SATAN's CANDY

Chap 1 — Get in line!

Snow would be welcome on the dried-out high desert, but not black ice. The drive into Dry Canyon was risky, with deer and elk taking refuge on this first day of winter. Gregory's mindset wasn't dominion over God's creatures, but hitting hundreds of pounds of elk flesh or venison with his work truck was something he couldn't afford. It wouldn't be the first roadkill.

It was already three hours past the noon solstice, and Greg sighed in relief; tomorrow would be more daylight. At the top of the grade out of the canyon, ice pellets started to stick to the windshield, and the radio had just announced the time. Greg had a decision to make. Turn back around or keep going. At fifty-five miles an hour, he'd make the Redmond fairgrounds before the early closing.

With the weather report predicting up to a half inch of ice overnight, Greg pressed the accelerator. It was one risk versus another. Not getting the booster shot would mean a violation and his on-site handyman business getting shut down, which he couldn't afford with five children to feed. The empty horse trailer started to fishtail on a patch of black ice! A mile ahead, Greg pulled into the closed weigh station and called his wife at the hospital. It took a few clicks and transfers before he reached the ICU nurses' station.

Angela picked up. "Greg, thanks for returning my call."

"No problem. I just pulled into the weigh station and am going to park the horse trailer here. It sounds like more ice until Christmas."

"I have to work a double shift. We just admitted a snowmobiler with a possible broken neck; we're waiting for the neurosurgeon."

"Okay, do the kids know you can't pick them up?"

"I called the school and got a message to the wrestling coach. Andy might have to miss practice to bring the kids home. Or you could go pick them up?"

"I would, but I need to get my booster. I heard they're running short of the Moderna."

"If they completely run out of that spiked cocktail that mimics a placental protein called syncytin-1, that would be a good thing. I've already heard of three miscarriages here at St. Charles."

"Okay, I'll call Andy." Greg abruptly replied, then got out to unhitch the horse trailer. The ice pellets penetrated his beard, and he pulled the brim of his cowboy hat down. *I'm not going to start the antivax argument with Angie. She should know better. Christ's sake, she's a registered nurse.*

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Greg pulled up behind the wagon train of cars, which wound into four rows of at least fifty cars each. National Guard members directed cars with flashlights. A female member in the standard camouflage uniform tapped the passenger window with a 3-cell Maglite. She wore a distinct blue veil over an N95 mask shielding her flawless skin from the wind-blown ice pellets. Greg lowered the window. She deliberately didn't lean in. "Mr. Platt, you'll be the last one in line tonight. Could you pull ahead and then put on your emergency flashers?"

"Thank God for that!" Greg pulled ahead and turned on the flashers.

The last will be first, and always be careful what you asked God for, came a clear warning out of nowhere. Greg looked in the rear-view mirror and questioned himself… *Were those her words*?

The diminutive woman was placing a sawhorse barricade with a stop sign across the gravel parking road behind his truck. There was no turning back now. The meandering line of cars inched toward the west-side arena door. This was Greg's third jab, and they now had it down to not even having to get out of your car. He unclipped his phone from the visor and opened the contact list.

"Redmond High School."

"This is Gregory Platt. I'm calling to give the okay for my son, Andy Platt, to pick up his siblings after school."

"Just a moment, Mr. Platt. I need to verify that Andy is on the family pick-up list." Click, then canned music—a second Click. "We're good here. I'll get the message to the middle school also."

It took twenty minutes for the line to move forward about ten car lengths. After about ten minutes of idling, Greg turned off the pickup; he was running low on fuel. He got out into the blowing cold and walked toward the open rodeo arena door when a fifty-thousand-candlepower searchlight shone on him. "Sir, you need to return to your automobile. You need to have a mask on!" blasted over loudspeakers.

"I need to pee," Greg yelled into the mounting storm.

"Get back to your car now or be detained!"

