# kindergarten for eternity

lessons from the streets about love, faith, and miracles



step harmon

# Kindergarten For Eternity

## Lessons From The Streets About Love, Faith & Miracles

Step Harmon

*Eagle Oak Press*



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*“Whatever you do*
*to the least of these*
*you do to me.”*

**-Jesus**

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# INTRODUCTION

I didn't go to the streets to fix anyone. In many ways they ended up fixing me. Here's how.

I went one day and never stopped. Simple act. It wasn't about religion or anything.

I had read the books. I had lived a full life by most measures. I understood systems, incentives, outcomes. I knew how the world ran.

But somewhere along the way, I realized I didn't fully understand how the world was meant to work—especially when it came to love.

The streets became the place where that gap was impossible to ignore.

Not because the streets are romantic. They're not. They are loud, unpredictable, unsanitary, heartbreaking, and often dangerous.

But they are also honest. Masks don't last long out there. Pretenses dissolve. Whatever is real rises to the surface fast. What surprised me wasn't the suffering. It was the curriculum.

Love. Faith. Trust. Sacrifice. Presence. Forgiveness. Dependence.

The same lessons, over and over again.

I kept thinking I'd graduate.
I never did.

**the classroom**

On the streets, love isn't an idea. It's an action—or it isn't love at all.

You learn quickly that love costs something. Time. Comfort. Certainty. Reputation. Sometimes safety. Sometimes tears. Love on the streets is rarely efficient and almost never convenient.

It interrupts plans. It ruins schedules. It asks for attention when you'd rather look away.

And yet, when love shows up there—when it's real—it feels unmistakably alive.

Faith shows up the same way. Not as doctrine. Not as certainty. But as trust exercised without guarantees.

Faith on the streets looks like showing up again after a hard night. It looks like offering help without knowing if it will be rejected. It looks like praying quietly while someone sleeps on cardboard, unsure whether anything will change, but choosing to believe that presence itself matters.

Miracles don't announce themselves either.
They arrive sideways.
A hardened heart softens. A long silence breaks. A person thought lost reappears. Healing comes, but not on schedule, not in the form requested, and not in a way that fits clean explanations.

Many miracles are only visible in hindsight. Some are never fully explainable at all.

And tears—those are everywhere.

Not just tears of pain, but tears of relief. Tears of recognition. Tears that come when someone realizes they're still seen.

I learned quickly that tears are not failure. They're information.

**what the streets teach**

Over time, a pattern emerged.
The lessons weren't random.

What we were learning on the streets—sometimes painfully, sometimes beautifully—mirrored something deeper. Something older. Something truer than the systems we build to manage life.

It began to feel like the streets were rehearsing the rules of a different kingdom. One where strength looks like vulnerability. One where the last are seen first. One where giving multiplies instead of depletes. One where trust is currency. One where love is not earned, but given.

In other words: heaven. Not heaven as abstraction. Not heaven as reward. But heaven as operating system.

The streets don't just expose brokenness. They expose alignment—or the lack of it. When love flows, things move

toward life. When fear dominates, everything contracts. The pattern is consistent.

This book is about those moments.

The encounters that revealed how heaven works—not someday, not elsewhere, but here. In real time. Through ordinary people. In fragile bodies. On cracked sidewalks.

**why kindergarten?**

Kindergarten is where we learn the fundamentals.
How to share. How to trust. How to listen. How to sit with discomfort. How to tell the truth. How to receive help.

We think we outgrow these lessons. We don't.

We just get better at hiding how often we fail them.
The streets strip that illusion away. They bring us back to the basics. Over and over again. Patiently. Relentlessly.

This is not a book about mastery.
It's a book about returning.
Returning to love when it would be easier to withdraw. Returning to faith when outcomes are unclear. Returning to trust when it's been broken before. Returning to sacrifice when self-protection feels smarter.

That is why this is kindergarten for eternity.

Because the lessons never end.

We often think heaven is just a place we go to in the future after we die.

But the fact is, heaven is already here, and we’re supposed to share it—on cracked sidewalks, under flickering streetlights, with hands that pass food, blankets, and hope from one person to another.

**what isn't in this book**

This book is the highlight reel.

The stories you're about to read happened over the course of seven years. Every day. And what made it onto these pages is maybe one day in seventy.

The rest of those days didn't have a story. They had a burrito. A bottle of water. A sleeping bag. A jacket when the temperature dropped. A pair of pants. A pair of shoes. A blanket. A can of Vienna sausages. Thousands of those small handoffs, from my car window to a pair of hands that hadn't been filled all day—and most of the time that was the whole transaction. No prayer. No conversation. No moment.

I didn't write those days down.

But I want you to know they were there, because I don't want you to close this book thinking the work was the miracles. The work was the daily showing up. The miracles were what sometimes happened when somebody showed up daily.

And there's no small thing when you're helping someone. A tuna sandwich handed to a man in the dirt is not a small thing to him. A pair of shoes that fit is not a small thing. A bottle of water on a day over a hundred is not a small thing.

The only person who ever thinks a handoff is small is the person doing the handing.

If you're reading this and wondering whether the thing you could do would even matter—it matters. You won't see most of what it does. You don't need to.

**— Step Harmon**

CHAPTER 1

# THE FORGOTTEN BOOK

## A green Bible on a shelf nobody used

I was nineteen and I was on a quest, though I wouldn't have called it that at the time. I'd just come back from England, broke.

I had been living in a trailer there with holes in the floor, no shower, a hose dripping into a bucket for water. The nearest airfield ran fighter jets overhead and the fuel smell got into everything. Winter was the worst of it—my fingers locked up at night, and my breath hung two feet in front of me like steam off a train.

I came home to California because I had nowhere else to go.

I was writing songs. Notebooks of them. I wanted to start a band. I was looking for something real in a world that I was starting to suspect didn't have much of it.

It was a Tuesday or a Wednesday, around nine at night.

I was at my first cousin's house in a small town, drinking beer with him in the den. Two chairs and a small couch, all of it more for looks than for sitting in. Bare walls. Nobody used this room. We were in there because we were talking about music—his songs, my songs, the band idea, all of it.

There was a closet door open about two feet.

Something on the top shelf caught my eye. A cloth-bound book, green. I got up, walked over, and pulled it down.

It was a Bible.

That didn't make any sense. Nobody in that house read the Bible. I never asked whose it was. I never figured out how it got up on that shelf in that closet nobody went in.

I wasn't religious. I'd have told you I hated religion—all the hypocrisy, the money, the people on TV. But I was holding this book in my hands and I was curious.

"I'm gonna open this for fun," I said to my cousin. "See what happens."

I closed my eyes. I flipped the pages. I put my finger down.

I opened my eyes and read the verse out loud.

*Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.*

Every cell of my body came alive.

My heart leapt in my chest. The room lit up—for me, not for him. He was sitting there the same as he'd been sitting a second before, and the room he was sitting in was the same room. But the room I was sitting in was full of light.

I was crying before I realized I was crying.

I looked at my cousin.

“Jesus is real,” I said. “Jesus is real.”

We talked about it for maybe fifteen minutes. Then I drove home.

My cousin didn’t believe me that night. He hadn’t seen what I’d seen. He hadn’t felt what I’d felt. There was no way for him to. The verse I’d read out loud said *where two or three are gathered*—but in that room at nine o’clock on an ordinary night, it had only been one of us.

A few months later, it was two.

CHAPTER 2

# Miracle on the Roadside

## Dying as thousands of people passed by

Greg had been wasting away in the dirt for months.

Six foot two. Maybe a hundred and forty pounds. Wrapped in a tattered sleeping bag pressed into the embankment, ants crawling across the blankets, a can of Raid within arm's reach—his only defense. The bitter chemical smell mixed with the staleness of pastries rotting in the sun beside him.

His eyes were the piercing blue of someone who had once been an athlete. He told me later he'd done triathlons. Biked twenty miles a day. His bike was still there, locked to the iron fence a few feet away, rusting. His body had stopped cooperating, and the bike had become a monument to the man he used to be.

Thousands of people passed Greg every day. Students rushing to class. Pedestrians on their phones. Drivers watching the road. They saw him. He wasn't their problem.

For weeks, I'd felt a pull to come here. Life got in the way. Today I stopped ignoring it.

I parked across the street, cut through traffic, and walked toward him.

"Hey. You want some food?"

Greg stirred. Lifted his head. His eyes searched for the voice.

“Sure,” he mumbled.

I handed him a tuna sandwich and a soda. He tried to sit up.

“I can’t hear out of my left ear,” he said, tilting his head toward me so his right ear could catch my voice.

I put my hand on his shoulder and prayed for his hearing.

The sounds around us faded. Muted. The traffic, the tires, the hum of a city that never really stops—all of it pulled back, like someone had dialed the volume down to nothing. The air between Greg and me went still. I didn’t see anything. But something was there.

Greg’s blue eyes locked on mine.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he whispered. “I used to be so strong.”

He started talking. About his childhood. About a brother he used to have. About the years of alcohol that had slowly dissolved him down to this patch of dirt. His voice caught on certain words, the way voices do when a man has been alone with his own story for too long.

“I can’t stand,” he said.

His legs had quit on him.

I’d seen this before. A year earlier, God had healed me from something doctors had no answers for. If He could do it for me, He could do it for Greg.

I prayed again.

The stillness deepened. A twenty-five-foot circle of quiet in the middle of a city that didn't know it was happening. I sat with Greg in it, and neither of us wanted to leave.

Eventually I had to.

I drove home with no idea what would happen next. That's the part people don't talk about. You pray, the air goes still, and then you get in your car and drive home and wonder if anything you just did mattered.

Two days later, I came back.

Greg was propped up. Still weak—but stronger than he'd been. He saw me and his face changed.

"Hello. You're back. I have something to tell you."

He lifted his arm. A hospital check-in wristband dangled from his wrist.

"I can hear," he said.

He said it the way a man says something he's been rehearsing, because he didn't want to forget any of it when I came back. I can hear.

Then he told me about the walk.

He'd stood up. Almost like normal. He couldn't explain it. He'd taken a few steps, and the steps had worked, so he'd taken a few more, and then—because his body was doing what it hadn't done in months—he just kept going. Two miles. To the hospital.

Not to be treated. To find out.

He wanted to know why his body had been failing him. He wanted an answer. He walked in under his own power, and the staff looked at him and saw a homeless man and, Greg figured, a drug user. They took his blood pressure. Checked his pulse. Sent him out.

“They don’t care,” he told me.

But he had walked. Four miles round trip. On legs that two days before could not hold him up.

I sat with him in the dirt. The bike was still locked to the fence. The Raid was still within reach. Everything looked the same.

Everything was different.

A week later, I came back again. I’d been turning it over all week, and I’d decided: if Greg was still here, I was going to call social services. He couldn’t stay in that dirt.

I pulled up. He was gone.

The sleeping bag was gone. The bike was gone. The pastries. The Raid. All of it.

A woman in the laundromat across the street had watched him for months too. She came out when she saw me looking.

His brother had come for him, she said. Drove out from the Midwest. They hadn’t spoken in thirty years.

Thirty years.

I stood there on the embankment where Greg had been dying, and I tried to picture it. A phone ringing somewhere in the middle of the country. A brother Greg hadn't spoken to since before some of those passing drivers were born. Whatever was said on that call. The drive. The two of them standing here in this dirt, seeing each other for the first time in three decades.

God had healed Greg's ear.

God had healed Greg's legs.

And then, quietly, while I wasn't looking, God had healed something neither of us had even thought to ask about.

CHAPTER 3

# Everyone Avoided Him

## Everyone feared him, even the other homeless

He looked like trouble.

Long hair tangled at his shoulders. A beard that hadn't seen a pair of scissors in years. Grimy hands, fingernails black. He sat on a busted bench mumbling to himself, his eyes darting—gray eyes, the kind of gray that doesn't look at you so much as through you.

And above those eyes, in the middle of his forehead, was a tattoo.

I couldn't tell what it was. It looked like some kind of cult symbol. Not a letter. Not a cross. Something I didn't recognize and didn't want to.

Homeless. Alone. Not even the other homeless folks would go near him.

I stood across the street for a minute, looking at him, and I'll be honest: I didn't want to walk over. I'd spent a lot of days handing out food on the streets by then. This was one of the few times I hesitated before crossing.

But I crossed.

“Hey. You want a burrito?”

At first he didn’t register that I was talking to him. Nobody did. When he realized the words were meant for him, his eyes came up slow.

“Uh, sure,” he said, soft. Like he hadn’t heard his own voice in a while.

I came back a few minutes later and handed him the food. Then I said what I always say:

“God bless you, man.”

Three words. My standard line. Short enough to say to someone who doesn’t want a conversation, weighty enough to be more than nothing. He looked up at me like he was trying to figure out whether I was kidding.

I wasn’t.

I turned and walked to my car.

Over the next two months, he started showing up at Chipotle.

Not randomly. Every day.

Right around noon, the time I usually went in. He’d come in with his free water cup and sit alone at a table—always alone, always at a distance from whatever table I was at. He

never asked for anything. He wasn't panhandling. He was just there, with his water.

I'd order, and I'd get him something too. I'd walk it over.

"Sure, sure," he'd say, soft. Same two words most days.

He never sat with me. I think he was embarrassed—of his clothes, his hands, the smell of the streets on him. I don't know if anyone had eaten at a table with him in years. He kept his distance the way a man keeps his distance when he's decided he's the kind of person other people shouldn't have to be near.

And here's the thing I started noticing, somewhere in those months:

He was polite.

Not just "sure, sure" polite. Something softer than that. Something that didn't match the forehead tattoo, didn't match the first impression, didn't match anything. His beard stayed the same. His clothes stayed the same. But there was a character to him that the appearance had been hiding.

I never saw him with anything. Not a backpack. Not a bag. Not a cardboard sign. Not a pile of belongings in a doorway. Every homeless person I'd ever met had stuff—the accumulated scraps of a life being lived outside. He had none of it. He just appeared at the bench, or at the Chipotle, and then he was gone until the next time.

I didn't think about it much at the time. People on the streets come and go. I filed it away.

One night I was at home, and I felt the nudge.

*Get in your car. Drive north.*

It was late. Stores were closed. I had no reason to be out.

I went anyway.

I figured I was going to the city fifteen miles up the coast where I usually saw him. But as I drove, the pull shifted. Not that far. Off the highway sooner. A little beach town about five miles north, right on the water.

Winter night. Cold enough that my hands hurt on the wheel before the heater caught up. Dark, too—that heavy coastal dark that comes when the sun's been gone for hours and there's marine layer sitting on everything. Traffic was light. Most people don't drive beach towns in January at that hour.

The town was the kind of place you don't go if you're homeless. Nice shops, cameras on every corner, security that moves people along. I'd been there plenty of times. I knew the streets.

I pulled into a parking lot near the pier.

And my headlights hit him.

He was right there. First thing I saw. Standing in the beam of my headlights like a deer, not moving, staring back at me. The ocean air swirled droplets of dew in the shining beams between us.

Same clothes. Same beard. Same grimy hands. Same tattoo above those gray eyes. The man I had been feeding for two months at a Chipotle fifteen miles north of here, standing in a parking lot in a town he had no way to get to, in the middle of a winter night, looking into my headlights.

I sat in my car for a second. I couldn't make it make sense.

Then I got out.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

He didn't startle. He didn't run. He gave me a small smile, calm.

"I come here all the time," he said.

No.

That's what I thought, standing there. *No, you don't.* I'd been to this town more times than I could count. I'd never seen him. Not once. He had no bus money, no car, no way to cover fifteen miles of coast on foot in winter, and—I realized—no things. He had come here, somehow, with nothing. Which is how he always was. Always nothing.

I didn't say any of that out loud. I just looked at him.

He turned.

