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**The**  
**Sodium**  
**WAR**





**The**  
**Sodium**  
**WAR**

**NATHAN MERRITT**

AutumnDay Publishing

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ISBN: 978-1-7370799-2-7 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-7370799-0-3 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-7370799-1-0 (ebook)

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Cover Photo by Cameron McPhee on Unsplash

Cover Design by Nathan Merritt

Insert Painting: *The Vision of Saint Eustace, Other Scenes with Tests of His Faith Beyond* by Maarten de Vos, 1601 (public domain)

Author website: [NateMerritt.com](http://NateMerritt.com)

Printed in the United States of America

AutumnDay Publishing

Spokane, WA

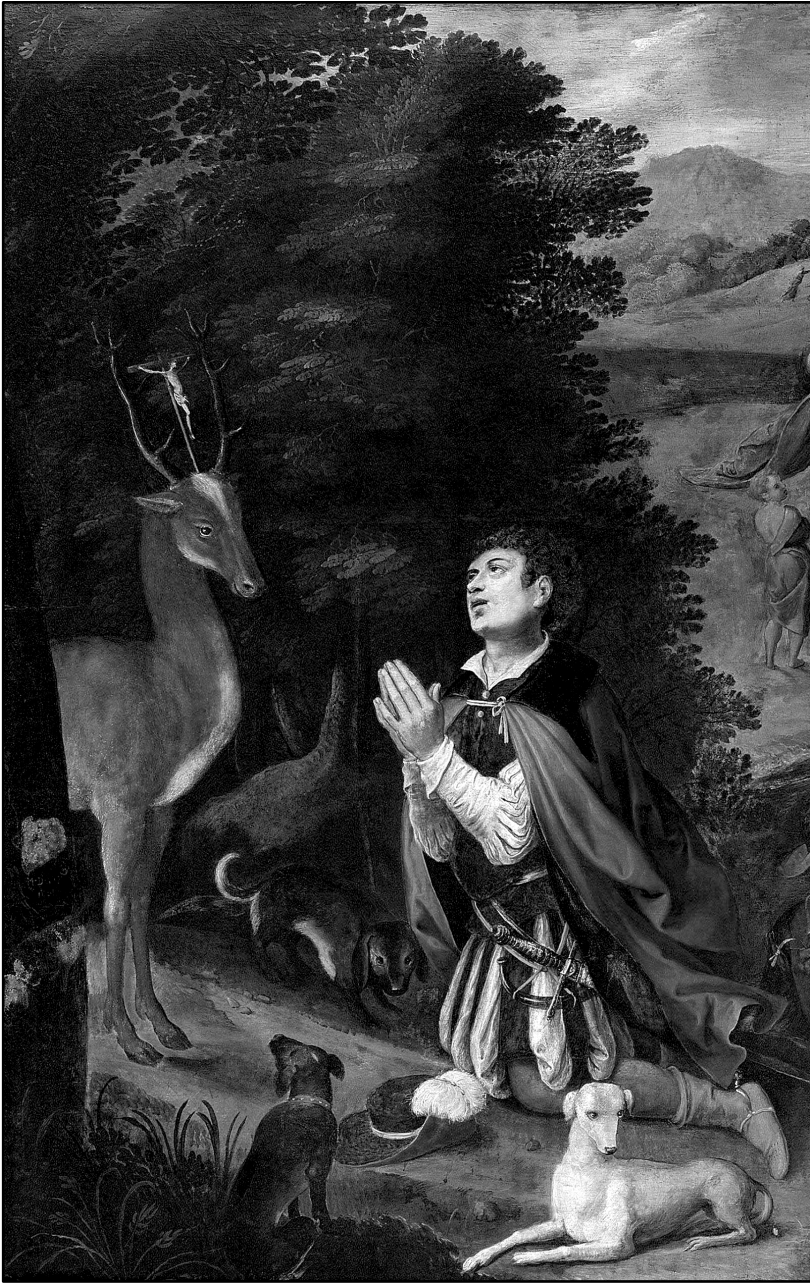
*For Athena, my eternal soulmate and best friend.*



*A new commandment I give unto you,  
That ye love one another;  
as I have loved you,  
that ye also love one another.*

