

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Choose the Good

My strongest memory is not a memory. It's something I imagined, then came to remember as if it had happened. The memory was formed when I was five, just before I turned six, from a story my father told in such detail that I and my brothers and sister had each conjured our own cinematic version, with gunfire and shouts. Mine had crickets. That's the sound I hear as my family huddles in the kitchen, lights off, hiding from the Feds who've surrounded the house. A woman reaches for a glass of water and her silhouette is lighted by the moon. A shot echoes like the lash of a whip and she falls. In my memory it's always Mother who falls, and she has a baby in her arms.

The baby doesn't make sense—I'm the youngest of my mother's seven children—but like I said, none of this happened.

A YEAR AFTER MY FATHER told us that story, we gathered one evening to hear him read aloud from Isaiah, a prophecy about Immanuel. He sat on our mustard-colored sofa, a large Bible open in his lap. Mother was next to him. The rest of us were strewn across the shaggy brown

carpet.

“Butter and honey shall he eat,” Dad droned, low and monotone, weary from a long day hauling scrap. “That he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.”

There was a heavy pause. We sat quietly.

My father was not a tall man but he was able to command a room. He had a presence about him, the solemnity of an oracle. His hands were thick and leathery—the hands of a man who’d been hard at work all his life—and they grasped the Bible firmly.

He read the passage aloud a second time, then a third, then a fourth. With each repetition the pitch of his voice climbed higher. His eyes, which moments before had been swollen with fatigue, were now wide and alert. There was a divine doctrine here, he said. He would inquire of the Lord.

The next morning Dad purged our fridge of milk, yogurt and cheese, and that evening when he came home, his truck was loaded with fifty gallons of honey.

“Isaiah doesn’t say which is evil, butter or honey,” Dad said, grinning as my brothers lugged the white tubs to the basement. “But if you ask, the Lord will tell you!”

When Dad read the verse to his mother, she laughed in his face. “I got some pennies in my purse,” she said. “You better take them. They’ll be all the sense you got.”

Grandma had a thin, angular face and an endless store of faux Indian jewelry, all silver and turquoise, which hung in clumps from her spindly neck and fingers. Because she lived down the hill from us, near the highway, we called her Grandma-down-the-hill. This was to distinguish her from our mother’s mother, who we called Grandma-over-in-town because she lived fifteen miles south, in the only town in the county, which had a single stoplight and a grocery store.

Dad and his mother got along like two cats with their tails tied together. They could talk for a week and not agree about anything, but they were tethered by their devotion to the mountain. My father’s family had been living at the base of Buck’s Peak for half a century.

Grandma's daughters had married and moved away, but my father stayed, building a shabby yellow house, which he would never quite finish, just up the hill from his mother's, at the base of the mountain, and plunking a junkyard—one of several—next to her manicured lawn.

They argued daily, about the mess from the junkyard but more often about us kids. Grandma thought we should be in school and not, as she put it, "roaming the mountain like savages." Dad said public school was a ploy by the Government to lead children away from God. "I may as well surrender my kids to the devil himself," he said, "as send them down the road to that school."

God told Dad to share the revelation with the people who lived and farmed in the shadow of Buck's Peak. On Sundays, nearly everyone gathered at the church, a hickory-colored chapel just off the highway with the small, restrained steeple common to Mormon churches. Dad cornered fathers as they left their pews. He started with his cousin Jim, who listened good-naturedly while Dad waved his Bible and explained the sinfulness of milk. Jim grinned, then clapped Dad on the shoulder and said no righteous God would deprive a man of homemade strawberry ice cream on a hot summer afternoon. Jim's wife tugged on his arm. As he slid past us I caught a whiff of manure. Then I remembered: the big dairy farm a mile north of Buck's Peak, that was Jim's.

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AFTER DAD TOOK UP preaching against milk, Grandma jammed her fridge full of it. She and Grandpa only drank skim but pretty soon it was all there—two percent, whole, even chocolate. She seemed to believe this was an important line to hold.

