

BRI CARMICHAEL  
*And So We Shall Fall*



The city is lifeless. Buildings that once stood tall have been reduced to hollow skeletons. Layers of brick have been stripped away, revealing sagging metal frames that struggle to bare their weight. The streets are littered with debris and abandoned cars. A thick layer of soot blankets the world around me, stealing nature's color palette and replacing it with a seamless coating of dingy gray.

I look up at the sun, which is straight overhead, dragging us into high noon. "Come on, we've got to keep moving," I say, swinging my backpack over my arms, wincing as the straps settle back into the indentations they've made on my shoulders.

Garrett quickly stands up in silent agreement, taking the lead and continuing eastward. Threats of oncoming nuclear warfare became all too real when the U.S.' coasts were hit first, sending ripples of destruction toward the Midwest, entire cities flattened from the continuous bomb blasts. The world around me fell into a state of anarchy as the darkest elements of human nature presented themselves. Gunshots followed by piercing screams and never-ending cries for help replaced the lullabies mothers sang to their children at night. However now, a hush has gradually fallen upon the earth, and everything has begun fading to gray.

I walk silently in Garrett's wake, focusing on the steady pace of his boots. Although every single muscle in my body aches in protest, an innate animal-like desire for survival commands my legs forward, refusing to fall too far behind.

Without notice, I run head-first into Garrett's pack, letting out a soft whimper. "Garrett! Why'd you stop walking?" I ask, trying to mask the edge of annoyance in my voice.

He stands silently, with his eyes fixated on a point in the distance. His pupils contract as he squints, exaggerating the wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. My eyes follow the direction of his gaze, stopping at a collapsed cement bridge about sixty yards away. Between the massive supportive bearings, the bridge sags, revealing an entanglement of metal rods that resembles dancing snakes. I'm still trying to examine the bridge and figure out what's so damn important about it when he shouts, "Jude, come on! Hurry!" And breaks out into a full sprint towards one of the bearings.

I hesitate before following his lead, slowly jogging toward the supportive bearing. As I near it, my eyes begin to make out two forms leaning against the tall cement wall, and I force my aching muscles to run faster.

Garrett slows his pace and begins walking toward the figures when he gets within a few feet, approaching with caution. I catch his pale eyes meeting mine, growing with concern. The stench of death welcomes me into a scene I wish I never saw.

A middle-aged woman sits propped up against the cement, her eyes are closed but her mouth hangs open loosely in a downturned position. The color in her lips and skin have fled, and has left behind a pale blue tint. Her skeletal fingers tightly clutch the handle of a knife in one hand, and the other rests gently on the arm of a small child, who is curled on her lap. Both plainly wear the face of starvation.

"Are they both..." I trail off, not wanting to hear the words come out of my mouth.

Garrett kneels down next to them, with a solemn expression on his face. I glance back at the child again, realizing we must only be *hours* too late. Color still tints his cheeks and paints his lips a faint pink. The air is suspended in my lungs as Garrett's fingers press softly against the neck of the small child.

"There's a faint pulse here, Jude," he says calmly.

I immediately rush over to Garrett's side and gently place my hand on the child's cheek. My throat tightens and my eyes begin to swell with tears as warmth radiates to my hand. Garrett shakes him gently as I frantically dig through my pack in search of what little water I have left in my plastic bottle.

Minutes drag by and the child remains unresponsive. It's us against his body's pull toward death. And once it begins to settle in, death has an unforgiving grip.

Just as my hopes are beginning to falter, the child's eyes begin fluttering, struggling to adjust to the sun's rays. Olive green eyes rapidly glance from me to Garrett as we come into focus. He immediately backs away and cowers in fear like a cornered animal, unsure of us. Garrett whispers to him in a gentle, soothing voice, offering water and a handful of the berries we'd gathered earlier in the week. For several moments, the child sits, unmoving, staring at Garrett's open palm with uncertainty before quickly grabbing the berries with his tiny hands and shoving them into his mouth. This is probably the first meal he's had in weeks.