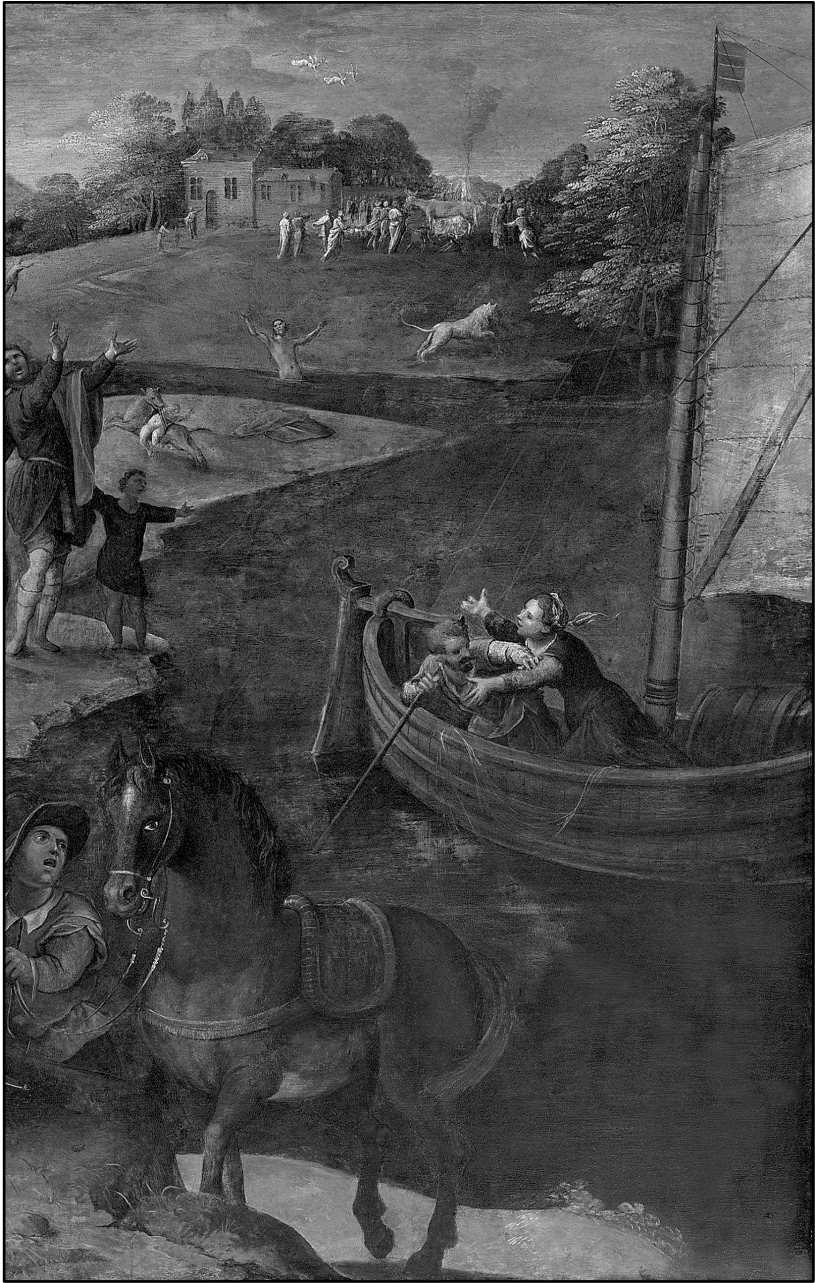
*By this shall all men know  
that ye are my disciples,  
if ye have love one to another.*

*—Jesus the Christ*



*The Vision of Saint Eustace, Other Scenes with Tests of His Faith Beyond*





Painted by Maarten de Vos, 1601



# Preface

**A**fter the string of mass shootings across the United States in August 2019, my wife challenged me with writing a screenplay concerning the alarming rate of gun violence in America. She even had the idea of enumerating the casualties in the end credits if it were made into a film.

Over the next month of brainstorming, I realized that the story that I wanted to tell wouldn't necessarily be about gun violence but racism, which is a significant motivator for hate crimes. Instead of debating gun control and alienating either half of the country, I wanted to share a story that could inspire empathy and a love for others.

By December 2019, I had organized sequence notes for the entire story. At one point, the project consisted of a trilogy of screenplays, but it evolved into a novel with three parts. I felt the story was important enough that everyone should read it—not just a handful of film producers.

The real-life events of Covid-19, displays of systematic racism, political upheaval, and rioting eerily resembled plot points that I had already devised for the story, and these motivated me to persevere with the project.

Now, in the Spring of 2021, as the novel nears completion, the nation is in mourning after more mass shootings and ongoing racial tension. My

hope is that this story may spread a little more love and peace. Please, be kind to everyone around you.

If you hear racist speech, no matter how insignificant or harmless it may seem, please teach the person that it does hurt and that it perpetuates division. Find a way to heal.

Please, do what you can to fight racism in the United States: 1) help close the racial wage and wealth gap; 2) make quality healthcare accessible and affordable to everyone; 3) support equitable school funding that doesn't rely on property tax as the primary source for education; 4) advocate for justice system reform with equal sentence terms, felony disenfranchisement rates, and fair treatment between races; 5) stop mortgage discrimination and property appreciation inequality; and 6) stand up to any other racial inequality you find. We can do this together.

I know that this is a controversial story. I am not proposing that white supremacy is as widespread as outlined in the book. It is regarded as a fringe movement, and my intention is that we stay vigilant in keeping it out of government and mainstream society. I do not support the racial slurs and ideologies depicted in the story—they are included as a means of creating awareness to the harm that they can cause.