He walked slow—toward the sand, toward the water. Didn't look back. I watched him go until the shadows and the surf and the dark sky took him, and then he wasn't there anymore.

I stood in the parking lot.

I drove home down Highway 1, the Pacific on my right, the heater finally doing its work. I was warm for the first time in an hour.

And somewhere along that road, the thought came.

*Was that an angel?*

It wasn't a dramatic thought. It arrived the way real thoughts arrive—quietly, almost reluctantly. I wasn't sure. I was turning it over, trying to decide whether it was something I could say out loud without feeling like a fool.

I reached down and turned on the radio.

A local Christian station.

A man was talking. I came in partway through his sentence, but I caught what he was saying. He was talking about Hebrews 13:2. About how sometimes we entertain angels and don't know it.

I kept driving.

I didn't laugh. I didn't speed up. I didn't do any of the things people do in stories when they get a confirmation like that. I just drove.

I'd wondered, and within a minute of wondering, a radio station I hadn't been listening to was preaching my answer back to me.

I don't know what he was.

I know what I saw. I know what the town was like. I know that in two months of Chipotles he was always there by noon, alone, with nothing, and then he was in a parking lot fifteen miles up the coast at night with no possible way to have gotten there.

I know that I had been feeding him the whole time.

And I know that on the drive home, the radio told me what I was already beginning to suspect.

CHAPTER 4

# Home Is Where the Heart Is

## She chose her dogs over safety

The concrete was unforgiving. Hard, cold, never warm enough, never soft enough. For two years, it was all Linda had. She slept under the buzzing glow of street lamps—not because they offered comfort, but because they offered the illusion of safety.

Safety was a lie out here.

Women disappeared. Women were assaulted, beaten, trafficked, left for dead in alleys. The streets were war, and Linda was unarmed. Her only protection was two dogs who loved her more than any person ever had.

Which is why the shelters wouldn't take her.

No dogs allowed. That was the rule. Every shelter, every program, every door with a roof attached to it: leave the dogs, and you can come in. So Linda made her choice, the way she'd made it a hundred nights in a row. She kept the dogs. She kept the sidewalk.

She had given up indoor air and a locked door for the only two souls who had never walked out on her.

Sleep didn't really come. The moment she drifted off, a noise—a voice too close, a shadow moving in the distance—would snap her back. There were no walls out here. No doors to lock. Just her, the dogs, and whatever the night decided to bring.

She was Texas tough. But toughness wasn't the same thing as safe, and she knew it.

I'd seen Linda for over a year. Always in the same few places. Always exhausted. Always holding on.

Then one evening I saw her again, at dusk, when the predators of the night come out—the pimps, the dealers, the men who look for women sleeping alone. And something in me broke.

It wasn't the tidy grief of "this is sad." It was anger. Hot, sharp anger at a world that had built a hundred warm buildings within walking distance of where she was sitting and left her on the concrete anyway.

I brought it to God.

"Lord, we ask for safety. We ask for provision. Only you can do this."

That's all I said out loud. What I didn't say was what I was picturing. The things that happen to women on sidewalks at night. The things you can't pray out loud in front of the person you're praying for, because saying them would pull the floor out from under her.

So I said the bare version. *Safety. Provision. Only you.* And I let God hear the rest.

Linda cried when I finished. Quiet tears, the kind that leak out past a face that's spent a long time not letting anything leak out. She didn't ask me if I thought it would work. I think she was afraid of the answer.

Weeks passed.

One evening I was out driving with food to hand out, and there was no one. Whole stretch of town, nobody. I asked God where to go.

*Cross the street. Go into that supermarket parking lot.*

I'd never pulled into that lot before. But I'd learned.

And there, near the exit, sitting on the ground with her two dogs, was Linda.

She looked up as I drove in. I almost didn't recognize her.

Her face was shining.

That's the only word for it. Not cleaner, not rested—shining. Before, she'd had almost no hope left in her face. Now her face had hope in it the way a window has light in it.

"Hey," I said. "Want some food?"

She grinned. Took a breath. And then the words came out of her like she was still catching up to them herself.

“I have a house.”

She said it like she couldn’t quite believe she got to say it.

“I have a house. And it’s fully furnished.”

A local church had come to her. Had seen her. Had done what a church is supposed to do. They’d given her an apartment.

And the dogs were going with her.

The thing she had chosen two years of concrete over—the thing every shelter had made her surrender—she got to keep. The dogs had won. Or rather, love had won, and the dogs got to come inside because love had finally shown up in the form of a set of keys.

Linda let out a breath, and for the first time since I’d known her, her shoulders didn’t sag. Two years of carrying a boulder of fear, and it was just—gone. Set down. Somewhere else.

The tears came then. For both of us. Right there in the parking lot, under the same streetlights she used to sleep beneath.

I never saw Linda like that again. Not because she vanished. Because she didn’t have to be that version of herself

anymore. The woman who sat on sidewalks to stay visible enough not to disappear—that woman was done.

She had a door now.

And behind it, two dogs who had stayed with her through every night it took to get there.

CHAPTER 5

# THE IMPOSSIBLE LINE

## Hope had faded as cancer progressed

UCLA had done all they could. The doctors, the machines, the endless treatments—they threw everything at it. But the cancer didn't budge. At 19 years old, Alex was told the unthinkable: *Go home. There's nothing more we can do.*

Cancer had become his new reality. No college parties, no road trips, no late-night plans with friends. Just hospital rooms that smelled of antiseptic and quiet conversations filled with words nobody wanted to say out loud. Life had become an endless loop of needles, blood tests, and waiting for results that only ever got worse.

Hope hung by a thread.

Then his aunt called me. She'd heard about my own healing—how I had come face to face with death, how Jesus pulled me back from the edge. *Could I pray for Alex?*

I didn't hesitate.

Fifteen miles later, I pulled up to their house. His mother opened the door, her face carved with exhaustion and grief. Once upon a time, she had smiled easily. Now, every expression was a battle.

“He means a lot to you, doesn’t he?” I asked.

Tears filled her eyes.

I could tell he was a treasure to her. A son she had loved since before he was born. A son now at death’s door.

I nodded. “He’s in the valley of the shadow of death,” I said. “I’ve been there too. It’s a lonely place. No one can go with him. But he’s not alone. Jesus is in there with him.”

I wasn’t there to offer false hope. I wasn’t there to comfort. I was there to tell her the truth. *God never sends me anywhere without a reason.* If I was standing at her doorstep, God had a plan.

“I don’t need to go inside,” I told her. “God can heal from anywhere.”

Jesus once healed a Roman centurion’s servant from miles away. The Spirit of the Lord isn’t bound by time, space, or distance.

So I stepped into the backyard. My friend and I knelt in the dry dirt, surrounded by weeds, out in the open. No fence. If the neighbors saw us, they’d probably think we were insane. Didn’t matter.

As I prayed, something shifted.

I saw it. A tornado—red, orange, blazing with fire—spinning through Alex’s home, burning away death and disease. My

friend saw a wave rushing over the house, washing everything clean.

I knocked on the door again.

“He’s going to be okay,” I told his mother. “God is bringing him closer first. He’s healing Alex’s spirit, and then He’s going to heal his body.”

She stared at me. No one had ever told her anything like that before.

“There is only one in charge of life and death,” I said. “And it’s not cancer. It’s God.”

I took a piece of chalk from my pocket and knelt by the front door. On the walkway, I wrote:

**Luke 1:37 – For with God, nothing shall be impossible.**

Every day, Alex, his mother, his father, his brother—they would walk past that verse. Every day, they would be reminded that there’s a line between what man can do and what God can do. *The impossible line.*

I left with expectation in my heart.

A few days later, Alex woke up and something was different. He couldn’t say what, exactly. He just felt better. Not a little better. Different-body better. The kind of better a dying nineteen-year-old isn’t supposed to feel.

His mother called UCLA.

They weren't expecting a call. When you send a patient home at stage 4, you don't expect a call—you expect a funeral notice. But they brought him in.

The fact that he had been sent home to die wasn't lost on the staff. And yet here he was, walking in under his own power, saying he felt different. Saying he felt better.

So they tested him. The full gamut of labs. Blood work, imaging, every panel they had run before, when the numbers kept getting worse no matter what they threw at the disease.

The results came back.

A doctor looked at them. Then looked again. Then asked for them to be run a second time.

They were run a second time.

Then a third time, because by now more than one person wanted to see for themselves.

No one in that room said miracle. Doctors don't use that word—they use words like unexplained and spontaneous and we need to rule out lab error. But the ruling-out kept coming back the same way.

Alex was cancer free.

The boy they had sent home to die walked out of UCLA carrying a chart no one could explain.

On the walkway in front of his parents' house, the chalk had faded but was still legible:

**Luke 1:37 – For with God, nothing shall be impossible.**

They had walked over it every day.

CHAPTER 6

# THE BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

## A slice of vanilla cake from Vons

I was at Vons, about to check out, when the thought came.

*Don't go yet. Get a slice of cake. It's someone's birthday today.*

It stuck out because it made no sense. I'd been doing this for six years—grocery runs, burritos, sandwiches, bottles of water. I had never once bought cake. Why cake?

I walked to the bakery counter and picked out a slice. Vanilla, white frosting, sprinkles. Six dollars. They boxed it up for me.

I got back in the car and drove three miles to a park I stopped at often.

Joanna was there.

I'd met her before. She was stocky, strong, battle-hardened—the kind of woman who'd been on the streets long enough that she didn't need anyone and knew how to say so. She took no guff.

I handed her a burrito the way I handed burritos to everyone else.

"Thank you," she said.

Then she added it.

"Today's my birthday. I'm fifty-four."

No way.

I stood there for a second.

"I picked this up for you," I said. I handed her the cake box. "Fifteen minutes ago, God told me to get a slice of cake for somebody's birthday. He didn't forget you."

She stared at the box.

She stared at me.

Then the tears came.

I let her have her moment. I didn't preach. I didn't pray over her. I just stood there while she opened the box and ate the cake.

Who knew how long it had been since Joanna had had cake on her birthday. She had been homeless for years.

She ate it slowly.

I got back in my car and drove away, leaving her with an empty box on the grass next to her and frosting on her fingers.

CHAPTER 7

# The Music Maker

## Mike drank because it dulled the sound of his life

Mike had toured with Tom Petty once.

Not a story he told to impress people—he didn't tell it like that. He told it the way a man tells you about a house he used to own, before he lost it. He'd played the stages. He'd heard the crowds. His fingers had known what to do without being asked.

Then the gigs dried up. Then the friends. Then the silence got too loud, and the silence is what the bottle is for.

Now he was homeless.

The one thing he still had—the one piece of the old Mike that hadn't been sold, spent, or walked away from—was his guitar.

And then someone stole it.

I found him slumped against a wall downtown. Eyes cloudy. Shoulders rounded in the particular way a man's shoulders round when he's decided there's nothing left to stand up straight for. He told me about the guitar the way people on the streets tell you bad news—flat, no edge, no self-pity. Just one more thing. Another kick while he was down.

Then I felt the nudge.

And God gave me a number.

*Seven days.*

“You’ll have a new guitar within seven days,” I said.

The words were out of my mouth before I could negotiate with them. Seven days is a specific promise. Seven days is the kind of promise that either makes you a prophet or makes you a fool inside of a week, and I’d said it out loud to a man with nothing left.

Mike looked at me like I was nuts.

I didn’t blame him.

Day six, I found the ad on Facebook Marketplace.

A woman across town was selling her daughter’s guitar. The kid had gone off to college and left it behind. The photo showed it barely touched, the kind of instrument a teenager picks up, practices on twice, and puts down.

I messaged her. Asked what she wanted for it.

She named a price.

It was about twenty percent of what the guitar was worth.

I read it twice to make sure I'd read it right. I didn't negotiate. I didn't tell her why I wanted it. I just drove over with the money.

She didn't ask why. She handed over the guitar like she was glad to be rid of it—like the guitar had been sitting there waiting to leave her house for exactly this reason, and she didn't need to know what the reason was. She had no idea a homeless man across town had lost the one thing keeping him tethered to who he used to be, and that she had just priced her daughter's old guitar at the exact number I could afford that afternoon.

God was orchestrating both ends, and only one of us knew it.

Inside the case, before I closed it, I wrote a note:

*Have faith. God always delivers.*

I wasn't just talking about the guitar.

I found Mike downtown, near a creek where the homeless clustered. He was there, same place, same wall. I walked over with the case in my hand.

I didn't say anything. I just held it out.

He looked at the case. Then at me. Then at the case again.

His eyes filled.

He opened the case. Pulled out the guitar. Laid it across his lap the way a man holds something he's been missing for a long time.

Then he strummed it.

The chord came out soothing—a clean, full sound that didn't belong on that street corner, next to a creek, across from a wall he'd been leaning against with nothing in his hands. It belonged in a room somewhere, with a lamp on and a song being worked out. But it was here now.

He played it once more, softer. Listened to it fade.

Then he looked up at me, and I didn't need to ask if he still remembered how.

Two years went by.

I didn't keep close track of Mike. I'd look for him sometimes when I was out driving—a glance down a street I knew he used to work, a scan of a creek bed—but not as a mission. Just the way you look for someone you've handed something to and then had to let go of.

The streets have their own weather. People get pulled away by it. Some come back. Some don't.

One afternoon I was driving through a town south of where we'd met, and there he was. Sitting at a freeway on-ramp.

He wasn’t alone.

There was a woman next to him. Striking—the kind of face you’d see on a movie poster, not at an on-ramp. Her eyes were clear. That was the first thing I noticed after her face. No drug haze. No hollow. She was present, in a way people on the streets mostly aren’t.

I rolled down the window.

“Hey. How’s it going?”

Mike turned—and I got the smile.

Not the smile from two years ago. That one had been covering something. This one was clean.

I pulled over. Grabbed some food. Walked up.

“This is my fiancée,” he said. “Deborah.”

She smiled. Said hello. And the way she said it—easy, unguarded—told me more about the last two years than any story Mike could have given me.

He told me what happened. A fight. Jail for a few days. Somewhere in that holding cell, he’d made the decision. No program. No revelation. Just a man sitting in a cell, deciding he was done.

He’d been sober since.

He and Deborah had met on the streets. He didn't go into how. I didn't ask. Some stories are theirs to tell when they're ready.

We talked about music.

Mike said something I'd heard before on the streets—that he'd picked up somewhere that music came from Lucifer. Something about worship in heaven before the fall. It was the kind of half-memory that floats around in rough corners of the world, and it had been sitting in the back of his head for years, making him wonder if the thing he loved most was somehow tainted.

"Music isn't his," I said. "You ever hear a song out of tune? You know it the second it happens. That's because music is built on order. Order is God's fingerprint. The enemy can twist things, but he can't create. Music is pure."

I watched it land.

Years of a quiet, low-grade worry just—went out of his face. Gone.

Then I felt the nudge again.

"They that wait on the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles," I told him. "Isaiah 40:31."

Mike's face lit up.

“I love hawks,” he said.

I hadn’t known that.

“Why hawks?” I asked.

“The freedom,” he said.

A man who’d spent two decades in a bottle, and then two years on the streets, and then a few days in a jail cell—and the bird he loved was the one that represented what he’d been trying to get back to the whole time.

God knew. I didn’t.

The last time I saw Mike, he was standing next to a truck. An actual truck, with an actual camper on the back. His, he said. He was heading to Montana—a new job, and Deborah was already up there waiting.

I watched him load the last of his things.

He’d started this story leaned against a wall with cloudy eyes and no guitar.

He was ending it behind the wheel of a truck headed north, to a woman and a job and a state he’d never lived in.

I don’t know what happened after Montana. I never saw him again.

But I think about the ad on Facebook Marketplace sometimes. A woman across town, pricing her daughter's guitar at the exact number I could afford, six days after I'd made a promise I had no business making.