Greg grabbed at his crotch, tucked his head into the wind, and backtracked. When he opened the door, he spotted a plastic travel urinal on the passenger seat. *Wow, they got this whole vaccination process streamlined,* Greg thought as he relieved himself into the

thousand-milliliter container.

The line moved forward another ten cars. He turned off the truck a second time to save diesel. Greg reached behind the passenger seat and got a sixteen-ounce beer out of a lunchbox ice cooler covered by a dusty horse blanket. *Maybe I should leave and come back another day. But with the shortage and the booster limited to only old people first, there might not be another chance. My workload is already down, and without having the booster, they could shut me down…*

Greg rolled down the iced-up side window and put his hand up to block the frozen rain pellets. The orange entrance gate was closed, and a Humvee was parked sideways. It was too late; no one was leaving that exit. The line of cars moved, and now he could see a snaking line of cars with their headlights leaving the opposite side of the arena. Greg finished the beer and then called home.

"Yeah, what's up, Dad?"

"Did you all get home okay?"

"No problem, Cecelia was coughing and wheezing all the way home."

"Is she okay?"

"She took a couple of puffs from her inhaler and has the vaporizer on in her room. I haven't heard any coughing for a while."

"Andy, go check on her."

Footsteps were followed by, "Ceelee are you okay!" Nothing… Then the sound of Andy's fists pounding on the door. "Ceelee, open this door. Dad's on the phone."

The door opened until the chain lock went taut. One girl among four brothers needed some semblance of privacy. Through the small opening, Andy smelt marijuana mixed with the methanol vapor smell. "Are you okay? Dad wants to know."

"Yep, tell Daddy Dear I'm just fine." Cecelia giggled and shut the door.

Andy returned to the front room where Matt and Mark were playing a video game and picked up the phone again. "Ceelee is okay."

"I heard Matt and Mark. Where's Frankie?"

"He's out in the shop working on a Cub Scout project."

"Let them know after I get the booster, I'll pick up pizzas. Also, your Mom has to work a double shift. I might be a couple of hours."

"I'll let everyone know." Andy hung up and yelled over the sound of the video game, "Dad's picking up pizza and Mom's working overnight."

He headed to Ceelee's room, put his ear to the door, and heard the Moody Blues

playing. He lightly knocked and heard the bedroom window shut.

The door slowly opened, and the grey smoke rolled out. "Flash me a boob shot, or I'm telling Dad that you're smoking weed."

"Go ahead, and I'll tell him you're drinking beer while driving. You'll be grounded for a month."

"Okay, deal. We'll both stay quiet. Dad's bringing home pizza."

"Great, I got the munchies." Ceelee stepped back from the door and lifted her sweatshirt. "Now bring me some peanut butter and jelly toast."

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It took Greg an hour to make it to the downgrade into the arena; he could now see how the new jab system worked. Ten cars at a time would be hand-motioned into five lines of two cars; you didn't even have to get out of your car. Human elements in hazmat garb would approach your car and give you the shot right through the window. The car ahead had four people in it, with an arm hanging out of each window; the jabber just worked its way around to each innocent victim. Another bot followed with a clipboard, shoved it into the car, then took pictures of licenses or other forms of ID.

"Wow, talk about efficiency," Greg said to himself, hoping that the line to pick up pizzas would be as efficient. Most restaurants had closed down their inside seating and developed better drive-thru service.

Three days before Christmas 2021, Gregory Pratt got his COVID booster with a blood alcohol content of 0.08%.

Greg was a good driver regardless—that's what he told himself. The half-pint of Jack Daniel's under the seat was just for the nasty customers who would tell him to mask up or leave. Today he had one who hired him to move two horses. He should have told the fat bitch to move her own studs, but the Pratt family needed money for Christmas.