"We need to get you out of here," I tell him softly.

He glances back to his mother, as if in understanding, and allows Garrett to lift him up in his arms. The child's eyes remain fixated on his mother's lifeless body as we head toward a small patch of woods, until she is completely out of sight.

"Bye momma," he whispers, and buries his face into Garrett's neck.

\*\*\*

The evening is spent concealed in the woods around a small fire, coaxing what little food we could into him. A sense of distrust of the world around him looms over his shoulders, as he only allows us to know his name. *Sam*.

As the sun begins to retreat behind the horizon, darkness slowly creeps in, until our world is condensed to the ten foot radius of light emanating from the dwindling fire. I stare at the fire as its booming heartbeat slows to a gentle pulse. Each ember struggling to stay lit. My eyes glance to Sam, whose body has become overcome with fatigue, lulling him into a deep sleep.

"I promise I will protect you," I whisper aloud, before succumbing to my own body's yearning for rest.

\*\*\*

I wake to a familiar sound. A choir of high-pitched trills. My eyes attempt to find the direction of the sound, and stop at the sight of Garrett and Sam kneeling beside a barren bush about thirty feet away. I rise slowly, my joints still stiff from sleep, and approach with curiosity, the sweet chirps growing ever stronger.

Resting in between two narrow branches, is a small bird's nest, with three baby birds opening their beaks wide, ready for their next meal. It's the first time the silence has been broken. The first sign of life being restored in a world ridden of its beauty. Their skin is still a translucent pink, with patchy tufts of peach fuzz. Their blind eyes haven't caught a glimpse of this world yet, and will never be aware of its previous state. Hidden in their gentle calls for their mother is that same desire for survival that pushes me forward.

Garrett and I collect more firewood for the day, staying close to our campsite while Sam continues to admire the baby birds.

After I get a small fire going, I pour water from Garrett's canister into a large tin cup along with some pine needles to brew tea, while Garrett rations our food supply. The eerie silence of the woods catches my attention, and I look ahead to find Sam holding the limp bodies of the baby birds in his blood-stained hands.

Garrett's eyes follow the direction of my gaze and we sit, motionless in time, as Sam approaches us with a toothless smile.

"Why-why would you do that, Sam?" Garrett asks, straining his voice.

Sam remains silent, except for a playful giggle paired with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders. Garrett hastily pushes a portion of berries toward Sam, while glancing back at me, boring his eyes into mine. He rises and beckons me over to a nearby tree, out of Sam's earshot.

"Jude," he starts in a serious tone. "He is unstable."

"How could you blame him after all he's been through!? He probably did that as a

way to cope with the trauma!" I say, raising my voice.

"He can't cope with the realities of this life. He's a child, he doesn't belong here," he replies.

"Are you suggesting we leave him behind? Where the hell is your humanity? How could you just leave a child to die? That's murder!" I shout as I forcefully push him away.

"We have to consider our survival, Jude! Our resources will be depleted twice as fast if we try to nurse him back to health, and he's in no condition to scavenge," Garrett says coldly.

"We're not leaving him behind, you selfish bastard," I demand. "Don't bring this up to me again."

\*\*\*

We're greeted into a new day with bright, orange beams of sunlight bleeding in through the tree line in the distance. I glance over to Sam, which causes waves of confusion and dread to wash over me. Garrett focuses his attention on whittling a twig, bags hang low under his eyes. I cross over the ash-filled fire pit and kneel beside Sam, giving him a gentle shake.

No movement. I shake him more vigorously and he still does not rouse. My chest tightens and a pang tugs at my heart as I lower my ear down to his nose. But all that follows is silence.

"Garrett, he's not breathing!" I exclaim, panic rising in my voice.

But Garrett makes no effort to avert his gaze from his whittling.