God was on both ends of that transaction.

He usually is.

CHAPTER 8

# WHO'S IN CHARGE?

## Satan’s watching you, she said

The plaza was in the middle of the kind of town where kids grew up playing baseball and ballet—until some of them didn’t anymore, and drugs and decay slipped in underneath the lives everyone else was still living. Two towns inside one town. Most of the people walking through the plaza at lunch belonged to the first town. The people on the benches and the stone edges of the gazebo belonged to the second.

I’d walked through the plaza a lot. I’d handed out food and water here for a long time. A lot of these folks knew me by sight.

Today there were about fifteen of them in and around the gazebo. Homeless, some of them high, some of them not. Some sprawled on the warm stone in the afternoon sun. Some sitting rigid on benches. A tired congregation.

I started making my way through the group, handing out what I had.

And then I saw him.

Off to one side, back against the wall, a young man—twenty-three, maybe—small but athletic. Not a drifter’s

body. A baseball body. A body that had been good at something recently.

Hiding.

He had a baseball cap pulled down low and he was actively pulling it lower, tugging the brim, keeping it pressed close to his face to make sure I couldn't see him. I wasn't that close. He knew I was close enough.

He was the only person in the gazebo trying not to be seen.

I'd never met him before. I don't know how he knew my face. But the way he pressed that cap down—hard, deliberate—told me he didn't want this moment to happen.

I kept moving.

"Satan's sitting over there watching you."

The voice was a woman's, soft and raspy, like sandpaper against the afternoon. Late twenties or early thirties. White. Small. A meth user—I knew the body and the skin well enough to read it—but today she was clear. Today she was tracking.

She was the only one in the gazebo who had spoken to me.

She was looking directly at me. Her eyes were trying to scare me. You can feel the difference between a look meant

to communicate and a look meant to do something to you. This was the second kind.

It didn't land. I don't say that proudly. I say it because that's what happened. The fear that was supposed to land on me didn't.

I looked back at her. Then I looked where she had pointed.

She was pointing at the kid with the cap.

I stood there for a second.

She hadn't gestured vaguely. She hadn't said Satan was "across the plaza" or "in the air" or any of the abstract pointing that sometimes comes out of people on meth. She had pointed at a specific human being in the gazebo—the one trying not to be seen. She was telling me something about him. Or something about him was telling something about itself through her.

I don't know which. I'm not sure it matters.

I'd been at this long enough to know what was happening without being told.

And then something came up in me without my thinking. Not loud. Not a declaration. Just a sentence that rose up the way sentences sometimes do when you need them.

"God is in control."

Four words.

That was it. That was the whole thing I said.

Everyone in the gazebo sat rigid.

Like fifteen people had simultaneously been put on notice. The ones lying down stilled. The ones sitting straightened. The woman stopped looking at me. The kid under the cap didn't move, but something in the set of his shoulders changed—not relief, not fear, something else, the posture of a body that had been caught by a frequency it wasn't expecting to be in the room.

The gazebo went quiet.

I didn't say anything else. I didn't walk over to the kid. I didn't try to get him to look up. I didn't pray over anyone or teach anyone anything. I didn't need to.

The atmosphere was the sentence.

I finished handing out what I had. A few people took food. A few didn't. Nobody met my eyes except the woman, and she wasn't trying to scare me anymore. She just looked tired.

I walked out of the gazebo.

Nobody got up.

I felt, walking away, that my assignment there was done. Not—*I finished the task I came here to do.* More like—*I was sent here for this, and now it's over.* I drove off.

The kid with the baseball cap, I never saw again. Whatever had him in the gazebo that afternoon either went somewhere else with him or stayed there and he stopped coming. I've wondered about him.

The woman, I did see once more, some time later. She was leaning against a big, burly homeless man who was something like the plaza's unofficial protector—a kind, broad-shouldered guy who looked after a lot of the women on the streets who needed someone to stand near. She had gone to him for shelter. She didn't look at me the day I saw her with him. Maybe she didn't remember me. Maybe she did.

What I remember is that the gazebo had fifteen people on notice for four words.

And that the meaner the streets got, the more God seemed to show up on them—not by sending armies but by sending a sentence. Letting it do the work a thousand sermons couldn't. Letting it go through a body as quickly as a breath.

*God is in control.*

It's not a slogan. It's the architecture of the room you're standing in, whether the room knows it or not.

CHAPTER 9

# Dying Under the Bridge

## The cold didn't kill him, lack of love did

The weirdest part was the cemetery.

We'd been handing out burgers at a homeless shelter around the corner—a different town than I usually worked, on the California coast. When we finished, the nudge came. Not in words. Just a pull toward somewhere I had no reason to go.

It took me to an old drive-in theater.

I hadn't been to one of those in years. Nobody had. The screen was still standing—huge, faded, staring across a weedy lot at a town that didn't need it anymore. I remembered drive-ins from when they were alive. Popcorn in the car. Those tinny speakers you hung on your window. A whole town parked in rows, watching a movie together.

This one had been empty for a long time.

I pulled in and sat for a second, not sure why I was there.

Then the pull shifted again. *Check the bridge.*

I didn't even know there was a bridge. But when I got out and walked, I saw it—a two-lane car bridge over a creek. Seventy-five feet across, maybe. The creek below was

narrow that day, but I could tell it sometimes ran bigger, depending on the rain.

Sage and scrub bushes crowded the approach. Under the bridge, the ground was different—bare dirt, stark and swept-looking. I'd seen a lot of underpasses by then. Usually there's some sign of people: cardboard, a tarp, a shopping cart, the remains of a fire. This one had nothing. No one lived here. No one had tried.

I peered under.

About forty feet in, I saw a shape.

At first I hoped he was sleeping.

That's what you hope. You see a human form lying under a bridge and your brain offers you the more bearable option first. He's resting. He's asleep. He'll stir.

I cupped my hands and yelled.

"Hey! You awake?"

Nothing.

I didn't walk closer. I don't know exactly why—partly because I was going to call the police and didn't want to disturb anything, and partly because something in me already knew. His chest wasn't rising. He wasn't shifting the way people

shift when they're uncomfortable. He was the stillness of a thing that had stopped.

And he had no shirt on.

It was the kind of California-coast cold that dips into the low thirties at night. A man sleeping rough in that weather doesn't take his shirt off. He puts on every layer he has. There was no shirt anywhere I could see. Just him and the dirt under a concrete bridge, on a night that had been cold enough to kill.

I called 911.

They came fast. Within five minutes sirens were coming from all directions—police, an ambulance, a fire truck, squad cars. Lights flashing against the gray sky. I stood back and waited.

Paramedics went in. They moved with urgency at first—you could see them wanting it to still matter. Then their pace slowed. Then they came back out, and you could read their faces from thirty feet away.

Gone.

The officer in charge came over to me. He asked how I'd found him.

I told him I'd been feeding homeless people around the corner at the shelter, and had just—come this way. I didn't

say anything about a nudge. He wouldn't have needed it. He had a job to do.

I didn't ask them what they thought had killed him. Nobody does in that moment. The paramedics didn't say anything to me. They didn't need to.

I stood there for a while after they'd loaded him. The bridge was above me. The cemetery was behind me.

A hundred yards away.

That's what I couldn't stop noticing. A hundred yards from where I was standing—maybe less—was a cemetery. Rows and rows of headstones. People who had died and been given a send-off. Names in stone. Flowers, some of them fresh. Family who had driven out, stood over a plot, said words that meant something to somebody.

And under the bridge, right next to them, a man had died in the dirt with no shirt on, and no one had known his name.

The world measures a life by what gets carved on stone afterward. If nothing gets carved, the life is assumed to not have counted.

But I was standing between the two places—the bridge and the cemetery—and I didn't feel the distance the world feels between them. He was as much a person as anyone buried on the other side of those bushes. He had a mother once. Maybe a brother. Maybe someone who had stopped being

able to reach him. Maybe someone who was going to find out later that week what had happened, and would carry it the rest of their life.

I didn't know any of it.

I didn't know his name. I never would.

I drove home slow.

I asked God why. Why this kind of death? Why a man who had gone to the farthest place he could go, to a dry patch of dirt under a bridge where no one else had even bothered to camp, and taken his shirt off in cold that would kill him?

The answer came. Not loud. Just one sentence from somewhere deep inside me.

*The man is free.*

Not free the way we use the word to tidy up a death. Free the way a man is free when whatever had been pressing him down for years had finally let go.

I didn't argue with it. I didn't push for more. I drove.

I never went back to that bridge.

But I’ve driven past the cemetery a few times since. Every time, I look over.

The headstones are still there. Names I don’t know, resting under grass somebody mows.

CHAPTER 10

# The Eagle Guide

## A bald eagle, a fast dive west, and a paved road I didn't know was there

I was in the coastal hills on my mountain bike, alone. Remote country. Fall. The sun was getting low.

I was out there to explore.

I'd been climbing for hours. Oak trees, eucalyptus, sandy soil that gave under the tires. I wasn't in any hurry.

At the top, the world quieted. The ridges rolled out in every direction. Out about a mile I could see a vineyard and some cellphone towers.

I sat down.

I'd come up a maze of trails—some well-worn, some animal tracks—and the light was fading, and I didn't know which trail down was the safe one.

I said it out loud.

"Lord, send me your eagle to show me the way."

I've always liked eagles. Their regal nature. I'd had a few encounters with them over the years, in places you wouldn't expect them. So when I prayed, that's the word that came out.

There are no known bald eagles in these hills. They are rare here. I knew that when I said it.

A bald eagle launched out of a eucalyptus tree right above me.

White head. White tail. Dark body. Unmistakable.

I got my phone out and I videotaped it.

It circled over me for about thirty seconds.

Then it dove. Fast. Due west.

It disappeared into the distance.

I got on my bike and went west.

The trail I picked went down the hill in the direction the eagle had flown. Not far down it opened up onto a paved road—one I hadn't known was there. The road went all the way down to my home.

CHAPTER 11

# The Mean Streets

## In the night they stole his meager belongings and tried to take his dog

Kenny was on the grass when I found him.

Late afternoon. A small park where the homeless clustered in ones and twos across the lawn. He was sitting by himself, knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around them—the way you curl up when what you really want is to disappear, but disappearing isn't an option, so you fold yourself as small as the world will let you.

His dog sat next to him. Calm. Scanning the park the way a dog scans a park when it's doing the watching for the man.

I'd never met Kenny before. I walked over and asked how he was doing.

He started crying.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Just the quiet break of a man who hadn't expected anyone to ask, and had been carrying the answer for longer than his body could hold. Sometimes the thing that cracks a person open isn't cruelty. It's the absence of it.

He was maybe thirty. The streets had carved lines into his face that didn't match his age. He looked older the way men who've been hungry for a long time look older.

"They tried to hit him with a stick this morning," he said, looking at the dog. "They've tried to take him before. I can't do this anymore."

The dog—oblivious, trusting—rested his chin on Kenny's shoe.

And I felt the anger come up.

Not the kind that flashes hot and leaves. The steady kind. The kind you feel in your chest for a long time. Anger at a world where a man with nothing gets the nothing taken from him. Anger at whoever had tried to hit this dog. Anger at what Kenny's face looked like when he said *I can't do this anymore*, because he meant it.

Enough.

Then God gave me a number. The same way as before.

*Seven days. Thirty days.*

I felt the awkwardness of it before the words were even out. The numbers were too specific. The kind of promise that either holds or makes you a liar, and I was about to say them to a man who had already heard too many things that didn't hold.

I said them anyway.

“Within seven days, you’ll have a job. Within thirty days, you’ll have a place to live.”

Kenny looked up. The tears slowed.

Hope is dangerous out here. It gets you hurt when it doesn’t deliver. I watched him decide whether to let the words do anything. Then he nodded.

“Okay.”

“You believe in Jesus, right?”

“He’s with me every day,” Kenny said.

And under the exhaustion, I saw it—the fight still in him. Buried, but not gone.

We walked out of the park.

Thirty feet from Kenny, maybe less, an older woman called to us from where she was sitting on a threadbare blanket. Seventy or so. Gray-black hair. Wrinkles cut deep from the kind of weather you only get when you live in it. Her voice had cigarettes and harder things in it.

“Hey! What church do you guys go to?”

We didn’t answer. It’s a question you hear on the streets. The people asking usually aren’t looking for church recommendations.

Then she locked eyes with me.

“You don’t need to answer,” she said. Her voice changed. “I know what church you go to. I’ve been up there.”

Her eyes were vacant when she said it. Not drunk-vacant, not high-vacant. Something else.

She held my gaze for a second longer.

Then she couldn’t.

Her face shifted. She looked into my eyes and something in her got uncomfortable, and she turned her head away. Like a person who had meant to stare down a room and then found a light in it she hadn’t accounted for.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to. *You are seated with Christ in heavenly places*—the line came up from somewhere in me, and I knew that’s what she had just run into.

We walked to the car.

I’d just spoken blessings over Kenny. Seven days, thirty days, the job, the home. And thirty feet away, on a blanket, something had been listening.

That’s how it goes sometimes. Good things move, and something else notices.

But notices aren’t verdicts. The blessings had already been spoken.

A week later.

Every other Friday we ran a BBQ for the homeless in a park about twenty miles east of where I'd first met Kenny. Burgers, Pepsi, no questions asked. Free to anyone, not just the folks on the street. We'd grill a hundred-plus burgers and fifty or sixty people would come through. It had become a thing.

I was working the grill when I saw a man and a dog playing on the grass.

I knew the dog before I knew the man.

Kenny.

He was standing. Not slumped. Taller somehow, though he hadn't grown—it was just that his body had stopped trying to fold itself small. His hair was stubbled, his clothes still told you he was sleeping outside. But his face had the fear out of it.

The dog dropped a ball at his feet. Kenny threw it. The dog brought it back. Again. Again. They were playing. Out loud, in public, like two things that weren't scared right now.

He came over for food. Two burgers and a Pepsi.

"I got a job," he said. "Just like you said."

Construction. A week to the day.

I handed him the burgers.

The dog nosed my shin. Kenny scratched behind his ears. Ball again. Throw again.

I went back to the grill.

Two weeks later the world shut down.

COVID. The freeways went empty. The streets went empty. The world pulled inside and closed its doors.

I'd moved south about twenty-five miles by then, but I had a Chipotle back up near my old house that I liked. A veggie bowl place. The manager and I would chat while he rang me up. During the shutdown the restaurant was hurting like everyone else, and going there felt like one small thing I could do—buy a bowl, say hello, help them hang on.

One afternoon, last minute, I decided to drive up for lunch. Thirty minutes on a freeway that had almost no one on it. Got my veggie bowl, sat in my car to eat—because that's how we ate in those months, in cars.

I looked out the window.

A man and a dog were walking down the sidewalk.

Nobody else was out. Just the two of them coming up the block.

I watched them get closer.

My jaw dropped.

Kenny.

Twenty miles from where I'd met him. Twenty-five miles from where I lived. On a sidewalk next to a nearly empty Chipotle, on a day I'd decided at the last minute to drive up for a bowl during a pandemic.

I rolled down the window.

"Kenny!"

He looked over. His face did the same thing mine had just done.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Big Bear."

His grandmother had gotten in touch with him. Somehow—he didn't explain how, and I didn't push—she had found him. She had a place for him to live. Big Bear, California, up in the mountains. Over a hundred miles south of where we were standing.

He was going to walk there.

Not take a bus, not hitchhike. Walk. Him and the dog. A hundred-plus miles of freeway shoulder and back roads, with

a dog who had been almost stolen once, and a grandmother at the end of it.

He said it the way you say a thing you've already decided is going to happen. The same calm he'd had when he decided to let himself believe the seven-day thing.

