* - that really meant *yes, you're right, now please stop bothering me*.

Trevor focused his attention back on Mrs. Fritz and continued.

- And as an adult? What was Paul like? Did you see him recently?

- Not lately. He's rarely seen. Just when he leaves for work or comes home. That's it. He's... you know, private. (For the third time.)

- Any relationships? A woman, perhaps?

- Him? I've never seen him with anyone. No man, no woman. Always alone. He's just...

- Private. Got it - Trevor smiled.

Dalton then turned to Mr. Fritz.

- And you, sir? You don't know anything about this man?

- Who? - the old man asked blankly.

- *Who?* Dalton raised his voice in frustration - Paul Calett!

Mr. Fritz squinted, digging through decades-old memories like dust-covered file drawers in his mind. Dalton could almost picture him mentally shuffling toward a creaky cabinet of forgotten thoughts, turning a rusted key.

Trevor gave Dalton a look that said, *Let's get out of here—waste of time.*

Then, suddenly, Mr. Fritz spoke, his voice tired but clear.

- I always thought they were strange. I think they hurt that boy.

Dalton's head shot up.

- What do you mean, they hurt him?

Even Mrs. Fritz looked surprised—this had never come up between them before.

- Well, I can't say for sure. But when the three of them would come out of the house, I always felt like they shared some dark secret. Like a heavy burden sat on their souls. I can sense these things - the old man said rasply.

- But you never told me that, John! - his wife scolded.

- I'm telling you now!

- I see... So you felt it. But no concrete signs? No bruises, no injuries on the boy? Dalton asked eagerly.

- I think the wounds were much deeper—on his soul, not his skin - Mr. Fritz said sternly.

Everyone understood what he meant.

- Alright, but that's not enough. It's all speculation. Just because they looked gloomy and... private - Dalton turned to Mrs. Fritz for confirmation.

- No! - Mr. Fritz murmured.

- No?

- It's not just speculation. I *know* these things. I was sharp in my youth—could connect the dots. I could've been a detective!

- Trevor, we've cracked the case! Mr. Fritz *feels* these things. Calett's guilty! Dalton said sarcastically. Only Trevor understood the joke—Mr. and Mrs. Fritz did not.

Trevor nudged Dalton toward the door.

- Thank you for your time. Have a lovely day - he said politely.

Trevor was behind the wheel while Dalton rested his elbow out the window, absentmindedly tugging at the skin on his jaw, as if trying to squeeze out an idea. Then he turned toward Trevor with a furrowed brow.

- We've got nothing. We're totally stuck.

- Not *nothing*! Remember? The old man *feels these things*! He could've been a detective -Trevor said – what was his surname again? Colomb...

- O, buddy! – Dalton replied quickly and they both laughed out loud.

- Well then, let's arrest Calett's father while we're at it! Shame he's already dead - he added with a smirk.

They laughed for another minute before Trevor got serious again.

- Still, they did say something important — that Calett was an aggressive kid. That usually points to something deep.

- True. Maybe we should question him again. Ask about his childhood, his parents...

- Maybe. But I don't expect much. He's a rock.

They didn't speak much after that. Both lost in thought as the car rolled down the highway.

Back at the station, they requested to have Calett brought up from holding once more. Dalton entered the interrogation room first. Calett was sitting exactly as before: same neutral expression, same pathetic, insignificant presence. Only this time, Dr. Frank Golder was sitting beside him.

- Mr. Calett, an eye witness recognised you not far from the crime scene. What were you doing there, were you alone? – but he received no answer, Mr. Calett kept looking at the floor.

- Mr. Calett. What kind of childhood did you have? - Dalton asked bluntly, cutting through the silence.

- Excuse me? - Calett looked genuinely surprised.

That's when Frank Golder, calm and composed but with a sharp stare aimed directly at Dalton, said:

- You don't have to answer anything, Mr. Calett.

Dalton clenched his jaw. He would've given anything to have Calett alone, to at least observe his reactions freely. Still, he pressed on:

- Your childhood. What was it like? What did you do? Did you play with other kids? Did you like school?

Calett had already drifted back into silence, staring blankly again.

- Did you have a dog? A cat? Did you like playing with toy soldiers? Or did you prefer dolls? Did you love your parents?

- Hey! That's enough! - Frank Golder cut in sharply.

But something about that last question struck a nerve. Calett's expression suddenly changed. His eyes trembled. Something had surfaced, memories, maybe. But only he knew what they were. Dalton and Trevor exchanged glances. They could both feel it.

Then Calett spoke, his voice trembling:

- You must love them. They are your parents, right?
- Please! - Frank Golder urged his client with a raised hand, visibly irritated that he had spoken.
- That's it - Dalton sighed. He stood up. - See you in court, Mr. Calett.

As they walked out, Dalton muttered:

- You tell me, the guy's an accountant. How the hell does he get that kind of lawyer?
- Beats me - Trevor replied - They didn't give any real explanation. Just said Golder's taking over the case. I'm sure the official statement will be that he felt morally compelled to defend this poor, wrongfully accused man... or some other bullshit.

Dalton suddenly recalled how the patrol had arrived with the witness the day before.

He and Trevor had greeted her warmly and escorted her into a private office. They closed the blinds to make sure no one would disturb them while recording the statement.

Trevor began:

- Good afternoon, Mrs...
- Mrs. Brown. My name is Helga Brown - she replied with a warm smile.

She looked to be around seventy-five, a sweet, kind-eyed grandmother. Despite her age, she was spry and bright. Trevor smiled back. She reminded him a lot of his maternal grandmother, who had passed away a few years earlier.

- I'm Detective Trevor, and this is my colleague, Dalton. We're glad you made it here safely. Can we get you some coffee? A piece of cake?

- Thank you, sweetheart, but if you don't mind, I'd like to get this done quickly and head home. My grandkids are coming tomorrow, and I haven't even started baking!

- Of course, of course - Trevor said as he powered up the computer to start typing her statement.

- You don't mind if I also record this for audio, right?

- Not at all, go right ahead! - she said sweetly.

- Alright, please tell us everything from the beginning. When, where, and what exactly did you see?

- Certainly, dear. That Friday afternoon, around four o'clock, I was heading home from Jetmore by bus. I'd been over to a friend's for tea and a chat. As we were coming down the 283, near that little wooded area, I saw a man walking. It struck me as odd because there's nothing around there but those trees. But I saw that brown jacket and that posture, and it hit me — I *knew* that man. It was Calett. I recognized him from the accounting office where I still clean three times a week.

Trevor nodded as he typed, prompting her to continue.

- That man never even greets me. He just sits in front of his computer like some lifeless machine. I've never seen him smile or talk to anyone.

- I see - said Trevor.

- So there I was, sitting on the bus. It was just me and the driver, and he was singing along to the radio, happy as a lark. I was staring out the window, thinking about what kind of cookies to bake for my grandkids...

- And was Mr. Calett alone? - Trevor asked with interest.

- Well... I'm not entirely sure. He was about a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty meters away. I think he was alone, but... I just can't say for certain, sweetheart. I wish I could.

She clearly felt bad about not being able to give a definitive answer.

- No worries, ma'am. That's already very helpful, thank you - Trevor said kindly. - And you didn't mention this to anyone at first?

- Oh no, I didn't think it was anything important. But the next day I saw on the news that a little girl's body had been found right around there — and it all came flooding back. I called the police immediately!

- You did the right thing, absolutely! - Dalton added with a smile.

- Thank you so much for coming in - Trevor said, handing her a pen - Please sign here to confirm your statement, and if anything else comes to mind, don't hesitate to call me directly — here's my card.

Mrs. Brown signed the statement, then was gently escorted home by a fellow officer.

As soon as she was gone, Trevor turned to Dalton:

- Well? What do you think?

- It's more than nothing — and it's the only lead we've got.

Her testimony was enough for Judge Edwards to authorize pre-trial detention. Even though the prosecution didn't request an expedited trial, Judge Edwards fasttracked the case.

Not even Dr. Frank Golder could get Calett out on bail, despite his efforts. The judge firmly denied it.

Chapter 4 - The Rider Farm - one week later

The rooster's crow loudly shattered the drowsy silence of dawn. It was around 4 a.m. Dave was already in the kitchen, brewing coffee. He opened the window to let the fresh, dewy morning air flow into the house. He was always the first to rise in the family. He loved mornings—the sunrise, the peace. He felt each day was a new opportunity, a continuation of all the things he'd already begun.

Today, again, he had so many things planned that twenty-four hours hardly seemed enough. Often, not even double that would suffice to finish everything on his list. Anne adored how active her husband was. She'd say often how lucky she was to have such a hardworking man—he was always doing something!

The girls were still sleeping peacefully. Dave made sure not to make a sound that could wake them. Despite his large, 110-kilo frame, he moved through the house like a jaguar stalking prey. He put on his daily work clothes and, coffee in hand, sat out on the porch. The newspaper hadn't arrived yet. A teenage boy delivered it each day from town, usually between six and seven. As every morning, Dave had already fed the chickens, horses and the little animals too. .

He loved these quiet, early coffee rituals. It wasn't the caffeine that mattered but the ceremony itself—the calm mental preparation for the day ahead. He planned everything in his head, step by step. He loved structure and was deeply bothered when things didn't go according to plan. When they didn't, it was usually due to some external factor—or fate intervening. He'd grumble a little, but thankfully, he was quick to let things go. He

never dwelled on anything—except for the conversation he’d had with Anne about little Samantha. That had haunted him since. He couldn’t let it go.

Anne’s soft footsteps interrupted his deepening melancholy. Dave sprang up and hurried to her. He loved hugging and kissing his beautiful wife—he wouldn’t miss it for the world, not even a single morning! After all these years, he still felt deep love and profound respect for her. Their shared memories and hardships only deepened his feelings. And he still found her incredibly attractive.

- Good morning, my love. You’re beautiful, he said.

Anne replied with a big yawn and a sleepy smile, saying without words - Thanks, but I’m not quiet awake yet.

They embraced. His compliment felt good, though she didn’t take it too seriously—she was a deep sleeper and often woke with a creased face. She always chuckled at his sweet remarks, feeling how much he truly loved her. Even in these hard times, he wanted to lift her spirits. Sometimes, when her hair was especially messy, he’d tease her: - What did you dream? That you tripped and fell? They both laughed at those moments.

- Is it morning already? - Anne asked jokingly.

- Not really, that was two hours ago, sweetheart! I already fed the animals. Half the day’s gone! - Dave chuckled.

-The girls still sleeping?

- Lucie’s stirring, but Sarah is totally KO’d.

- I wonder who she takes after - Dave teased.

- Oh come on, I’m not KO’d—just haven’t had my coffee yet! - Anne smiled.

-It’s on the counter, my love. Brewed it this morning - Dave pointed toward their old, trusty two-and-a-half-cup stovetop espresso maker. It had seen better days, but still worked like a charm. Dave loved it—not like the new gadgets.

- How long have we had this little coffee maker? - Anne asked.

- Oh, I don’t know—must be at least ten or fifteen years - she replied, nodding.

- The stuff they make nowadays falls apart after a couple of years—cheap quality.

- True! Manufacturers don’t care about quality anymore—only quantity. Just junk.

- Partly makes sense, most folks just go for the cheapest option, not the best. But not the Dodge. That car—they put real material into that one. I love it!

- I know - Anne smiled. - Your third child.

- Exactly! - Dave laughed.

Just then, movement sounded upstairs—tiny footsteps echoed on the wooden floor. Lucie came down the thick wooden steps, careful and deliberate. Dave waited at the bottom with wide open arms and a beaming smile. His heart pounded as if he were meeting his first love for a date.

- Good morning, baby girl - he said softly, full of love, and opened his strong arms.

Lucie leapt from the third step into his embrace, wrapping arms and legs around him. These morning hugs were beyond words for Dave. He felt blessed—like he’d won the jackpot of the Universe. He drew

indescribable energy from these hugs each morning. For Lucie, they were like sunrise: reliable, warm, and full of light. Just as the sun always rises—rain or shine—her dad was always there to hold her.

Lucie held him as if she'd never let go. Dave gently sat her on Anne's lap. She wrapped her arms around her too, and Anne kissed her soft cheek.

- How did you sleep, sweetheart? - Anne whispered.
- Good - Lucie answered in a small voice midyawn.
- Want me to make you hot chocolate? Dave whispered.
- Yes - Lucie murmured sleepily.

Lucie began playing with the ring on Anne's finger.

- Daddy, do I have to go to preschool today?
- No one has to do anything, sweetie. But yes, you're going today. Mommy and Daddy are working, and Sarah will be at school. But if you want, next week I'll take you off for a day—but you'll have to help me on the farm. Deal?
- Yes! - Lucie squealed with joy.

Anne laughed. - Lucky girl! You'll get to help Daddy with the gardening. It'll be a great day!

Lucie lit up—her eyes sparkled. But she was still a bit sleepy and yawned again.

Sarah now descended the stairs, soft steps and sleepy but beautiful face making Dave's heart swell again. He hugged her at the stairs. Sarah, being older, let go quickly and took a seat. She saw Lucie and rushed to hug her, and Lucie hugged her back sweetly. Then she hugged and kissed Anne.

- Good morning, Mom! - she said and sat at the table.

Lucie always looked up to Sarah, her big sister. She followed her everywhere and wanted to be just like her. But if they fought during play, she wouldn't hesitate to slap her—until Sarah slapped back and reminded her who was bigger.

It reminded Dave of something his father once said: - *It's not the size of the dog in the fight—it's the size of the fight in the dog!* - And little Lucie, with the soul of a Jack Russell, would charge at any other dog, no matter the size. To her, size didn't matter. They were both just dogs. Why shouldn't she be the stronger one?

When Lucie was born, Sarah had been excited at first—but a few weeks in, she was jealous of the attention. Her jealousy came out as tantrums. To help with that, Dave asked Sarah to help him on the farm while Anne focused on Lucie. It made his job harder, but it pulled Sarah out of her jealous state.

- Ready for hot chocolate? - Dave asked the girls—not really for an answer, just to say the drinks were ready.
- Yes! - they cried together.

Anne tidied up the dishes and glasses. Dave looked at his daughters and thought, *Whatever I did in a past life, it must have been good—because this is heaven!* Three amazing girls. What else could this be but Eden?

The phone rang. Anne picked it up and hung up a few seconds later.

- That was fast - Dave said, curious.

- It was Nancie. She asked if we're going to church on Sunday. Father Charles wants everyone to be there—to pray for little Samantha.

Nancie was the wife of John Bradfield, their neighbor. They lived closer to town and ran a small farm too.

- For Samantha? - Lucie asked. -Why do we need to pray for Samantha, Mommy? - she looked up, puzzled.

Anne gathered all her strength to hold back tears. She bit her lip, while Dave turned his gaze to the fields, trying not to let his daughters see his emotion. Anne hugged Lucie and whispered tearfully into her ear:

- Because Samantha is in heaven now.

Lucie gently took her mother's face in her tiny hands, wiped her tears, and said:

- I love you, Mommy! So... are we going to church? - she smiled with big, curious eyes.

