The Kindness That Peels Off

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

By the third year of almost being homeless, I had learned the difference between help that holds and help that peels off in the rain.

Most people never think about help that way. Help is help, they say. A meal is a meal. Twenty dollars is twenty dollars. A kind word is a kindness. A person trying is a person trying.

And I understand why they say it. I used to believe that too.

Back when I still had my organization, back when my name still opened some doors and didn’t make people tilt their heads with pity, I believed effort counted for more than outcome. I believed intention mattered most. I believed if enough decent people kept doing small decent things, the world would bend toward mercy on its own.

Then the roof went.

Then the donors thinned.

Then the grants got harder.

Then the rent climbed.

Then my body began collecting damage the way an old house collects leaks—quiet at first, then everywhere at once.

Now I know better.

Band-aids are not healing. They are proof that someone saw blood and could not bear to see it, but they had no plan to stop the wound.

Reading sample — continued

My name is Daniel Voss in this version of the story, though the truth under my ribs belongs to me. I am fifty-seven years old, live in Texas, and if you looked at me from across a coffee shop, you might think I was just another tired man in a clean shirt trying to hold his place in the world. You would not know the shirt was ironed in a borrowed laundry room. You would not know the shoes pinched because my feet had swollen from standing too long in heat. You would not know the notebook in my satchel was less a journal than a ledger of who had promised what, who had forgotten, and which days I had enough gas to pretend I still had choices.

I wasn’t sleeping on sidewalks. People hear the word homeless and picture a man under a bridge, beard full of rain and cardboard. They do that because it lets them think homelessness is visible. Manageable. Separate. Something they would recognize before it got close enough to touch them.