I have a deep love for the state of Texas and for the people that are there, my family, and my friends. This is a work of fiction. Places and characters are not based on real locations or people.

—Nathan Merritt

# Part One



## Chapter One

# Imminent Storm

Rafe watched his young mother tape up the inside of their living room windows, even though his science teacher had told him it was a bad idea. Instead of shattering into smaller pieces of glass, the windows might fracture into large, deadly shards that could hurtle across the room.

“Whatever you do,” the well-spoken black teacher, Mr. Fourier, had said earlier that day, “make sure you don’t tape up your windows or stand next to a bulging door during the hurricane tonight. Doing those things can hurt you.” He had even used illustrated overhead projections to make his point clear.

The small, seven-year-old Rafe looked around his living room and imagined a bloody, cracked windowpane lodged into the wall behind him. It was a frightening image, but he didn’t dare mention the concern to his mother as she continued stretching the tape across the glass.

Unfortunately, he was bound by his Southern upbringing to *respect his elders*—the thought of correcting his mother was too terrifying. Tiny for his age, all he could do was watch the crime scene unfold and imagine how he might be a silent, powerless accessory to murder.

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“Rafe,” his mother, Edith, asked, “can you bring me another roll of tape? I believe there’s one in the kitchen, in a paper sack.” Even though it was 2003, his middle-aged mother seemed perfectly content living with all the norms of the 1950s. Her curly, blonde hair was short, and she wore a floral, pleated dress that came down to her knees.

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded and dutifully returned, visibly anxious, knowing that the duct tape he was holding could be in the hands of the investigative police in the days to come. He stood next to her, immovable, like a robot that had been given conflicting lines of code to process, and he was afraid that sparks would soon fly from his ears. *At least that’s what happens on TV*, he thought.

She applied another strip of tape and said, “Alright, I think we’re just about done.” It was then that she finally looked at the sweaty, pale boy and asked, “Are you okay?”

He nodded sheepishly, and his perfectly combed, blond hair didn’t move at all. His mother frequently reminded him that she liked it that way.

“How was school today?”

Outside, dark clouds had already formed, and a few drops of rain began to fall. As the pecan trees swayed in the wind, Rafe thought he saw the wheelbarrow in the yard move just a little. Looking at the scene reminded him of something else the teacher had taught that day.

“Mr. Fourier showed us what happens when you light a balloon on fire.”

“Really?” His mother quickly whipped her head around as if she had caught someone red-handed. “Did *that man* light a fire in the classroom?”

“No, we went outside this morning. It was sunny.”

Deflated, she returned to inspect her work. “So, what happened? Did it pop?” she asked, closing the curtains. The deed was done, and there was nothing he could do to rectify the situation.



Now beside himself, Rafe sat on a small storage bench to watch his mother move furniture away from the windows. He wondered if that afternoon might be the last time he would see her alive because of the accident that was bound to happen. He tried to memorize every second of their final moments together.

“Did it pop, Rafe?”

“Yes,” he replied, almost unsure of himself, “but the water balloons took a lot longer because the water *absorbed* all the heat.” He liked saying the new word he had learned in class that day.

Lifting a heavy chair, she muttered, “I wonder why *that man* had you playing with balloons. Surely, there are other things to learn.”

Rafe had to convey the storm’s gravity, but he was still timid. “Mr. Fourier wanted to show us why we’re having this hurricane. He said that the ocean is taking a lot of the sun’s heat, and that’s what makes bad weather happen.”

“Oh, I see.” She didn’t seem fazed at all by the science teacher’s lesson or remotely concerned about their *impending doom*.

For the rest of the night, Rafe kept vigilant in his duty to make sure nobody entered the potential crime scene. During dinner, he looked toward the living room every time he heard a crack of thunder, expecting the worst. The storm raged on, though, as the heavy rain pummeled their home.

RAFE AWOKE TO HIS MOTHER lifting him with his blanket out of bed in the middle of the night. A faint light came from the hallway, so he could barely see. He knew it was her, though, by the sound of her soft voice.

“It’s okay, dear. We’re going to sleep in my room tonight.”

She quickly walked down the hallway, shielding his face from his father’s flashlight, and made it to the bedroom. Being carried always strengthened his faith in her and the love that bound them.

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For as long as Rafe could remember, there was always a plan in place for a hurricane. His mother's closet was in the middle of the house and the furthest away from any windows.

"Is he okay?" his father asked in the dark.

His mother softly replied, "I think he went back to sleep."

As the thunder roared and the wind howled, they huddled on the closet floor. Since his mother was still holding him in her arms, he felt the door close with his toes. The final step of security, the faint sound of the latch, could barely be heard over the horrendous destruction outside.

"Is everything off?" she asked.

"Yeah," his father responded, "I checked the gas, electricity, and water. So, we should be alright."

"Mom?"

"Yeah, sweetie?"