Anne looked to Dave. She knew how he felt about church. He wasn't a fan—too many hypocrites pretending to be saints once a week, while the rest of the time they were ready to drown each other in a spoonful of water. They didn't usually go to church, except on holidays. But they liked Father Charles—a kind man who truly cared about others. He lived modestly and helped the poor.

What bothered Dave was the institution behind the church—the hypocrisy, the dogma, the priests living in luxury. Anne felt the same, which is why she waited for Dave's nod before answering Lucie. They always made decisions like this together.

Dave saw they were waiting for him. His voice was soft but firm:

- Of course we'll go.

He kissed his daughters' heads, gave Anne a kiss too, and walked out the door, thoughts swirling. He thought back to the last time they'd gone to church.

People knew the Rider family didn't attend often, but no one seemed to mind—except for two local gossiping old ladies, Mrs. Morris and Mrs. Peckerwood. They were infamous for their sharp tongues, yet so intimidating that no one dared call them out for it.

Chapter 5 - A ceremony for Samantha

The next morning, the girls were excitedly getting ready for church. They loved putting on their special Sunday dresses. Both were cream-colored with little white silk frills. Anne had them custom-made a few months ago. They looked like two little angels. Dave wore a light short-sleeved shirt that showed off his strong arms, thick with veins. He looked like a movie star. Anne loved having such a handsome, athletic husband.

When Dave saw Anne, he was speechless. Her freshly washed red curls bounced with every step as if they had a life of their own. She tied them back into a ponytail—just the way Dave liked it. He loved seeing the line of her neck, finding it incredibly feminine and attractive. He couldn't help but say:

- You're beautiful, my love - he whispered, and gently kissed her.

Anne smiled modestly, enjoying both the compliment and the kiss. She teased:

- Is that a new cologne? It suits you.

Dave grinned in satisfaction. The morning began quietly once again. The countryside was basking in beautiful sunshine. A light breeze played with the tall blades of grass like a hand brushing back someone's hair. Dave turned to Anne.

- Do you think it's a good idea to take the girls? What if...

He didn't finish the sentence. Anne knew what he was trying to ask.

- Don't worry. Father Charles knows how to speak in front of children. He won't say anything inappropriate - she reassured him.

- Yeah, sure. I am not worried about him. I just hope someone else doesn't start going into details... They're still so young. I'd prefer if they didn't know about things like this yet. In a few years, sure, we'll have to talk about it.

- You're right. But you've already told them that there are bad people out there—adults who hurt children.

- Yeah, they know that. But only that much. I didn't go into detail—God forbid! - Dave ran a hand through his hair. - That's just the world we live in. Sick people are everywhere. You never know who it is until they get caught. It could be anyone.

- But we can't see evil in everyone - Anne replied.

- Of course not. That would drive me insane if I started imagining monsters behind every face. Still, better to be prepared. Like you said the other day—I should teach them some basic self-defense. One quick strike to a soft spot, then run and scream! I'll start teaching them when we get back. Then we'll practice until it becomes automatic.

- Yes, but it would take a really sharp-minded kid to react in such situation... - Anne didn't finish the thought.

- Ugh, let's not talk about this right now - Dave muttered, frowning—not at Anne, but at the idea itself. He couldn't bear to think of anyone hurting a child.

Outside, the girls were already getting impatient.

- When we are leaving? - Sarah shouted, running around with the dogs.

- Right now, sweetheart - Anne replied as they all walked toward the car.

They owned a three-year-old white Dodge Ramcharger. It had tinted windows in the back, a ground clearance of half a meter, and full offroad tires. A beast of a vehicle—perfectly suited to Dave. It was built to last forever. It only had three doors, which didn't bother the girls much, but Anne was less thrilled about constantly folding the seat forward to let them in. Dave, on the other hand, loved this car. It was the 5.9-liter V8 manual version, and even after three years, every time he climbed in, he looked forward to the deep, growling rumble of the engine.

He didn't drive like he did ten years ago—he was much more thoughtful and cautious now. He considered himself a good driver, always preferred to yield than to be aggressive. But he still couldn't stand slow, indecisive drivers. He loved overtaking them, showing them how it should be done.

Dave stepped out of the house and headed toward the car. When he saw the girls, once again, he was speechless. Anne always dressed them, so Dave only saw the finished product. Dressed identically, with braided hair—they looked so beautiful it moved him.

- Who are these two angels, sweetheart? And where are our daughters? - he called out to Anne.

- Daddy, it's us—Lucie and Sarah! - little Lucie giggled.

- Wow! Mommy sure knows how to make diamonds shine even brighter! - Dave said sincerely.

By then, Anne had reached the car, and Dave's compliments brought a warm smile to her face.

He lifted Lucie into the backseat, while Sarah climbed in by herself. She liked the challenge of having to climb high. It wasn't easy for her either, but when Dave instinctively reached to help, she snapped:

- Nooo, Daddy! I can do it myself! I'm not a baby! - She jumped back down just to climb in again on her own.

Dave chuckled and stepped back, hands raised in surrender

- Okay, sweetheart! I know you're not a baby - he laughed.

Dave turned the key in the ignition and savored the sound of the engine. He gave it a few revs in neutral—the whole chassis gave a satisfying shake. A grin spread across his face, and the girls burst into excited laughter. Only Anne pulled a face and mumbled under her breath:

- You're such a big kid...

Staying on theme, Anne made a suggestion:

- So, why don't we trade it for a Prius? - she asked sincerely.

- My Dodge? For a Prius? - Dave repeated with wide eyes and stepped on the gas again, just to make his point.

- Technically, it's *our* Dodge - Anne replied.

- Of course, honey. You know what I mean. Can you honestly picture me in a Prius? - he said with a playful smirk. He leaned forward close to the windshield and pulled a silly face.

Anne burst out laughing - Nope! Definitely not!

Dave smiled, satisfied they were on the same page, and settled comfortably into his seat like he always did. He knew the road well—where the dips were—so he gave it a little extra gas to emphasize just *why* there would be no Prius. The Dodge lifted slightly off the ground over the bump and landed softly. The girls screamed with joy, shouting - Do it again!

Dave winked at them in the rearview mirror and said, with mock disdain:

- Prius... - He blew air through his nose like he was blowing away the very thought of it.

Anne turned her head toward the window, hiding a quiet laugh.

The ride to church was peaceful. Both Dave and Anne grew quiet, each lost in their own thoughts, weighed down by the emotional gravity of the day. They didn't talk much. Anne gently calmed the girls when they bickered over something minor. Dave just stared ahead at the road, drifting into memories—especially one from the night before.

He had gone out with some buddies to a nearby pub called *The Barracks*, which used to be *Fred's Tavern* a few years back. It was a typical country bar—Randy Travis, George Jones, Willie Nelson played over the speakers, mixed with original songs by a local band called *The Urbans*. They were a lively bunch, great for casual drinking, dancing, chatting—and, of course, the occasional bar fight, often stirred up by hot-headed cowboys on Saturday nights when the place was full of young people.

Dave had met up with three friends: Carl, Jones, and Trevis - all cattlemen, or cowboys - as they called themselves. They weren't big-time ranchers, each had maybe a hundred or two hundred head of cattle, but they made a decent living from it. Hard work, no doubt.

The guys were already at the bar when Dave arrived, drinking beer.

- Howdy, boys! - Dave greeted them with a nod. The soft country music meant he didn't have to raise his voice.

- Hey Dave! - they called back, raising their bottles. He took a seat on a barstool next to them.

Unlike most men in the area, Dave didn't wear a cowboy hat. It just didn't fit his style. He had a khaki-colored baseball cap that was a little faded from all the washing.

- So, what's up, big man? How are the chickens? - Carl joked, teasing Dave for not being a cowboy. Dave had chickens, horses, pigs, and a few small animals, but no cattle.

- They're good, thanks. Lucie and Sarah are asleep by now, and Anne is probably reading a novel in bed - Dave laughed, and the others joined in.

- I didn't mean it like that! - Carl tried to backpedal a bit, embarrassed.

- I know - Dave smiled at him and gave Carl a friendly slap on the back causing him to nearly spill his beer - Buy me a Bud and it's all forgotten - Dave added with a wink.

Carl knew Dave was a peaceful man and had no intention of finding out what he was like when pushed too far.

The bartender turned toward Dave.

- Hey Dave, what can I get you?

- Hi Mike! I'll take an ice-cold Bud, thanks! Carl's buying - he said with a wink to the bartender.

All four of them clinked their bottles together.

- Cheers! - they said in unison and took a few refreshing gulps of their cold beers.

- So what do you guys think about this case? - Dave cut straight to the point, his thoughts had been circling around it all day.

- Which case? - Carl asked, puzzled.

- You idiot! Little Samantha... Trevis jumped in and glanced around cautiously, as if he were about to tell a racist joke and needed to check if any people of color were nearby.

- Oh, right. That's awful - Carl snapped back into it.

- You know this Calett guy? The suspect? - Dave asked, hoping to get some info on the guy.

They all shook their heads and took another sip from their icy Buds.

- It's brutal. I haven't heard of anything like this happening around here in years - Trevis said.

- If I got my hands on that bastard, I'd shoot him dead - Carl said angrily.

- Yeah, but that's murder too - Jones replied.

- What about you, Dave? - Trevis turned to him.

- About what?
- That sick bastard. What would you do to him?
- That question doesn't really make sense, Trevis. What do you mean? Like, if they brought him right here and said, *'Here's the guy who killed little Samantha'*?
- Yeah, or... I don't know. Just hypothetically, what would you do?
- That's hard to answer - Dave began thoughtfully - Of course I'm furious about this kind of thing. My stomach turns when I think about the horror of it. It's vile evil. It destroys a life... more than one, actually—whole families.
- Yeah, the families get destroyed too - Trevis muttered, shaking his head. - So... would you kill him? Electric chair?

Trevis genuinely wanted to hear Dave's opinion. Dave didn't really want to talk about it, but he saw Trevis wasn't going to let it go, so he decided to lay it out.

- I think the worst crime a person can commit is harming a child. And to hurt them like *that*...- he stopped himself from going into details.
- Hard to argue with that - Jones replied.
- People like that need to be removed from society, permanently. And here's the problem. The system is broken. Even if they convict someone like that, he'll get twenty or thirty years max, then he's out again. Free to ruin more families. Why? Why let a sick, deranged animal like that back near our children?

Trevis raised his eyebrows, staring into his beer, nodding. He liked where Dave's thinking was going. Dave continued:

- Personally, I wish that kind of monster a very long life.
- That made all three of them look up at him in confusion. Trevis choked on his beer and started coughing.
- What?!? - Carl snapped.
 - Yeah. I wish them a very long life - Dave repeated. The three friends nearly jumped off their stools, ready to declare he'd lost his mind—but Dave quickly clarified:
 - In a cold, dirty, damp, dark prison where there's no chance of escape, surviving on bread and water until the end of his days.
 - Don't mess with me, Dave - Trevis said, laughing - You scared the hell out of me! - but Dave didn't laugh. Not in such topic. He took a sip of his Bud.

Trevis wasn't done - Bullshit. Death penalty. End of story. That's what really removes them from society.

- And what about this? Dave asked - Life sentence plus surgical castration. That would be the proper course of action for a violent predator like that. Think about it. If someone's capable of committing such a monstrous act, what's to stop them from doing it again? Don't give them the chance!

Trevis still wasn't satisfied. Carl and Jones were laughing at how hard he was digging in.

- Come on, Dave. You know how much a surgery like that costs? Plus feeding the bastard in prison? I don't want my taxes going to keep that rat alive! But I'll pay for the injection that puts him to sleep—for good!

Jones had remained silent until now, but he felt the urge to speak up — a storm of anger was brewing inside him.

- I can't think of anything more despicable than those child-abusing bastards - he said with absolute conviction.

- They only come second on my list - Dave added calmly.

- Second? - Carl asked, surprised.

- Yes - Dave replied firmly, taking a sip of his beer.

- Well now I'm curious! Who tops your list then? Who could be more vile than someone who harms a child?

- Carl pushed.

- It's quite simple - Dave answered steadily - What those twisted predators do is basically a VIP pass straight to hell, no doubt. But the ones who supply them with innocent children for money? Now *those* are the lowest of the low. They know what horrors these poor kids will endure, and they still take part in it for money. And then there are the ones who know what's going on and turn a blind eye for a paycheck.

- I never even thought of that - Carl muttered. - But you're absolutely right, man.

Dave then tried to steer the conversation in a different direction — and his next question caught everyone off guard:

- Hey Trevis, so... when's the baby coming for you guys? - He looked at Trevis.

Dave knew it was maybe the worst moment to bring that up, but he genuinely wanted to know, and honestly, he was tired of the death sentence debate, so he let it hang in the air. Trevis blinked at him in surprise, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. The question hit like a cold shower after the heavy topic before.

- Bringing a kid into this world? You've got to be kidding - he said, taking another swig of his beer.

Dave partially understood and accepted Trevis's response given the situation, but he had a different view. He felt compelled to explain:

- Isn't the world what we make of it, Trevis? We're all part of it. You, me... and all the bastards that make you feel the way you do.

- I don't know, man - Trevis muttered, shaking his head.

- I'm raising my kids to make the world a better place than the one they were born into. Yes, it's a huge responsibility, and a duty too. But tell me, what goal is nobler for a man, for a father?

Dave had just said something that made all three of his friends pause. In one sentence, he summed up fatherhood so clearly and powerfully that none of them could argue. With raised eyebrows, they quietly let his words sink in for a long moment. Then Dave continued:

- So... how long have you and Tina been together?

Trevis blinked again, a bit caught off guard by Dave's question.

- Uh... five years, I think. Yeah, we moved in together four and a half years ago.

- And? Still going strong? Dave asked.

- Yeah, sure. I mean, we have our ups and downs like everyone, but... yeah - Trevis replied, shrugging.

Jones leaned forward on his elbows - You guys ever talk about marriage?

Trevis rolled his eyes. - Tina brings it up now and then.

- And you? - Carl pushed, half-smiling.

- Eh... I don't know. Feels like such a huge step, you know? Like, once you're married, there's no going back.

- That's kind of the point - Dave said with a smirk, taking a sip of his beer.

- You saying you'd go back if you could? - Jones teased.

Dave smiled, shook his head, and looked down at his bottle - No. Not in a million years. Anne is the best thing that ever happened to me.

Trevis raised his beer - To Anne!

They all clinked bottles again, and the mood lightened for a moment.

- But seriously - Dave said after a beat. - If you love her, and you trust her, and you can't imagine a life without her... then what are you waiting for?

Trevis was quiet for a moment - I guess... I don't know. Maybe I'm scared.

- Of what? - Carl asked.

- Of messing it up. Of not being good enough. Of not being able to protect her... and a kid.

Dave looked at him, his expression softening - That fear? That just means you're taking it seriously. And that's a good thing.

They all fell silent again, each man sitting with his thoughts. The music in the background shifted to a slower song. Randy Trevis's voice hummed about old memories and long roads.