I handed him food through the window. A grocery gift card from the glovebox. He took them, thanked me, kept walking.

A job in seven days. A home in thirty.

And a grandmother in Big Bear, already on her way back into his life before I even knew to ask for her.

I sat in the parking lot and watched him go down the sidewalk with his dog, getting smaller, until he turned a corner and was gone.

CHAPTER 12

# THE DESERT ROSE

## A woman wandering and broken

I was driving to Phoenix.

Nine hours through desert. Before I pulled out of my driveway that morning, I'd prayed a specific prayer—one I'd been thinking about for a while. I'd told God I didn't want to guess. I didn't want to walk up to strangers and announce healings over them and hope I'd heard right. If somebody needed healing on this trip, I asked that they would tell me. Out of their own mouth. Unprompted.

Then I got on the road.

Lancaster is three hours north of my driveway. The temperature was already past a hundred by the time I pulled into a Del Taco. The asphalt had that wavy shimmer it gets when the heat has been sitting on it all morning.

She was outside the door.

A small woman, maybe five feet, ninety pounds. Late seventies, early eighties. Her skin was wrinkled and tan from too much sun. Her hair was white—whiter than white. She was clean. She didn't look crazy. She looked like somebody who, somewhere along the way, had run out of money and hadn't found her way back.

“Would you like something to eat?” I asked.

She shook her head, barely. “No.”

She went back to watching the street.

“How about a cold drink? It’s scorching out here.”

She looked at me. Really looked. Then she said, “Okay. A Sprite, please.”

The *please* was what got me. It came out of her like something left over from another life. Manners she’d had before whatever had happened to her happened.

I went inside and ordered her Sprite and some food, and a meal for myself. I walked back out and handed her the Sprite. The condensation was already running down over her sunburned fingers.

I went back in and sat down in a booth.

A minute later she walked in, limping a little, and sat at the table next to mine. Facing me directly. One table away. She looked at me eye to eye.

I slid my fries across to her. She didn’t hesitate.

I hadn’t said anything about God. I hadn’t said anything about healing. I’d bought her a Sprite and some food and slid my fries across a Del Taco table.

Then she said it.

“Someone ran over my leg.”

She told me the story. She’d been sleeping in a sleeping bag near a driveway. A man backed his truck out and drove over her. He didn’t see her. Her leg got crushed.

She said it matter-of-factly, the way you might tell someone what you did last weekend. No tears. Her voice was small and gravelly. She sounded educated.

I sat there with my mouth closed and the prayer I’d prayed that morning going through my head. *I asked that they would tell me.*

She had told me.

“God’s going to heal your leg,” I said. “Do you believe that?”

“Yes.” She said it boldly. Like she’d been waiting.

“Lord, heal her leg, in the name of Jesus.”

That was the whole prayer. Nobody around us. Nobody looked up.

She thanked me.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

I finished my food. She finished hers. I got up and walked out into the heat and got back in my car.

I pulled out of the Del Taco lot and got back on the highway. Six hours of desert still to go.

That's when I heard it.

*I am the healer. You did your part. Now go.*

This was new to me. I'd never heard it put that plainly. I sat with it as the miles went by. I had wanted to stay. Part of me had wanted to watch her stand up and walk out of that Del Taco healed so I could tell the story with my own eyes in it.

That wasn't my part.

My part had been to show up in Lancaster at the hour she was there, to offer a drink to a woman who hadn't asked for one, to slide fries across a table, and to say one sentence in the name of Jesus.

I never saw Sherrie again.

I was just the messenger. I didn't know that yet.

CHAPTER 13

# In a Coma

## From the outside it looked like this young man was done

I never met Terry.

I never met his father, never met his mother, never sat by his hospital bed, never held anyone's hand through the three months he was unconscious. His family lived three hundred miles away. I knew about him because a friend of mine knew his family, and the story had traveled down the coast to me by word of mouth.

Terry was nineteen. He'd been driving home one night—a decision he almost didn't make. He usually took Ubers. This time, for a reason he probably couldn't have explained, he didn't.

The accident came fast. I don't know the details. I never asked. What I know is what everyone who heard about it knew: the car was mangled, Terry wasn't conscious when they pulled him out, and by the time the hospital had stabilized him, he was in a coma his doctors weren't sure he'd come out of.

His father didn't believe in God. That's what I was told. Never met him, so I can't say it in first person. But apparently when your son is on life support, the beliefs you've been holding

onto start getting rearranged without your permission. The family was praying. The friends were praying.

That was the situation.

Then, one afternoon, it became mine.

I was at the beach watching the waves come in.

I do this sometimes. There's something about a horizon line and water that straightens the inside of your head. I was sitting there looking out at the Pacific, noticing something I hadn't really paid attention to before—how each wave was an offspring of the last one. One came in and pulled back, and the water it left behind rose up and became the next wave, and then the one after, each one born from the one that had just died. Nothing in the ocean was separate from anything else.

That's when the sentence came.

*Terry isn't going to die.*

Clear. Not loud. Not building. Just a finished sentence arriving in the middle of my head.

I didn't argue with it. I didn't negotiate. It wasn't the kind of sentence you negotiate with.

I sat for another minute, watching the waves, and then I knew the sentence was not just for me. It was for his

family—the ones three hundred miles away who'd been standing around a hospital bed for however long it had been, trying to hold on.

But I didn't know them.

I couldn't call a mother I'd never met and tell her her dying son wasn't going to die. Not over the phone. That was a message you deliver to someone's face, or you don't deliver it at all.

So I recorded a video.

It wasn't fancy. I set the phone up, looked into the camera, and told them what had happened. Where I was. What I'd heard. That I didn't know them, that I didn't know Terry, but that I'd gotten a word I believed was for them: their son wasn't going to die.

I sent it through my friend, and he passed it along to the family.

That's all I did.

I didn't call to check in. I didn't follow up. I didn't pray over it every night. I had other people on other streets in other towns who needed food that week and the week after, and I kept doing that. Terry was three hundred miles away, in a body I'd never seen, surrounded by family I'd never meet. The word had been sent. The word wasn't mine.

This is the part of these stories that doesn't get told enough. Sometimes God gives you a thing to carry to somebody, and carrying it is the whole job. You don't get to watch what it does when it arrives. You don't get to be part of the miracle on the other end. You're not the one in the room when the eyes open.

You're the FedEx guy. You sign the delivery, and you go.

Three months later, Terry woke up.

I don't know how. I don't know whose voice he heard first, what his first words were, whether it was slow over a day or sudden in an afternoon. I wasn't there. I never asked. Those details belong to the people who were.

What I know is that he woke up. That he came back. That after ninety days of machines and monitors, a nineteen-year-old opened his eyes and started breathing on his own.

A few months after that, I saw a photo of him on Facebook.

He was bowling. With his family. Standing up, holding a ball, about to send it down a lane.

That was it. That's what I got. A Facebook photo of a stranger I'd been told wasn't going to die, doing the most ordinary thing a nineteen-year-old can do with his family on a Saturday—and doing it because he was alive.

Terry's story is between Terry and God.

What his father came to believe, what Terry remembers, what happened in that hospital room the morning his eyes opened—none of that is mine to tell. I wasn't there. I don't know.

What I know is a sentence I heard at a beach, watching waves that kept being born from each other. I know I made a video. I know I sent it. I know three months later, somewhere three hundred miles away, a boy I'd never met went bowling.

Sometimes that's the whole job.

Deliver the word. Don't pretend you're the one who healed anybody.

Walk back to the car and keep going.

CHAPTER 14

# Nobody Like Her

## A woman reading in a park where nobody like her came

A 7-Eleven near my house had been donating food that year.

They usually gave it to somebody else. That week, for a reason I didn't ask about, they gave it to me. A crate of it. Chocolate bar donuts, chicken salad sandwiches, fruit bowls, chorizo tacos. The donuts warmed the car as I drove.

I ended up at a park I'd never been to.

Fifty-plus acres. Pines and oaks. A duck pond. The kind of park where families have picnics and joggers loop the paths. Homeless people didn't come here.

It was just after lunch, seventy degrees.

I parked under a pine and got out, and that's when I saw her—a woman sitting in an old VW Bug two spaces over, reading a book.

She didn't look homeless.

She looked like somebody on her lunch break. Mid-fifties, large, five-ten maybe. White. Reading. The Bug was dark blue, the original color.

*Ask her.*

“Hey,” I said. “Would you like some food?”

She looked up from the book. For a second I saw her register the question, and I braced for the way that question sometimes lands wrong.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Yes, I would love some. My food stamps are late and I don’t have anything right now.”

Her name was Patty.

I handed her donuts, fruit bowls, chorizo tacos. Whatever she wanted. She took them with both hands.

Once she saw I was actually there to help, she started talking. The shy was gone.

She prayed all the time, she told me. Not formal prayers. The kind you have when there’s nobody else.

Her friends and family didn’t get it. If there’s a God, they’d ask her, why are you living in your car? Why does your leg hurt from edema? Why is your boyfriend stuck out of the country?

She didn’t have good answers for them. She just kept praying anyway.

A few months back the apartment had gone. The bills had gotten bigger than the paychecks. So she'd moved into the Bug and found a place to park at night where she felt safe.

"At least I have a car," she said. "And I've got a safe place to park at night."

I didn't pray for Patty. I didn't speak any word over her. I just handed her food from a 7-Eleven crate that a stranger had given me that week without explaining why.

When I pulled out of the lot, she was still in the driver's seat with her book open on her lap and the food on the passenger seat beside her, in a park where nobody like her came.

CHAPTER 15

# THE HEART SPOKE

## Something louder than words

He was six-two, maybe taller. Shirtless. Shoeless. Standing on a Santa Barbara sidewalk in torn white cotton pants, sunburned down to the bone.

No one was looking at him.

Everyone was walking around him—tourists in flip-flops and sunglasses, families with ice cream cones, couples heading toward the beach. It was mid-afternoon in summer, the kind of sun that has something to prove. Even with a hat I could feel my skin frying.

And in the middle of all that vacation, he just stood there. African-American, about twenty-five, long curly afro. Like he'd been dropped onto the sidewalk from somewhere else. He didn't have a sign. Didn't wave anyone down. He just stood outside a café with his arms at his sides and let the city walk past him.

I'd spent the day handing out food to a dozen homeless people already. I had a backpack in my car that I'd been carrying around for weeks, planning to give it away—whenever it felt right. Every day that week, I'd looked at the people I was helping and thought *not yet.* The backpack kept staying in the car.

I saw him from thirty feet away.

I knew.

*He's the one. Give him your backpack,*

the Holy Spirit said. But the nudge confirmed something I already felt. Some recognitions don't need words.

I walked back to the car, stuffed some food inside the pack, came back, and handed it to him.

"This is for you."

He looked at me. Wide-eyed. Like he wasn't sure I was real.

Then he opened his mouth to say something.

And nothing came out.

Nothing in the way of words, I mean. What came out was a sound—raw, deep, coming from somewhere below his chest. Not a cry. Not laughter. Something older than either.

It was the kind of sound a person makes when they've been weeping from the depth of their soul and they don't have language for it. The way a small child cries before they have words. You know that sound. Every person who's raised a child knows that sound. It's what crying is before it learns to be a sentence.

That's what came out of this grown man standing on a Santa Barbara sidewalk.

He was mute.

He couldn't speak. And in that sound, I heard more than any speaker on that street was saying to anyone that day. Gratitude. Relief. Something from a lifetime of being passed by, cracking open for a second because someone had stopped.

I didn't say anything.

I clenched my fist, tapped it twice against my heart, and pointed at him.

*I see you. God sees you.*

His eyes welled up.

Mine did too.

Later I would try to figure out where that gesture came from, and I wouldn't be able to. I hadn't planned it. It came from somewhere in me I hadn't been to before—my heart finding words that my mouth didn't have. Turns out a voice and a heart aren't the same thing. He taught me that, without saying anything.

Then he pointed at his own chest.

The skin was burning. Blistering. His shoulders were already starting to peel. In Santa Barbara summer sun, shirtless, he was cooking.

He needed a shirt.

I looked around—no stores close enough, no bags in the car that had one. Before I could even start to problem-solve, my friend Ian, who was with me that day, reached up, grabbed the back of his own T-shirt, and pulled it off over his head.

He handed it over.

He didn't say anything either. Didn't make a big deal of it. Just took his shirt off his own back and gave it to a man he'd met ten seconds ago.

Another sound came up out of the man's chest.

Higher this time. Lighter. The kind of sound a kid makes when he gets a birthday gift on a day that isn't his birthday. Not the deep cry from before. Something almost like a laugh, if a laugh didn't need a voice.

He pulled the shirt over his head. Smoothed it down over his burned chest. Tears came down his face and cut clean lines through the dust.

Then he looked at both of us.

The look was gratitude beyond what any words would have carried even if he'd had them. He held us in his eyes the way

a person holds onto a thing they know they won't get to keep.

Ian stood there shirtless in the sun, and neither of us said anything. We didn't need to.

We walked back to the car.

I never saw that man again.

I've thought about him over the years—in Santa Barbara, standing in the sun with no shirt and no voice, making a sound that came from deeper in him than language went. I've thought about Ian, peeling off his shirt the way you'd peel off a thing that never really belonged to you. I've thought about the fact that I walked back to my car knowing something I hadn't known when I'd walked up.

Not all voices speak.

Not all silences are silent.

And sometimes the heart has things to say that your mouth has never learned how.

CHAPTER 16

# The Wire Cross

## A gift given twice

The homeless artist sat cross-legged on the warped boards of the boardwalk, silver wire moving between his fingers like it had a mind of its own. Trees no bigger than a thumbnail. A heron mid-step. A dog curled tight. Each piece balanced on a scrap of driftwood the sea had sanded smooth. He didn't look up when people passed. He'd stopped expecting them to stop.

Most didn't. Their eyes slid past him the way eyes slide past peeling paint, past gulls fighting over a french fry, past anything that might ask something of them.

Then the family came.

A teenager—fourteen, maybe fifteen—with the kind of open face that hasn't yet learned to close. His parents trailed him, already two steps ahead in their minds, already at the car.

The boy stopped.

One piece had caught him. A small figure of twisted silver wire, kneeling at the foot of a rugged cross, the whole thing mounted on a curl of driftwood. He crouched down. His fingers hovered over it without touching.

"Wow," he said, quiet enough that it was mostly to himself.

“Come on,” his mother called, already moving. “Leave him alone.”

The boy stood. His shoulders dropped in that particular way teenagers drop their shoulders when they’ve just learned, again, that what moves them doesn’t move anyone else. He turned to follow.

The artist watched him go. Something pulled in his chest, low and sure.

*Give him the sculpture.*

“Hey.”

The boy turned.

“You can have it.”

For a second the boy didn’t move. Then he came back, hands out, and the artist placed the cross in them. Their fingers brushed—just a second, just skin on skin—and the boy grinned like he’d been handed something much larger than a piece of wire on a piece of wood.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Then he was gone, running to catch his parents, the little cross cupped in both hands.

The artist went back to his wire. The gulls kept arguing. The tide went out.

Four months later.

The mother's hands would not stop trembling. She had been in this hospital room for six days. Six days of beeping, of nurses with soft shoes, of the doctor's voice saying words like *trauma* and *percentage* and *prepare yourselves.* Her son lay on the bed with a tube taped to his mouth and a bruise the color of a plum spreading from his temple to his jaw.

The car had been hit from the side. That's what they said. The other driver was fine.

Her husband stood at the window. He hadn't spoken in an hour.

"I need air," she said.

He nodded without turning.

They took the elevator down in silence. Walked out into a wind that smelled of salt and hot oil from the snack bar. Their feet knew the way before their minds caught up—toward the water, toward the boardwalk, toward the only place that had felt like something once.

They didn't talk. They just walked.

And then she saw him.