"Are we going to drown?" He was petrified. All he could think about was the house being destroyed under the weight of the water outside, like the balloons popping in class. He thought about the taped windows cutting the walls and the doors exploding. And what made it worse was that the darkness of the closet amplified all of his fears.

His father's voice was low enough that Rafe couldn't tell where he was sitting. "Don't worry, Son. Everything will be fine."

It was then that his mother hummed the most beautiful song for him. He had heard it many times before, and he couldn't tell if she was humming just for him or the whole family. The love behind the angelic notes penetrated every fear and sank deep into his heart as he closed his eyes and drifted off peacefully.

## Chapter Two

# But a Sword

(16 Years Later)

All Rafe could do was watch Bri play with her curly red hair instead of focus on the task at hand. He even held the menu in front of him as a last-minute shield in case she happened to glance at him. After several months of dating, she was still that intoxicating.

Behind her, a lamp with the perfect color temperature gave her just the right glow, and Rafe moved in his booth seat a little to find the right angle to take a mental picture of her.

“Alright, I think I’ve got it,” she said with a small chuckle. “You?”

It was then that she finally looked up, and he melted, completely smitten by her beautiful blue eyes and freckles.

“What’s so funny?” he asked as an automatic defense mechanism.

She looked around at the small Mexican diner and admitted while leaning in, “Whenever I got a veggie burger as a kid, they always assumed that my mom had ordered it. I’m sure I’ve confused a lot of waiters in my day.”

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Rafe found her treasured menu item at the bottom of the page, and after checking to see if it was within budget, he joked, “Well, if I order the same thing, then the poor guy won’t have to worry.”

“Have you ever had one?”

“Nope. First time for everything, I guess.” He quickly scanned a few side dishes on the menu should the vegetable atrocity not sit well with him. In his mind, it was downright un-American to eat such a thing. Right now, though, a side dish would be a luxury.

“Wonderful! They’re amazing! I hope you like it!” She smiled in such a way that cemented the whole ordeal, and he couldn’t resist it.

The little diner was crowded and noisy, so Rafe didn’t hear his phone ring. Although they had reached an agreement about their order, the only way he could relieve his anxiety about the burger was to study the image design of Mexican paintings on the walls.

“Is that your phone?” Bri asked.

He reached into his pocket, looked at the screen, and declined the call as if nothing had happened.

She continued amiably, “Who was it? You can take it if you like. I don’t mind.”

“Oh, it was my mom,” he responded, slightly bitter. For him, the mood had changed. Instead of being present with the love of his life, he was reminded of his mother’s tendencies.

Bri sat up and genuinely asked, “How is she doing? I haven’t talked to her in a while.”

“The same as always, I guess—”

Across the room, a group of men at a table had grown impatient, and one of them shouted at the waiter, “Hey *beaner*, can we get some service over here?”

The sole waiter in the small diner was a slow-moving, elderly Hispanic man. “Yes, sir. One moment, please,” he managed as he finished serving his current table.

Bri turned to Rafe as if she wanted to start a war. She wore her moral compass around her neck as if it guided every single action, and he knew that she couldn’t let the racial slur go unchecked. They had been down this road before.

As soon as she edged toward the end of the booth seat, Rafe whispered, “Don’t worry about it. Just let it go.”

“I can’t do that. That man needs to be called out.”

“Why? It’s not going to do any good. Just look at him. He’s probably not going to change.” The man across the room was a tall, rugged cowboy, and Rafe wanted to avoid any confrontation with him.

Bri stood up right away. “Sir, please apologize to the waiter.” The noisy diner quieted down, and most of the patrons stopped to watch.

“Why?” the tall man asked. “Are you calling me a racist?”

Rafe tried to tap her foot, but she was too far away; talking about all of this was horribly awkward. But of course, if any of those gentlemen approached Bri to hurt her, that would be a different story. He understood that kind of fight.

“No, I’m just asking you to apologize,” she responded calmly.

The waiter humbly interjected, “Really, ma’am, it’s no trouble at all.” He approached the new table with pen and paper in hand, ready to take the orders.

“Good! Because I’m not a racist,” the tall gentleman declared.

“How you choose to identify yourself is your prerogative. I’m just calling you out on your actions. Why do you want to offend this person?” Bri asked. The duel was getting more and more awkward with each new volley.

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“Well,” the cowboy replied as he looked at the waiter, “it seems he doesn’t take any offense, so it’s not offensive—”

“I’m offended,” she quickly rebuked.

The towering man then slowly walked up to Bri, and the closer he came, the tighter Rafe’s fists clenched as he sat at the table. After all these years, Rafe still had a small frame, but he was very trim and athletic. He thought about running out the door with Bri in his arms to escape the situation, but he figured that they would inevitably return to a similar confrontation again.

The small restaurant was silent, and all eyes were on Bri and the rugged cowboy that approached her. If someone in the room were willing to fight against racism, they could now vicariously take up the mantle through her. Many phones were already recording and live streaming the standoff.