Since returning to full-time in-person learning, Oregon was on track to have one of the worst chronic absenteeism rates in the country. Cecelia's asthma always kept her on that chronic absenteeism list, but his boys needed to get at least a high school diploma so they wouldn't end up being a beck-and-call handyman. Andy had plans to join up like his dad. Cecelia had no plans; just making it on her own seemed like an impossible dream. Mark and Matt talked about fishing in Alaska, just nothing nine-to-five. Frank, the youngest, was different, kind of a mama's boy. He liked baking and play acting with

Cecelia. He liked Cub Scouting over Little League and would rescue any animal he found. He named a grey squirrel Squeaky, and they played hours on end until the UPS truck ended that friendship.

The four boys had heard the truck and trailer rattling down the unimproved road. Mark and Matt blasted out the front door and off the porch, both returning with a giant pizza. Andy got a gallon of milk from the fridge, put it on the table, and started to say a blessing…

"Mom's not here, let's eat," Matt chimed in.

"Good food, good drink; getting cold, let's eat, Amen," Mark added and grabbed one piece of pepperoni and a piece of Canadian bacon.

Frank snatched two pieces of the Canadian bacon, started picking off the meat and pineapple, and said, "Ceelee only likes cheese pizza." He then left the room.

"Thanks, Frankie, I forgot," Greg said, opening the fridge door and grabbing a beer.

Although Frank was the youngest, he didn't like being called Frankie. Ceelee was the one he went to for emotional support; the nine years between them felt more like mother and son than brother and sister. They were the blondes in the family; Mark and Matt continually kidded them with the blond jokes.

Greg was snoring in the recliner when his phone vibrated in his shirt pocket. He undid the pearl snap on his cowboy shirt and flipped it open. The display showed **11:15 pm — St. Charles Hospital.**

"Greg, how are the kids?"

He rubbed at his eyes and looked around the darkened room. An orange glow from dwindling embers filtered through the woodstove's smoky glass. "They're all in bed…"

"How is Cecelia?"

"She's better after two puffs on her inhaler. She and Frankie huddle up in her room, playing dress-up and acting out charades."

"Good. I just prayed a rosary for her and Ann Marie in the hospital chapel."

"For Ann Marie… Why?"

"Ann is the one in ICU with a broken neck."

"What! What happened?"

"They were snowmobiling up at Three Creeks recreational area, and she slipped into a tree pocket and hit a frozen branch."

"Oh wow. Did she have a helmet on?"

"Yes, she did, Greg, but that's sort of after the fact and won't be helpful now."

"So, she's going to be okay?"

"We don't know. Ann has a brain bleed and is in a Coma. It's God's will now."

"Okay, so what can I do?"

"It's been all over the ten o'clock news, maybe it's best you let Ceelee know that her best friend is here at St. Charles so she can pray for her and the Garrison family."

"I can do that. She's finally sleeping, should I wake her?"

"No, but do it if she wakes up. I'll be home in the morning to explain what more I learn overnight."

"Okay, be super careful driving, Angie. That old Bronco can be squirrely, especially on ice."

"Dr. Warren is covering the ER tonight. He's already offered me a ride home in his new Land Cruiser."

"Angie, take Larry up on that offer. We don't need two tragedies this Christmas season."

"I think I will. If the ER doesn't get jammed up, I should be home before noon."

"Sounds good. Stay safe. Love you."

No sooner did Greg lower the leg rest on his recliner than Cecelia appeared at the end of the hallway in her extra-large sweatshirt, rubbing at her eyes. "Was that Mom on the phone?"

"Yes, it was, honey." Greg walked over and got on his knees, still taller than Ceelee. "They brought Ann into the hospital today; she broke her neck riding a snowmobile. Your mom will have more information in the morning. Just remember it's God's will."

Cecelia dropped to her knees and tucked her head to her thighs. "Why is it God's will? Is He mad because she gave away her baby?"

Greg didn't respond. He went to the kitchen and got a bottle of whiskey out of a cupboard above the refrigerator. He mixed two drinks and handed one to Cecelia. "Take this; it's like medicine. But don't tell your mom."