Too Hot to Think

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The dashboard thermometer blinked 104°, then cut out completely, a soft clicking sound the only sign the battery was still alive. David Mercer stared at it through a glaze of sweat and exhaustion, slumped in the driver's seat of his 2005 Dodge Caravan—the color once silver, now scorched pale by the merciless Texas sun.

It had been three days since the AC died. Two since he last found a public fountain with cool enough water to rinse the salt from his neck. And this—this was supposed to be fall.

He pulled the sunshade across the windshield, though it barely helped anymore. It was more a ritual than a solution. Something to make the inside of the van feel slightly less like an air fryer. He peeled off his damp T-shirt and tossed it behind the seat where a stack of legal pads, dog-eared mail, and a crushed cereal box served as his desk, his bookshelf, and sometimes his pillow.

Out the side window, the heat shimmered on the pavement like smoke. Even the birds had gone silent. The parking lot behind the old strip mall—a collection of fading signs and cracked asphalt—was mostly empty except for his van and a red Prius with a broken taillight. The owner of the Prius sometimes slept there too, but they never spoke. There was a quiet agreement: no questions, no noise, no judgment.

Reading sample — continued

David wiped his forehead and tried to focus. He was halfway through rereading a grant rejection letter from two weeks ago. The same recycled language:

“Due to funding restrictions, your application cannot be considered at this time…”

His nonprofit—Books Across Borders—had been his life for over twenty years. What started as a mobile book delivery program for underfunded schools in rural Texas had grown, then collapsed, then barely clung on through COVID-19. And now? With libraries being defunded, books banned, and federal dollars diverted into "parental oversight panels"… what was left?

He’d tried everything. Pivoting to digital. Partnerships. Fundraisers. A podcast he couldn’t finish because his hotspot kept cutting out. The mission had been noble: literacy as a weapon against ignorance. But lately, ignorance seemed to have all the firepower.

He crumpled the letter, stopped himself, then smoothed it back out and folded it neatly. Paper still meant something. Even if no one else believed that anymore.