

Title: Faith, Family, and Fire Fight

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Church Family Picnic

“Woohoo! Go, Jim, Go!” Jess stood up and clapped for her husband as he hit a triple and sprinted around the bases. Feeling Morgan grab hold of her skirt and stand up beside her, she smiled down at her little one. “Look.” She knelt, put her arm around Morgan, and pointed to her husband rounding the bases. “Look at Daddy go.”

Still holding Jess’s skirt, Morgan sucked her thumb, eyes wide yet smiling as she watched her daddy slide into third just as the baseman caught the ball above his head. “Daddy slid.” She looked up at her mom, eyes questioning.

“That’s right. He did, and look, he’s even safe!” Jess explained excitedly, but then paused and mumbled, “But his jeans aren’t.” She gazed disapprovingly at the rip on the side of his pant leg. Jim caught her gaze, looked down at the rip, and shrugged, guiltily. She crossed her arms. He grinned and then turned his attention back to the game, clapping and yelling encouragement for the next batter... who didn’t seem to be around, yet.

“Next!” Derrick yelled from the mound, slapping the softball into his mitt in an attempt to break up the group of chatting deacons so they could get on with the game.

“Oh, keep your shirt on,” Trent said as he grabbed the only wooden bat from the pile. After swinging it in a circle a few times, he stepped up to the plate.

“Yea! Let’s go, Trent!” His wife, Teresa, clapped from the sidelines. “Home run!”

“Slug it, Daddy!” His daughter cheered.

Derrick wound up and threw. Trent swung.

“Strike one!” Pastor Thomas, the ump, yelled. Trent gave him a look. “Rejoice in the Lord always, Trent.”

“And hit the ball!” Trent’s son, John, added from the “dugout” bench.

Trent mumbled something inaudible and pulled back the bat. Derrick threw his best overhand fast ball right over the plate. “Strike two!”

“Strike two!” Trent let his bat clunk on the ground and did his best to look outraged, even though he wasn’t mad. “This is softball. You can’t throw overhand!” He glared at the ump.

Pastor shrugged.

“No one ever specified!” Derrick shouted from the mound.

“Yeah, don’t be a sore loser!” the first baseman yelled.

Trent let his hands fly up. “He’s been throwing it underhand the entire game!”

“Get over it!” The third baseman yelled.

“Kill the umpire!” Jim added from third. Pastor shot Jim a look.

“Do you need me to throw it underhand?” Derrick used his best sympathetic voice.

“No.” Trent pulled back his bat with a vengeance.

“Come on, Trent. Hit me home!” Jim called.

Jess smiled as she sat back down on the wooden bench and pulled Morgan into her lap. “Hi, Jess.” Melinda came and sat down beside her. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, not very well.” Jess shook her head, still smiling. “Jim’s team’s sinkin’ fast.” Melinda smiled.

“Strike three! Batter out!”

“See what I mean.” Trent’s son booed, but Jess couldn’t tell if he was booing the ump or his dad. Trent reluctantly handed the bat to Mr. Riley, the church’s most senior deacon at age seventy-nine.

“I guess so. Thought you’d be hanging around with the teens somewhere.”

Jess thumbed over her shoulder at the group of young people playing volleyball. “Until further notice, or they get bored, or a fight breaks out, I’m taking some time off.”

“Youth group getting to be too much?”

“Nah, it’s good exercise.” Jess pumped her fist animatedly.

Melinda gazed off into the distance. “These annual picnics are something I’ve always loved about this church, even as a child.

Jess smiled at her. “Where do your parents go now?”

SMACK! The most senior deacon hit the ball sharply... over everyone’s head. Deacon Riley took off, slowly but as fast as he could manage, as Jim sprinted home.

“Whooo! Go, Jim, Go!” Jess stood up, clapping excitedly.

“Safe!”

“Yea! Go-o-o, Jim!” Jess kept clapping.

Mr. Riley was rounding second by time the outfielder finally found the ball and hurled it hard and fast for Wade at second. Wade ducked, and the ball sailed right over him. "Wade!" Derrick started running toward it as it beamed toward third, past third, and into the stands. Melinda grabbed Morgan and split with the other ladies who all gasped and jumped off the bench, all except for Jess who stood up and caught the ball right before it fell to the ground.

"Here. Throw it here!" The third baseman called as Mr. Riley rounded round the base.