- Come on - Dave said suddenly, finishing the rest of his beer and slapping the bar - Let's not drown in philosophy all night. I've got church tomorrow.

The others groaned and laughed.

- Church? You?! - Carl teased.

- Yep. Whole family's going. Charles wants everyone there to pray for little Samantha.

The laughter faded quickly.

- Yeah... right - Jones murmured.

Dave nodded, eyes firm - She deserves it. Her family deserves it.

Dave didn't continue his train of thought on Trevis's parenting duties. He didn't want to talk his friend into anything, also didn't want to take responsibility for anyone else's decisions—only his own. He was already glad that Trevis had taken him seriously and thought about what he had said.

Dave didn't mind if others disagreed with him, as long as they were willing to argue intelligently and explain why they thought the way they did. What bothered Dave—deeply—was bigotry. When someone clung to their opinion tooth and nail, refusing any open dialogue, wrapped in endless egotism and a false sense of infallibility. In those situations, Dave felt immense pity and disappointment—especially if it was someone close to him. But over time, he had learned how to handle it. He would end those conversations quickly. Not in anger, but with dead calm. Outwardly. Inside, he nearly exploded—but no one ever saw that. And it only lasted

a few seconds. As soon as he distanced himself from such people, he found his inner peace again, as if nothing had happened. That's what Dave was pondering from the night before.

By then, they had arrived at the church. Anne gently shook Dave's shoulder.

- Are you okay, honey? You were really deep in thought - She waited to hear what was on his mind—Dave always had great ideas.

- Of course. I was just thinking about last night with the guys. You know, at the bar.

- Did you talk about the case too? - Anne glanced back at the kids, hoping they wouldn't ask what case. But they were busy with their own things. Dave parked the Ramcharger and turned off the engine.

- Yeah, we talked about it. Everyone's outraged.

- Understandably. That's the normal reaction. Who was there? - Anne asked.

- Carl, Jones, and Trevis - Dave replied. He was about to open the door when Lucie asked curiously:

- Daddy, are they your friends? - she looked at her father with her big green eyes, waiting for an answer.

Dave turned around and nodded.

- Wow, sweetheart, that's a great question! And my answer is yes, I feel like they are my friends - he felt that Lucie had brought up a topic worth explaining here and now, since she had asked. He continued, and Anne listened intently too, she knew something meaningful was coming.

- You know, sweetie, people show their true colors when trouble hits. That's when you really see who they are. The important people in your life aren't the ones who are around when you're happy and successful. They're the ones who stand by you when things go wrong and help you - Lucie listened carefully; you could almost see her little mind working to process it all. Sarah also put down her book and looked at Dave. He continued, now looking at both girls:

- Do you remember when the barn caught fire?

- Yes, yes! - they both replied almost at once.

- I ran out to save the animals, and Mom called Trevis because he lives closest. Trevis was there in fifteen minutes and helped put out the fire. That's what a real friend does.

- But didn't Carl and Jones come too? - Sarah asked, now curious. She had very sharp logic, always spotting connections and inconsistencies—sometimes to a fault. Like a meticulous teacher who catches every mistake. And Sarah turned that into a bit of a competition.

- They didn't. But they didn't know there was a fire. I'm sure they would've rushed to help if they'd known. And when Carl's tractor broke down, I went over to fix it so he could get back to work. I didn't do it for money. It wasn't a big job, but he couldn't get it going again, and he really needed it. You see?

- Yes, Daddy - they answered.

Dave wrapped up his thoughts with one last sentence:

- That's selflessness—love—that we feel toward our fellow human beings. You can't have that kind of bond with everyone. It's not possible to have lots of real friends. But those who think like you do, who lift you up and energize you when you're with them—those are your true friends. One day, you'll have friends too, and then you'll understand exactly what I just said. He smiled and gently stroked the girls' cheeks.

- I have friends! - Lucie piped up loudly.

- Me too! - Sarah chimed in. Anne and Dave laughed but kept it gentle.

- Good! - Dave said. - Alright, let's go, or we'll be late!

Dave and Anne walked hand in hand toward the church. The girls walked ahead of them. There were many familiar faces around; they greeted each other quietly with a - *How are you? Doing well?* - but no one stopped to chat. As they passed by Mrs. Morris and Mrs. Peckerwood, the two old widows seized the moment and immediately began whispering, throwing disapproving looks at Dave. For some reason, it was always Dave who seemed to bother them.

The sting of their spiteful whispers hit him like lashes.

- Well, would you look at that, they actually show up sometimes? - one muttered to the other—just loud enough for their discontent to reach Dave's ears, and likely others'.

Anne heard it too and looked at Dave's face. She saw his expression darken, and she could tell he was just about to say something. She knew Dave would never start an argument during an event like this, he was far too mature and reasonable for that. But she also didn't want him to say even a polite - *Good day, ladies*. Anne squeezed his hand. Dave looked at her, as if she had just snapped him out of a daze. Anne smiled and winked at him. That was what Dave loved most about her—she always knew how to ground him. She never let dark thoughts pull him down. Dave smiled too, as if the old ladies' grumbling had just vanished from his mind entirely. As if it had never happened.

Anne loved that Dave had strong convictions. He was like a rock. Morally unshakable. She knew he'd rather die than sell his soul or his honor. Dave always said that a person's greatest value is their honor, because, as he put it:

- What do we take with us when we die? Our car? Our house? Gold or diamonds? NO! Only our honor. And that has no price.

That's what they always taught the girls too. Even though they were still little, he hoped he had planted a seed in them that would grow into a mighty tree of wisdom that would guide them for life. This was the moral backbone that radiated from Dave's very being, the force that made him so resolute. He could not tolerate injustice.

They continued walking toward the church entrance, but Dave's sense of honor wouldn't let him pass by without at least giving the two grumpy old ladies a quick look and a slight shake of the head—signaling that their bitterness had no place in the sanctity of this occasion. He felt that enough cruelty had happened already. Then he leaned toward Anne and said:

- We should come more often. Such a lovely company here!

Anne nearly burst out laughing, but suddenly everything went quiet. As if someone had turned off all the sounds in the area. The silence became oppressively heavy.

The Torstens had arrived—little Samantha's parents.

Peter walked slowly, head bowed, pushing Marie in a wheelchair. Since the incident, she had kept fainting, and they didn't dare risk her collapsing again. They shuffled forward with slow, dragging steps. They were unrecognizable. Barely in their thirties, they now looked more like fifty. Their eyes were hollow, lifeless—like bottomless wells. Whatever fell in would be lost forever.

Everyone gave them a glance, but quickly lowered their eyes and stared at the ground. A few older ladies crossed themselves. Dave watched as Peter pushed his wife past them. The silence was broken only by quiet sobs and the sound of nose blowing.

Marie no longer cried. She had nothing left. She was empty, burnt out. So was Peter. They were like two empty sacks, blown around by the wind. Dave let out a deep sigh. Anne squeezed his hand, as if trying to give him strength.

The mourners slowly entered the church.

Father Charles gave a very beautiful speech, and everyone prayed together for little Samantha. At the end of the ceremony, no one spoke to Peter and Marie directly, but as they walked out of the sanctuary, a few people gently placed their hands on Peter's shoulder and moved on with somber, compassionate faces.

Outside, quiet conversations had already begun. In hushed tones or whispers, everyone was talking about the upcoming trial. The voices carried a mix of anticipation and tension.

Father Charles had just said goodbye to someone when Dave reached him. Dave was about to say farewell as well, but Father Charles placed a hand on his forearm and said:

- Wait, Dave. Do you have a minute, please?

Dave looked at Anne, but she had also heard and smiled at him with a blink and a nod, signaling: *Of course, go ahead.*

- We'll wait outside – she said.

Father Charles stepped slightly aside with Dave and said:

- How are you, Dave? And how's the family? - he asked, though Dave could tell that this wasn't the real reason he had stopped him.

The priest was a short man, around five foot seven, with slightly olive-toned skin. From the structure of his face, Dave guessed he might have some Native American ancestry. His eyes shone with goodwill and clarity. He was an intelligent man—you could talk to him about anything.

- We're doing well, thank you. The usual. Working, living our lives - Dave replied with a smile.

The priest nodded with genuine satisfaction. He hadn't expected any other answer. He could see that Dave and his family were doing well. They radiated harmony and peace.

- It's been a while since we've seen you here... - Father Charles began the real conversation.

Dave let out a long sigh.

- We wouldn't have come now either, if it weren't for... - but he didn't finish the sentence. He took a deep breath. He was an honest man—he never lied. Not even when a lie might have made someone else feel better. He felt that lying would mean deceiving himself.

- Father, I respect you. But this is not my world. I accept that some people need to come here and listen to you to find their way, and I honestly say I enjoy your sermons too—to a certain extent. Don't take that the wrong way.

- Not at all! I'm glad to hear your honesty, Dave - the priest said, patting Dave's shoulder like a father would.

- But Father, this - Dave pointed toward the two old women still lurking slyly at the edge of the church doorway.

- Is this the lofty feeling we're meant to find here? I choose to spend time with people I love. People who uplift me, who share a similar spirit.

Father Charles's smile softened Dave's stern face.

- You're absolutely right! That's not why you should be coming here. I understand what you mean - the priest agreed.

- Father, I've lived an honest life for as long as I can remember! I respect and love my fellow human beings! I wonder how many among your flock can honestly say the same?

- Well, there are definitely some very decent people here - the priest replied, defending his congregation.

- Of course there are. And I have no problem with anyone who chooses to attend church or any congregation. Everyone should believe in what they want. As long as it doesn't harm others—why not! But do you know what bothers me the most, Father?

- Please, tell me - Father Charles replied with sincere curiosity.

- Freedom - Dave said.

Father Charles's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. He tilted his head slightly, as if he had just heard something that didn't quite fit.

- Freedom? - he repeated.

- Yes. Or rather, the lack of it. Where is human freedom in religion? Didn't Jesus say we shouldn't follow dogmas? That God is not in stone buildings or idols, but within us? Everywhere. In everything and everyone.

- That is certainly one way to interpret Scripture - the priest answered with conviction.

- You mean—what's left of it? - Dave added.

- What do you mean by that? - Father Charles asked, genuinely puzzled.

- Do you believe that the Bible we know today is the original version? Don't you think it's missing the most important part? Jesus's life? How he became that superhuman being? Where he traveled? Who he met? Who he learned from?

- Well, they do write quite a lot about him, true, not much of his young age - Father Charles replied, clearly uneasy.

- And we're not even talking about the secrets of the Vatican yet. Do you know who 'Vatica' was, Father?

- Well... not really - the priest admitted. There was a flicker of confusion in his eyes.

Dave continued, feeling that since the priest had confronted him, he owed him a clear explanation of his views—once and for all.

- Father, I believe every person is born free. Created by God, or the Creator, or source energy—or whatever we call it. We came into this world to experience freely. To learn, to gather information, to love, to laugh, to hate—to feel the full range of this physical existence. I cannot experience that freedom under dogmas and constraints. Everyone has a right to choose their path, their religion, or their church. I believe there should be as many religions on Earth as there are people! Because each person lives in their own universe. Everyone has their own belief system. Even if two people practice the same religion, it's impossible that they believe *exactly* the same thing! That's just not possible!

- That's a very interesting perspective, Dave - Father Charles said gently. Dave continued, still with a warm tone—he didn't want to lecture the priest; he respected him.

- Father - Dave gently took the priest's clasped hands in his large palms:

- What you do is good. Your intention is good.

Father Charles smiled, his heart warmed by those few words.

- You are very much needed here. There are many good people who come to you every week, people who need you to recharge them. I know that you truly care for your flock and look after them as a shepherd should. Thank you for giving me your attention and pulling me aside. It truly means a lot. I know you meant well, but believe me—I don't need this right now. I feel I've found my path, and that's the freedom I want to pass on to my children.

Dave knew that Father Charles could have left this place a long time ago. He had been offered high positions within the church, but he had stayed. He wanted to support this small community spiritually. He truly considered them his own flock.

Now he was glad he had stopped Dave. He felt such honesty, such warmth, such wisdom flowing from this man—something he hadn't felt from anyone in a long time. He looked at Dave in admiration. If someone had seen the look on his face, they might have thought Jesus himself had appeared to him.

Dave let go of the priest's hands, and Father Charles snapped out of his thoughts. After a couple of seconds of hesitation, he tried to speak:

- Yes, Dave. I understand.

He couldn't say more.

Dave felt he had one last thing to say:

- I follow the path of love, Father. That is my faith. Or, if you will, my religion.

Father Charles deeply understood the meaning of that word. Coming from such a big man, the word *love* sounded unusual, but not weak. On the contrary. Because he didn't use it lightly, it radiated strength and purity of spirit—something very rare.

- Father, do you eat meat? – Dave's tone suddenly sharpened. The question caught Father Charles off guard, he blinked several times and shook his head in confusion.

- Of course, Dave. But why do you ask?

- That's just it! You speak of Jesus and love, yet you take the lives of sentient beings in order to consume their flesh. Don't you feel the contradiction in that? I haven't eaten meat for years, Father.

- I didn't know that - Father Charles replied, surprised.

- I feel that my soul cannot bear such a burden - to take, or have others take, the life of a living, feeling creature so that I may eat its flesh.

The priest fell silent, his gaze turning inward.

- But the Bible says that God created everything for mankind, including the animals - he tried to justify the moral side of eating meat.

- The Bible, Father? - Dave asked back. – The one compiled and edited by the Church according to its own will? The same Church that, even two thousand years ago, profited greatly from turning temples into blood-soaked slaughterhouses and selling meat? And what kind of God would demand such sacrifices? Father, I don't wish to serve a God like that – it cannot be the same loving Creator who made humanity with compassion.

- I've never thought about it that way... what you've said is very interesting, Dave, - Father Charles admitted. It was clear that he truly felt the weight of the thoughts shared with him.

- You do love and respect Jesus, don't you, Father?

- Of course. The LORD. He is the greatest teacher who ever lived - said the priest, clasping his hands and lifting his eyes toward the heavens.

- Good. I feel the same way. But tell me, Father - how do you think Jesus would kill an animal? What is the loving way to kill a sentient creature?

That question struck Father Charles straight to the heart. He blinked rapidly, trying to force words from his mouth, but none came - only honest bewilderment in his eyes. Dave saw this and knew they are on the same page. His clear gaze met the priest's, and he smiled gently.

Dave's honest openness touched Father Charles deeply. He couldn't say a word, just stood there in silent contemplation, his gaze slightly blurred by the thinnest veil of emotion. Dave could tell that this was the moment, they were speaking the same language now, and nothing more needed to be said.

With slow, firm steps, Dave walked out of the church. The priest watched the tall man leave and gave a respectful nod toward him, as if to say: - *That was a good talk, my friend* - He knew he had lost Dave forever. But a strange feeling came over him. He didn't feel sorrow, he was glad that Dave had found his own path.