“But you’re white,” the man argued, now standing two feet away from her. At this, Rafe slowly rose with both fists seemingly glued to the table.

“I’m offended as a human being,” Bri stated as she stared the tall man straight in the eye. A slice of the current state of America, the two squared off like a brewing storm.

Quickly breaking the stare-down, the cowboy noticed Rafe’s white knuckles that were ready to strike. The man unexpectedly turned around to face the waiter and repented, “I’m sorry for what I said. There was no need for me to be mean. I’m sorry.”

With that, the tall man tipped his hat toward Bri with a sheepish smile and returned to his table. A crisis was averted, and a different atmosphere fell over the diner. A few more *pleases* and *thank-yous* were heard, people smiled a little more, and the waiter stood a little taller.

WHEN THEY FINALLY REACHED the motel parking lot in his truck, Rafe couldn't ignore his error anymore. "I'm sorry about that back there. You were right."

Bri opened her passenger door and playfully asked, "About the burger or the guy who was very rude?" Before he could say anything, she closed the door, leaned through the open window, and teased, "Don't worry about it. I usually am."

Her smile was disarming, and in the moonlight, he could do nothing but admire her. He truly aspired to be more passionate and courageous like her but felt that he couldn't possibly attain that, even after several lifetimes.

As he offered no reply other than a chuckle, she asked, "So, tomorrow at 4 AM then?"

"Yeah, we need to head out early," he answered, looking at the New Mexico desert landscape with anticipation. "I appreciate you doing this for me. Hopefully, you can get enough sleep." By the time he had finished speaking, she had already set an alarm on her phone.

While scanning her texts, she returned, "Not a problem," and gave him a peck on the cheek. "It looks like the Townsend hearing was stalled. I may need to call in and help."

"It never ends, does it?" He no longer had her attention, and she was off on one of her crusades.

As they walked toward her motel-room door, she replied, "No, not really." Her tone was both disheartened and energized at the same time.

A few years younger than Rafe, Bri was a natural-born spitfire reporter. She had the uncanny gift of yanking out the truth and presenting it in a way that anyone could understand. This was her oxygen. You knew that as soon as she adjusted her glasses, she was trying to look past whatever you may have just told her and look right into your soul.

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When he reached his own motel-room door, which was next to hers, he couldn't help but be inspired by her and her dedication to her craft. He watched her read the latest on the Townsend hearing, and he assumed it was political. To him, it didn't matter, but he knew it should.

“Well, goodnight then,” he said as a reminder of his presence.

“Goodnight,” she politely replied, not lifting her phone-bound gaze as she closed the door behind her.

Rafe couldn't close his door, though, as there was too much promise in the vast New Mexico desert, beautifully lit by the early winter moon. Everything was perfect.



## Chapter Three

# Under a Bushel

To the south, in a little town called Sodium, Texas, Rebah stood at her kitchen sink. She was content washing dishes, as it was a form of therapy for her. Although she was in her mid-thirties, the many years of being an elementary teacher had dragged across her worn-out face.

This was her time to unwind and think about the day, to assess if she could have done anything differently as a teacher.

She often muttered, “Yep, I need to look up the Spanish word for that” or “I’ve got to make copies of that worksheet.” And the only way she could concentrate was by listening to church hymns on a little CD player that Jim bought for her many years before.

At times, Rebah would mention a boy’s name in her planning, and Jim would bark out from the living room, “Who’s Tomás?”

“Oh, he’s one of my students,” she would say, followed by an update with ecstatic enthusiasm. “He’s actually reading now!”

Without another word, Jim would usually continue watching the crime-heavy news on TV and not pay her any more attention.

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Unfortunately, the dishwashing session ended abruptly, and she removed her apron. There wasn't another item to clean in the kitchen, the CD had stopped, and it was time to move on. Rebah found herself peering into the dark living room, longing for something, as the kitchen was the only lit room in the house.

Holding a laundry basket, she walked down the upstairs hallway and knocked on her son's bedroom door. "Sam, are you hungry? I have your dinner on the stove if you're hungry."

Calling out his name again through the cheap wooden separator was fruitless. When she opened the door, she drew a heavy sigh—he had already left for the night. A quick scan of his room revealed dirty laundry and broken toys on the floor, trash strewn about, and an open window that let in the devastation of an evening downpour. She promptly closed it with a shiver.

From the outside, the tiny house on the outskirts of town was now dark except for Sam's room. As Rebah stood at the window on the second floor, she appeared like a beacon as blackness covered the landscape for miles.

After an exhale, the mother slowly dialed a number on her phone. "Hey, Jim—" she started, already broken.

The voice on the other end was loud and abusive, but she kept the phone to her ear.

As soon as there was a break in the senseless scolding, she meekly said, "I'm sorry to call you. Is Sam at your place tonight?"