Same spot. Same crossed legs. Same silver wire moving through fingers that never seemed to stop. She had walked past him a hundred times. She had never looked at him.

Her son had.

She stopped.

Her husband stopped beside her, and she felt him understand without her saying a word.

She knelt down. The artist looked up, and his eyes were not what she expected. Tired, yes. But steady.

“Our son,” she said. And then her voice broke and didn’t come back for a moment. “He took one of your pieces. Months ago. The cross.”

The artist waited.

“He’s on life support.”

The three words sat there on the boards between them.

The artist looked down at his hands. Set the wire aside. Looked back up.

“Well,” he said. His voice was rough, the kind of voice that doesn’t get used much. “This might sound crazy. But maybe we could pray.”

The mother began to cry before he finished the sentence.

Right there on the sand-dusted planks, in the wind, with strangers walking around them and a boy on a skateboard rattling past—three people prayed. No words she could later remember. Nothing that sounded like the prayers she had grown up with. Just a man with dirty hands asking God for a boy he had never met.

When it was over, the parents thanked him. The mother reached into her bag for money and the artist shook his head. They walked away.

Neither of them said it, but both felt the same thing: nothing had changed. They had just been desperate enough to try.

The elevator doors opened on the fourth floor and she heard her sister's voice before she saw her.

"*Where have you been?*"

Her sister was in the hallway. Hands over her mouth. Crying—but not the way she had been crying for six days.

"He's awake."

The mother's legs gave out a little and her husband caught her elbow.

"He's *awake,*" her sister said again. "He asked for water. The doctor can't—"

She didn't finish.

They ran.

In the room, her son was sitting up. Not propped—sitting. The tube was gone. A nurse was at his side adjusting something, and her son was looking around the room like a person waking up in a hotel he didn't remember checking into.

He saw his mother in the doorway.

He smiled.

She crossed the room and did not cry until her face was pressed into his hair, and then she cried for a long time, and he let her.

Later—she didn't know how much later—she looked at the bedside table. Her sister had brought his things from home, the small stuff, a phone charger, a book.

And the cross.

The little wire figure kneeling at the foot of it, still balanced on its curl of driftwood.

She picked it up. The wire was warm from the sun through the window.

Her son watched her hold it.

"That's my favorite thing," he said.

She nodded, because she couldn't speak.

Outside, miles away, the tide was coming back in, and a man with dirty hands was shaping another piece of wire into something small enough to fit in a stranger's palm.

CHAPTER 17

# THE BROKEN COWBOY

## The rodeo rider couldn't kick drugs until this

Michael was standing at the exit of a Walmart parking lot, holding a sign.

Stop-sign exit, cars creeping up to it one at a time, most of them looking past him at the traffic on the road beyond. You've seen this scene a hundred times. America has a version of this picture in every town.

His sign wasn't what I expected.

*Anything helps, as long as it comes from the heart.*

Eight words. I read it twice.

I pulled in and parked, and when I walked back over, I got my first real look at him. About five-seven. Thin, wiry. Gray

hair gone a little wild. Glasses that looked like they'd come out of a 1980s optometry catalog—wide frames, slightly tinted, the kind nobody makes anymore. Small man. Sturdy.

A cowboy. You could tell before he said anything.

His story came out in pieces, the way stories do when a man hasn't told them in a while.

He'd ridden rodeo for decades. Broncos. The wildest ones. He'd spent most of his life hanging onto half-ton animals that were trying to throw him, and he'd been good at it. His knees were paying for it now—you could see it in the way he stood, the way he favored one side.

But the rodeo wasn't what had broken him.

Heroin was.

It had started small, the way those stories always start, and then one day it hadn't been small anymore. He'd been owned. He'd been crushed. No bronc had ever done to him what the drug had done.

He and his wife had both been through it. And they'd both come out the other side—they'd gotten clean, built something back, been a married couple again for a while. Decades, he said. They'd been married decades.

Then one morning he had woken up, and she hadn't.

Heart attack in her sleep. He told me this without embellishment. Didn't name her, didn't tell me when it had been, didn't tell me much of anything. Just said the thing that had happened: she'd gone to sleep, and the next day she was gone.

I didn't ask.

There are silences you don't fill in, and when a widower who's been through heroin tells you his wife died in her sleep and then looks down at his shoes for a second, you let him look at his shoes.

His name was Michael, he said, after the archangel.

His father had been a pastor. His mother had raised him in the kind of faith that goes down into a child's bones and stays there even after the child walks away. And Michael had walked away. He'd given his life to Jesus once, back when the world still felt steady under his boots, and then somewhere in the middle of everything he'd let go of the rope.

Heroin had slipped in through a door he'd left open.

He hadn't told me he'd come back. But he had. You could see it in him. I figured it was the darkness he'd finally gotten tired of—that at some point, some night, sitting in his beat-up car or walking out of a rodeo arena or standing over a bed that wasn't going to be slept in again, he'd decided he'd had enough. He didn't explain it. I didn't ask him to.

Some men come back to God quietly. You don't get a story. You just get what's left of them afterward, and it's better than what was there before, and you thank God for it and leave it alone.

While we were talking, the cars started stopping.

Not a lot of them. But three or four, over the course of maybe fifteen minutes, rolled up to the stop sign and rolled down their windows and handed him things. A few bucks. A bag of food. Someone gave him a sandwich.

Michael accepted each one the way a man receives a gift: with a small nod, a thank you, no fuss. He didn't wave his sign. He didn't hustle them. He just stood there, and the help came.

Before I'd walked up, no one had been stopping.

It felt like the conversation had drawn something down. Like standing near him had reminded passing cars that there was a person at the stop sign.

I told Michael about my own healing—how Jesus had pulled me back from something doctors couldn't name. He listened the way a man who knows something about rescue listens. When my phone rang and I took the call, he didn't fidget or walk away. When I hung up, he said, "Go on. I want to hear the rest."

I kept going.

“Only God can do that,” he said, when I was done.

Like he was telling me, not the other way around.

“You homeless?” I asked, though I already knew.

“Yeah.” He nodded toward a pale blue Honda sedan parked off to the side. Battered. Dusty. “That’s home. God got me a deal on it. No way I could’ve managed it on my own.”

Then he told me something that stopped me.

Another homeless man was staying in that car with him.

Michael didn’t know this guy all that well—hadn’t told me his name. But the man didn’t have a car, and Michael did, and to Michael that settled it. “It’s not right for him to be on the ground,” he said. Like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

A man with a battered Honda and a sign at a Walmart exit was running a shelter for one.

I thought about the poor widow Jesus talked about—the one who put two small coins in the temple treasury, and Jesus said her offering was worth more than all the rich men’s combined, because she had given out of what she didn’t have. I didn’t say it out loud. Michael was already doing it. He didn’t need me to identify the parallel for him.

The conversation wound down. I told him I had to go.

He nodded. Didn't try to hold me. Didn't ask for anything.

And then, out of nowhere, he said it.

"I'll see you in heaven."

He said it at the stop sign, in the middle of a Walmart parking lot, in a pair of eighties glasses, with a sign in one hand and a bronc rider's wrecked knees under him. He looked me directly in the eyes. He said it the way a man says the most important thing he has ever said to anyone.

Five words.

I didn't know what to say back. I don't think anything I could have said back would have been enough.

I got in my car.

I never saw Michael again.

I still think about him. The cowboy from nowhere, at a stop sign I'd happened to pass. A man who had lost his wife and his body and most of his years to things he hadn't expected to survive, and who was still there—giving half a battered Honda to a stranger, holding a sign that asked for help only if it came from the heart, and telling me he'd see me in heaven like the meeting was already scheduled.

Some people you meet once and the meeting is all you get.

I believe him, though. I'll see him there.

CHAPTER 18

# The Lion and Cat

## Turn-by-turn through 300 acres

We'd just moved into a new house backed up against 300 acres of wilderness.

The kind of land with mountain lions and bobcats on it. Coyotes. Rattlesnakes. Deer bones on the game trails where something had finished with them.

Our cat had been with us since she was a newborn—we'd rescued her from a field in the country and tried a few names on her before giving up and letting her attitude settle the question. She was the Queen. She ran that house.

She was also an in-and-out cat, and after two days in the new place she wanted to see what was out there. I let her out.

She didn't come back.

By dusk she still wasn't home. By seven I was on the porch. By eleven I had the door cracked open in a November cold snap that was supposed to be the coldest of the year. She wasn't coming back. I slept on the couch with a blanket pulled up and listened for her.

Hours before dawn I went out.

The air was freezing. The sky was pitch black with stars looking down on me. I walked the game trails with a flashlight. I knew what was out there. I went anyway.

“Lord,” I whispered, “where is she?”

A phrase came into my head. I’d never heard it before, or if I had I hadn’t noticed.

Not by strength or might, but by my Spirit.

I’m no theologian. I didn’t know if that was from the Bible or from somewhere else. I just knew it had come to me, in the freezing dark, on a game trail, in answer to a prayer about a cat.

My wife and I sat with it most of the morning. By late morning the hope had gone out of her eyes. I could see her getting ready to let go.

“She’s alive,” I said.

I said it with more faith than fact.

*Get on your bike and ride.*

So I did.

The trails went up. Sandy soil, knobby tires, hill after hill. A mile in I was soaked through.

The directions came one at a time.

*Left.*

*Up.*

*Right.*

*Keep going.*

I took the turns as they came. The grade got steeper. My legs burned.

Then:

*Stop.*

I skidded to a halt at the edge of a ravine. A dry creek bed below, tangled in poison oak. I swung my leg off the bike and started to step forward.

*Stop.*

I froze.

I looked down.

A rusted barbed wire fence was inches from my shin. If I'd taken one more step I would have gone into it at speed.

I stepped carefully over. The wire got me anyway—caught my shin on the way across and opened it up on the rust.

I ignored it.

I cupped my hands to my ears.

Then, faint: a meow.

I went down the embankment through the poison oak. Branches caught my arms. At the bottom: silence. I stood there with my heart pounding.

Another meow. Closer.

She crept out of the brush toward me. She knew she was safe now. I scooped her up and she was trembling against my chest.

I carried her out of the ravine.

I walked home with the cat in my arms, leaving the bike behind.

When I got to the door and rang the bell, my wife opened it and saw the cat and started crying.

“You have the Holy Spirit with you,” she said.

I jogged back up the trail for the bike.

As I got close to the spot, a woman was standing there, looking at it.

“Hello?” she called. “Is this anyone’s bicycle? Are you hurt?”

I came up out of the ravine. She was about fifty, blonde, piercing blue eyes, a foreign accent I couldn’t quite place.

“No, I’m fine,” I said. “I was out here finding our cat.”

Her eyebrows went up.

“A cat? Out here? That’s dangerous. A mountain lion got a Rottweiler out here recently.”

She showed me photos on her phone—bobcats she’d seen on this trail. Multiple.

“Thank you for checking,” I said. I picked up the bike.

I started to leave, then turned back.

“What’s your name?”

“Helen,” she said. “Helen Faithfull.”

CHAPTER 19

# THE CHRISTMAS VISIT

## A late-night drive to a town proved to be answers and a gift

Christmas Eve. Nine at night.

Ian and I were settling in when the nudge came. *It's time to go.*

We drove forty minutes south, into a town I used to live in—the kind of town where I had no business being on Christmas Eve, at nine at night, alone with a friend and a car full of blankets and food.

I knew this place. It had seen better days. There was a military base nearby that had been scaled back years ago, and poverty had crept in behind it, the way poverty does when the jobs that held a town together start going somewhere else. The streets hadn't changed much. The storefronts had. I hadn't driven through after dark in a long time.

Most homeless people don't work the streets on Christmas Eve. They find a corner, tuck in, and wait the night out. You don't usually see anyone.

But tonight we saw someone.

Near a dimly-lit McDonald's, under flickering neon, a man sat on the curb with a sign.

Maybe forty. Stout. Brown beard. He didn't look up when we pulled in—just sat, hunched into his coat, the flashing yellow-and-red of the sign making his face look stranger than it probably was in daylight.

We got out, walked over, handed him some supplies. Asked if we could pray for him.

"Sure."

I prayed for safety. I prayed for a home. Not a long prayer. A Christmas Eve prayer from two strangers in a parking lot, just asking that this man would not be forgotten tonight.

When I opened my eyes, he looked straight at me.

"My assignment is done," he said.

I didn't respond right away. People don't say things like that. Not homeless men, not on curbs, not on Christmas Eve. He said it with a calm finality—not sad, not dramatic. Just a man reporting in that his work here had concluded.

Something in me said *go.*

I thanked him. Ian and I got back in the car and drove.

I don't know what he was. I'd had an encounter like this before, in a parking lot by a pier—a man I'd been feeding for months who turned out to be somewhere he couldn't

possibly have been. That chapter is its own story. I can't say for sure what was sitting on the curb by the McDonald's in flickering neon. But I'll tell you: he said "my assignment is done," and the hair on the back of my neck went up, and we left.

We drove fifteen minutes across the town—all the way from one end to the other. The nudge kept going. *Further. Further.*

We ended up near the edge of the city, where the streetlights get sparser and the foothills start rising up into oak and sage country. Darker out there. The temperature was dropping. You could see your breath in the dashboard light.

And there, in the shadows at the edge of where the town stopped, was another man.

Almost invisible.

He was sitting on the ground with his back against something. Around sixty years old, I'd guess. Six-two. Two hundred pounds. Ruddy complexion, weathered. Blue eyes when he looked up—the kind of blue you see in the sky when there's no weather in it. He was clearly homeless, but he wasn't dirty. That's something you notice after you've done this long enough. Some homeless people have given up on keeping themselves clean, and some haven't. He hadn't.

We got out and walked toward him.

He watched us come, slowly, like he couldn't quite believe two people were getting out of a car at 10:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve to walk into the shadows toward him.

We handed him a blanket. Hand warmers. A beanie.

Then I asked if I could pray.

He nodded.

I placed my hand on his shoulder. Jesus is always direct with his words, so I tried to be direct with mine. I didn't perform a prayer. I just said what needed to be said—that God saw him, that God hadn't forgotten him tonight, that the cold wasn't the end of the story.

When I was done, he looked up.

His eyes were full.

"You have no idea how much I needed this," he whispered. His breath was visible in the cold. "I've been sitting here, praying. I didn't think He was listening."

He said it with surprise. Like someone had just handed him something that shouldn't have been possible—like why would God even listen to him? Of all the people in the world to answer tonight, why him?

The answer, of course, was that He does. That's how He is. That's what these years on the street have shown me over and over.

"You're the real ones," he said.

I asked what he meant.

He said it was the odds. It was late, he was in the shadows, he had just prayed, and two men had pulled into his town from somewhere else and walked directly at him. There was no version of that he could make sense of. The math didn't math.

Then he mentioned the hernia.

A double hernia, he said. He'd been carrying it a long time. He didn't make a request exactly—just named it, the way a man names a thing that had been eating at him.

I almost laughed.

Not because of him. Because of God.

A few nights earlier I had prayed for another man with a hernia. Older guy, around seventy-five, bent over so far he couldn't stand up straight. After we'd prayed for him, he'd stood up. Just—stood. Straightened his back, looked around surprised, said the pain was gone. I'd been thinking about him for days.

And now here was this one. A different man, a different town, with the same condition.

“Lord,” I said, hand still on his shoulder, “You said to lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.”

I prayed for his body. I knew—the way I’d known with the older man—that this was going to go where it needed to go. My faith on this wasn’t a theory. It was built from a week earlier.

We stayed a little longer. Gave him the rest of the supplies. Told him we’d be thinking of him.

Then Ian and I got in the car and drove back up the forty minutes of freeway to my house. It was past eleven by now. Christmas morning was coming on the other side of midnight for the rest of the world. We didn’t talk much. There wasn’t much to say.