Breakfast became a test of loyalty. Every morning, my family sat around a large table of reworked red oak and ate either seven-grain cereal, with honey and molasses, or seven-grain pancakes, also with honey and molasses. Because there were nine of us, the pancakes were never cooked all the way through. I didn't mind the cereal if I could soak it in milk, letting the cream gather up the grist and seep into the

pellets, but since the revelation we'd been having it with water. It was like eating a bowl of mud.

It wasn't long before I began to think of all that milk spoiling in Grandma's fridge. Then I got into the habit of skipping breakfast each morning and going straight to the barn. I'd slop the pigs and fill the trough for the cows and horses, then I'd hop over the corral fence, loop around the barn and step through Grandma's side door.

On one such morning, as I sat at the counter watching Grandma pour a bowl of cornflakes, she said, "How would you like to go to school?"

"I wouldn't like it," I said.

"How do you know," she barked. "You ain't never tried it."

She poured the milk and handed me the bowl, then she perched at the bar, directly across from me, and watched as I shoveled spoonfuls into my mouth.

"We're leaving tomorrow for Arizona," she told me, but I already knew. She and Grandpa always went to Arizona when the weather began to turn. Grandpa said he was too old for Idaho winters; the cold put an ache in his bones. "Get yourself up real early," Grandma said, "around five, and we'll take you with us. Put you in school."

I shifted on my stool. I tried to imagine school but couldn't. Instead I pictured Sunday school, which I attended each week and which I hated. A boy named Aaron had told all the girls that I couldn't read because I didn't go to school, and now none of them would talk to me.

"Dad said I can go?" I said.

"No," Grandma said. "But we'll be long gone by the time he realizes you're missing." She set my bowl in the sink and gazed out the window.

Grandma was a force of nature—impatient, aggressive, self-possessed. To look at her was to take a step back. She dyed her hair black and this intensified her already severe features, especially her eyebrows, which she smeared on each morning in thick, inky arches. She drew them too large and this made her face seem stretched. They were also drawn too high and draped the rest of her features into an

expression of boredom, almost sarcasm.

“You should be in school,” she said.

“Won’t Dad just make you bring me back?” I said.

“Your dad can’t make me do a damned thing.” Grandma stood, squaring herself. “If he wants you, he’ll have to come get you.” She hesitated, and for a moment looked ashamed. “I talked to him yesterday. He won’t be able to fetch you back for a long while. He’s behind on that shed he’s building in town. He can’t pack up and drive to Arizona, not while the weather holds and he and the boys can work long days.”

Grandma’s scheme was well plotted. Dad always worked from sunup until sundown in the weeks before the first snow, trying to stockpile enough money from hauling scrap and building barns to outlast the winter, when jobs were scarce. Even if his mother ran off with his youngest child, he wouldn’t be able to stop working, not until the forklift was encased in ice.

“I’ll need to feed the animals before we go,” I said. “He’ll notice I’m gone for sure if the cows break through the fence looking for water.”

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I DIDN’T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. I sat on the kitchen floor and watched the hours tick by. One A.M. Two. Three.

At four I stood and put my boots by the back door. They were caked in manure, and I was sure Grandma wouldn’t let them into her car. I pictured them on her porch, abandoned, while I ran off shoeless to Arizona.

I imagined what would happen when my family discovered I was missing. My brother Richard and I often spent whole days on the mountain, so it was likely no one would notice until sundown, when Richard came home for dinner and I didn’t. I pictured my brothers pushing out the door to search for me. They’d try the junkyard first, hefting iron slabs in case some stray sheet of metal had shifted and pinned me. Then they’d move outward, sweeping the farm, crawling

up trees and into the barn attic. Finally, they'd turn to the mountain.

It would be past dusk by then—that moment just before night sets in, when the landscape is visible only as darkness and lighter darkness, and you feel the world around you more than you see it. I imagined my brothers spreading over the mountain, searching the black forests. No one would talk; everyone's thoughts would be the same. Things could go horribly wrong on the mountain. Cliffs appeared suddenly. Feral horses, belonging to my grandfather, ran wild over thick banks of water hemlock, and there were more than a few rattlesnakes. We'd done this search before when a calf went missing from the barn. In the valley you'd find an injured animal; on the mountain, a dead one.