Anne sat on a bench in the shade of a huge, old yew tree. Only a few people remained in front of the church by now. Those who were still there were already chatting about entirely different things. The veil of mourning had drifted away with the departure of the Torstens.

Sarah and Lucie were running around joyfully, collecting snails. Lucie's little hands were full of them. She ran over to Dave as soon as she spotted him:

- Daddy, look! - she said, holding out her dirty hands filled with white snails.

- Wow, look at that! We'll have to ask Mommy to make you some delicious snail soup! - Dave laughed.

- Ewww, nooo, Daddy! - Lucie squealed and ran off to tell Sarah what their dad had just said.

- So, had a good talk with Father Charles? - Anne asked with a gentle smile on her face.

- The usual. Why don't we come more often...

- Well, you can understand him too.

- Sure. I like the guy. It can't be easy dealing with so many... - Dave searched for the right word, then found it. - ...people in need of help.

Anne looked up at her husband with love as they walked away from the churchyard. Without needing words, she knew exactly what Dave had told Father Charles. That's what she loved about him—that he didn't hurt others, but expressed himself freely. No one could ever back him into a corner, because he was honest and stood for freedom. And only a tyrant would have a problem with that.

Chapter 6 - The 4th of July

As part of his morning routine, Dave always checked the calendar. It was a habitual gesture to organize his thoughts. He knew he couldn't remember everything, so he usually wrote down where he needed to go or where to take the kids, birthdays, Anne's days off—everything that shouldn't be forgotten. Nothing was written for today, but when he saw the date, his heart skipped a beat—because he was a patriot. Dave loved his country. Still, there was always a strange feeling inside him on this special day.

It had become a tradition for the whole family to go to the town park where all sorts of events were held. The kids loved it. Dave found it a little forced, but because of his love for the homeland, he didn't mind. They stayed at the celebration for a few hours. The weather was pleasantly warm, with the sun shining brightly. The children met their little friends. Dave and Anne also ran into a few acquaintances. They had nice conversations, but the case of little Samantha cast a shadow over everything. The topic came up involuntarily, and it stunned everyone.

Carl and Trevis were there with their partners. They stood next to a bench, sipping ice-cold Budweisers. Tina and Claudia sat nearby, enjoying ice cream and chatting when Anne and Dave arrived with the girls.

- Hey guys! - they greeted each other.
Dave bought ice cream for Anne and the girls. Sarah took Lucie to the bouncy castle, while Anne sat down with Tina and Claudia and joined the conversation with ease, quickly catching up and laughing along with them.

Dave grabbed a cold Bud and walked over to the guys, a few steps from the bench.

- Hey, man, after that talk we had at the Barracks the other night, I've been thinking a lot about the things you said - Trevis remarked.

- Oh yeah? Glad to hear it. So, what did you come up with? - Dave asked, sipping from his cold beer.

- That you were right.

- Right about what, Trevis? - Dave laughed.

- Don't laugh, man, I'm serious! - Trevis replied, slightly offended that he wasn't being taken seriously.

- Sorry, just surprised! You were so stubborn—I didn't think anything I said would hit home.

- But it did! Especially that part about kids.

- Wow - Dave said honestly, clearly surprised.

- Tina and I talked. She agrees—it's time to bless our relationship with a baby. She was so happy when I brought it up. Said she never dared mention it because with the way I've been thinking, she figured it'd just start a fight.

Dave smiled—warmly. He was genuinely happy Trevis had made this decision and that his partner was happy too. Trevis continued:

- Actually—get this—Tina told me she was going to tell me this week that she loved me but that we were going in different directions. She wants a family. Kids - Trevis took a sip of beer and had to steel himself to keep going.

- So Dave, man—I'm f*cking grateful you brought that up that night! - Then he jumped at Dave and hugged him.

Anne, Tina, and Claudia looked on, laughing—unaware of the conversation. All they saw was Trevis hugging Dave with emotion. Dave patted him on the back like a father to a son. He looked a bit awkwardly toward Anne, but her smile reassured him - Don't worry, it's all good - She had no idea what that moment was about, but she was proud her husband had that kind of impact.

Trevis finally let go but kept his eyes fixed on Dave, full of gratitude. Dave felt it and it warmed his heart.

- Alright, man. I'm glad it turned out well for you. I can't wait for you to experience that miracle too. Get ready—it's gonna be something else! - He winked. Then turned to Carl and opened his arms wide, like it was his turn now in the hug line.

- I'm good, man! Maybe next time - Carl laughed.

All six of them laughed heartily. Trevis had snapped out of his emotional state. Carl took the lead in the conversation again:

- Man, look at this crowd! I love this day.

Dave sighed deeply. He could feel they were stepping into territory rarely discussed with his friends—especially not on a day like this.

- Is this really our country, Carl? What makes it ours? - Dave asked sincerely. Carl looked puzzled, unsure if he was joking.

- Well whose else would it be, man? The British? - Carl said, taking a swig with a hint of offense.

- Of course not. Not the British. But what about the natives?

- I don't know. They're long gone, or moved away, or whatever - Carl answered dismissively. He'd never thought about it.

- Where would they have moved to? They were the victims of one of the biggest genocides in history.

- What? - Carl blinked.

- Look it up if you don't believe me. Just on the North American continent, the native population dropped by 10 to 15 million from 1492 to the end of the 19th century - Dave said sadly.

- Wait—if that's true, how come we've never heard of it? - Trevis asked, just as confused.

- Guys—just because something isn't blasted in the media or in your face, doesn't mean it didn't happen. Look it up. And not all of them were murdered by our ancestors—plagues and displacement killed many too. But we can't pretend this beautiful celebration doesn't rest on some ugly foundations. That number is nearly three times the number of Jews killed by Nazis in WWII—at least according to official data. That genocide is rightly remembered everywhere. But this one? Not a word.

- Damn, man... that's a heavy thing to bring up today - Carl said.

- I know. But I always have this dual feeling on the Fourth of July. I'm not trying to kill the mood—but facts are facts. Even if people try to bury them - Dave took a sip of his beer and delivered a final punch.

- And that's just North America. The most respected historians estimate between 55 and 70 million native people were killed across the entire American continent between 1492 and 1900.

Dave stopped. Let them process it. Anne and the others were still chatting and laughing, unaware of the heavy historical wound being reopened just a few feet away.

- I think that's bullshit, man. Somebody probably made those numbers up - Carl groaned, almost whining.

- Yeah, maybe! Anything's possible - Dave answered - There are folks who say the same thing about the Jewish Holocaust—that the numbers are exaggerated. Anything can be said. I just shared what I read. But even if we don't quibble about exact numbers, what happened is still horrible. For me, even one unjust death is too many. Let alone thousands, hundreds of thousands—or millions. These are wounds in the Earth. Painful energies that may never be healed.

- You're right about that, Dave - Carl agreed. - Even one innocent death is terrible - Carl suddenly remembered his mother, and a tear escaped. A few years back, she was at a gas station when armed robbers stormed in and gunned her down along with five other customers and the cashier. Her only crime was being in that place at the wrong time. He'd never been able to process that senseless brutality. So he could very much relate when it came to mass suffering.

- But it's not just the lives that were taken! - Dave continued. Carl and Trevis listened closely.

- It's also the knowledge they took with them to the grave. Think about it: shamanism, their way of life—the respect for Earth and life, the unity of all things. Isn't that a beautiful idea? Maybe... just maybe, that's exactly why they had to be wiped out. So that the new world could be built on artificial religions, scattered and misinterpreted scriptures. Because those don't preach universal unity. Humanity's awareness had to be suppressed—so it could be controlled.

The topic was heavy, but it didn't weigh on their consciences. Even if their ancestors committed those crimes, the Declaration of Independence and the ideals the country was built upon still filled their hearts with pride.

Then Dave threw in one last question. He was curious.

- I've got a serious question for you guys. Don't answer right away—just think about it honestly.

Carl and Trevis looked at each other.

- Man, you've already hit us with some deep stuff today. Can it get even heavier? - Carl laughed nervously. - Alright, go ahead—hit me.

- Okay. So... if you could only teach your kids one thing in your whole life—what would it be?

- Whoa, you really can't answer that off the top of your head - Carl scratched his head.

- Well I don't have any kids yet - Trevis replied.

- You will. And if you could teach just one thing—what would it be?

- I don't know, man. Maybe a profession? Or to be honest? Or hardworking? It's hard to pick just one - It was clear Dave had struck a nerve.

- I guess I'd say hard work. That gets you ahead in life - Carl finally said. - But enough suspense. What would you teach, if you could only pick one?

Trevis and Carl looked at him, genuinely curious. Dave looked them straight in the eye.

- Gratitude.

Carl and Trevis were quiet, trying to interpret what he meant. They weren't fully convinced yet. Dave sensed it, so he continued.

- I believe gratitude is the most important thing in the world. It contains everything. It's a universal concept—the foundation of our existence. Think about it: can there be true happiness without gratitude?

- Actually... that's true - Carl admitted slowly - I'm starting to see why you said that. That's deep, Dave. Really deep.

- And how do you teach that to your kids? Trevis asked sincerely.

- I'm glad you asked. It's a fair question!

Back then, if the girls complained about something, Anne and I would always tell them that it's not nice. We'd give examples. Tell them about people who live under difficult conditions or suffer from illnesses. About how happy those people would be if they were healthy like us or lived even half as well. At bedtime, we ask them: 'What are you grateful for today?' And let them think. The more things they can name, the better they understand.

- I get it, man. That's really good - Carl said, clearly touched.

Dave smiled and spread his arms wide. Carl laughed and hugged him. Anne and the others saw the moment and chuckled again.

- What are you up to, sweetheart? - Anne called over, laughing.

Dave shrugged.

- What can I do? The guys are just in a hugging mood today!

And everyone burst into laughter again.

On the way home, the wind had picked up. Strong gusts shook the big body of the Dodge, and Dave just smiled at it.

- Something's coming - he noted cryptically.

- What is it, Dad? - Lucie asked.

- A storm's coming, sweetheart. But don't worry, we'll be home before it hits - Dave reassured her.

Dusk had fallen over the Rider farm. The wind carried dust as the four of them rushed into the house. Anne bathed the girls and prepared them for bed, while Dave was still downstairs, putting things away. In the distance, a loud thunderclap echoed.

- That was a good one - Dave muttered softly at the rumble. Then another strike hit. The house itself trembled.

- Time to head up - he encouraged himself, but then remembered the small barn window needed to be shut. He rushed out into the dimming light. The wind was getting stronger, kicking up more dust. Dave had to shield his eyes with his hand to avoid getting it full of dirt. By the time he got back inside, the rain had begun to fall. The huge drops hit the window glass like large bugs crashing into it. Within moments, the rain was pouring down in sheets.

Dave loved the rain. He knew that without water, there was no life—only barren deserts. He especially liked soft, gentle rain that fell straight down. But this was not that. This was a raging downpour. Still, water was water - At least the tanks will fill up nicely - he thought with satisfaction. They had a well with an oldschool, wind-driven water pump that gave deliciously clean water, but he still liked collecting the rainwater that flowed

off the rooftops. He had an old, rusty tank someone had discarded, but it was perfect for storing irrigation water.

Dave was also getting ready for bed. He couldn't wait to lie down—this day had been long. The girls were already in bed; Anne was reading them a bedtime story under the soft light of a night lamp. A few lightning bolts still struck nearby. Anne put the book down and looked toward the window. She was afraid of lightning. Lucie spoke up first:

- Mom, we don't have to be afraid, right Dad?
- That's right, sweetheart. Just stay calm—it'll pass as quickly as it came.

The rain seemed to ease, turning into a soaking, gentle drizzle. The girls fell asleep. Anne turned off the little lamp and kissed their small heads peeking out from under the blanket. Dave and Anne got into bed in their cozy little bedroom. Anne loved curling up under her thick, soft comforter after a long day, pulling it up nearly to the top of her head. It made her feel like she was inside a marshmallow.

But Dave couldn't fall asleep, even though they had been in bed for nearly two hours. His mind kept returning to the next day's hearing and the conversations from the park. He went downstairs to drink a glass of water. He moved quietly, so as not to wake the family. He didn't even turn on the lights, just felt his way through the darkness. He knew the house well. He had filled his copper flask earlier in the evening. He couldn't wait to take a few sips from it. Carefully, he unscrewed the cap to avoid making noise.

Suddenly, a shadow passed by the window. The rain was still falling, splashing loudly into the puddles. Dave stepped out onto the porch and grabbed an old shovel handle he'd left out, which he planned to fix the next day. As he reached the corner of the house, he saw a dark figure. A man. He was trying to pry open one of the windows.

Dave was surprised the dogs hadn't noticed, but they had hidden in their shelter and fallen into deep sleep because of the rain.

- What do you think you're doing? - he said to the figure.

The man was so startled that he dropped the metal tool into the mud.

- Shit...- he cursed in panic, frozen in place by the sight of the big man.

- Do you know what a father, a husband, is capable of to protect his family?

Dave's muscles tightened, and the veins on his hand bulged as he gripped the shovel handle. He felt adrenaline surge through his body.

The figure seemed to realize the seriousness of the situation. He deeply regretted choosing this house to break into. He removed the scarf from his face, remorseful, and looked up at Dave with his head lowered. His lips were trembling from fear and his soaked clothes. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five. Dave already felt sorry for him.

- Clearly, life led him here - he thought. He could be his son. But Dave had no son. Just two little daughters—who would have been terrified had this man broken in and woken them. Dave assessed the situation and decided not to hurt him. He wasn't a threat. Still, he wanted his words to carry weight. He spoke firmly:

- What would your father do to protect you? Find yourself a job and a girl who loves you. Because next time, you might not be this lucky!

Something shifted in the young man's eyes. Maybe just a spark of a new thought—but it was there. He no longer feared Dave. He could feel that if Dave had wanted to hurt him, he would have done it already. But he

didn't. And he had even spoken to him like this. The young man began backing away, then turned and ran into the darkness. Within seconds, he was gone, swallowed up by the night. Only the snapping of twigs underfoot could be heard.

Dave exhaled deeply and smiled to calm himself down from the adrenaline. He glanced toward the dogs and made a soft - pss-pss- sound to check if they were really just sleeping and hadn't been harmed. They began to stir, and Dave felt relieved. He went back upstairs and lay down. His mind was still racing. He remembered that, as a boy, he too had stolen a few things from the local store with his friends. Not out of malice—he had felt guilty about it—but there was nothing he could do now. He had forgiven his younger self for those foolish mistakes. He knew he had to move past the bitterness to restore his values.

His father had preferred spending his evenings at the bar rather than raising him with love and morals. All Dave could do now was raise Sarah and Lucie in a way that they would know right from wrong. He and Anne had always placed great importance on honor and a clear conscience. They had told the girls countless times that there was no better feeling than sleeping peacefully at night, free from guilt.

The next morning, Anne noticed that Dave was deep in thought. She found it strange that he hadn't come over to hug her like he usually did.

- What is it, honey? What's bothering you? - she asked as she stepped over to Dave, who was standing at the kitchen counter, staring off into space.