We’d gone into a town where I used to live, on a night nobody was out, and we’d found two men who had been waiting for someone.

The first one had told us his assignment was done.

The second one had been praying, and God had answered him by pointing two guys in a car at the edge of the foothills where he happened to be sitting in the cold.

The math didn’t math, as he’d said. But that’s the math heaven runs on. It adds up different.

CHAPTER 20

# The Namesake

## Sitting on a sidewalk in a college town

I'd given her a burrito about a week before.

It was late spring, warm and sunny, and she was sitting in the same college town on the same main street—a town full of twenty-four-year-olds studying and relaxing before real life began.

She was twenty-four. She was sitting on the sidewalk with a small backpack like a kid might take to school.

Petite. Maybe five-four. Smooth dark skin. No drugs. No signs of mental illness. Her eyes were alive.

I parked my car and she happened to be right there when I got out.

I walked up to her.

"You're a believer in Jesus, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yes, I am." She said it easily, friendly, like it was obvious.

“I’m not homeless,” she added. “I’m traveling.”

We talked for a minute. She was from Michigan. She was moving—not running, moving. Her voice was peaceful. Friendly. Whatever she was doing out here, it wasn’t what being out here usually meant for people.

*Ask her if she’s been baptized with the Holy Spirit.*

“You’re a believer,” I said, “but have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?”

“I’ve believed for a long time,” she said. “But no, I haven’t.”

I sat down next to her on the sidewalk.

People walking past looked at me the way they’d been looking at her. I was homeless now too, as far as they could see.

I didn’t look back at them.

I prayed for the Holy Spirit to come on her. For protection, for strength, for a covering that would carry her through whatever she was moving toward.

After a moment, I asked the simplest question.

“What’s your name?”

She smiled.

“Joy.”

CHAPTER 21

# Sea of Life

## The waves held no answers for the couple walking the beach

“Go back to that beach you went to last week.”

That was the whole instruction. No explanation. No rider attached.

The beach in question wasn’t a friendly one. It’s a remote California stretch where the waves can and do kill you—deep water, chaotic surf, rip tides so textbook they could be the dictionary definition. Great whites patrol offshore. An experienced scuba diver had drowned there not long before. It’s not where you go for a stroll. It’s not where you go for anything, really, except to stand at the edge of something bigger than you and remember how small you are.

I had been there the week before. Nothing notable had happened. I hadn’t been back since.

Now the Holy Spirit was telling me to return.

I grabbed my gear and got on the road.

California was burning that week.

The wildfires had been going for days, and the sky was the color of something you'd seen in an apocalypse movie—a sick orange-brown haze that turned the sun into a dull coin you could look at directly. The air smelled like smoke and tasted like ash. You could feel it in your throat with every breath. The kind of day when the news tells you to stay indoors.

I wasn't staying indoors.

Thirty-mile drive. I took the two-lane road that winds through small towns you've driven through a hundred times without remembering any of them. One of them was a place I used to know—the kind of town a country song would call *a small town* without feeling the need to specify anything else. I was passing through it when I saw him.

A young guy, maybe twenty-one. Thin and tall. Long brown hair, dirty. Standing alone in front of a Taco Bell.

I pulled up.

"You want a taco?"

He looked up, and he was the kind of surprised that homeless people get when somebody sees them. It took him a second to answer.

"Could I get a bean and cheese burrito, instead?"

He said it politely. Almost apologetically. Like he didn't want to be any trouble. That kind of politeness—you don't forget it. The streets don't usually leave that in a twenty-one-year-old.

"Yeah, of course."

I pulled around and went inside.

I was standing at the counter when the thought came into my heart. Not loud. Not audible. Just a sentence dropped into me with the certainty these sentences have.

*Get twenty burritos.*

I paused. Twenty? For one guy?

But I've been doing this long enough to know that when a sentence like that comes in, you don't question the quantity.

I ordered twenty.

The cashier didn't blink. I brought them out to the car—a warm stack on the passenger seat, steaming through the paper—and I handed the first one to the young man.

"Thank you," he said.

Quiet. Polite. He took the burrito carefully, the way you take something valuable.

I pulled out of the lot.

I had nineteen burritos on the passenger seat and no plan for any of them.

The nudge kept going as I drove through the town. *Turn left. Turn right.* I followed a set of directions I wasn't generating. The streets I was turning onto were the ones a town keeps out of its postcards—chain-link fencing, iron bars on apartment windows, a weight in the air that wasn't smoke. Poverty has its own atmosphere. You could feel it pressing in.

Then the nudge stopped me.

I was near a power plant station, just past the edge of a neighborhood, when I pulled up in front of three beat-up RVs slumped against a curb. They looked like tired animals lying down. You'd have driven past them thinking they were abandoned.

I got out of the car.

"Hey—would you like some food?"

Nothing.

"Hey—I've got some food. Anyone hungry?"

After a few calls, the doors of the RVs started opening.

People came out slowly. Bewildered. About five of them, all told. A woman with exhaustion in every line of her face. Two

people who clearly hadn't seen running water in a while. Another. And another.

They came toward me like people coming toward something they weren't sure was real.

I handed each of them a burrito. A few of them got two. They stood there holding the warm paper in their hands and thanking me over and over, and it hit me that this might be the only meal they were going to eat that day. Or that maybe, because this food had shown up, the money they would have had to spend on it could now go to gas, or a bill, or something else they couldn't otherwise afford.

Nobody had done this for them before.

I stood there for a minute after I'd handed the burritos out.

I had fourteen left.

The nudge came again. Quiet. Finished with this stop.

*Now go.*

I drove west.

The smoke got thicker as I got closer to the coast. By the time I turned onto the beach access road, the air had changed—not just darker but denser, a kind of damp

ash-soup that coats your windshield if you're driving through it. The parking lot was nearly empty. One or two cars.

There was a volunteer at a folding table near the beach entrance.

He was guarding a section of dune where snowy plovers were nesting. Threatened species—small white shorebirds that make their nests in the sand, and get run over by humans who don't know to watch for them. So there's a volunteer, sitting at a folding table in ash-fog, protecting the spots where the next generation of a threatened bird is trying to hatch.

I said hello. We talked for a minute about the air, about the fires, about how very few people were coming out to a beach that shouldn't have anyone on it today anyway.

As I turned to head down to the sand, he said something almost as an afterthought.

"That couple down there—they're the only ones on the beach."

I looked.

Two small figures climbing back up the dune toward the parking lot. A dog bounding beside them. They were still pretty far off, but my eyes stuck on them. The way the nudge sticks to a person sometimes when you don't yet know why.

I walked toward them.

She was struggling up the dune.

Thin—too thin. A clear plastic oxygen tube ran from her nostrils down under her coat to wherever her tank was. Her steps were small. Her husband walked beside her, one hand low on her back, not pushing—just there.

They were in their fifties, I'd guess. He was quiet. She was the one the journey belonged to, and he was walking next to her because that was what he could do.

I waited until they'd crested the dune and caught their breath before I said anything.

I introduced myself.

I told them about my own healing—the one the doctors couldn't name, the one I'd almost died of, the one that had ended when I'd said to God that I would trust Him no matter what happened and a stranger had shown up to tell me I'd be healed. I told it short. I didn't preach. I just told them the way you tell someone standing in the same place you once stood.

Her name was Christine.

She had a small cross on a chain around her neck. Light blue eyes. The kind of tired that isn't about sleep—the kind that's about a body that's been slowly losing a long fight.

She had known hope once. You could see it. And somewhere along the long road of a failing body and unanswered prayers, the hope had started to thin out.

She listened intently to everything I said. So did her husband, standing close to her, not speaking. It was her journey. He was there to bear witness to it.

When I finished, she was crying—not the fast kind, the slow kind, the kind where tears pool before they fall.

I asked if I could pray for her.

She nodded.

I didn't deliver a long-winded prayer. I asked God for her healing. I named what I'd just heard her say about her body. I asked that the same God who'd stood in for me would stand in for her.

That was it.

I don't know what happened in her body in that moment. I didn't see her oxygen flow change. I didn't see her color change. I can't tell you she was healed standing on that dune in the smoke.

What I can tell you is that she had come to that beach—the dangerous one, the one with the rip tides and the sharks, the one where a scuba diver had drowned—looking for answers the waves weren't going to give her. And then a stranger had

climbed the dune to tell her a story about a God who had answered him. That wasn't nothing. That might have been everything. Only Christine and God know.

They thanked me. I thanked them. I walked back up to the parking lot.

I never saw Christine again.

I got in the car and drove home.

On the way through town, I passed a homeless camp—a cluster of tents and tarps off a service road, the kind of place most people drive past without letting their eyes land on.

I pulled over.

By the time I'd walked the last fourteen burritos through that camp, they were gone. Every single one. The number of people there matched the number of burritos in the bag, almost as if something had counted ahead.

Nothing was wasted. Nothing was left over. Twenty had been ordered. Twenty had been given away.

I got back in the car and drove the rest of the way home through the smoke.

The ash was still in the air. The fires were still burning. Christine was still walking her journey wherever she was walking it.

But somewhere, on a beach at the edge of a state that was on fire, a woman on oxygen had been handed a story by someone who'd been where she was.

And twenty people who otherwise wouldn't have eaten that day had eaten.

Sometimes that's what a day is. You don't always know what the beach is for. You go because you're told, and you find out on the way home why you were sent.

CHAPTER 22

# SHOW, NOT TELL

## Demonstrating that faith is a verb

Mike was sitting on a low cobblestone wall at the edge of an outdoor plaza, a little book open in his hands.

Late afternoon. The sun was long, the shadows were stretching, and the plaza around him had the quiet hum of a place starting to wind down. Tables outside the cafes. People with shopping bags walking past. Mike in the middle of it on a wall, flipping pages.

I don't usually stop for this. A guy reading a book is a guy reading a book.

But something said *pause.*

I paused.

"You reading the Bible?"

His head came up. "Yeah." Then, right away: "I've got a question about Philippians."

I sat down next to him on the cool stone.

"What's it about?" he asked.

He wasn't asking me to recite Paul's imprisonment in Rome. He wasn't asking for verse numbers. What he wanted was simpler, and also bigger.

"Is love in there?" he said. "Is that what it's about?"

I looked at him, at the book in his hands, at the plaza getting golden around us.

And I realized I didn't want to answer him out of the book.

I'm no Bible scholar. I don't have degrees. I don't have the kind of knowledge that teaches a guy the structure of an epistle. What I did have—sitting there on that wall—was a few years of stories.

So I told him those instead.

I told him about the homeless people I'd been walking with. I told him about Greg on the embankment. I told him about the guitar I had to buy on day six. I told him about the woman who said her heart strings were being pulled. I told him about the man under the bridge I'd found too late, and the man next to the McDonald's who said his assignment was done. I told him about the boy I'd never met who came out of a coma three hundred miles away after I'd recorded a video.

I told him these one at a time. Some of them made him quiet. Some of them made him lean in.

Every time I thought I'd told him enough, he said, "Tell me another one."

So I did.

This went on for over two hours.

I couldn't believe it myself. I'm not usually the guy holding anyone's attention for two hours about anything. But he wouldn't let me stop, and the longer I talked, the more I started to notice something.

I wasn't quoting scripture. I was telling him about God today. About love happening now—on sidewalks, in parking lots, in the passenger seat of someone's car during a diabetic crisis, under a bridge in January.

That was Philippians, in a way he could see it.

Love doing what love does, in people too ordinary to have written it down.

At some point I slid off the wall and dragged my foot across the concrete.

A thin scuff-line, maybe three feet across.

"This is the possible side," I said, stepping onto one side of it. "This is where most everyone lives. The side where things add up and make sense and you plan your life around them."

Then I stepped across the line.

“This is the impossible side. This is where God is. And we can live here too.”

Mike looked at the line.

I don’t know what he saw on either side of it in that moment. But I could see he was looking. Not just at the line. At himself, standing on whichever side of it he’d decided he belonged on.

Then, right on cue, the old man arrived.

You could hear him before you saw him—that scuffle-drag of a body in pain trying to keep moving. Mid-seventies. Skin like sunbaked leather. A bend in his back that wouldn’t come out, even when he tried to straighten it.

He circled us like a dog looking for a spot to lie down.

“I don’t have my pain meds,” he said. “I don’t have my pain meds.”

His hand was pressed into his lower back. You could see the effort it took him to stand at all.

Mike and I looked at each other.

Two hours of stories about God healing people in impossible situations, and a man in visible pain had just walked into our conversation.

I don't believe that was coincidence. I don't think any atmosphere gets two hours of testimony built up in it without something responding to the pressure.

I stood up. Brushed the dust off my jeans.

"Do you mind if I pray for you?"

He nodded. Didn't really hear the question. Just nodded.

I looked at Mike. "Come here. You're in this."

Mike's eyes went wide the way eyes go wide when a thing you've been thinking about abstractly suddenly has hands. But he came. He stood up from the wall and walked over.

We laid our hands on the old man's shoulders—me on one side, Mike on the other.

I prayed short.

"Pain, go. Jesus is the medicine."

And it went.

Fast. Not inch-by-inch the way some healings go. Fast. His face shifted, the way a face shifts when something has just stopped hurting. His back started to come up. Not all the way at once, but in one clean motion. When he was done, he was standing almost two inches taller than he'd been when he circled us.

His eyes had light in them.

He didn't say thank you. He didn't make a fuss. He just turned and walked off whistling some tune I didn't recognize, moving like a man twenty years younger.

We watched him go.

Mike stood there with his mouth slightly open.

"Where did you come from?"

He said it the way a man says it when he's already been sitting on a wall asking himself the same question about his own life.

I didn't know Mike's full story. I knew he was young. I knew he'd been on the Hollywood scene or near it, and I got the sense he was at a fork—that the book in his hands and the plaza at the end of the day and the question about Philippians were all pieces of him trying to decide whether he was going back to what he'd come from, or something else. He had been debating his future on that wall when I

walked up. Two hours of testimony and an old man walking off whistling weren't going to settle that debate for him.

But they had moved the debate somewhere new.

I didn't answer his question with a line. I just looked at him for a second, and I think he understood.

Then I walked back into the plaza and the golden light and left him sitting on the wall with his book.

CHAPTER 23

# Cherry Pepsi and the Book of Life

## A children's book, a picnic table, a winter morning

We held a BBQ for the homeless every two weeks at a park we always used.

Late afternoon into evening. Burgers until the burgers ran out—usually about a hundred. We brought coolers of Dr. Pepper and regular Pepsi.

Kevin was a regular.

He was five-ten, white, blonde hair, blue eyes. He looked about thirty. He was probably sixty.

He was shy. He didn't say much. But every time he came through the line with his burger, he'd ask the same thing.

"Got any Cherry Pepsi?"

For a while the answer was no. You could see it on his face when we said it. The first time I noticed how much he cared, I went out and bought some. After that we always kept a few cans of Cherry Pepsi in the cooler. For Kevin.

One winter morning I was setting up for the BBQ.

Kevin was there already, at one of the picnic tables. He was hunched over the table with his head down on it and his arms around a book. Fast asleep.

The book was a children's book called *On the Day You Were Born.*

It was his. He'd been reading it. His face was on the page.

A sixty-year-old man asleep on a picnic table with his face on a children's book about the wonder of being born.

*Why is this here?* I asked in my head.

*I put the book here.*

Not the book on the table—the book in his hands. His life. A story about the wonder of the day he was born, placed by God into the arms of a man.

I didn't wake him. I didn't touch the book.

Sleep is an escape from the struggle, for a lot of the people I've known on the streets. You don't interrupt it.

I found out later what Kevin did. He worked a graveyard shift doing manual labor for the county—cleaning up parks, I

think. He slept in the park during the day because he didn't have a place to call home.