My heart stops when my eyes land on the faint mix of purple and yellow discoloration along the front of Sam's throat. My eyes harden and my fingers dig into the soil beneath me as my hands begin to make tightly clenched fists.

"You monster," I say, through gritted teeth. "How could you do this?"

"We have to think of *our* survival, Jude," he says, rising to his feet. "And Sam was a threat to it."

My entire body shudders at his words, each one like acid against my skin. "A threat? He was a child!" I shout as I frantically begin shoving my sleeping mat into my backpack. As I reach for the tin cup resting in the pile of ashes, I feel Garrett's hand grip my forearm tightly.

"Let go of me," I say, glaring at him. He kneels down next to me, his face so close to mine I can smell his rancid breath.

"You know he was unstable," Garrett says, speaking so quietly I can hear my own heartbeat. "And our resources wouldn't have supported him. It was a matter of time, Jude. It was easier this way, before you got attached. I was protecting you."

I struggle to make a clear image of him as tears begin to well in my eyes. "Well you don't have to worry about protecting me anymore," I say, yanking my arm away from his grasp as I rise to my feet. "We have nothing to gain from traveling together."

As I make my way out of the woods, back toward the open road, I hear Garrett's footsteps trailing behind me.

"Jude, please! You have to understand!" He shouts. "He was a child, there was no place for him in this world!"

The moment I feel his icy fingers clasp around my shoulder, I immediately draw my gun out from my waistband and turn to face him. The small wrinkled space between his eyebrows in my sights. "Take one step closer and I swear to God I will fucking shoot you!" I shout.

"You're turning on me now? I was protecting you, Jude!" He yells back. My throat begins to tighten as tears threaten to surface. My thumb pushes the safety lever down with an audible *'click'*.

"Fine. Do it then," he whispers, glaring down at me. I can feel his blue eyes piercing into mine.

"Fucking do it! Nothing matters anymore, there's no hope for this world, It's all going to shit!" He shouts. "It's just us and our ruins!"

I secure my gun back into my waistband, being careful to not avert my gaze from his. If that's how he feels, I want him to suffer in this world slowly.

\*\*\*

Several miles separate me from Garrett and the patch of dead leaves that will serve as Sam's grave. The landscape has remained unchanged. A panoramic view of decay and destruction constantly follows me as I continue eastward.

The rays from the hot white sun bore into my skin as I walk along an open interstate. I can barely make out the faint white lines that separate the lanes in the road, hidden under a layer of ash and rubble. To my left rests the pathetic remaining form of the cement median, large cracks fracture the barrier in multiple places, in others, blocks of cement is entirely missing. I walk under the faltering metal frame of a highway sign, the bar looming just a few feet over my head. The highway is bordered by two stretches of sparse woods, most of the foliage stripped away, exposing the frail shafts of bark.

Through a break in the cement wall, the gleam of a metal railroad beam catches my attention, and beckons me to follow it. I cross over a small patch of charred grass and stop just before the tracks. The long metal beams bend and curve in awkward angles, and the wooden railroad ties splinter to form sharp, jagged

edges. I decide to follow the path of the tracks and don't turn back.

\*\*\*

The constant dull pain that runs through my heels with every step tells me I've followed these tracks for several miles. Despite my body's resistance, I continue forward, only to be stopped seconds later by a sudden stabbing pain in my right foot. I immediately drop to the ground to examine it, and find a large, glossy acorn lodged in the treads of my boot. After pulling it out forcefully, I roll it around in my palm, carefully observing how its shell reflects the sunlight.

My fingers dig a small hole a few inches deep into the dirt next to me. The feeling of the cold, moist soil surprises me, and I gently place the acorn into the hole.

"You've got a big burden ahead of you, little guy," I whisper before covering it with a layer of dirt.

I stare at the spot where I buried the acorn, unmoving. A question, a challenge, a hope invades the emptiness in my mind. Will this tiny, seemingly insignificant part of nature be responsible for mending the scar of humanity?