“Are you a hero or a villain?” a friendly voice asked.

I was caught off guard as I looked up from my phone at the man who just slid into the seat across the table from me.

“Which one?” he inquired.

“What?” I replied, obviously confused.

I looked around the mall food court. It was crowded, but there were plenty of other places to sit besides the little table I had taken a reprieve from holiday shopping at.

“Are you a hero or a villain?” he repeated with a perplexing look in his eyes.

This stranger looked like most of the other shoppers, only maybe more relaxed. Neatly cut hair. Big winter coat. And now that he has my attention, an awkward, forced looking smile. He certainly wasn’t timid though.

“I like to think I’m a good person.” I nervously chuckled. *What’s up with this guy?*

“That’s not what I’m asking. Everyone likes to think they’re a good person. What I’m asking you is, if you would sacrifice yourself to save a bunch of people who don’t care about you, or would you let them die in exchange for your own safety?”

He reached into his coat and pulled out a large manilla envelope.

“This will explain to everyone else what I’m about to do.”

He placed it on the table between us.

“But it makes no mention of our conversation.”

I could feel a tightness in my muscles as I realized this was not somebody I wanted to interact with anymore. I slid my phone into my pocket and began reaching for my shopping bags when his demeanor changed and the veil of congeniality fell from his whole person.

“If you move I’ll kill everybody in here.”

My chest tightened. *This guy is nuts! He can’t be serious. I need to leave. I need to leave now.*

“I’m going to die in the next few minutes.” he continued in his newly stern manner.
No more forced smile.

“And I’m not going alone. I have an explanation in here.” he tapped the envelope. “But you get a chance to decide how many come with me. I’m going to get up from this chair in a minute and start shooting. I’ll miss the first two shots to give you time to make your decision.”

*What the Hell is this?*

“If you haven’t tried to stop me after the first two shots I’ll assume you aren’t going to try. That’s when I’ll start killing the people around us. But not you. I promise I won’t hurt you. You get to go home to your family unharmed.”

I looked around at the people. *A hundred? Two hundred? More? There were kids.*

“However if you come at me, I won’t shoot anyone else. Just you and me. My statement—” he tapped the envelope again, “makes it clear that I’m here to kill as many people as I can before the police stop me. It doesn’t say anything about our little talk here though. So if you decide to walk away and let dozens of others die knowing you could have stopped it, you and I are the only ones who will ever know. But you will always know you aren’t the good person you thought you were five minutes ago. I would argue it makes you almost as much of a villain as me.”

A hint of a smile returned to his face.

“If we both die you’ll be celebrated as the hero who saved Christmas for all of these people and their families. Well, not your family. Without some kind of sacrifice it’s not heroic is it? More like-a good deed, right?”

I was trying to gage if he was serious. Either way I wanted to run.

“Why me?” I managed to say aloud.

“Because I honestly can’t tell what you’ll do just by looking at you. Every other book in this library, I can judge by its cover.” He gestured to the crowd of people with his open arms. “You’re the only mystery novel on the shelf.”

This didn’t make sense to me.

“The time for talk is over. Action or inaction.” He said as he quickly stood up. “Hero or Villain?” he asked one more time before pulling a black pistol from his coat.

He turned away from me and fired. I jumped from my seat. He fired again.

*That’s two.*
I lunged for his right hand and he turned into me. I felt the pressure wave between us and thought he tried to push me off of him, but he was grabbing me as tightly as I was grabbing him. I could see on his face that the smile was no longer forced. Darkness began pouring into the periphery of my vision like being shut into a double door cabinet. I felt him pushing the warm, wet, gun into my hand. The cabinet doors were closing fast on me. I couldn’t breathe. He pushed my finger into the trigger guard. I couldn’t feel my legs beneath me.

*How was I standing?*

With my last sliver of vision I watched him keep his word, squeezing my hand around his gun as we fell away from each other.

*I was a good person.*