The Key Ring Gospel

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

I don’t remember when the anger stopped being a reaction and started being a residence.

At first it came like weather—thunder, then passing. You could take shelter, wait it out, open the windows again. But now it lives in my body the way old injuries live in the body: the ache that returns before the storm even arrives. It shows itself in my hands, in a mild tremor that flickers through my fingers like my nerves are trying to climb out of my skin.

I’m sixty-five. I should be an old man with a chair near a window, not a cot under fluorescent lights.

But in the warehouse, there are no windows. There are rows. There are rules. There is a constant hum of noise that eats your thoughts and spits out your worst instincts.

Two hundred and fifty men packed into one building, a hard echo of every argument, every cough, every muttered prayer. TV screens bolted high like false suns. Boom boxes playing other people’s lives at full volume, because silence is a threat in a place like this. Urinals outside, exposed to freezing winter air or the kind of summer heat that feels like punishment. Showers rationed by time and patience. Food served lukewarm, like the system can’t even be bothered to pretend it’s feeding you with care.

Reading sample — continued

The staff walk the aisles with clipboards and keys, and those keys are a language. The key ring says: I open doors. I close doors. I decide who stays and who goes.

Sometimes I hear those keys in my sleep.

And that’s how I know I’m not sleeping.

Insomnia isn’t just being awake. It’s being trapped in a body that refuses to power down because it’s convinced danger is near. Prison did that to me. Prison rearranged my nervous system. It trained me to wake at small sounds, to catalog threats, to sleep lightly like survival depends on it—because it did.

Eight years.

I don’t say that number much. In America, a number becomes a brand.

I know because I’ve lived it twice—first in a cell, then in the “free world,” where the walls are invisible but the doors still don’t open.

I didn’t plan to end up here.