

Darkness crept under the tree canopy as Willard Peeples forced himself up the incline. He had left the road half an hour back and trudged up the mountain trail headed home. The longer he hiked, the more shallow his breath became. After walking two hours from Fort Payne, he was convinced that the mountain would kill him. Some coyote would find him face-down in leaves moldered from recent December rain.

A sharp pain cut under his left ribcage without warning. He forced himself to sit, to rest until his breath eased.

He could lessen his load by leaving the backpack where it now lay and move on empty-handed. But that would negate his journey. The Christmas toys, small as they were, were meant for his two girls April and June. His wife Caroline had a spitting fit when she came to after each birthing and read the names on the birth certificates. He chuckled at the memory. She had wanted each to be named after her mother. He had named them for the months in which they were born “to help them remember their birthdays,” he had said. “If I can’t give them a real party,” he muttered.

He wished he had had enough money to buy something nice for Caroline, but after his arrest she would have accused him of stealing whatever he brought her.

Willard had first heard about early release for non-violent prisoners on the exercise yard. Goliath, a prisoner whose name fit his size, sat down by Willard and eyed the tower guard. “You and me gonna be catching the chain soon. Getting out of here, man,” he whispered.

“Yeah.” Willard spoke with his back to the tower. “Like we’re growing wings and fly.” He snorted.

“Duck, that fresh guard, he ain’t no bug. He say cell warriors being released ‘fore the virus kill us all.”