I imagined Mother standing by the back door, her eyes sweeping the dark ridge, when my father came home to tell her they hadn't found me. My sister, Audrey, would suggest that someone ask Grandma, and Mother would say Grandma had left that morning for Arizona. Those words would hang in the air for a moment, then everyone would know where I'd gone. I imagined my father's face, his dark eyes shrinking, his mouth clamping into a frown as he turned to my mother. "You think she chose to go?"

Low and sorrowful, his voice echoed. Then it was drowned out by sounds from another conjured remembrance—crickets, then gunfire, then silence.

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THE EVENT WAS A FAMOUS ONE, I would later learn—like Wounded Knee or Waco—but when my father first told us the story, it felt like no one in the world knew about it except us.

It began near the end of canning season, which other kids probably called "summer." My family always spent the warm months bottling fruit for storage, which Dad said we'd need in the Days of Abomination. One evening, Dad was uneasy when he came in from the junkyard. He paced the kitchen during dinner, hardly touching a bite. We had to get everything in order, he said. There was little time.

We spent the next day boiling and skinning peaches. By sundown

we'd filled dozens of Mason jars, which were set out in perfect rows, still warm from the pressure cooker. Dad surveyed our work, counting the jars and muttering to himself, then he turned to Mother and said, "It's not enough."

That night Dad called a family meeting, and we gathered around the kitchen table, because it was wide and long, and could seat all of us. We had a right to know what we were up against, he said. He was standing at the head of the table; the rest of us perched on benches, studying the thick planks of red oak.

"There's a family not far from here," Dad said. "They're freedom fighters. They wouldn't let the Government brainwash their kids in them public schools, so the Feds came after them." Dad exhaled, long and slow. "The Feds surrounded the family's cabin, kept them locked in there for weeks, and when a hungry child, a little boy, snuck out to go hunting, the Feds shot him dead."

I scanned my brothers. I'd never seen fear on Luke's face before.

"They're still in the cabin," Dad said. "They keep the lights off, and they crawl on the floor, away from the doors and windows. I don't know how much food they got. Might be they'll starve before the Feds give up."

No one spoke. Eventually Luke, who was twelve, asked if we could help. "No," Dad said. "Nobody can. They're trapped in their own home. But they got their guns, you can bet that's why the Feds ain't **charged in**." He paused to sit, folding himself onto the low bench in slow, stiff movements. He looked old to my eyes, worn out. "We can't help them, but we can help ourselves. When the Feds come to Buck's Peak, we'll be ready."

That night, Dad dragged a pile of old army bags up from the basement. He said they were our "head for the hills" bags. We spent that night packing them with supplies—herbal medicines, water purifiers, flint and steel. Dad had bought several boxes of military MREs—Meals Ready-to-Eat—and we put as many as we could fit into our packs, imagining the moment when, having fled the house and hiding ourselves in the wild plum trees near the creek, we'd eat them. Some of my brothers stowed guns in their packs but I had only a small

knife, and even so my pack was as big as me by the time we'd finished. I asked Luke to hoist it onto a shelf in my closet, but Dad told me to keep it low, where I could fetch it quick, so I slept with it in my bed.

I practiced slipping the bag onto my back and running with it—I didn't want to be left behind. I imagined our escape, a midnight flight to the safety of the Princess. The mountain, I understood, was our ally. To those who knew her she could be kind, but to intruders she was pure treachery, and this would give us an advantage. Then again, if we were going to take cover on the mountain when the Feds came, I didn't understand why we were canning all these peaches. We couldn't haul a thousand heavy Mason jars up the peak. Or did we need the peaches so we could bunker down in the house, like the Weavers, and fight it out?