Jess just tossed it up in the air and caught it a couple times.

"Come on! Hand it over!" Derrick called. She just smiled and kept tossing it.

"SAFE!"

"That wasn't fair!" Derrick demanded.

"Here you go." Jess tossed him the ball.

"I always knew I married a smart girl!" Jim grinned from the dugout.

Derrick gave them both a look as he headed back to the mound. "Cheaters never prosper!" He called over his shoulder.

Melinda chuckled as she came back with Morgan. "Now that's thinking on your feet."

Jess smiled, picked up Morgan, and sat down. "I think us girls should get a game going."

Melinda looked around skeptically at the available females. "Why don't you play with the boys?"

"What? Me? I'm no tomboy." She looked playfully offended.

"Mmm. Well, you'll have to count me out. I gotta be heading out pretty soon."

"Gotta work tonight?"

"Yeah. Another day, another dollar. Got tomorrow off, though. I'm going to visit my folks."

Jess nodded. "Well, that's nice. How's your dad doing?"

"Did you know they called in hospice?"

Jess shook her head. "Sorry."

"Might be the last time I get to see him alive." Jess reached out and pulled her into a hug. A couple stray tears trickled down Melinda's face. "Thanks."

"How 'bout your mom? How's she doing?" Jess asked pulling back.

"Okay." Melinda nodded, teary-eyed. "It's pretty hard on her, but she's always been a strong person."

"Sorry." Jess didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah," She spoke softly staring off into the distance. "It's time, though... all that cancer. He's ready to be done suffering. He's at peace with it. I know that. So is Mom." Sniffing, she wiped a couple stray tears away. "They'll meet again someday. We'll all meet again someday."

Jess nodded. "I'm sure glad of that. Then, it's not really goodbye."

Melinda nodded back. "Just see you later," she finished. There were a few moments of silence before Melinda said, "Well, I'd better go. Don't want to be late." Though still sniffing, she smiled as she got up.

"Hope your night goes well."

"Yeah. Hopefully no cancer patients." Melinda turned to go.

Jess turned back to the game. She smiled as Derrick tackled Jim midway between first and second. "I said, 'you're out,'" he yelled, showing him the ball. Jess figured he had either caught a pop up or tagged second and Jim kept running. Although, she

wasn't sure. She wished she hadn't missed it.

"No tackle baseball!" Pastor Thomas yelled from behind home plate. "And Jim, obey the rules or your Pastor's gonna bench you!"

Arms crossed, Jim trudged back. "How can you bench someone's who's already out."

"No sour grapes, now. No sour grapes."

Melinda frowned as she approached her car and saw a flat tire. "Great." She walked around her car. No, make that two, one on the right and one on the left. *That's weird.* She figured if she'd driven over something they would both be on the same side. *No, wait, scratch that.* She ran her fingers along a big slit on the top of the tire. *So much for it being an accident.*

Anger knotted her stomach as she walked back toward the crowd. Not even at church was she safe from stupid people. Still, she wondered. She didn't think anyone at church had anything against her. Of course, she didn't think anyone out of church had enough against her to slash her tires. It was curious. She glanced at her watch and wondered if this was going to make her late. She had time, but not a whole lot. She walked faster, hoping she could quickly con some strong guy into volunteering. She and lug nuts never had gotten along.

"I think this better be all I do for now," Taylor said, rubbing her baby-filled tummy and making her way away from the volleyball net.

"Okay. Thanks for playing with us," one girl called.

"Come back after you've gotten a rest," another one yelled.

Taylor made her way to the swing sets and sat down at the bottom of the long metal slide. Glancing to the side, she saw Jack leave his game of kickball and come over. Taylor made a mental note that no one called to him to come back later. In fact, their cold stares seemed to suggest they were glad to see him go.

"Jerks," Jack mumbled as he came and sat down on the swing closest to her.

"Not enjoying the game?"

"They're just all a bunch of jerks." He kicked the mulch with his shoe. "I wouldn't even be here if my parents didn't make me."

"I don't think I've ever met your parents."

"Yeah, well, you're not missin' much."

"Why don't they ever come to church?"

"They're smarter than that. They know what a good time is. This sure isn't." He swung a little.

"I don't know. I don't think it's been that bad."

Jack didn't answer. He just stared down at the ground, still swinging a little.

"Jack?" Taylor looked at him. "What are we going to do about...."

"We've had this conversation before," he sighed.

