

# 1

IT WAS COLD THAT NIGHT. The fire was no more than an ember, and the supply of firewood was growing slim. *More will need to be cut in the morning*, Michael thought.

He pulled his jacket a little tighter around him. His clothes were tattered and had almost worn thin from taking care of his quaint home. He took it as his responsibility to make sure the day to day things ran as they should. Not that the others were counting on him to do so, he just enjoyed the work.

Michael never considered himself much of a leader, but he was willing to take care of the others with him. There were eight of them together in a small three-room shack they called home. It had once been a grand house, but the years were against it and most of the rooms had collapsed. He and his wife, Rebecca, had naturally emerged as the caretakers of the band of refugees hidden away within its walls.

Michael always looked up to his wife. Although he was intelligent by others' standards, his wife always seemed to have wisdom and insight into every situation. She was also the best cook of anyone he knew. He considered himself lucky to be living through these times with someone who was once a professional chef. The thought of food and all the meals she had cooked took his focus off the fire and onto the growing rumble from his stomach.

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"Dear? How's dinner coming?" he called out to the kitchen through the rubble of what once was the dining room. The cool draft seeping through the boards nipped against his face.

"It'll still be a little while, sweetie," she replied.

"What are we having?"

"The usual. Mexican beans and beetles."

"Sounds delicious, just in mine can you hold the beans and hold the beetles?"

The thought of such meal genuinely repulsed him, but in these times, there was no use in being picky. Food choices were limited to what could be grown or killed, and supply for both was dwindling down to almost nothing. When he was younger, he had never dreamed his life would turn out this way. He had always seen himself living the city life. He could still remember glimpses of it looking out through the window of his classroom. He had always been serious about his job. As a chemistry professor, it was his duty to help the bright minds grow so that they may do something that would change the world. In all honesty, he wanted to be one of those, but it never seemed that he had the opportunity.

Although it wasn't the life he had planned, he did feel like he had a better sense of accomplishment. It wasn't the accomplishment of a goal like he had dreamed, but a fulfillment of purpose, nevertheless. His focus was on his survival and the care-taking of the others. It had also brought him a lot closer to Rebecca.

Back then he had spent so much time working, she had taken a backseat in his life. Now they were working together to take care of her mother and all their friends. He was no longer tied to the day to day grind of trying to push ahead. At this point, he was happy just to wake up to another day.

Even though his childhood dreams seemed to be further out of reach, his newfound purpose had allowed him to still be thankful. He was thankful for Rebecca for staying with him after all these years. He was thankful for the children they had together, wherever they may be. He was thankful that he was still alive and even had a place to call home. Most of all, he was thankful God had always been with him and held him even through his darkest times.

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Rebecca would be proud of him for thinking that way. She was always the spiritual one of them. She would spend hours every day praying for him and those in their care. Humble and selfless were the two best ways to describe her. Her prayers were directed toward lifting him up and helping them find the guidance they needed. Even when times were trying and tore at her, those times that would cause even an old-time pastor to lose his hope and faith, she would stand firm and trust God. Michael admired her for that. Her faith stood as a rock of encouragement to him.

Such faith was a rare gem in these days, and it helped Michael to always keep hope. That in itself was rare. Michael wanted to believe that there was something out there that had a hand on his life. That somehow, in the end, everything worked out. When the government had outlawed everything to do with religion, hope seemed to have died with it.

Despite the law of the land, Michael tried to hold onto his beliefs. He mostly did so because of Rebecca's insistence. Even so, his faith wasn't comparable to that of his wife's. Maybe the reason was, although he had seen the powers of good, he had also seen the power of evil. The power of everything his entire existence seemed to be against. The power that could control even his own hands once. He began to shudder and pushed such thoughts and memories away from his mind as far as he could.

"You okay, Mike?"

The sudden voice invaded his thoughts. He looked around and saw Wesley staring at him from the corner of the room. He considered Wesley to be one of the closest friends he had. He and his wife had been with Michael and Rebecca for almost six years. He once was a police officer before the war that changed the world. He always carried with him a sense of strength and determination. Although it had been years since he had given up his profession, he still looked as if he could take someone down if needed. His muscles stretched tight the fabric of his shirt as he leaned over the small table in front of him. Michael noticed that he and several others had huddled together and started up a card game.

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"I can't say I'm looking forward to beans and beetles either, but that wife of yours is one heck of a cook. She fixed some delicious squirrel skins earlier," Wesley said. He placed one hand on his stomach, and his mouth moved as if he could still taste it.

"Oh no, it's not that. I was just thinking," Michael said.