- Last night I came down because I was thirsty and couldn't sleep. I saw a shadow pass by the window.

Anne looked alarmed.

- A shadow? What kind of shadow? - she whispered, so the kids wouldn't hear.

- I went out back with a shovel handle. There was a burglar trying to pry open the window.

- Oh my God! Why didn't you call the police? Anne asked upset.

- I wanted to see what it was first. And by the time they'd get out here...

- But tell me already! What happened? - she rushed him.

- Relax. Nothing happened. When he realized he was caught, he froze. He didn't even run. He took off his scarf and looked at me with his head down. He completely surrendered. I could feel it—he wasn't some professional thief. Just a young guy who's really lost - Dave said, taking a sip of his morning coffee. Then he continued:

- Don't worry, he's not coming back. He was terrified of me—I saw it. I gave him some advice before he ran off. I think he sensed I wasn't going to hurt him or chase him down. But do you know what the craziest thing is?

- What? - Anne asked, truly curious.

- That boy was me. At that age, I did so many stupid things. It's a miracle I didn't get into worse trouble.

Anne didn't ask any more questions. She trusted Dave's instincts and knew he'd had a rough childhood. It really was a miracle his life hadn't gone down the wrong path.

Still, he rigged up some empty tin cans tied with fishing line, placing a few screws inside so they'd rattle loudly if someone triggered them. He put them in places where the kids didn't play, but which someone might use to sneak up on them. Not that he thought the boy would come back—but if he found the house, someone else might too.

He also checked the large steel cabinet in the bedroom with its heavy padlock. His good old Winchester rifle rested there with a few boxes of ammunition. It was a 1957 Winchester '94. Twice a year he took it out,

cleaned it, and went out to the field to shoot at some tin cans—somewhere safe, where no one could get hurt. He had never shot a person and hoped he never would—but he wouldn't hesitate to use it to protect his family.

Chapter 7 - Calett's Trial

It was already evening when Dave got home from the trial. The kids were running around the field with the dogs. Anne rushed to meet him, excited, and saw that her husband was visibly upset. She embraced Dave and asked anxiously:

- So, what happened?

- Ah! - NOT GUILTY! They let the guy go! – Dave growled, shaking his head in frustration and sat down at the small dining table.

It wasn't the fact that Calett hadn't been found guilty that bothered him, but the whole trial had shaken him. The entire hopeless situation—that little Samantha's killer was still out there, possibly hunting other children—deeply disturbed him. Whether it was Calett or someone else, the fear remained. The memories from the courtroom flooded back. The atmosphere had been so tense it was almost unbearable, filled with helpless confusion.

Dave sat on the porch and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

- So? Do you think he did it? – asked Anne, handing him a steaming cup of lemon balm tea.

- I don't know. It's not clear, but the guy gives me the creeps. Even if he didn't do it, he played the innocent way too well. When the prosecutor threw the photos in front of him, he sat there as if the horrors in those pictures didn't affect him at all. Just stared at them with a blank expression. I only saw from a distance when the prosecutor raised them up before slamming them in front of him, but even from there, the horror Samantha must have endured was visible.

– Dave stared ahead, lost in thought. Anne saw how much it had affected him. The calm that usually radiated from him was now completely disturbed. It would be a serious task to restore it—if it was even possible anymore.

Dave continued his account:

– The whole trial had this oppressive and strange atmosphere. I don't know... even the prosecutor seemed unsure. Sweaty and nervous. He kept glancing out into the audience, like... – but he didn't finish. He intended to keep this part to himself, but Anne's curiosity was piqued.

– Like what? – she crouched in front of Dave, watching him.

– Like someone had him by the balls. He seemed cornered. It was weird.

– Could Calett have been part of a network that...? – Anne couldn't finish the sentence. She burst into tears.

– Anything's possible. I'm just telling you what I felt there. – Dave hugged Anne to comfort her, then continued:

– The only evidence against Calett was the testimony of an elderly lady. And even that was shaky. She claimed to have seen Calett from a bus near the scene on the day of the murder, walking down a dusty road,

possibly not alone. She thought there might've been a little girl with him, but she couldn't swear to it. Her eyesight wasn't the best, and it was from quite a distance.

– That's intense! But of course, it had to be from the one angle where you can't see clearly. And if it's an elderly woman's word... I guess the jury didn't take her too seriously – said Anne, grimacing – Didn't they find anything at his apartment? Or DNA on the body?

– Apparently they thoroughly searched his home when he was arrested. But nothing. At least officially—nothing... and get this: they didn't find his DNA on the girl either, according to the official investigation files... There was some unidentified DNA, but it came from the lab

– Dave added, raising an eyebrow.

– Oh my God! You mean...? – Anne asked, alarmed.

– Anything's possible! There were several strange things about this trial. If I look at the motives and circumstances, we can't rule out the possibility that someone higher up pulled this guy out of the shit.

– Jesus! – Anne gasped.

– And that lawyer—some Golder guy. He was extremely good. I think he could get the Devil himself out of hell. The way he twisted words. In the end, he convinced the jury that the found DNA sample was officially NOT Calett's, and that the old lady's testimony was unreliable since she wasn't sure if he was alone. That discredited her. So they didn't dare convict him, because if found guilty, he would likely have faced execution. I saw it on the jurors' faces—that's where the prosecution lost them. They also brought in the bus driver, but I don't even know why. He didn't see anything. He was watching the road and listening to the radio. That route only had the old woman and him onboard. And to be honest, the prosecutor should've been much more assertive, damn it! He mentioned that Calett had been an aggressive kid who fought a lot. Former teachers confirmed this. But he didn't push that point hard enough – Dave said angrily. – We're talking about the brutal murder of a little girl! Enough is enough!

Anne's thoughts began spiraling in the same dark direction. They didn't want to accuse anyone without evidence, but both their instincts and open minds pointed that way.

– I didn't like Judge Edwards's attitude either – Dave continued.

– Why? What did she do? – Anne asked, still crouched beside him.

– More like, what she didn't do – Dave sighed. – She acted like this was a petty theft case. She was in a hurry, like she had a date at the „Donut-shop”.

Anne would normally laugh at this, but not now. Dave didn't mean it as a joke; it just slipped out.

– Do you think she's in on it too? – Anne asked, surprised.

– I honestly don't know. Maybe she was just having a day. Or she was burnt out, I don't know.

Anne nodded in agreement. Dave continued his complaints:

– Of course, all the so-called justice warriors in the courtroom were desperate to find a scapegoat right then and there. Even with barely any evidence, they wanted to see Calett in the *chair*.

– You mean executed by lethal injection?

– Of course. You know what I meant.

– Well, whatever. The prosecutor filed an appeal. Although I don't know why. With this little evidence, it's useless... – Dave concluded sadly. – What really bothers me isn't that this guy wasn't convicted—and certainly not that he wasn't sentenced to death. You know how I feel about that.

– I know, honey – Anne said, stroking his shoulder.

– It's this half-assed effort and negligence that's upsetting! In such a serious case! How can they do that?

They both grew quiet. Dave didn't agree with the death penalty. He opposed it. In his view, a repeat killer or rapist might deserve it, but who has the right to take another life? The judge? The executioner? That's murder too. For such monsters, execution isn't even punishment—it's relief. What they really need is a reformed system that removes violent offenders from society forever! Not to a luxury prison where they can live comfortably, but to a dark, filthy solitary cell with only bread and water to keep them alive. Why should a monster deserve anything better?

The system wasn't like that, and it infuriated Dave. There were loopholes and weaknesses in the justice system too, almost as if they were steering things toward chaos.

A few minutes passed like this before the laughter of Sarah and Lucie echoed from a little farther away. Dave's thoughts snapped back to the farm and his family. As if the fog cast over him by the trial had suddenly lifted with the rays of the setting Sun. He smiled and sprang up so quickly that the chair almost tipped over. Anne caught it, laughing. She knew why he had jumped up and was glad he had snapped out of that gloomy state.

– My little angels! – Dave ran toward the girls, who had just returned from running around.

– Hi, Daaaddy! – they shouted together – We were waiting for you! Did you bring us a surprise from town?
– Lucie asked, jumping into his arms and hugging him. Her big green eyes stared up at him, waiting for an answer.

Dave always made sure to bring something small—some treat or surprise—for the girls whenever he rarely went into town.

– I did, sweetheart – Dave smiled – It's in the house. Bananas and pineapple. I know those are your favorites! But you'll get them in the morning—no fruit this late!

– But why, Daddy? – Lucie asked, her eyes wide.

– You wouldn't sleep well, sweetie – Dave replied, stroking her head.

Sarah arrived too, with the two dogs. All four of them were so muddy they looked like they had rolled in the dirt on purpose.

– Hi, Dad! Did you bring anything?

– Yes, he did! Pineapple and bananas! – Lucie jumped in quickly.

– But we can't have any, not until morning! she added, pouting .

– Come on, Daaad! – Sarah protested.

– You'll get some in the morning. No fruit at night – Dave said firmly, ending the conversation. The girls accepted this and ran into the house laughing. Dave called after them:

– Go straight to the bath! You're as dirty as piglets after a mud bath! – he laughed loudly.

Before the trial, Dave had stopped by the store to pick up some fruit for the girls. He also brought a special kind of flour for Anne from the local mill, so she could bake something tasty.

The evening now passed peacefully. Dave and Anne were already beginning to move on from the disturbing events. They believed that we are not just animals acting on instinct, but feeling, thinking human beings. So let's use that gift!

When it came to parenting, Anne and Dave always made sure to raise their daughters with love and consistency. They upheld these same values with other children as well. Sarah was a bit more difficult than Lucie, especially when she hit her defiant phase. She was hard to manage. Dave had to stay calm more often, while Anne could dwell on things for hours or even days, overthinking and blaming herself. Over the years, Dave had learned to handle Anne's sensitivity.

In one of those tough moments, Anne started reflecting:

– Do you think we're doing something wrong? These tantrums and pointless battles are completely draining me! – she turned her worried face to Dave.

– I don't think so, or at least I hope not. We do everything with the greatest love. I think this is just a phase, that's all.

– All we can do is accept it and try to approach the tantrums and stubbornness accordingly.

– Sure, but it's exhausting. For months now, it's like we're enemies.

Dave laughed, but not in a mocking way.

– I love how sensitive you are! Sometimes that's a wonderful thing, but right now, it's what's tearing you up.

– Easy for you to say, you get over these crises so quickly – Anne replied.

– Well, I can't help that, it's just how I am – Dave smiled, and then added:

– Didn't you already analyze Sarah's birth chart?

– I did. Or at least I started – Anne answered, thoughtfully.

– And? What did you find? I'm really curious – Dave urged.

– Well, she'll have to undergo some changes in her personality. It won't be an easy task.

– Then we'll give her all the help we can. Right?

– Of course, but it's not that simple. She needs to feel and realize things for herself. These are individual lessons for everyone.

– But even that's a big deal—that you care about this and that we're trying to give her conscious, meaningful guidance.

– You're right. It really is a fascinating subject. The life tasks we bring with us and the personalities we're born with here on Earth.

– It really is interesting. You could already see her unique little self from an early age. Just like Lucie. Two completely different little beings.

– Totally! And think about your story too, Dave. The kind of family karma you were born into.

– Oh man, I could tell some stories about that – Dave agreed.

– And still! You managed to break the cycle! I don't see a single trace of that in you now, despite all you had to face as a child.

– Then nothing is ever truly lost, right? – Dave laughed – One thing's for sure: everything is vibration and waves. And kids have super-sensitive antennas!

– That's so true! – Anne nodded.

– And when we snap, they sense that too! We have to grow with them.

– Exactly! This is a shared journey – Anne smiled – I'm glad you see things so clearly.

– The credit goes to both of us, my love! You opened my eyes to so many things! Without you, I don't think I would've made it this far.

Anne softened, accepting that they still had work to do with Sarah. But Sarah needed them—and their love.

It was crucial they raised them with consistency because the girls were smart. They tried to test their parents' limits. It happened more than once that they asked something from Dave, and if he said no, they went straight to Anne, or vice versa, hoping the other would give in. But Dave and Anne always corrected this quickly—explaining that if one of them already made a decision, the other wouldn't change it.

Over the years, they managed to break them of this habit, which they considered a major success. Another thing they were strict about: they didn't tolerate tantrums or lying! It only happened a few times, but thanks to Anne and Dave's firm stance, these behaviors completely disappeared.

Chapter 8 - Two years later

Sam was pulling the cart along the dusty little road at a calm pace. Dave didn't push him—they had plenty of time. That was all he had planned for the day. They were just heading home from the local market. It was a weekday. Anne was at work, and the girls were at school. It was a beautiful summer day. On days like this, Dave usually took the horse and cart because Anne had the Dodge for commuting. Anyway, the cart was more practical—he could load it up, which wouldn't have been possible with the Dodge.

The market was held in a grassy field. A few other farmers had also arrived by horse and cart. They were probably the last of their kind, because the next generation only used cars. Understandable—it didn't require as much time and care as a living being. Most young people no longer had the desire for that.

Dave sold almost everything he brought to the market. Many people from the city frequented this market because they loved the fresh, high-quality vegetables and healthy farm products. Only some corn and potatoes were left on the cart—he hadn't sold all of them. But he didn't mind. He thought he'd make dinner from them for the girls.

Sitting on the cart, he hummed a cheerful country song he'd heard earlier playing from the rolled-down window of a pickup at the market. He hummed to the rhythm of Sam's gait, even bobbing his head a little, as if he were at a bar listening to a live band. The summer breeze whispered gently in his ear. He loved the soft breeze that swept across his face in this heat. It was as if the wind was whistling along to the country tune he heard from a pickup truck that passed him by with rolled down windows.

He was in this relaxed state when, all of a sudden, it sounded like he heard a scream.

That pulled him out of his daydream, and he looked around with furrowed brows. Sam just kept walking calmly. Dave figured it must have been a hawk or some other bird of prey. He looked up at the sky but saw nothing. He was about to return to the music in his head when the scream came again—the same sound.

This time, he brought Sam to a halt and listened carefully. The horse stopped immediately and began nibbling at the thick grass. Dave scanned the surroundings. On the left, the wind gently swept across the field; to the right, there was a small oak forest. It was quite dense. He couldn't see inside because the large branches, full of leaves, hung low and blocked the view into the depths of the woods.

Dave turned his head slightly so that even the light breeze wouldn't interfere with his hearing and listened closely. Long seconds passed. Nothing. Silence. - I must be imagining things - he thought, and just as he was lifting the reins to get Sam moving again, he heard it again!

This time it was clear, sharp, heartwrenching, unmistakable—a scream from a child, a little girl! It came from the forest!

Dave jumped down from the cart with a silent, swift motion like a big cat ready to charge. He hurriedly looked for something on the cart and found only a short-handled shovel, which he had recently re-shafted. His father had forged the metal head himself. It was heavy—too heavy for just any man to handle. He liked it because it was indestructible. A real heirloom piece meant to serve generations.