He wasn't a bum. He was a guy with a night job and a children's book.

Six months after that morning, they found Kevin in the same park. Natural causes.

I loaded five twelve-packs of Cherry Pepsi into my car and drove over.

The homeless people I handed them to all loved him. I hadn't known how many of them did until that day.

CHAPTER 24

# The Man in the Wheelchair

## A word on the back of an envelope

James wasn't supposed to be in a wheelchair.

He'd been riding his bike when the car hit him. The hospital patched him up as well as hospitals do, but they couldn't stitch back what was lost. The chair was permanent, they said.

I'd seen James before the accident, over the previous year and a half. He'd been on his feet then, riding his own bike around town. About thirty-five. Blonde. Maybe five-ten. Quiet, polite, kept to himself. A nice guy. I'd handed him a burrito now and then. He never said much.

Now here he was, on the concrete sidewalk outside a Goodwill in a strip mall that could have been anywhere in America. He was on the ground behind his wheelchair. The chair stood empty in front of him.

A twenty-pound bag of dog food sat on the sidewalk.

He was trying to figure out how to get it onto the chair.

I held the chair steady while he got himself back into it. He had upper body strength—that was what was left to

him—and he used it, muscle by muscle, until he was seated. His shirt had blood on it. IV marks on his arms, the kind you get from being stuck four times a day by people chasing something in your bloodstream they can't quite find.

He wasn't angry about the chair. He was angry about the shirt.

"They messed it up at the hospital," he said. His voice was normal. No self-pity in it. Just a man annoyed that somebody had ruined a shirt he couldn't afford to replace.

That's when I felt the nudge. *Go in with him.*

Inside, I told him to pick out whatever he wanted. He chose simple things—a shirt, some pants. At the counter I paid. About fifteen dollars. He had no money.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You've already done a lot."

A lot. Two burritos and a fifteen-dollar pile of clothes at Goodwill. That was a lot to him.

Outside, I asked about the dog food.

"That's for a friend," he said. "She's got a dog."

We stood there together and worked it out—how to rig a twenty-pound bag to a wheelchair so it wouldn't slide off and wouldn't tip him. It wasn't elegant. It held.

He started to roll away, and that's when I heard it. Not loud. Not audible. A sentence dropped in with the certainty these sentences have.

*James will be healed.*

I had a card envelope in my car. I grabbed it and a pen. On the back I wrote four words: *God will heal you.*

I caught up to him and handed it over. I told him what I'd heard—that God was going to heal him. That he would walk.

He took the envelope. He read it. He listened.

"Okay," he said.

No emotion. No argument. Just *okay*. He rolled away with the dog food balanced behind him and the envelope in his hand.

Three weeks later I was back at the same shopping center.

James was sitting on the grass near the Food Maxx. No wheelchair. A bike lay on the grass beside him.

He grinned when he saw me.

I took a couple of photos that day. Before and after. I still have them. I'm not going to publish them—they're for me, for remembering. Some things you carry quietly.

I saw him one more time, years later.

He was outside an Albertsons, asking for money. Still on his feet. Healthy. Walking.

We didn’t talk. There wasn’t anything to say. My mission with him was over the day he stood up.

CHAPTER 25

# Running with the Pack

## Five chihuahuas in a yellow kid carrier

Bill was standing at the far end of a beachfront park in Santa Barbara, about two in the afternoon, trying not to be seen.

His eyes moved over everyone who got close. His bike was an older mountain bike, battered, with a yellow kid carrier hooked on the back. The kind of trailer you'd use to pull a toddler to the park.

*Go talk to him.*

I walked up slow.

"Hey. I've got some food if you'd like it. And I'd love to pray for you, if that's okay."

His eyes came up. Sharp, tired.

"I'll take the food. I don't need prayer."

His name was Bill. He was about sixty-seven. Long gray-brown hair. Deeply tan. His voice was cautionary.

He mentioned his girlfriend. She was sick.

“Let’s pray for her then,” I said.

I prayed for her. Short, quiet, nothing fancy.

Bill stood there for a second after.

“I guess I could use some prayer too,” he said. “Got a tumor. In my brain.”

“Lord,” I said, “heal this tumor. Make Bill whole. In his body, in his heart, in his life.”

He started talking about the cops.

Tickets for loitering, every place he went. Citations he couldn’t fight and couldn’t pay. One after another.

That’s when I noticed what was moving in the kid carrier behind his bike.

“How many dogs you got in there?”

His face changed.

“Five.”

He said it softer than anything he’d said so far.

“What are their names?”

He rattled them off—all five, quick and easy. I only caught the last one.

“And the papa dog,” Bill said. “His name’s Malachi.”

Malachi.

I’d met a homeless man an hour north of Santa Barbara. His name was Bryan. Bryan wore a baseball cap every day with three words written on it in large black Sharpie.

*Malachi 4:2.*

Malachi 4:2 says: *But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.*

It’s not a verse most people can quote. It’s not a verse most pastors preach on. It’s tucked into the last page of the Old Testament. Bryan had it inked on his hat and wore it every day like a sign nobody was reading.

I told Bill about Bryan.

I told him the verse.

Bill stood there in the park next to his bike with five dogs in a yellow kid carrier and one of them named after the prophet of a verse another homeless man he’d never met was carrying around on his hat.

“God’s got you, Bill,” I said. “You will be healed.”

I left him there with five chihuahuas in a yellow kid carrier, the papa dog named after a prophet on another homeless man’s hat.

CHAPTER 26

# Delivered from Demons

## Something pulled on her heart

I was sitting outside a Jersey Mike's, waiting on a sandwich.

Strip mall. One of those anywhere-in-America shopping centers—a drugstore, a nail salon, a sub shop, a parking lot. I'd never been to this one before. The Holy Spirit had me turn into a plaza I didn't know existed, sit at a wobbly metal table on the sidewalk out front, and order turkey and Swiss.

I don't know what I thought I was doing there. You don't always know. Sometimes the nudge just says *here,* and you sit down and wait.

That's when she came over.

She was maybe thirty. Five-four. Gray-streaked hair under a beanie, though the streaks didn't match her age. Her clothes were more rags than clothes. Her hands hadn't seen soap in a long time. Blue eyes.

She wasn't loud. She wasn't asking for money. She was just coming toward me across the parking lot like she was following something only she could see.

“My heart strings are being pulled.”

That’s what she said.

Not *hi.* Not *can I have a dollar.* She walked up to a stranger at a sandwich shop and said “my heart strings are being pulled,” in a voice that sounded older than she was. Older than her. Like someone was talking through her from a century ago.

Who says “heart strings”? That’s an expression from somewhere around 1930. Nobody under the age of ninety uses it. But she said it like it was the only phrase she had for what was happening to her, and she was trying to get it out before whatever was happening made her stop.

“I don’t want to leave this area,” she said.

I looked up at her. Asked God what this was.

*Let her sit with you.*

So I did.

She slid into the chair next to me like it was the most natural thing in the world. People around us kept their distance, eyes sliding away the way eyes slide away. Nobody saw a homeless woman sit down at a stranger’s table. Or if they did, they decided not to.

“I’ve never felt this before,” she whispered. “I don’t want to leave this area. My heart strings are being pulled.”

Third time.

She said it like she was admitting it—not announcing it, admitting it. Like a person under a spell describing the spell to someone who might be able to lift it. Something was tugging at her that she couldn't see and couldn't resist, and she had walked toward the sub shop because the tugging pointed her there.

I'd been sitting in this plaza for ten minutes because the Holy Spirit had pointed me here.

Two different tugs. Same coordinates.

"This is Jesus," I said quietly. "He loves you."

Her blue eyes came up to mine. For a second I saw her—not the hair, not the beanie, not the rags. Just her, the person she'd been before whatever had taken her. The daughter God was still seeing under all of it.

A single tear slid down her cheek.

"Yes," she whispered. "Jesus."

Then she started talking about her children.

She had several. She said their names, or tried to. She was looking straight ahead now, not at me.

Her voice changed.

It's hard to describe and I don't want to over-describe it. It started human. Hers. Then somewhere in the middle of a sentence about her kids, the voice began to sound like it was coming from somewhere else. The cadence shifted. The words got twisted. I don't mean accent. I mean the sound of the voice itself stopped sounding like a person. It sounded non-human.

I sat there. I'd been at this long enough to know what I was hearing.

I asked her if I could pray for her.

She nodded. She didn't look at me. She was still looking straight ahead.

I placed my hand near her, not on her—she was not mine to touch. I began to pray. Quietly. Not loud. No performance. Just words that needed to happen.

Her body began to move.

It wasn't a seizure. It wasn't shaking. It was a single slow convulsive wave that started at her waist and traveled up through her torso and neck to her head. Then another. Then another. Her eyes half-closed. Her mouth worked. She was mumbling—not to me, not to anyone I could see.

I kept praying.

"Out," I said, once, quietly.

Seven minutes.

I don’t know how I know it was seven. I wasn’t timing it. But when it was over I somehow knew. Seven minutes of her body making that wave, her eyes half down, her voice making sounds that weren’t her voice. I sat in the chair next to her and did not move and prayed and said *out* when I felt I needed to, and otherwise just kept the prayer going.

No one at the strip mall saw it. Or if they did, they kept walking past. We were alone on a sidewalk patio with a convulsive wave and a prayer.

Then it stopped.

The wave ended. Her body settled. Her breathing slowed. Her head came up.

She looked at me.

Her eyes were clear.

The woman who looked at me was not the woman who had sat down. She was the same person, but the thing that had been riding behind her eyes was gone.

“Jesus is Lord,” she whispered.

She said it the way a person says something they’ve just remembered. Not a declaration. A remembering.

She stood up.

She didn’t say anything else. She didn’t ask for food. She didn’t look confused. She just stood up and walked away across the parking lot, the same direction she had come from.

I watched her go.

My sandwich arrived.

The employee set it on the wobbly table in front of me and walked back inside. I looked at my turkey and Swiss and at the empty chair next to me where, three minutes ago, a woman had been shaking in a wave from her waist to her head while a voice that wasn’t hers had been saying things I couldn’t make out.

The sandwich had taken twenty minutes to arrive at a sub shop. Sandwiches don’t take twenty minutes at a sub shop. It was as if a window of time had opened over that sidewalk for what needed to happen, and then the window had closed, and then the sandwich could come out.

I ate it.

I never saw her again. I didn’t get her name. She was a stranger before, and a stranger after.

But she walked up to me saying the heart strings of her body were being pulled toward a stranger at a sandwich shop, and what was pulling them was the same thing that had pulled me into a strip mall I’d never set foot in.

Heart strings.

That phrase is going to stay with me. A woman using words from a hundred years ago to describe a tug she couldn’t explain—and the tug turning out to be a rescue she didn’t know she was walking toward.

CHAPTER 27

# THE FAITHFUL TIP

## The waitress never expected this

Every Wednesday I ate sushi at the same place, a little spot in a coastal town, and I sat at the counter.

The waitress was mid-fifties, Korean, maybe five-three, thin, black hair, black eyes. She'd been doing the job over twenty years.

One Wednesday she mentioned her knee in passing.

"What have you tried to fix it?"

"I'm going to try acupuncture." She said it hopefully.

A few weeks later I was back at the counter.

"How's your knee?"

She shook her head. "Still hurts. Acupuncture didn't help."

When she brought the check I flipped it over. I wrote two references in block letters, big enough she couldn't miss them.

*EXODUS 15:26*

*MATTHEW 4:23-24 — HEALING*

The first one is God saying *I am the Lord who heals you.* The second is Jesus going through Galilee healing every disease and sickness among the people.

I handed the check back to her. “Read these when you get a chance.”

The next Wednesday I came in and sat at the counter.

She saw me and smiled.

“My knee is healed. No pain. None.”

CHAPTER 28

# THE LONG ROAD

## She walked from Ohio to the coast, alone

The park had a gazebo, and the gazebo drew homeless people the way a porch light draws moths.

There were five of them on the day I met Diane. Some of them were asleep in sleeping bags. In the middle of the afternoon.

I used to wonder about that until somebody explained it to me. You sleep in the day because the day is safer. At night, somebody can come and take what little you have, or do worse. So you sleep when the sun is up and there are witnesses, and you stay awake at night.

It was late November. Cold. The sun was out and doing nothing about it.

Diane was sitting on a bench. Maybe five-seven, solid build, strong in a way that made me think she could handle herself. Late sixties. White. Brown hair that was losing its fight with gray.

I offered her food and she took it.

She told me she had walked from Ohio.

Not driven. Not hitched. Walked. To the West Coast. Nineteen hundred miles, give or take. Late sixties, on foot, alone.

She'd had a husband in Ohio. When she talked about him her voice went quiet. Everything else she'd faced, she'd faced down. Not him. So she'd left. And she'd kept leaving, one day at a time, one road at a time, until the continent was between them.

Then she said this.

"Some guy held a knife to my throat the other night. But I wasn't scared. I just started chuckling. God's protected me through so much worse. I rely on Him."

She chuckled telling it, the same way she said she'd chuckled at the guy. The knife-holder, she told me, had run off.

Diane took no guff from anyone.

I looked around at the houses across from the park. Nice houses. Regular lives.

"People think life's about stuff," I said. "They gather things, pile them up, like it makes them rich. But you—you've got something that can't be stolen. Something that won't rust or fall apart."

Diane nodded. "Yeah. God always protects me now."

She said it plain. Like somebody reporting a fact.

Then she told me about her daughter.

Thirty-nine. Gone. Diane had buried her.

“It made me think life is precious,” Diane said. “Not to be wasted.”

And then the tears came—out of this woman who had just told me about a knife at her throat without blinking. She apologized for them. Wiped at her face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cry.”

“Tears are good,” I said. “They cleanse the soul.”

I sat with her.

That was most of what I did that afternoon. I sat. I listened. Somewhere in the middle of it I prayed out loud for her, didn’t care who heard. The other four on the gazebo didn’t look up. The houses across the park didn’t know we were there.

I left her on the bench in the late-November sun, with food in her hands and the other four sleeping around her in the daylight where it was safe.

CHAPTER 29

# Losing Your Religion

## A diabetic episode, she needed help

Every two weeks we ran a BBQ in the park in a small town on the California coast—one of those towns like a hundred other towns. A grill, a folding table, a cooler of sodas, a line of people who didn't have a place to eat that afternoon. Burgers, chips, something sweet at the end if we had it. That's the whole operation.

I hadn't planned to be there that night. I'd been tired, I'd had other things going on. Then the nudge came—the kind that doesn't let up—and I went.

Sixty burgers over the course of the evening. The park filled and emptied in waves: men, women, a few kids, people who looked like life had been uneven. Around twenty folks were still there when it happened.

We'd just handed off the last burger.

A car came screeching into the parking lot, tires kicking up dust.

I knew the driver before he was out of the car.

He was a homeless musician I'd been running into for a while in the town where I did most of my street work. Early twenties. Dark hair, long. Good singer. I'd heard him playing downtown on and off—sitting on a curb with a guitar case open in front of him, voice carrying down the block better than anything coming out of the bars nearby. I'd stopped and encouraged him a few times. He was young and had real talent and was living rough, and when a young man like that gives you a song on a sidewalk, the least you can do is tell him it was good.

He jumped out now, panicked.

"You got any protein?!"

His voice was high. His hands were moving before his words were. "She's diabetic—she needs protein *now!*"

The grill was cold. The last burger had been handed off a minute before. We had chips, sodas, cookies. Nothing with protein in it.

And then I remembered.

I keep Vienna sausages in the trunk.

I started doing it a few years back. I used to buy a case of them from Aldi every few weeks—canned, cheap, shelf-stable, and actually protein, which most of what you hand out to people on the street isn't. I'd give them away

along with whatever else I was carrying. They're a small thing. Most people probably thought they were stupid.