"Well snap out of it. Come join us and play a little rummy. We've only got thirty-eight cards, so it's kind of a challenge. We'll even be nice and tell you a few of the ones that we're missing."

Michael thought about it but decided against it. "I think I'll go check on the ladies in the kitchen. I hate for Becca and Allie to be all alone in there. Besides, I am hungry."

He stood up and shuffled through the small passageway in the rubble of what once was the elaborate dining room. In its day, the house was rather exquisite. It had a grand living room with a fireplace, a dining room that could seat twenty people, and several other rooms. The house had belonged to Michael's parents. It was the house he had grown up in. His parents spent a lot of time there, throwing parties for various guests. They were well known throughout their community. When he was younger, he always hated having so many people in and out of his house. He would have never thought that its remnant would become a shelter to so many.

As he went into the kitchen, the sight surprised him. Instead of seeing his wife and daughter finishing up dinner, he saw Allie cleaning up the soup which had spread across the floor in all directions. Rebecca was nowhere to be found.

"Allie, what happened? Where's your mother?"

"Mommy's fine. That new lady was asking her a bunch of questions. She got really mad and ran down the stairs," she said, pointing to the stairway leading into the bedroom.

To his six-year-old daughter, she may have seemed fine, but Michael was concerned. It was unlike Rebecca to get mad at anyone, much less mad enough to waste the food that was so scarce to come by.

Without a second wasted, he ran across the kitchen. The bedroom was connected to the kitchen but had been built much lower

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than the rest of the house. A small stairwell ran along the wall down to it. Michael stepped through the doorway and saw Rebecca crying on the makeshift bed. Before he could take another step or even call to her, the other woman, Amanda, was in his face.

She was much older than he and Rebecca. The brown in her short, curly hair had almost been replaced by white. She looked as if she could be as old as his mother. Amanda had come to them two days ago. She had told them that she was in need of a place to stay for a few days and then she would be moving on. Rebecca had decided to make it a rule that anyone who came to them would always be welcomed and treated with kindness. Michael was uneasy about letting strangers in, but Rebecca reminded him that they were all strangers once. She had such a heart for people, regardless of what may happen. Her insistence persuaded Michael, and so he let Amanda join them. At that moment, he regretted that decision.

“You killed my son!” Amanda screamed at him, loud enough he was sure that everyone could hear.

“What are you talking about? I barely know you,” Michael said out of sheer confusion.

“You were the reason my son died. You killed him.”

“Ma’am, I have no idea what you are talking about. I only met you days ago, when you came to us for refuge. I don’t even know who your son is.” He was sure he had never met this woman before in his life. He searched the lines of her face for any sign of familiarity but found none.

“I have searched this world over to try and find you. You will pay for what you did to him. Don’t pretend to be so ignorant. You killed Cade.”

At the mention of that name, the memories flooded over Michael. He did know Cade. He knew him well. His death, however, was a distant memory. He couldn’t remember it vividly. It was as if his mind was clouded. Michael searched for answers and told Amanda the only thing that seemed logical.

“Ma’am, I didn’t kill your son. It had to have been an accident.”

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"First you say you don't know him, now you're trying to cop out and say he died in an accident. I know what happened, and I know you are lying. You can't even keep your story straight."

Amanda's anger toward him was apparent. She was very defensive and seemed to have her mind made up on Michael's guilt without hearing anything he had to say.

Michael tried to get through to her regardless. He concentrated as hard as he could on the memory. He remembered Cade had sent for him. He was supposed to meet him somewhere. The train station.

"I didn't know who your son was until you told me his name, and I am telling the truth. He died at the train station. It was an accident." Michael tried to remain calm to help defuse the situation, but the memory of that day made it difficult. Even more so because of its haziness.

Cade had been Michael's closest friend. He was a biology professor at the same university Michael worked at. He also joined the war with him, fighting alongside him. In all that time, he and Michael had gotten very close. Although his memory of Cade's death was spotty at best, he was sure it was an accident. There was no way he could have killed his friend.

"No. I know the truth," Amanda scoffed. "I received a letter from Metro Underground Security detailing everything."

"I don't know what that letter said, but I worked with Cade and served with him. Why would I want to kill him? Besides, that day at the train station was the first time I had seen him since the war. He had wanted to tell me something. I can't remember what it was, but I do know that it wasn't long after he just collapsed onto the tracks."

As painful as it was to relive the horror of that moment, he had to try to ease the tension between them. He thought he was getting through to her. She had begun looking down while he was talking. As his own memory was working its way back, he began to feel a little more confident in himself. The supposed letter concerned him, though.