Dave moved quickly but carefully under the hanging branches into the shadowy mystery of the forest, still hoping his senses had tricked him. But they did not! About fifty meters away, he saw movement and instantly focused in. A man was dragging something behind him.

Dave recognized the man—and it hit him like a lightning strike.

It was Paul Calett!

The same worn brown jacket, greasy hair, and distinctive hunched back he remembered from two years ago at the trial. Time froze. The prosecutor's confused face flashed in his mind, then the judge's expression as she read out the verdict in a tone that allowed no appeal- *NOT GUILTY!* - and the sound of the judge's gavel pounding down. That thud and that verdict had burned themselves into his memory.

A wave of realization crashed down on Dave with such force that his body locked up under the weight. He couldn't move. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Dave quickly advanced, silently, following Calett who was dragging the little girl—but the monster hadn't noticed him. His twisted desires burned so fiercely that he was like a rabid hyena in the scent of blood. He soon grew tired of dragging the limp little body and let her drop to the ground. Then he leaned over the unconscious child and began to pull down his pants. He didn't even sense that Dave was already behind him.

Calett leaned close to the girl's ear and whispered in a devilish tone that made even Dave shudder:

- YOU ARE MINE.

At that moment, Dave's entire life, all his experiences and knowledge, came into alignment. He knew, with every fiber of his being, that right here, right now, he had NO CHOICE!

With the force of a furious stallion, Dave kicked the monster off the girl. Calett flew nearly three meters through the air, landing with a thud and gasping, stunned to realize he had been caught. He landed on his back, and in his lust-driven rage, he looked up at Dave with bloodshot, twisted eyes.

Dave looked down at the girl, who stared back at him with terrified eyes. But she wasn't afraid of Dave—the terror she had experienced with Calett was still etched on her face. A single tear ran down her dirt-streaked cheek. Dave could feel every heartbeat pounding in his chest. His body trembled with power and adrenaline.

He stood between her and the evil, like a marble statue placed there by the Creator himself to guard the innocent. It was as if the entire goodness and strength of the universe had gathered within him to save a single, pure soul.

Calett quickly recovered from the shock. With a crazed scream, he pointed at the child and shouted in a demonic voice:

- SHE IS MINE!

And then he charged at Dave, rabid with hunger for the adrenaline-soaked flesh of the girl—an underworld predator—and Dave was the one standing between him and his prey.

Calett lunged at him like a beast, wild with madness. But Dave's mind was crystal clear—clearer than ever before. Time itself seemed to slow down for him, allowing him to react with precision. As Calett lunged, Dave stepped aside and, with a rock-solid grip, seized his neck with his right arm—so fiercely that he instantly snapped the man's vertebrae. His spine cracked and Calett collapsed like a rag doll.

Dave was filled with a power so vast, so primal, that he stood holding the lifeless body for long seconds as if it weighed nothing at all.

Sam lifted his head from the thick-stemmed poppies and twitched his large ears. He looked toward the trees. A rhythmic cracking of branches echoed through the forest.

Dave emerged from the shadowy, mysterious woods and stepped into the light. An immense energy radiated from him—so much that even the horse instinctively recoiled a little. Dave was not alone. With his right arm, he gently held the battered little girl close, who clung to his neck, resting her head wearily on his shoulder, nearly asleep. In his left hand, veins bulging, he gripped the shovel like a medieval knight would wield a sword after defeating a horde of barbaric invaders who had ravaged his homeland.

There was tremendous sorrow in his eyes.

Under the weight of what he had just done, Dave nearly collapsed. The immense gravity of his act pressed down on him with a force he had never known.

Chapter 9 - Wichita Police Department

Dalton arrived later at the station. Trevor was already sitting at his desk, waiting impatiently.

- Come on, let's go quickly, I'll tell you everything in the car!

Dalton followed him in confusion, like a puppy waiting for a treat. He had no idea what the rush was about.

- Damn, some guy took out Calett! A guy named David Rider. From a farm near Dodge City!

- No way! That's serious. Where is he? - asked Dalton, excited.

- He's already in custody. Didn't resist when the patrol went out to get him. But get this—he caught Calett dragging a little girl into the woods! - Trevor continued his briefing.

- Holy shit! Sounds like something out of a movie! So... we get to interrogate him? - Dalton's excitement grew. The news had fired him up.

- We'll question him later. The boss asked us to swing by Calett's place quickly—see if there's anything left behind.

- The sick bastard... so he really was the one who killed the other little girl, too! And he got away with it then! - Dalton slammed the dashboard - But they already searched his apartment when they arrested him! Didn't find anything incriminating—that's why they let him go - he continued.

- Yes, but it was two years ago. Look, it's the boss's request. Let's check the place fast, then we head back and talk to David.

- Alright, let's roll!

The street where Calett lived was quiet. Just another regular weekday morning. They parked in front of the house and walked up the small steps to the door. Trevor tried the handle, but it was locked.

- You don't have the... - he didn't finish the sentence because Dalton kicked the door so hard it broke off at the hinges, screws flying.

- Nice job - Trevor remarked.

- I doubt the owner will press charges, do you? - Dalton grinned and stepped into the house.

- Ugh, that smell! - he muttered, wrinkling his nose.

- You check upstairs, I'll take the ground floor - said Trevor.

Dalton went up the wooden stairs, disgusted by the darkness in the house. The place felt inhumanly cold. Oppressively so. He couldn't imagine staying there long.

- Anything? -Trevor shouted up.

- Yeah! Ass smell! - Dalton replied under his breath. He rummaged through drawers and closets. Nothing suspicious.

- Nothing downstairs either - Trevor said as he came up.

- Nothing up here, man. But this place creeps me the hell out! It's so dark. No air. Let's get out of here! I really want to talk to that David guy.

Trevor did another sweep, checking drawers and closets, just in case. For all its weirdness, everything seemed in order. He peeked into the bathroom too.

- His toothbrush is still here! Guess he wasn't planning a long trip - he joked.

Finally, Dalton laughed too.

There was one locked drawer they couldn't open. Dalton kicked the little wooden cabinet so hard it fell apart at the joints, and they pulled the drawer out. Both were surprised when they looked inside.

There was a single photo. An old black-and-white picture of Calett's parents. They weren't smiling, just standing next to each other with blank faces on their wedding day. It was in a thin black wooden frame with cracked glass. It looked like it had been punched—there was still blood on it from a cut hand.

- He loved them, right! - Trevor remarked sarcastically.

Dalton started heading downstairs when Trevor stepped in a spot that creaked oddly. Dalton turned back with a furrowed brow.

- Wait a sec, man! - he held up his left hand.

- What? - Trevor spread his arms.

- Didn't you hear that?

- Hear what? - Trevor looked puzzled.

Dalton pointed to where Trevor was standing and raised his eyebrows. Trevor stood still like they used to play freeze tag as kids. He stepped back, and Dalton lifted the small Persian rug that had been covering the old wooden floorboards. When Trevor stepped off it, the piece of parquet clicked back into place with a soft sound.

- Ah! - Trevor said admiringly - You've got good ears, man!

Dalton didn't care about Trevor's compliment—he was already focused on the floor like a hunting dog that had caught a scent. He excitedly pulled out his red plastic-handled Swiss Army knife from his pocket and flipped out a small blade. He tapped on the suspicious board and the ones next to it—it definitely sounded different. Hollow. Like there wasn't anything solid underneath.

He tried to pry one side up, but it fit tightly. He dropped it back down after the first attempt.

- Damn it! - he muttered. He kept trying. He took a deep breath to calm himself and pried the board again, trying to hold it with his fingernail while lifting the other side with the blade—but he dropped it again.

- I don't believe this! - he grumbled, then ran out to the car. Trevor just stood there, watching the floor, not trying anything himself—he trusted Dalton. Soon, Dalton came back with some duct tape.

- Ha-haaa! - he said with a grin, like a kid solving a puzzle.

- You're not gonna beat me! - he whispered as he stuck two strips of tape onto the board and pinched them together to pull the piece out evenly from the rest. The slightly looser plank slid out.

Dalton set it aside and they peered into the hole. The concrete underneath had been chipped away a bit, and they spotted a folded piece of paper in the shallow cavity. Dalton's eyes lit up. This is what he was looking for!

He quickly put on a pair of latex gloves and carefully took out the paper. He placed it on the floor, holding it with his gloved left hand while using the blunt edge of the knife to unfold it. Then he picked it up so they could read it together. Their faces darkened. They exchanged a look.

- Motherf*cker! - Dalton growled, clenching his jaw in anger as he read:

7-8, blonde, shapely – Avenue L 1015

5-6, brown – Vail 45

6-8, blonde – always sings – Kettle Way 12478

4-5, blonde – Kelley Avenue 1266

3-4, brown – likes puppies – Brightside Ave 1865

4-5, blonde – W Park Street 2856

The – entries - were written like a shopping list a mom gives her kid so he doesn't forget what to buy. Dalton understood instantly.

- Check these out, make sure all of them are okay—hopefully it's just a list of targets! - He handed the note to Trevor so he could read off the addresses. Trevor took it with disgust, as if it might be contagious.

He called the station immediately and relayed the information. Dalton now hated the house even more than before. He shivered as he stepped out and brushed his shoulders off like he was covered in dust—to shake off the bad energy.

They waited in front of the house for the forensics team to arrive and search for more evidence. Meanwhile, the patrols sent to the addresses on the list returned quickly. Everything was calm at each location, and the children were all safe.

Chapter 10 - Earlier that day - Dave Says Goodbye to Anne

After bringing Nancie safely home, Dave rushed to Anne. His heart was full of fear and sorrow. He knew that what he had done would affect his entire family. It took him about forty-five minutes to get home. The girls were already there and ran out to greet him.

- Daddy! - they shouted - We missed you so much!

Dave had never struggled with his tears the way he did in that moment. He knew the police could arrive for him at any minute. He wasn't afraid of them—he actually liked the police—but he feared being taken away and not knowing what would happen next.

- Sweetheart - he called to Anne. The nervousness in his voice was unmistakable. Anne came out of the house with a worried look on her face. She had never seen her husband in such a state.

- What happened? - she asked anxiously. It was clear Dave was holding back tears. Not knowing what to expect, she forced a half-hearted smile and sent the girls away:

- Go on, go check on the kittens in the stable!

- Okay! - they shouted and ran off, unaware of what was coming.

Anne stepped up to Dave, held his face in both hands, and looked into his eyes. But hers were already red and teary too.

- Come on, don't spare me - she said, her voice trembling, her thoughts racing. She had no idea what to expect.

But Dave couldn't speak. He collapsed to his knees in sobs. Then he looked up at Anne. It took a few seconds before he could finally speak.

- I killed him.

Anne was shocked by what she heard. But it wasn't enough information. She impatiently pressed on:

- Killed who? Why? Just tell me! - But by then she had also fallen to her knees, covering her face with her hands and crying.

- It was Calett! He killed Samantha! - Dave finally said. Saying it out loud brought a strange sense of relief. He had cried out everything. He was mourning the peaceful life he once had.

Anne couldn't say a word. She didn't even know what to ask. She leaned in and hugged Dave supportively, resting her head on his shoulder.

- When will they come for you? -she asked.

- Anytime. I rushed home to tell you.

- Then tell me, please! - she urged.

- I heard a scream coming from the little oak forest on my way home. I thought I imagined it, but then I heard it again, even louder! I went into the trees and saw Calett dragging John's little girl, Nancie. I caught up to him just before he started his disgusting acts. I kicked him as hard as I could. It felt like facing the Devil himself! Terrifying! Not the shy guy from the trial. He was completely possessed. I stood between him and

Nancie, and when he came at me, I dodged and grabbed his neck. I felt strength like never before. I grabbed him so hard I could feel his vertebrae separate with a snap. He died instantly.

- You didn't think about your family? - Anne shouted hysterically and began hitting Dave's chest with her palms. He just knelt there, taking the blows, numb.

The girls' laughter from nearby pulled them both out of the moment.

- Why are you two kneeling like that? - Lucie asked, hugging Dave. Sarah hugged Anne.

A siren could be heard in the distance, growing louder. Four police cars arrived for Dave. He was still kneeling when two officers approached.

- David Rider? - one of them asked firmly.

Little Lucie looked up at the uniformed man with wide green eyes.

- Hi! What's your name? - she asked with a genuine smile.

- Uh... I'm Sergeant Phillips - the officer replied, a little flustered by the girl's innocent question as he took off his hat.

- And what do you want from my daddy? - she asked with a worried expression, nearly in tears.

- Come here - Dave said and hugged her tightly - Everything will be okay, sweetheart. The police officers are good people. I'm just going to talk with them - He kissed her on the head.

Dave stood and held out his hands together. The cuffs clicked around his thick wrists, and Sarah came running from the doorway, screaming:

- Daddy, don't go! - she cried, clinging tightly to his waist.

Dave felt like his heart would break in two. Anne took Sarah's hand, but she didn't want to let go of Dave. Her sobs turned into hysterics. Lucie stood by in confusion, only now beginning to understand that her father was being taken away. Her little mouth turned down, and silent tears rolled down her cheeks as the police cars kicked up dust leaving the farm.

Dave remained in custody until the trial. He wouldn't have had the money for bail anyway. He didn't hire a lawyer—he saw no point. He was placed in the Wichita County Jail. A few days later, Anne came to see him. They were granted ten minutes through a plexiglass barrier, using a phone.

Dave looked calm, but he was tired. Anne, too, looked exhausted and more worn down than usual. They picked up the phone, but for a few seconds, neither of them said a word. They just looked at each other. Finally, a gentle smile formed on Dave's face as he looked into Anne's eyes.

- Hi, my love. I missed you - he said kindly. Anne smiled back, though it wasn't the same sincere smile as before.

- We all miss you so much – she said, barely holding back tears.

- How are the girls? - Dave asked, eyes already brimming with tears.

- They're doing a little better. The first few days were really hard. They both slept with me... and they still do. They're in your spot.

- That's good - Dave replied.

- Your friends have been amazing. They come by every day. Carl's there now. He fed the animals and is watching the girls. I was going to bring them here, but I wanted to see you first.
- You did the right thing. And Carl... he's a real friend. Please tell him I said thank you. I truly appreciate it.
- What about the public defender they gave you?
- Some young guy. Seems nice, but honestly, it doesn't matter. I don't think it'll change anything. I'll take responsibility for what I did. I have to live with it.
- Did he say how long you could get?
- Maximum is twenty years.

Anne dropped the phone and collapsed onto the table in tears. Dave also set the receiver down and waited quietly for Anne to recover.

- But that's the maximum - he continued
- The minimum could be just a few years, if the judge is lenient.
- When's the trial? Do you know yet?
- Yes. Exactly two weeks from now. Ten a.m.
- We'll be there. I'll tell everyone. Half the town will show up, I promise. I love you so much!

Anne pressed her palm to the plexiglass. Dave did the same.

Chapter 11 - Dave's trial

A massive crowd had gathered in front of the Wichita Courthouse. The courtroom was packed to capacity. Everyone was there to support Dave.

- FREE DAVE! HE'S A HERO!