Fighting it out seemed likely, especially a few days later when Dad came home with more than a dozen military-surplus rifles, mostly SKSs, their thin silver bayonets folded neatly under their barrels. The guns arrived in narrow tin boxes and were packed in Cosmoline, a brownish substance the consistency of lard that had to be stripped away. After they'd been cleaned, my brother Tyler chose one and set it on a sheet of black plastic, which he folded over the rifle, sealing it with yards of silvery duct tape. Hoisting the bundle onto his shoulder, he carried it down the hill and dropped it next to the red railroad car. Then he began to dig. When the hole was wide and deep, he dropped the rifle into it, and I watched him cover it with dirt, his muscles swelling from the exertion, his jaw clenched.

Soon after, Dad bought a machine to manufacture bullets from spent cartridges. Now we could last longer in a standoff, he said. I thought of my "head for the hills" bag, waiting in my bed, and of the rifle hidden near the railcar, and began to worry about the bullet-making machine. It was bulky and bolted to an iron workstation in the basement. If we were taken by surprise, I figured we wouldn't have time to fetch it. I wondered if we should bury it, too, with the rifle.

We kept on bottling peaches. I don't remember how many days passed or how many jars we'd added to our stores before Dad told us more of the story.

“Randy Weaver’s been shot,” Dad said, his voice thin and erratic. “He left the cabin to fetch his son’s body, and the Feds shot him.” I’d never seen my father cry, but now tears were dripping in a steady stream from his nose. He didn’t wipe them, just let them spill onto his shirt. “His wife heard the shot and ran to the window, holding their baby. Then came the second shot.”

Mother was sitting with her arms folded, one hand across her chest, the other clamped over her mouth. I stared at our speckled linoleum while Dad told us how the baby had been lifted from its mother’s arms, its face smeared with her blood.

Until that moment, some part of me had *wanted* the Feds to come, had craved the adventure. Now I felt real fear. I pictured my brothers crouching in the dark, their sweaty hands slipping down their rifles. I pictured Mother, tired and parched, drawing back away from the window. I pictured myself lying flat on the floor, still and silent, listening to the sharp chirp of crickets in the field. Then I saw Mother stand and reach for the kitchen tap. A white flash, the roar of gunfire, and she fell. I leapt to catch the baby.

Dad never told us the end of the story. We didn’t have a TV or radio, so perhaps he never learned how it ended himself. The last thing I remember him saying about it was, “Next time, it could be us.”

Those words would stay with me. I would hear their echo in the chirp of crickets, in the squish of peaches dropping into a glass jar, in the metallic *chink* of an SKS being cleaned. I would hear them every morning when I passed the railroad car and paused over the chickweed and bull thistle growing where Tyler had buried the rifle. Long after Dad had forgotten about the revelation in Isaiah, and Mother was again hefting plastic jugs of “Western Family 2%” into the fridge, I would remember the Weavers.

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IT WAS ALMOST FIVE A.M.

I returned to my room, my head full of crickets and gunfire. In the lower bunk, Audrey was snoring, a low, contented hum that invited me

to do the same. Instead I climbed up to my bed, crossed my legs and looked out the window. Five passed. Then six. At seven, Grandma appeared and I watched her pace up and down her patio, turning every few moments to gaze up the hill at our house. Then she and Grandpa stepped into their car and pulled onto the highway.

When the car was gone, I got out of bed and ate a bowl of bran with water. Outside I was greeted by Luke's goat, Kamikaze, who nibbled my shirt as I walked to the barn. I passed the go-kart Richard was building from an old lawnmower. I slopped the pigs, filled the trough and moved Grandpa's horses to a new pasture.

After I'd finished I climbed the railway car and looked out over the valley. It was easy to pretend the car was moving, speeding away, that any moment the valley might disappear behind me. I'd spent hours playing that fantasy through in my head but today the reel wouldn't take. I turned west, away from the fields, and faced the peak.

The Princess was always brightest in spring, just after the conifers emerged from the snow, their deep green needles seeming almost black against the tawny browns of soil and bark. It was autumn now. I could still see her but she was fading: the reds and yellows of a dying summer obscured her dark form. Soon it would snow. In the valley that first snow would melt but on the mountain it would linger, burying the Princess until spring, when she would reappear, watchful.