The reply was equally berating, and she ended the call, thanking him for his time and watching Samuel. She then helplessly sank down into the puddle of water at the base of the window, consigned to another evening alone.

"Father in Heaven," she whispered, "please watch over my boy." Somehow, knowing that her small prayer was at least heard was comforting.

## Chapter Four

# Placidus

**T**he bullet pierced the flesh but missed the soul. As the body fell to the earth, the sky darkened, and it began to drizzle again. There was no intent for remorse or even a thought for any eulogy. No words were uttered. A father had just died—and the spirit lived.

BEFORE PULLING THE TRIGGER, Rafe had the mule deer's neck in the scope's crosshairs. He knew he wasn't skilled enough to shoot the head, especially with the deer's quick, unpredictable movements, and he wasn't positioned correctly to aim for the small target area of the heart.

There were limitations, though. If the shot were too low on the neck, the buck would probably take off and eventually die a slow, painful death.

Rafe looked up at the early morning overcast sky across the New Mexico desert and noticed that the wind was picking up. The magnificent animal would soon scamper away, and he knew that by just watching it graze, the deer could hear the second hand of his wristwatch move. It was otherworldly like that.

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Through the scope, he marveled at its dark eyes, and he thought about how his father took him hunting when he was ten.

HOURS BEFORE SUNRISE, the only thing the preadolescent Rafe could see was the beam from his father's flashlight sporadically bouncing all over the grass. His father was looking for something. Unfortunately, the numerous tall trees blocked out the moonlight, and all the boy could think about was the howling wind and the creaking trees that seemed to engulf them.

"Okay, now get on up in this tree," his father softly commanded in a Southern accent. The small tree before them had low branches for climbing, and it would serve as a decent perch for the young hunter. "I'll hand you the gun when you're ready."

"Yes, sir." He reached for a few branches to hoist himself up and was annoyed at how his father's flashlight created shadows that made it harder to see where he needed to go. Finally, after climbing about eight feet from the ground, the boy said, "Okay, I'm ready," and reached down for the weapon.

His father had dark brown eyes and always sported a full graying beard. Rafe always thought it was because he was hiding a scar or something interesting on his face, but the truth never came out. More of a listener, his father only spoke up if Rafe needed guidance or help moving forward.

"Now, I'm fixin' to go this way," he said, "so whatever you do, don't aim in that direction. Okay?"

The boy looked in the direction his father had pointed, but it all looked the same. It was a dense forest at night. He quickly nodded with his eyes closed because the flashlight was aimed right below his face and resolved that anything to his left would be off-limits.

When he heard his father leave, he was finally able to open his eyes. "Bye, Dad."

“Yep,” his father whispered.

All Rafe could see was the flashlight beam getting fainter as the silhouette of a man walked stealthily toward his own tree like a deer himself. Rafe was soon alone, holding a 20-gauge shotgun for his imagination.

Every sound was amplified like a choir of nightmares. The chirps, the howling wind whipping through the creaking branches, the soft footsteps on dry leaves below, and the incessant clawing on bark all took center stage in his mind.

After shifting around in the tree multiple times, trying to find any of these creatures, he found himself uncertain which way his father had gone. He didn't dare lift his gun. Shadows moved in every direction. Some were small and were probably branches or bushes, but others he couldn't make out.

Suddenly, he noticed a massive shadow that looked like a bear slowly approaching his tree. He couldn't move. He couldn't even blink.

In an instant, he closed his eyes, the darkness being almost no different than before, and he said the quickest prayer he could. When he uttered his final plea and opened his eyes, the beast was gone. The moon shone a little brighter on the ground below, and the little boy sighed in relief.

NOW YEARS LATER, Rafe looked at the deer's neck through the scope and wondered if what he had seen that one night might have also been a deer. Perhaps. There was no way of finding out.

He smiled, knowing that all those fears from his childhood were long gone, and he pulled the trigger. The great buck fell, and he imagined the sound of it.

Fortunately, Rafe was able to drive his truck right up to the magnificent animal. He was so excited that he flew out of the vehicle with his video camera, leaving the engine running and the driver-side door open.

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As he danced around the dead animal, composing dramatic, handheld shots, Bri stayed in the warm truck, having leaned over and closed his door as soon as he left. He could shoot still-life objects for hours, continually searching for an image design that spoke to him, but he knew that he could only have his girlfriend for a short time. She had to get back as soon as possible.

Somehow, remembering that night with his father brought out his Southern drawl, and he called out to her, “It’s fixin’ to rain. We gotta do this.”

When she finally arrived at the corpse, carrying the camera tripod and audio equipment, she shook her head with a chuckle at how easily he had slipped into his old manner of speaking. “Fixin’ to, huh?” she teased as if to confirm an apparent return to his childhood.

“Well, some things just remind me of my dad.” He admired the deer and wondered what a hunting trip with his father would be like now. *What kind of conversations would we have? Would my dad be proud of me?* Questions and fantasies swam around his head as he stared at the bloody scene.