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Amanda was digging through a surprisingly pristine purse as he attempted to talk to her. His hopes of ending the argument dissipated when her eyes locked onto his. Up sprung her hand, holding a letter with some photos.

"I have the proof," she exclaimed.

Michael grabbed the so-called "proof" from her hand and began to look at the pictures. They were fuzzy but were clearly taken the day Cade died. He saw himself walking up to Cade next to the track at the station. The next one showed him with his finger pointed at Cade in anger, while he made a questioning gesture. Then one photo where both of his hands were at Cade's collar pulling him in toward him.

The fourth photo was the one she was considering proof. He saw Cade falling helplessly onto the tracks as the oncoming train approached inches away. He saw himself with both arms outstretched toward him. From looking at the photo, it appeared as if Michael had pushed Cade into the oncoming train.

He was in shock. He could see why Amanda made the assumptions she had. If only he could remember it in more detail. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to break through the fog. He began to read the letter in an attempt to jog his memory.

*Ms. Amanda Simon,*

*My name is Ben Rogers. I work for the Metro Underground Station as captain of the security guard. I am writing this letter to you today with information about your son's death. We have been working closely with the Federal Police on the investigation. The day in question, I was monitoring the activity near the tracks. I witnessed two men arguing, one of which has been identified as your son Cade Simon. When I noticed the argument, I began to go toward them to resolve the issue. As I got close, the argument became very heated. Then the assailant pushed Mr. Simon in front of the oncoming train*

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*before fleeing the scene. The photos I have sent with this letter are stills from the security camera that filmed the incident. We have recently identified the assailant as Michael Anderton, a known terrorist at large. Despite reports to the contrary, we have yet to apprehend him. He managed to evade us, and the man we arrested that day was simply part of an elaborate plan of Anderton's. We know that he has prior history with Mr. Simon. We believe this is the reason for the altercation. It is our hope that if he has contacted you, you will aid us in bringing justice to your son.*

*Thank you,*

*Ben Rogers*

*Captain, Metropolitan Underground Station*

After reading the letter and seeing the photos, Michael's head was spinning. He was being accused of murder, and now there was evidence and a witness set against him. He knew the truth, or at least he thought he did. What he didn't know was why a security guard captain would make such an accusation.

He didn't push Cade. He was sure of it. But the photos and the letter made him doubt himself. He was certain that he didn't remember pushing him into the train, but he also couldn't remember how he fell. That part was still blank to him. His head kept spinning, and he began to feel dizzy. He pushed passed Amanda and went down the stairs next to his wife. Rebecca looked up at him. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying.

"I know you, Michael. I've known you for a long time, before any of this even started. Before the suffering. Before the war. I've known you. I can't believe any of this. When she came to me trying to get me to incriminate you, I fought her. I fought her with all that I had. Then she showed me the letter and the pictures. Now I don't know what I know. I didn't think you had even gone to see



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him that day. I've sat here and prayed continuously seeking an answer, but none has come."

Her words cut deep. Not only had Michael's own faith in himself been shaken, but also the faith of his wife. If she couldn't believe in him then what hope was there for him? He couldn't even believe in himself.

He was beginning to settle in his mind to just accept the punishment. Perhaps Amanda did know the truth. She had physical proof, and he couldn't even rely on his own memory of the incident. He feared what that meant for him. If she turned him over to the Federal Police, with the heinous crime of murder, they would sentence him to death. To even think that he had murdered his best friend in cold blood, though, was death itself. As he began to speak, to admit his guilt to the accusations, Rebecca spoke up again.

"I may not have an answer yet, but when I do, we'll make sense of this. I know how close you and Cade were, so I know there has to be a better explanation. I may not understand what's going on, but I believe this will work out. God knows the truth as to what happened that day, and that is good enough for me."

There was the Rebecca he knew. There was her surety. There was her faith. Amanda couldn't shake it, even with physical evidence. Rebecca knew the truth, regardless of what anyone tried to say. Even if it were her own hopes that were saying it.

"Thanks for still trusting me," Michael said.

"Michael," she said. "I know this may be painful, but could you tell us what you remember about that day?"

Amanda scoffed at the idea. Her mind was made up. There was no use trying to change it, but Michael obliged to Rebecca's request, if nothing else, for his own peace of mind. He closed his eyes to concentrate. He was determined. He wanted to remember. Of all the horrible things he had done, he couldn't believe he had murdered Cade. He was sure he didn't, but he couldn't remember.

He remembered going to the train station. He remembered greeting Cade at the platform. He remembered him dying. Everything in between and everything after was blank. He cleared his

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mind and thought about what the letter had said. The pictures he had seen entered his mind. Then there was the answer as the images flooded in.