"It always ends in an argument."

"That's because you won't listen!" He leaned against the chain and stared at her. "I told you to take care of it in the beginning. You just keep putting it off! The longer you put it off, the harder it's going to be."

"I don't know." She didn't look at him. "I think my dad would kill me."

"That's a lame excuse." He looked away.

"I don't know. I just.... It's so final."

"Good. Finish it."

"I don't know if I want to finish it... part of me does, but part of me loves you and loves this baby. It's our baby, part of you and me."

"I don't want anything to do with it."

"But it's ours."

"It's going to ruin your life. Do you want that?"

"How can you be so sure?"

"You're gonna be tied down to it for the rest of your life. That kid's gonna be with you for the next 18 years! You let it be born, and your life's over!" His voice was both overwhelmed and angry. "You'll never find a guy. No guy's gonna want someone with a baby."

"Not even you, even when it's your 'kid'?" Her voice had an edge on it.

"Right. I'm not getting tied down to no family."

"But you *would* want me back if I killed the baby." Her voice was thoughtful.

"Aborted the pregnancy. It's not alive, yet."

"Oh, really," she sneered at him and tossed her head. "Answer me. Could we get back together if I 'abort' the baby."

Jack shrugged. "Why not? Just make sure you're on birth control this time."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're a bum."

He got up, raised his hand and clenched his fist as if he wanted to hit her. Then raising his hands as if he was pushing against something, he stepped back. "You know what? It's your thing. Do what you want. I'm out of here." He turned and walked away.

"What do you mean?" She called after him, afraid this was goodbye forever. He didn't slow down or even acknowledge her.

"Any idea who could have done this?" Jim asked as he rolled the spare tire toward the wheel well.

"Thanks for letting me use your spare since I only had one. Sure I can't pay you for it?" Jim nodded his head as he lifted the flat one off the axle. "Well, I'll make sure to get them changed and get the spare back to you tomorrow."

"No rush." He pulled the old tire off. "Any idea who did it?"

"No." She leaned back against her car. "First, I thought maybe it was just a random thing. You know, a group of kids go slash tires at a random church while they're all in the service, but it can't be because no one else has any of theirs slashed."

"Anyone at your job mad at you, a patient or something?" He lifted the spare on.

"No. I'm sure it's nothing like that. I thought maybe Carlos, but he's still trying to get back together. He asked to see me again. Personally, I'd rather just break free, but I don't know. Maybe there's still something there. I did love him once. Maybe he'll change."

"Maybe he'll become a Christian?" He looked up at her as he twisted a lug nut.

She shrugged. "Anything's possible." She didn't sound convinced.

Jim shrugged as he turned back to the tire. "True."

"Then I remembered the other day when I ran into Taylor at the hospital. We had lunch together. It was nice, but I'm sure my opinions on abortion were *quite* clear." She glanced at him. "I happen to know that Jack is definitely not prolife."

"You think he might have done it?"

"I don't know. I don't have any evidence. If I accuse him, he's just going to deny it."

"Maybe not." He paused as he tightened the last lug nut. "It's been done here before... to former youth leaders. Maybe they got the wrong car." He smiled at her. "Maybe I owe you this spare tire."

She didn't return the smile. "Our cars don't look anything alike." She kicked her heel back against her car.

"Well." He stood up and walked around to the other side of the car. "I'm sorry it happened. It is a pretty expensive prank."

"Seems a lot worse than a prank." Arms crossed, she trudged after him and watched him begin to untighten the lug nuts.

"Okay. Crime, then." He untwisted the nut the rest of the way by hand, put it on the ground, and started on the next one.

Dr. Matt Fredricks rubbed his face as he pulled his car into the church parking lot. It had been a long, busy day in the ER, and he was dog tired. He planned to pick up Taylor and head straight home. Then maybe he'd order pizza, break out a medical book, get a can of pop, and just relax. Used to be, he'd grab a beer, but the latest revival meetings had changed his mind about even social drinking. In fact, he had pledged to the Lord never to drink alcohol again, which was hard at first, but as time went on, not so much. He'd never been a heavy drinker.