Dave heard the chants, and they warmed his heart. Even though he didn't feel like a hero, he was deeply moved that so many people stood by him.

The trial itself lasted barely an hour and a half. Dave admitted to the killing but pleaded self-defense. His lawyer asked the court to consider several mitigating factors: Dave's clean record, his military service, and the fact that his actions were taken in defense of a helpless child.

He also referred back to Calett's earlier trial—where the man was acquitted of Samantha's murder due to lack of evidence—and submitted as evidence the handwritten list found by investigators at Calett's home, containing young girls' names and addresses.

Even the prosecutor didn't push for a harsh sentence. Throughout the trial, the supportive murmurs of the crowd were clearly heard. Hundreds had shown up. They weren't aggressive, didn't swear, but firmly demanded justice.

The jury withdrew and returned with a verdict rather quickly.

Attorney Richard Grady accepted their statement. He was in his sixties, slender, firm but reserved in appearance, and bald. He opened the envelope, put on his reading glasses, and read aloud the jury's decision:

- *The jury finds the defendant, David Rider, guilty of manslaughter.*

- I have considered your clean criminal record, your honorable military service, and the fact that your actions were carried out in the defense of a child, in a moment of emotional intensity. Taking all these mitigating circumstances into account, I hereby sentence you to five years in state prison, with eligibility for parole after three years. This sentence is final.

Anne was sobbing—relieved and sad at the same time. She was devastated to lose her husband even for three years, but also grateful it wasn't longer. That she wouldn't have survived.

Dave, too, felt a weight lift—he wasn't entirely crushed, but knowing he'd have to live in a cell instead of on his farm with his family for three years brought him deep sorrow.

Dave had already been in prison for a week when Anne brought the girls to visit him for the first time.

Lucie and Sarah ran to him and hugged him tightly. Anne let them have that moment before stepping up to him herself. She had already come to terms with the situation but missed him terribly.

- Hey, how are you? Everything alright on the farm? Are you helping Mommy?

- Of course, Dad! - Sarah replied confidently.

- They're great, really helpful! And guess what? Lucie got knocked over by the little piglet—ran right into her and started jumping on her belly with muddy feet! - They all laughed together.

- I'm glad you're all doing so well - Dave said, wiping tears from his eyes.

- It's fun here too! Luckily, no pigs are jumping on my belly! - Dave chuckled, and Anne joined in.

- But Dad, why aren't you coming home with us? - Lucie asked with big eyes.

- I have to stay here a little while longer, sweetheart. I have some things to take care of here. But you'll come with Mommy every few weeks, and you can tell me everything that's going on at home, okay?

- Okay - Lucie replied.

Sarah already understood the situation. She didn't ask questions about it—just looked at Dave and said:

- That white outfit's kinda cool. Did you pick it out?

- Thanks, sweetheart. Yeah, there's a big outlet downstairs, and apparently, we all like this one best—except that bald tattooed guy over there. He prefers orange - Dave joked. Anne laughed. She was glad Dave hadn't lost his sense of humor. It gave her hope.

- How's your roommate? - Anne asked, deliberately avoiding the word – cellmate - in front of the girls.

- He's alright. Got into some tax trouble. Not the sharpest tool in the shed. Someone took advantage of him, pinned the blame. Poor guy. He got six years! Can you believe that? Six years—for tax fraud! - Dave left it there. Anne understood the implication.

- Have you heard anything about little Nancie? - Dave asked.

- No. Nothing. They moved away after everything. Understandable after what happened. Their situation is still better than the Torstens'. They got divorced. Peter's now a full-blown alcoholic. Totally spiraled. Probably on the streets, if he's still alive - Anne's eyes filled with tears. She didn't say it aloud, only mouthed the words while covering her mouth so the girls wouldn't see:

- Marie committed suicide.

Dave swallowed hard and struggled to hold back his tears.

- That bastard Calett destroyed them - Anne added - They couldn't recover from what happened.

Dave suddenly drifted into a different place in his mind. Anne saw it and immediately regretted saying Calett's name.

- I'm sorry, darling...- she whispered, guilt on her face.

- No... you didn't say anything wrong. I just drifted a bit – Dave replied gently.

One of the guards tapped his watch, signaling time was up. Dave understood and turned to the girls.

- Alright girls, this is all the time I get with you today. I'm so glad you came with Mommy. Always listen to her, okay? Can I ask you something?

- Of course, Daddy! - they nodded eagerly.

- You're big girls now. Would you look after Mommy for me?

- Yes, we will! - they beamed proudly, happy to be trusted with such an important task.

Anne hugged Dave tightly and kissed him.

- We'll come again. Take care of yourself.

- I will, sweetheart. You know where to find me - Dave said with a smirk, trying to lighten the mood. He would've given anything to walk out of there with them.

Dave's cellmate was a quiet man. He spent most of his time staring out the barred window. Overweight, short, balding, in his fifties, with kind but somewhat vacant eyes. His gaze gave off a sense of innocent goodwill.

Dave was lying on his bed reading a book. He closed it and spoke up:

- Hey, Andrew.

- Yeah? - came the soft reply.

- Got any kids? - Dave asked sincerely.

- Two boys. Twelve and fifteen. They live with their mom and the jerk who got me into this mess - Andrew replied bitterly.

- Damn... took the wife and the money. That's rough - Dave commented - It's alright. You've got me now

- Yeah, but only for three years – said Andrew sadly.

- Strictly three! - they both burst out laughing, the sound echoing through the hallways.

After a pause, Andrew sat silently on his bunk. Something was weighing on him. Eventually, he mustered the courage to speak.

- Can I ask you something?

Dave was a bit surprised—Andrew rarely started conversations. He put his book aside and replied:

- That's already one! - he teased.
 - What? - Andrew blinked.
 - Sorry! Just a joke. My daughter Sarah always asks if she can ask something, and I say, 'That's already one!'
 - Oh! Got it - Andrew smiled. It was the first time Dave had heard him laugh. It gave him hope that maybe Andrew wasn't so lost after all.
 - That's actually clever - Andrew admitted.
 - Couldn't resist - Dave said.
 - I get it. I miss my kids too. Looks like we're in the same boat.
 - What did you want to ask? - Dave inquired, now curious.
- Andrew hesitated, choosing his words carefully.
- Well... it's kind of personal. If you don't want to answer, I understand. But ever since I found out you'd be my cellmate, I've been dying to ask... - He paused, then asked:
 - Do you regret it?
 - Whoa. That's a big one - Dave replied.
 - Sorry, man. I shouldn't have.

- No, I'm glad you asked! And that you care about my feelings. I'll tell you - Dave sat up to look Andrew in the eye.

- I've done a lot of dumb stuff in my life—especially when I was younger. I was angry at everyone: my dad, the world. But you know what? I can't undo any of that. I just hope I didn't cause any unforgivable damage.

But there's one thing I'm sure of: every mistake, every choice I made led me here. And I don't mean prison—I mean this stage of my life, the things I've lived through, my family. Everything is connected. Everything has a reason and consequence.

Andrew nodded, deeply moved.

- As for your question—do I regret it? NO! Not a single thing. Because everything I've done made me who I am. And that day... when I had to make that decision, I didn't act out of anger or revenge. I acted to protect a little girl. I felt a power in me so strong, I would've gone to hell itself to save her.

This is how it ended. I know what I did. I accept it. I'll carry that weight. But you know what? I'd make the same choice again. We can't stand by in the presence of evil. Children are the most vulnerable—they need us.

Andrew sat silently, overwhelmed. Then he stood, walked over, and held out a fist. Dave looked up, gave a half-smile, and bumped it. It meant everything.

- And yeah... what I did brought me here. And it breaks my heart to be apart from my wife and girls for three years. But when I get out... I'll be able to look them in the eye with a clear conscience. That's worth more than anything.

Three years later, Anne and the girls waited in the parking lot.

When Dave walked out, the girls ran to him. He picked both of them up and carried them across the street. Anne stood by the old Dodge, smiling.

- Finally, you're here, beautiful! - Dave shouted.

Anne walked towards him but he rushed to the Dodge first and patted it lovingly, then looked at Anne to see if she got the joke. She did—and didn't mind at all. She was just glad Dave was still himself.

- You're still such a goof - she laughed, leaping into his arms and squeezing him so hard he could barely breathe.

Their life slowly returned to normal. Anne had kept the farm in excellent shape—it was clear she had worked hard.

Days passed, and everything seemed just like before...Except for one thing. The memory of that one afternoon still clung to Dave's conscience like a leech—reminding him how close it had come to destroying his life completely.

Chapter 12

25 years later

The farm was still filled with the same tranquility as always. Perhaps even more peaceful than twenty-five years ago, as the girls had grown up and moved out. They had started their own families and had children of their own. Sarah had two daughters, and Lucie had a little boy and was expecting a baby girl. Anne and Dave mostly produced only what they needed on the farm now. They kept fewer animals, read a lot, and took long walks. Over the years, they'd had many dogs. For the past few years, two fox terrier mixes hunted rats around the house.

Birds chirped in the warmth of summer, and the soft sounds of waking nature rang like wind chimes in every direction. Dave sipped his usual morning coffee on the porch and breathed in sync with nature. He was still in awe of the precision and order he could sense from this tiny corner of the universe. He couldn't get enough of it. Anne's calm, quiet steps echoed on the wooden stairs. Dave rose from the porch bench and stepped inside to receive his morning hug.

- Good morning, my love - he said, embracing Anne and planting a soft kiss.

Anne smiled, half winked at Dave, and returned the hug. They stood wrapped in each other's arms for a few seconds. The decades of shared memories had forged a bond so strong, it felt unbreakable.

- I'm so grateful for you - Dave said.

Anne smiled and hugged him even tighter.

- I'm grateful for you too.

- I really mean it! - Dave said - With you, I can truly be who I am. I can't imagine what life would have been like without you.

Anne caressed his head and looked into his eyes.

- The pancakes are burning - she said.

Dave blinked, snapped back to the present, and then burst into laughter. He remembered—back when they first got together. Anne's mother was making pancakes, and she started hugging Dave for no special reason. Anne was looking at them and had jokingly broken that moment with that exact line. The pancakes were ready cooked and had indeed started to burn - back then.

They both laughed heartily at the memory. Dave seized the moment.

- You know what? I'll make pancakes! Want some with your morning coffee? – Dave smiled.

- You know I'm not really a breakfast person - Anne replied sweetly.

- I know. But it's been so long since we had pancakes! I'm really craving them! - Dave said with a smile.

- Alright then! I'll have one - Anne grinned like a child, holding up her left index finger.

During breakfast, they chatted quietly. The sounds of nature grew stronger, and the animals stirred as well.

Anne's thoughts turned more serious. After a long pause, she spoke. She looked into Dave's eyes and gently held his hand.

- My love... Over the years, I couldn't bring myself to bring this up. I felt you were still processing it, fighting your own inner battles. I wanted to give you time.

Dave understood what was coming and, indeed, the weight of that day still lingered in his soul. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

- Of course, go on. What's been on your mind?

- I know it's a hard topic, but I feel it's time we talk about it. We're not getting younger, and we need to make peace with certain things.

Dave nodded in agreement but remained silent, waiting for Anne's thoughts. It had been a long time since that day crossed his mind, but the burden never truly left. Anne continued, seeing he was listening closely.

- That monster, Calett—and the others like him—they have something in common.

Dave focused entirely on Anne, and in an instant, the memories of that day rushed back into his mind. He listened, curious to hear where she was going.

- Most of them... they were victims too. Abused by their fathers, relatives, or some other evil person.

Anne's anger surfaced; she had always been deeply moved by the suffering of abused children. She continued:

- I'm not excusing what they did. What they did is unforgivable!

Dave nodded. He appreciated the direction Anne was taking.

- But imagine... what if, after their first trauma, they had received help? What if they'd had protection and professional support to process those horrible experiences?

She looked deeply into Dave's green eyes.

- Of course it would have made a difference! Dave agreed - Even if they couldn't forget the horrors, help in processing them could have made a huge impact.

- Still... I see so many similarities between your childhood and Calett's.

Dave's eyes widened in confusion.

- What do you mean?

- Oh no, don't look at me like that! - Anne said quickly - Just think about it. You both had difficult childhoods. Both of your fathers abused you. And your mothers either couldn't or wouldn't do anything. And as children, you had no one to turn to!

Dave let out a long sigh before answering:

- You're right. But mine was nowhere near as horrific. My father only hit me and kept me in fear. But Calett's father... he violated him in the most evil way possible. That's much worse.

Even as he said - *only hit* - it was clear from the emotion in his eyes that it had been nothing short of daily terror.

Anne continued:

- Of course, there's a difference. But I think it's incredible that you managed to handle it and became such a good man. The opposite of your father.

- Yeah... I knew I never wanted to be like him. I still feel sorry for that little boy I once was—and all the children in the world who endure such things every day.

Dave was overcome with emotion and began to cry. Anne let him. She knew he didn't need coddling, just the release. Dave wiped his tears and blew his nose. He looked Anne in the eyes and gently held her hands.

- You have to know... I couldn't have done it without you. Who I became, who I am now—that's all because you've been my partner. Your love and sensitivity helped me overcome my anger and resentment. You brought me peace. And the fact that you gave me two such wonderful gifts—our daughters—is the greatest blessing a man could ever receive. I'm so grateful for you!

But he couldn't say more. His emotions overwhelmed him, and he sobbed on Anne's shoulder. Minutes passed before the storm settled. They were both glad they had finally talked it through. Anne was the first to snap out of the moment—there were things to do! The girls and grandkids were coming soon.

- Could you please go to town and pick up a few things? - Anne asked sweetly.

- Of course, my love. What do you need?

- I wrote them down for you here - she said, handing him a little note.

- Go to old George's herbal shop, please! That's where you'll find these things. If not, ask him to order them. Don't bother going anywhere else—if he doesn't have them, no one else will.

Old George was well over eighty. A short, bald man with a mustache, he had an incredible knowledge of the human body, having spent his whole life studying it. He worked with herbs and natural remedies. Most of his supplies he either grew himself or collected from places where they naturally occurred. Whatever the ailment, he usually knew what berry, root, or tea would help. Most of the time, his advice really worked, but he always reminded his customers: this is only a small aid—because most symptoms are just signals from the body. His way of saying - *Hey! You're doing something really wrong! Please stop!* George always tried to get to the root cause.

He himself had never taken a single pharmaceutical—only herbs.

Anne had a lot in common with old George. She loved studying plants and learning what they were good for. Every day they drank their herbal teas. Elderflower and lemongrass were their favorites. Those grew in their little garden.

Sometimes she and Dave would discuss these things. Just like yesterday morning. They had been gardening together, and Anne had brought it up again:

- I'm so happy about this little garden - Anne said with a genuine smile as she plucked a fresh lemongrass leaf. She crushed it between her fingers and smelled it - Mmmm, I love it!

- I can't even imagine buying all this from a store. Especially since you don't know how many chemicals go into those pretty-looking vegetables.

- Exactly! And it's funny—we never go to the doctors.