Bri surveyed the rocky brush terrain near Placid, New Mexico, surrounded by misty mountains in every direction. “Alright, so where do you want me?”

“It’s all about the background,” he replied as he glanced behind himself. While pointing at a flat rock in the ground, he proposed, “So, how about over there?” Already kneeling next to the deer, he imagined how the whole story would edit together.

She then moved the camera and tripod toward the desired location and made a few manual adjustments. Rafe was never comfortable in front of the camera, but somehow holding the head of a dead deer by the antlers put him at ease.

“I’m thinking a zoom out from the head to a medium-wide should be good,” he said, brimming.

Without realizing it, Bri glanced at the overcast sky to witness the unavoidable signs of what was to come and tucked a few strands of her curly red hair under her sweater hood. She had survived without any online communication for almost four hours and was now visibly eager to return to civilization. “And after this, we’re done, right?”

“Yep. This is the last shot,” Rafe confirmed, turning the animal’s neck so that it was facing the lens.

Bri looked up from the viewfinder and protested, “Don’t you want to close its eyes? It’s freaking me out!”

“No. I think they’ll grab people’s attention.”

After a few more camera adjustments, she said, “Alright, I’m rolling.”

Ecstatic that his video ended with an actual kill and that he documented the whole hunt successfully, he began the final segment.

“And so, to sum up, we had a couple of things going for us.” Rafe held up his gun and taught, “We had top-quality optics, we found some tracks near this small pond, and we relied on the rut, which is a time when the mule deer acts abnormally and is less cautious.”

It was then that his mind wandered off. He thought about the weight of the whole ordeal and how he might hoist the magnificent animal onto his truck. *It’s a burden, but it’s worth it*, he thought to himself.

“Well, folks,” he continued, “that’ll have to do for this week’s episode, so remember to plan, be patient, and keep your eyes peeled. This is Rafe Davidson. Until next time!”

As soon as they had packed the camera and hunting gear, it started to rain, and he tried to lift the deer but couldn’t. “Would you be willing to

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help me with this?” he asked Bri, realizing he couldn’t handle the cumbersome task alone.

She had already turned on her phone to engage in the morning’s headlines, texting with one hand and using the other to shield the device from the sudden downpour. Her current crusades were so vital that she was unaware of how soaked she had quickly become. “This rain is something else, huh?”

While Rafe hastily shifted some of the equipment toward the cab to make room for the new burden, he noticed Bri standing in the rain, seemingly unaffected, as she continued to text. “Alright, do you want the head or bottom?” he inquired.

She pocketed the phone. “Which one’s lighter?”

“It’s all the same.”

“Well, I’m not touching that head,” she declared.

The mule deer was unnaturally heavy, but they finally managed to hoist it onto the bed together. Unfortunately, Bri came away from the ordeal with blood smeared across her chest.

Disgusted, she shrieked, “Gross! Now I need to change my sweater.”

“If you wait long enough, the rain will wash it out,” Rafe said as a sincere and practical gesture. But as soon as she gave him a smirk, he backpedaled. “Of course, you can wear my jacket that’s in the cab if you want—”

“Nope, I’ll be fine. I came prepared for anything, including being bloodied-up, apparently.” The rain continued to fall, and she quickly flew into the cab to find a suitable remedy.

As Rafe moved the buck closer to the cab so that he could close the gate, he found himself transfixed by the animal’s dark eyes, as if he were staring into a beautiful night sky. There was a connection and an



overwhelming feeling of peace, even while standing in the cold rain, that he couldn't wrap his mind around.

Bri opened the cab window and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he finally returned, coming out of a trance.

Engrossed in her phone, she continued voraciously consuming a massive amount of information and responding to texts. Suddenly, she exclaimed, "My phone's blowing up!"



## Chapter Five

# Unhinged

Samuel, Rebah's only child, knew what he was doing was right; *It's what God wants*, he thought. He couldn't figure out why he was still sweating, though.

He approached Columbia Elementary like he did every morning, unkempt, marching down the same sidewalk where his mother used to hold his hand on the way to school, and they would converse openly. Of course, he didn't need to hold her hand now; he was 11.

His stringy, dirty blond hair hung over his eyes, which looked like they hadn't seen a dream in years. He wore a death-colored ball cap, which was against the school dress code, and it only pushed the strands down further, creating an eyeless enigma.

Samuel removed the cap once he arrived at the schoolyard, though, as he felt that everyone should obey the rules. There was an order with everything in his life, and it required strict adherence.

He observed the chaotic groups of children running and playing on the grass as he charged toward the front entrance. Their antics and over-

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hyper energy always annoyed him. *Stupid little kids—they're all the same*, he silently judged.

OCCASIONALLY, REBAH DID GET A GLANCE from Samuel as he passed her first-grade classroom, but there wasn't even a break in his stride that morning. Her heart had been beyond broken for many months.