That night they were the only protein in the park.

We ran to my car. I popped the trunk. I grabbed two cans and a sugary soda and we sprinted back across the lot.

She was in the front seat of his car. Late thirties. Tiny—maybe five-one. Short hair, pale skin, dark blue eyes that didn't quite track when I leaned in. Lips already losing color. She was slumped in a way the body doesn't slump when it's in control of itself.

He opened the passenger door.

I gave her the soda first.

She downed it the way a person who's been here before downs it. No panic on her end, even though her body was panicking for her. She'd done this. She knew the drill. She put the can to her mouth and it was gone, and then the Vienna sausages were gone, and she was chewing and breathing and chewing and breathing with the focused calm of someone who has walked back from this particular edge more times than I wanted to think about.

Ten minutes.

That's how long it took. In ten minutes her face came back. The color returned. Her eyes started tracking. She sat up. She looked at me and gave me a small, tired smile.

She stepped out of the car on her own.

The Holy Spirit whispered in me: *This is why you needed to be here tonight.*

The musician—I'll just call him that, since I knew him from downtown—had been watching her. When he saw she was back, something in his chest let go.

Then he did the strangest thing.

He leaned into the backseat of his car, and there were three guitars in there. Three. I didn't know where the other two had come from. He wasn't playing three at a time downtown, that was for sure. But he reached past them and pulled one out and came around to where I was standing, and—like a man who lives on music the way some people live on oxygen—he started playing.

Not any song. *Losing My Religion.*

He didn't say anything. Just started strumming the opening, slow and clean in the evening air.

If you were alive in the nineties, you know it. That slow mandolin-sounding opening, the voice coming in low.

I joined in.

I used to sing in a rock band years ago. The harmonies on that song are in my body whether I like them or not. So I

picked up the second vocal line underneath his, and we stood there next to the car she'd nearly died in, singing an R.E.M. song as the sun dropped.

Then she came out of the car.

She walked over, reached into the backseat past her boyfriend, pulled out another one of the guitars, and started playing.

*Playing.*

She knew the song. She knew the chords. She had just been a diabetic emergency ten minutes ago and now she was harmonizing with him on the opening verse of "Losing My Religion" in a park BBQ parking lot, and her voice—when it came in—was raspy and low and alive, something close to Stevie Nicks.

I'd never seen her with him before. I didn't know they played together. But when they came in on that chorus, they'd clearly done it before. A lot. It was the kind of playing two people only do when they've done it in a living room a hundred times before they ever do it in public.

The three of us sang through the whole song.

Twenty homeless people in a park BBQ area stopped what they were doing and listened.

When it was done, I turned to him.

I said something about the title. About how religion is man-made—rules, rituals, a thing we built—and how God is something different. Not a religion. A relationship. Someone you sing with, not about.

I said it pretty directly. More than I usually would.

He didn't argue. He didn't push back. He just looked at me, curious—the way a young man looks at a thing he hasn't considered before but isn't ready to decide on yet. He nodded a little. He went back to tuning his guitar.

That was the whole conversation.

I still see him downtown, playing occasionally. I don't know if what I said settled into him or just floated past. I'm not sure it matters, exactly. He heard it. That's the job.

What I'm sure of is this: a woman who was sliding toward a diabetic coma in the passenger seat of a car got pulled back by a can of Vienna sausages I'd bought at Aldi months earlier for reasons I couldn't have fully articulated at the time.

She came back, she sang, and then the three of us made music in a parking lot while twenty people listened.

That's not religion. Religion doesn't do that. Religion couldn't do that.

What showed up in that parking lot was the other thing. The one that's alive.

And the next time I saw the musician downtown, voice carrying down the block, I thought: *He doesn't know what he was a part of that night. But she does. And God does.*

I put a few dollars in his case and kept walking.

CHAPTER 30

# The Tattoo Answer

## A brain tumor had consumed her life

I was walking around town handing out food to the homeless.

One o'clock, warm summer day. I went past a bench outside a shoe store, and a woman was sitting on it with a box of chicken wings in her lap.

I caught a sharp smell as I passed.

"That smells good. Is it vinegar?"

She looked up, surprised. Brown hair, brown eyes. Around thirty.

"Hot sauce," she said. "But yeah, there's vinegar in it."

I started telling her my story. I don't know why—I just started. About my body wasting away, about the healing that came when there was nothing left but my spirit holding on.

Her eyes filled. "That's exactly what I'm going through."

I sat down on the bench.

She had a brain tumor. A big surgery was coming. She hadn't been outside in months. She'd quit her job because she couldn't focus. She couldn't sleep. It was all she thought about.

"You know Jesus, right?" I said. "I can see it in your eyes."

She nodded.

She asked me what she should do in her fear.

I didn't have an answer yet. And then she pulled up the leg of her jeans.

The tattoo covered her calf—seven inches by four, beautifully done, the kind of work only a real artist does. Matthew 11:28. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*

She traced the words with her finger.

"I got this when I first became a Christian. I was so full of hope back then. Unstoppable."

I looked at her calf. I looked at her face.

"*You're going to be okay. God's got you. You're going to come through this stronger than ever.*"

She cried. Not hard. Just enough that she had to wipe her eyes.

"This is exactly what I needed to hear."

I told her my name. She told me hers—Micala. We exchanged numbers. I stood up and left her there on the bench with her chicken wings and her tattoo.

A few months later my phone buzzed.

*Surgery done. Tumor-free.*

She'd sent a photo with it. She was smiling, wearing a t-shirt that read *Let's Taco About Jesus.*

CHAPTER 31

# THE NEW STEPS

## A pitcher with his shoe off

Taylor was sitting near the Verizon store with a cardboard sign at his feet.

*Anything helps.*

This was a city of a hundred thousand people that had grown like a weed over the past thirty years. Taylor was sitting on a curb in one of its shopping centers, just after one in the afternoon.

I'd seen him before. Handed him a burger once, a burrito another time. He'd been on his feet those times. This time he was limping.

"Sorry," he muttered as I handed him a couple of tacos. "My feet are all messed up."

He was early thirties. About five-eleven. Dark blonde. Even dirty, he looked like an athlete.

"I hate sitting here, asking people for help," he said. "It's all my fault. I made a lot of bad decisions. This is on me."

"We've all made bad decisions, Taylor," I said. "By all rights, a lot of us should be dead because of them. But God takes those things away."

He studied me.

“You go to church around here?”

“I believe in God,” I said. “He saved my life a few years back.”

“What’s wrong with your feet?”

He slipped off his left shoe. Then the sock.

The skin on the top of his foot was raw, layers of it rubbed clean off. A blister the size of a fist stretched across it, angry and oozing. Every step he was taking was tearing more of him away.

“These shoes don’t fit right,” he said. “But it’s all I got.”

Then, out of nowhere, he said it.

“I played pro baseball in the minors. I was a pitcher. Used to throw ninety-six miles an hour.”

He said it the way you say something you still can’t believe happened to you—half pride, half proof, pulled out of a pocket where he’d been keeping it for when somebody needed to see it. He wasn’t bragging. He was remembering.

“I pitched too,” I said. “Little League.”

He told me about the other night. Some guy had been beating on a woman in the parking lot. Taylor had stepped in. Got knocked out cold.

That had been before the foot injury. Different story. But he told them close together, the way things stack up in a life like his had become.

“I used to be somebody,” he said, mostly to himself.

I looked at his foot. I looked at him.

*Get him some new shoes.*

“I’m going to get you some new shoes,” I said.

His head snapped up. “You don’t have to do that, man.”

“I want to. And someday, when you’re back on your feet, you’ll help someone else who needs shoes. That’s how this works.”

The Goodwill didn’t have his size. I drove to a Big 5 a few miles away and found a pair that looked solid. Fifty dollars.

When I got back, Taylor was limping across the parking lot again, trying to tough it out.

“Sorry I can’t move quicker,” he said.

I handed him the box.

He stared at it like it might vanish if he blinked. Then he tore it open like a kid on Christmas morning.

Inside, on a piece of paper I'd slipped into the box, I'd written seven words.

*You're getting new shoes because you're walking a new path.*

He read it.

And then, without really thinking, without knowing anything about him beyond what he'd told me on that curb, I said it.

"You're going to have your own construction business someday. You'll employ twenty, maybe thirty people."

His eyes welled up.

It turned out he did construction.

I hadn't known. He hadn't told me. He'd told me about pitching ninety-six miles an hour. The construction was a life he'd had in between the mound and the curb, and it was a life he was going to have again.

"I'm not gonna cry," he muttered, blinking fast.

He cried anyway.

A few months later I saw Taylor again.

He’d come into some money—a family inheritance, he said. Twelve thousand dollars. He was leaving the streets.

He was clean. He walked fine. No trace of the foot.

He looked like a man ready for a new path.

CHAPTER 32

# Lost in the Dark

## His scraggly hair and appearance kept people away, as did the darkness

A town like any other across America. People scrambling on their way to work, to school, or in between.

I was handing out food to the homeless.

He was standing on a small bridge over a creek, between two stores. He looked about sixty. Five-eight, medium build. Long gray hair in wild waves. A beard that looked like it hadn't been touched in years. Piercing blue eyes. He was mumbling to himself.

I walked over.

Before I could say anything he turned and looked at me.

"Oh, the Holy Spirit."

It shocked me. In a good way.

His name was Robert.

He started telling me his life's story right there on the bridge. He'd been in foster care as a boy. He'd been on drugs for decades—I didn't ask why and he didn't say. He was still using. Faith found somewhere along the way and then lost.

“Do you want me to pray for you?”

“Yes.”

I reached out my hands. He reached out his. His fingers were twisted—arthritis, I think—bone knotted against bone.

I prayed.

His body started to tremble. Then his knees buckled and I held him up.

Three or four minutes. That’s all it was.

When the trembling stopped he was quiet for a long moment. Then he started talking, softer now.

“When I was a boy, I was in foster care.”

He stopped. Started again.

“They took us to a tent revival near Los Angeles when I was eleven.”

His eyes drifted.

“I remember walking forward to the altar, kneeling down, closing my eyes, and accepting Jesus.”

He was quiet again.

“I stayed there for hours. When I finally opened my eyes, everyone was gone. The whole place was empty.”

A boy of eleven, alone in a tent, everyone gone home.

He looked at me like he was trying to figure out if that moment had really happened. If it still counted. After the foster homes and the decades of drugs and what his hands had become.

“*It did. God remembered you. Still does.*”

I left him there on the bridge, on his feet, between two stores, with cars going by on both sides. Still an addict. Still loved.

CHAPTER 33

# POWER TO FORGIVE

## The stolen skateboard journey

I'd been giving Danny food for a while. He was late twenties, Mexican-American, about five-nine. His mom prayed for him constantly. His dad had washed his hands of the whole thing. His brother had died of an overdose. He'd told me.

Danny was an artist. He carried markers and pads and all kinds of supplies around with him on the street. He was good at it, too.

He also had a reputation. Anything valuable given to him was gone within days. Other homeless guys would take it and sell it for a fix.

One day I heard it inside me: *Buy Danny a skateboard.*

I knew it would get stolen.

"Come on. I'm going to buy you a skateboard."

"No way. I can't believe it."

We walked to a surf and skate shop a couple of blocks away. Danny picked out the one he wanted. I paid for the board and I bought a lock too—my idea, not his. I knew the lock wouldn't matter.

Two weeks later I found him sitting on a bench on the main street, outside the stores.

“Don’t be mad,” he said before I could open my mouth. “It got stolen. I know who did it.”

I wanted to go find the guy. Take the board back. That was my first reaction. I sat there on the bench with Danny and worked on the second one.

*Forgive.*

Forgiveness is harder than I thought.

“We could go get it back,” I said. “But let’s not.”

We prayed right there on the bench. Out loud. For the board to come back, and for the guy who took it.

A month later I was downtown and Danny was sitting in the sun. He waved me over.

“Did I tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“The guy who stole my board? He came back. Said he felt bad about what he did. He’s been giving me skateboards ever since.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Four so far.”

CHAPTER 34

# Hell and Back

## Alex wanted to die and did an enormous amount of drugs to try and accomplish it

The first time I met Alex was near a creek in town. About fifteen homeless people were there. It was summer. I handed out food and told them God loved them.

Most of them looked at me like I was crazy. Not Alex.

He hugged me.

“You always help us,” he said. “If you ever need anything out here, I’ve got your back.”

“God’s got my back.”

He thought about that for a second.

Alex was late twenties. Five-ten. Brown hair in tangled waves. A face full of piercings—one between his eyes at the bridge of his nose. He looked like he could have been in the movies, or the lead singer of a rock band. That was his vibe.

He’d been homeless for years. He carried Narcan on him to revive other addicts when they overdosed.

“I’ve pulled people off the ground more times than I can count.”

About a year later he told me what had happened before I met him.

He’d taken 320 hits of acid. He’d wanted to die.

“I saw hell, and I didn’t want to be there.”

That’s all he said about it, and all I’m going to say about it.

Eight months went by. I didn’t see him.

One day I heard in my spirit to drive forty miles north to a town I’d never been to, a small town out of my way by a longshot.

I went.

It was about two in the afternoon. Alex was at a park by the city hall with some other homeless people. Skating down the sidewalk.

Same piercings. Same hair. His eyes were clear.

“Hey! I’m sober, man!”

He had a daughter. She was seven. He wanted to be a dad she could be proud of. He’d been clean for months.

I reached into my car and pulled out a small New Testament I kept in there to give away when I felt compelled to. I opened the cover and wrote:

*To my friend Alex, always trust God.*

I gave him a ride to his place—an old wood house, neat and tidy. He got out of the car and then his face went pale.

“Oh no! Where’s the book?”

We both looked. He found it on the backseat.

He held it in his hand and walked up to the house.

A man many had counted out, going inside to care for his young daughter.

# EPILOGUE

I didn't plan any of this.

I'd tell you I set out to write a book about homelessness, or about healing, or about faith on the streets—but none of that would be true. I set out to go for a drive one afternoon with a tuna sandwich. What happened after that, I wasn't in charge of.

The stories in this book took years to accumulate. They're still accumulating. I didn't stop when I ran out of chapters. The sandwich runs didn't end. The nudges didn't end. The phone still rings. There's still a cooler in the back of my car most days. I'm writing this sentence on an afternoon where I already know I'll be out there by sundown.

This is what the kindergarten turned out to be.

A class I kept thinking I would graduate from. A curriculum that only got deeper the longer I stayed in it. Lessons I thought I'd learned, taught back to me by people who had every reason to have given up and hadn't. The streets kept being my teacher. They still are.

If you've made it this far, I want to tell you two things.

The first is that none of the people in these stories are types. They're not symbols for anything. They're individual human beings with names, and most of them are still out there, and the rest are with God. The streets are not a category. They're a room full of specific people.

The second is that you don't have to go to the streets to be in kindergarten. The curriculum runs everywhere. Love, faith, trust, sacrifice, presence, forgiveness, dependence—those classes are being taught in offices, in hospital rooms, in grocery aisles, at dinner tables where nobody is saying the thing that needs to be said. Anywhere a person can be seen. Anywhere a person can be handed something.

I'll keep going. I don't know what the next assignment is. I rarely do. The nudges come, I go, and sometimes I come home with a story and most of the time I don't.

If you see me in a parking lot somewhere—pulled over at a stop sign, handing food through a window—stop and say hello. I'd like to meet you.

And if you've got something in your own car you've been meaning to hand to someone, this is your nudge.

Go.

— ***Step***

## About the Author

**Step Harmon** spent years walking the streets alongside the homeless, the forgotten, and the unseen—not to fix anyone, but to learn.



kindergarten for eternity is his firsthand account of what the streets taught him about heaven, humanity, and the lessons we never outgrow.

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