- That's true! We never have. I don't even know who my GP is anymore. Can't remember the last time I saw them - Dave mused.

- Really? You can't remember? - Anne asked.

- Well... what day is it today? - Dave replied.

Anne looked puzzled - Tuesday.

- Then never! - he said, and burst out laughing. It was an old joke he liked to use.

Anne laughed so hard her straw hat nearly fell off.

- I love your sense of humor! - she said.

- Well, not exactly true. I did go once—about twenty years ago—when I needed surgery for my hernia. Remember?

- Oh right! The hernia! I'd completely forgotten. Good thing they operated quickly.

- Yeah, it's been perfect since. They stitched me up well! - Dave said proudly.

- But really, this whole pharmaceutical industry... It's terrifying how much crap doctors push on people.

- You mean pharmaceutical agents - Dave corrected her - The other day, I went into the pharmacy for a bandage and couldn't believe my eyes. The place had been remodeled and expanded—it was like a department store!

- I know! I rarely go, only when absolutely necessary.

- I was shocked to see so many sick-looking people standing in line, hoping that miracle pill would make everything better.

- Don't get me started. It's an entire industry feeding on these poor folks, who think that any symptom can be cured with a pill that they swallow and from the belly it magically goes straight to the problem area in the body. Sure, sometimes meds are necessary, but I seriously doubt this much medication is really needed.

- I completely agree. Most people don't want to fix the root cause—they just treat symptoms. It's easier. But they don't think about the side effects. Then they get trapped in a vicious cycle, popping pills to counteract other pills, until they don't even know which one they're taking for what anymore. It's scary!

- It is. And that vaccine hysteria from a few years ago? - Anne recalled.

- Yeah... Carl and Trevis even stopped talking to each other over it. Remember? We had no clue what the fuss was about. Thank God we don't have a TV.

- We only saw the news online. It was so disturbing how people were being herded like cattle. They said it was some experimental vaccine.

- Oh right! Carl refused to take it, and Trevis was ranting about collective responsibility.

- What bothered me the most was the coercion. That's violence to me. If someone thinks it's great, let them take it and be happy they're protected—if that's true. But if someone doesn't want it, leave them alone! Everyone is born free, and has the right to decide what they allow into their body. No one stands above anyone else to make that decision for them.

- Exactly! - Anne agreed and carried on.

- But here's an even scarier thought! Suppose there's an industry that makes billions... Isn't it possible that some selfish people might have an interest in creating pandemics?

- Whoa, that's a tough claim - Dave said - That would be evil.

- Exactly! It would be. I am sure in history this kind of thing has never happened before—that someone creating a problem just to offer their miraculous 'solution' – said Anne ironically.

- If you take that line of thinking further -Dave added - I feel the same way about wars. No sane person wants to kill someone else just because they're of a different nationality, religion, skin color—whatever.

- It's horrifying. I just can't wrap my head around it - Anne said, shaking her head.

- But it's perfectly logical if you follow the money. Just look at who profits from wars, medicine, media brain washing. We're talking about enormous sums, massive resources. The people who trigger these things don't care about the pain and suffering they cause. They sacrifice innocent people like disposable pawns.

- It's so clear—and yet the same old hate propaganda still works. Who would've thought that in the 21st century, people could still be manipulated with such outdated methods?

- The purpose of history is to learn from it. But we keep failing - Dave said sorrowfully.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and emptied his half-liter water bottle.

- Anyway, I'll stop by old George's - Dave said. - It's been a while since I've seen him.

He was genuinely glad to have a reason to visit the wise old man. They were barely ten years apart, but Dave didn't feel or look over seventy. His grey hair was the only clue. He felt the years and all the work in his body, sure—his joints ached a little in the mornings—but nothing a bit of activity couldn't fix.

Dave rarely drove into Dodge City anymore. He didn't like going there—felt like the old magic had vanished. People used to respect each other, or at least pretended to. Now, a dull blanket of indifference hung over everything. It wasn't the city itself that had changed—the old buildings still stood, the parks and squares had been updated a bit, and Dave actually liked that.

It was the people who had changed.

Smartphones and the internet had exploded so fast that Dave felt the world was spinning beyond comprehension. As if machines had taken over.

After breakfast, he kissed Anne on the forehead and headed out—he had a mission! Anne needed things. Whatever they were. She had asked, so he would deliver. The old Dodge still ran like a charm. It was over thirty-five years old now, but it cruised among the flashy new pickups with the dignity of a war veteran, respected not for looks, but for service.

A few older folks gave Dave a knowing nod and a thumbs-up as he passed - *Now that's a truck!*

As he approached George's herbal shop, he noticed police cars blocking the road and traffic being diverted. At first, he thought it might be a crime scene. But then he saw the crowd and the banners. The rising volume of music also hinted at some kind of event.

As he drove past the officer directing traffic, he glanced toward the crowd. Usually, he wouldn't have cared who was gathering and why—but this time the *colors* were so loud and blinding it was impossible to ignore. Like a parrot in a mating dance screaming - **LOOK AT ME!**

Then he saw it—and it hit him all at once.

Just a few seconds... but it was enough.

The signs. The half-naked people. Men in leather thongs, high heels, lipstick. And there, on the stage—a little boy. No more than ten. Bright red lipstick, a skirt, posing and being photographed.

Around him, men dressed like dogs, barking on all fours with leather masks and collars.

Dave felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. He almost swerved off the road—yanked the wheel at the last second with a squeal of tires. A nearby cop turned, alarmed, but seeing no danger, looked away.

What he *couldn't* see was Dave's storm of thoughts.

He felt overwhelming sorrow for the child... and pure rage toward the parents. In Dave's mind, they belonged in a psychiatric ward. And the doctors who pumped these kids full of hormones and performed sex changes? They should be in prison. For life.

It reminded Dave of Mengele's monstrous experiments.

He'd seen clips of this online. He wasn't ignorant—living on a farm didn't mean living under a rock. He had always been deeply interested in the world. Always asking: *Why?* What's *really* going on?

He saw global patterns, threads of influence—things he could only really talk about with Anne. Bringing them up around others just got him labeled a - conspiracy theorist - But he didn't care. Dave was the kind of man who'd definitely choose the red pill in *The Matrix*—however painful the truth was, he needed to know.

He had strong opinions about this new - liberal - wave. He believed they preached tolerance but rejected anyone who thought differently. Disagree, and you were suddenly a *nazi*, a *bigot*. Dave could not stand that double standard.

To him, sexuality was a private matter.

He knew and respected people who were different. He didn't care about race, religion, sexual orientation—only about a person's actions.

But what he saw now? This wasn't about love or acceptance. It was *propaganda*—perverse, manipulative, and worst of all, targeting children. Destabilizing them. Crushing innocence. Undermining the sanctity of childhood and family.

And that was Dave's line. He would always defend children's innocence.

He wasn't bigoted. Just grounded.

He'd even had a few gay friends. Once or twice, someone made a move on him. He didn't overreact—just shut it down politely but firmly. A single gesture, a head shake was enough. Unmistakeable.

But this... parade... was different. He could feel it. A twisted battle for hearts and minds—especially the young. Like a final war where everything will be decided and the dark side went full in.

Then something shifted.

A wave of warmth washed over Dave's soul.

Across the street, he spotted a line of silent protestors. Only adults. Hundreds of them, dressed in white. Standing hand in hand, looking skyward.

No shouting. No slogans. Just quiet strength and compassion.

And yet their presence was *powerful*. A force of pure, loving resistance. It radiated.

Dave felt it—deeply.

A revolution had begun. One that couldn't be stopped. One that would sweep across the world with the power of creation itself.

These thoughts overwhelmed Dave—he felt almost euphoric.

The quiet shadows between tall buildings gave way to a bright corner, where sudden sunlight hit his eyes and made him squint. He quickly turned his head. The sharp transition jolted him back to reality—to his actual mission. Anne had sent him here for a reason.

Just a few blocks down, the street was peaceful again. This was the *real* Dodge City feel. A calm Saturday morning buzz filled the air. People strolled, shopped, and greeted each other kindly.

This was what Dave loved. This gave him hope.

After the chaos a few blocks away, this scene grounded him. Friendly faces, quiet conversations. Harmony.

He found a parking spot easily on the shaded side of the street. Adjusted the truck perfectly—he took care not to sticking out into the road, always tried to avoid inconveniencing others, and expected the same in return. He couldn't stand selfish parking. Jokingly, he used to say:

- I'm a farmer, but that guy's a real asshole.

Anne disliked cursing and always reminded him when he said – *f*cking...!* —by calmly adding – *What-ing?* - Dave already anticipated it and smiled. He accepted that she was right, of course. Anne knew that was it, just one word to release his anger. Then he is calm again, and would not curse. He was smarter than that.

A final check in the mirror, satisfied, he turned off the V8 engine. The old beast still purred like a lion. He stepped out and took a deep breath. The smells from the nearby dinery hit him.

He inhaled again. Long and deep.

It made him hungry.

He smiled. *Would be nice if Anne were here too...* They could grab breakfast together—*well, breakfast for him, coffee for Anne. Maybe next week*, he thought.

He strolled toward the herbal shop with a light step. Inside, it wasn't crowded—he quickly got everything Anne had listed. A short, warm chat with wise old George, then Dave walked back like a proud boy sent on his first solo errand.

Mission accomplished.

Almost back at the Dodge, he pulled out his keys when he passed a young mother wiping her child's mouth with a beautiful cream-colored silk handkerchief.

She accidentally dropped it.

Dave *immediately* turned and bent down to pick it up—*manners were sacred to him*. There was never a question of *not* picking it up. But as he stood back up, pain shot through his left knee. He winced.

Still, he'd do it again a thousand times. With a smile, he turned to the woman to hand it back...

And then it happened. Something in him froze. Time bent. His body was there, but his mind was somewhere else.

His eyes locked on the woman's necklace—a small angel-shaped pendant—one that had been burned into his memory nearly thirty years ago. On a day unlike any other. A day he'd never forgotten.

The first time he saw it, it was lying in muddy dirt. Torn from a little girl's neck in a violent struggle. Buried by evil. Almost lost forever.

Now it shone again.

Dave's heart pounded so loud he felt it in his throat.

It was her. Nancie.

She recognized him too—this was the giant with the pure eyes, the one who had saved her. Nancie had buried that memory deep, never fully understood what happened, or rather *what could have happened*—until now. She felt warmth in her heart and blush on her face.

She looked at her children with overflowing love—then threw her arms around Dave's neck, sobbing. Just like before, she pressed her face to his right shoulder. Thirty years later. The exact same gesture.

Her children stood silently, watching. Dave gently returned the embrace.

A full minute passed.

He had *never* felt anything like this. A gratitude beyond words. For nearly three decades he had carried the weight of that day without ever knowing what became of her. No validation—until now.

This moment... was his reward.

Not that he had expected one. But it came anyway.

The self-sacrifice... had not been in vain.

A wave of peace washed over him—so deep it felt like he might lift off the ground. Float.

Nancie let go and took her children's hands. A boy and a girl—maybe five and seven. Beautiful, well-behaved kids. They looked up at the big man, silently.

She didn't speak either.

She just gazed into Dave's green eyes. As if looking at a messiah.

And he looked back. Happy to see her well. Thriving. Loved.

A few more seconds passed. Neither said a word—none were needed.

Then Nancie and the children quietly walked away.

Dave heard the boy's voice, curious:

- Mom, who was that man?

- An old friend, sweetheart...- she replied softly.

Dave sat in the truck, still holding the steering wheel with both hands. Teardrops streamed down his cheeks. He had always hoped for something like this, deep down. A sign. A moment. Now he had it.

He didn't see himself as perfect. Or a saint. But he did see himself as *true*.

That was enough.

He started the engine and drove home, choosing a different route to avoid the earlier madness. This peace... he wouldn't let anything take it away.

Anne waited on the porch.

Her eyes were full of warmth and love. She *loved* seeing him come home—because *home* was where he belonged. With her. Especially after their deep conversation this morning. It had knocked down a wall between them.

- Did you have any luck? - she called.

- Got everything you asked for! - Dave replied proudly.

The scent of delicious vegetable reached him even before stepping inside.

- Wow! That smells amazing!

Anne handed him a big mug of honey-lemon tea.

- Here, love. Just how you like it.

Dave kissed her and took a sip.

- When are the kids getting here? - he asked eagerly.

- Sarah just called—they're on the way. Lucie's already en route. Took some effort with the little ones, but they made it.

Dave sat down, sipped his tea, and stared across the fields.

- Mmm... Perfect - he said.

- Did you run into anyone in town? - Anne asked from the kitchen.

- Just an old friend. Nancie. And her two beautiful children.

Anne didn't ask any more. She didn't need to.

It was all written on Dave's face.

His eyes were clear. Peaceful.

She sat beside him, laid her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her and took another sip.

Then leaned back and watched the clouds drift by.

He wished that moment would last forever.

Epilogue

This book was not written for profit, but out of love and goodwill. It does not draw from personal experience, but is a product of imagination—therefore, all characters are fictional. Any resemblance to real people may stem from the reader's own imagination.

It is dedicated to those who feel the weight of protecting children. Every child has the right to grow up in love and safety! This is one of our most important missions as adults. Only through this can they become pure-hearted, genuine human beings.

I need to mention one more transformation—something I only began to truly understand and live by after finishing the book. It is the complete renunciation of eating meat.

Changing such a deeply rooted habit after forty-three years is not easy, especially one so widely accepted by society. Yet, as consciousness rises to higher levels, the idea of taking the life of a sentient being for nourishment becomes incompatible with the soul's inner truth.

No one can be forced onto this path—just as nothing in life can be forced. Every soul enters this world free, guided by its own will. As each consciousness evolves, the yearning for true freedom will awaken, and humanity will begin to see the wrongful, sinful patterns that have held it captive for millennia—patterns created by the dark architects of distorted social norms.

From the depths of my heart, I wish for this great awakening of consciousness to sweep across the Earth.

It is essential that an awakening process begins—so that, united in love, we can turn life into a wonderful experience!

I hope you found thoughts or reflections in this story that resonated with you—maybe it sparked something that makes your life better or more beautiful, or perhaps gave validation to a difficult decision you once had to make.

If you've read it, please pass it on with love to someone whose soul might be touched by it.

The World Lives in Me

*The world lives in me — not outside, not afar,
The present springs up from my soul's inner star.
In silence I shape it — through actions and voice,
And dream into being a purer world by choice.*

*With love's sacred flame I light hearts in the night,
I guard what is pure through the storm and the quiet.
My honor's a stone that no time can erode,
A promise I speak becomes law, becomes code.*

*I need not be seen — no badge on my sleeve,
But a compass within that will never deceive.
I kneel to no falsehood this world may bestow,
My heart, every day, to the Maker will grow.*

*If flowers arise where my footprints remain,
Then I know that my hope was not planted in vain.
And when I arrive at the end of my quest,
I'll smile and say: I lived. I loved. I gave my best.*

www.bakosart.com

bakos-art@hotmail.com