Without realizing it, she had wandered into the middle of the hallway among a sea of children to watch the last glimpse of her only child disappear around a corner. Suddenly, without warning, he turned toward her at the last second and gave a faint smile. She didn't know that her eyes were wet.

"Mrs. Jarik, are you okay?" a bright young girl with black hair asked Rebah as she took her hand.

Her default teacher facade then took over, and she responded, "Yes, Isabella, everything's fine." She put her arm around the softhearted girl, and they both walked into the classroom. "How's your dog feeling today?"

As the door closed behind them, Isabella shared, "He told me that he's really sad that his mother was picked on."

LATER THAT MORNING, IN HIS SCIENCE CLASS, Samuel learned about different insects from a slideshow presentation. Because the lights were off, the boys around him kept making distracting noises.

Coming to the end of his short fuse, Samuel spun around in his desk to look at the boy directly behind him, Mario Sanchez, and blasted, "What do you want?"

After a chuckle and a confirmation glance toward his friends, Mario snickered, "Nada."

Samuel wanted to reach out and punch Mario right in the jaw. He had no idea what the boy said, and for all he knew, it could have been an

insult. Staring at Mario's long, frizzy, black hair in the dark, Samuel envisioned scalping him like a Civil War soldier from one of his military books at his father's house. For the young white boy, those were the only books worth reading.

"Boys, settle down!" commanded Mr. Lorenz, the only adult in the room.

Samuel turned back around to continue studying the pictures from the slideshow. He counted their legs and noticed the thinness of their dead wings.

*Stupid little bugs*, he thought to himself. *Why would God want these things anyway? What purpose do they have other than food? They all look the same—annoying little bugs.*

The lights flickered on, and most of the students found themselves caught in the act of something, either still giggling, sleeping, or just being 11 years old.

"Alright, y'all come up here and see what I have for you," invited Mr. Lorenz. The class gathered around the table at the front of the room, which displayed many of the same insects from the slide presentation, only now they were suspended by pins on little foam boards.

There were cockroaches, beetles, grasshoppers, butterflies, and many other specimens that caused a few children to utter their disgust at the display. But despite their disapproval, they pulled in closer, as if they were rubbernecking the scene of a small insect Armageddon.

Unfortunately, Mario was small for his age and couldn't see the table from behind everyone, so he went around looking for a spot to fit in, but there was no room. At last, he moved in close to Samuel, merely brushing his arm. And without any hesitation, Samuel landed a pent-up blow right on Mario's face, sending him to the ground, spread out like one of the dead insects for everyone to see.

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*Annoying, little bug*, Samuel thought.

The children chaotically gathered around the new real-life display on the floor, accidentally bumping the table. And before Mr. Lorenz could prevent the inevitable, one of the dead butterflies took flight and crashed onto the ground with a severed wing.

“That’s enough, Samuel! Get yourself to the principal’s office now!” Mr. Lorenz demanded. The choice had been made, and the consequence was now set.

Samuel didn’t care. He walked out of the room with his coat and backpack as a few boys helped Mario to his feet. There was blood on the floor, and like the plague, everyone scurried away from it.

MR. LORENZ SOON ORDERED A NEARBY BOY to run a clean rag under the classroom faucet. “Everyone, get back to your seats!”

He quickly walked Mario to his desk and examined his bloody nose and the back of his head, which had received a small cut when he hit the floor. Thankfully, his thick, dark hair had helped to soften the blow.

“Here,” the fatherlike teacher said softly to Mario, handing him the wet cloth, “hold this to your head. Everything will be alright.”

His eyes now wet, the towering man stood up and addressed the children as if it were his last lesson. “This has got to stop!”

As Mr. Lorenz approached the table at the front of the room, he considered shoving it a few inches out of pure frustration and righteous anger, but he slapped it like a heavy gavel instead. The students jumped.

“Please, for the love of God, just be nice to each other!” he implored. “I don’t care what your dad does or what your mom says—we’re all God’s children!”

All of their eyes were on him, and he wondered if he had frightened them or if he had pierced their hearts enough to make a difference.

He soon approached the classroom door, defeated, knowing that every parent would probably find out about his outburst and demand his resignation. There was nothing that anyone could do; the racial hatred in the town was too deep and widespread for redemption.

To his astonishment, the troublemaker obediently sat on the bench outside the principal's office at the end of the hallway, so Mr. Lorenz returned to the class, pulled out his phone, and dialed for assistance.

WITH HIS HEAD COCKED TO ONE SIDE, Samuel found himself studying the red brick wall by the office. The bricks were staggered, never forming a straight, vertical line. It seemed like the whole mess worked against itself, but then he saw it:

A single jagged, cement line in the wall formed a staircase from the floor to the ceiling, and he marveled that such a symbol was there among the chaos the whole time. It spoke to him. Not only was he trying to do the will of God, but there was also an order to all things.

Once Mr. Lorenz's door finally closed, the echo shot across the hallway, and Samuel bolted further into the school.