Finding a parking place, he stopped the car and got out, throwing the door shut behind him. Pressing the lock button on his remote, he slowly made his way across the parking lot toward the grass where everyone was playing. He smiled as he walked past a group of little ones laughing and screaming as they played tag. He'd never been really big on fun, even as a kid, and after his wife died, he had hardened himself against it even more... even birthdays and Christmas. He'd leave a couple presents for his kids and make sure he was scheduled to work... a double shift if he could manage it. It hadn't been good for his kids. He'd estranged everyone from him. Now... He stepped onto the grass. Now he was trying desperately to change before it was too late... before he completely alienated his last child... his last child and his last hope of keeping any remnant of his family. He kicked a rock, wishing he had tried harder to get today off.

"Hey, Matt!"

Matt turned toward Jim's voice and looked around for a moment before seeing him knelt down, changing a tire. "Hi, Jim, Melinda." He nodded to her as he walked toward them. "What happened here?"

"Someone slashed my tires." Melinda, leaning sideways against her car, arms crossed.

Matt raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Any idea who?"

Melinda stared into the distance. "Not really."

Jim took the second slashed tire back and put it in her trunk with the first one. "That's that." He picked up the jack and tossed it in, too.

"Hey, thanks, Jim, you're a lifesaver." She hurried around to the driver's side.

"Gonna make it in time?" Mat opened the door for her.

"I don't know! Gonna try! Thanks again!" She called toward Jim then smiled at Matt as he closed the door for her. Immediately, she threw it in reverse and buckled while backing up.

"She's in a hurry." Matt said, watching her go.

“Yeah, she’s late for work.”

“Oh,” Matt nodded. “Could have used her this morning. It’s been some day.” He rubbed his face.

“Glad she didn’t have to, though. I think she had a good time here.”

“That’s good.” He paused. “Wish I could have gotten the day off.” His voice was apologetic.

“Me too,” Jim draped his arm over Matt’s shoulders, “but now that you’re here, let’s get you some food.” He guided him toward the building. Matt looked back toward the grass. “I wasn’t really planning to stay.”

“Why not?”

Matt drew the line at ever telling anyone that he was worn out. “I guess I can stay for a while.”

“Great.” Jim slapped his back and opened the church door for him.

“In here?”

“Right. Out there’s the exercise.” He pointed toward the field. “This way’s the food. Can’t expect a man to expend too much energy on an empty stomach.”

“It does sound good. I haven’t had any lunch yet.” He followed him down the hallway to the fellowship hall.

“Well, ya can now.” He led him toward the kitchen. “Hey, Martha!” He yelled across the fellowship hall so loudly it caused Matt to jump. “We’ve got one more,” he stated as he got closer. “Anything left?”

“Yes, Sir. The Lord has given us a gracious supply. Come on over here, young man.” Standing in the kitchen doorway, she held out a plate with silverware. *Young man?* Matt couldn’t help looking surprised as he accepted the plate and glanced at the food outstretched on the breakfast bar in the process of being covered and packed up. She went back in on the kitchen side. “What would you like?” She began removing lids.

“If you’re cleaning up, I don’t want to be a both...er.” Jim pushed him closer to the counter.

Trying to hold back a smile, she scooped a generous helping of potato salad, reached over the counter, and slapped it on his plate. “Help yourself.” She motioned to the neatly lined up homemade dishes and continued removing cling wrap and foil.

Matt backed up so Jim uncovered the roast beef. “Want some of Carley’s homemade Italian Beef. You’ll never taste better?”

“Sure,” Matt answered abruptly.

“The BBQ’s better,” Martha called over her shoulder as she took a stack of dishes to the sink. “Rick won the BBQ cookoff three years in a row with that recipe.”

“Gotta try some of that.” Jim put a hamburger bun on his plate and slapped a generous amount of BBQ on it.

“What did you make?” Matt needed something to say, but soon regretted it in fear that she hadn’t brought anything.

“I made the pistachio salad. Turned out a little runny this time,” she called back as she turned on the water.

“That’s this one.” Jim pointed to a green whipped salad with pineapple bits and mini marshmallows.

“Looks good to me.” Matt took some. He glanced up to see her smile though she didn’t turn around.

“She also brought the watermelon,” Jim added, “but of course it took a higher source to make that.”

“Yeah.” Matt tried desperately not to look as uncomfortable as he felt.

“Relax, old friend,” Jim whispered in his ear while absentmindedly scooping different salads and casseroles onto his plate, “she hasn’t taken out any visitors since 1992 when the Sunday school superintendent brought a hussy to the Valentine’s banquet.” Matt gave him a look. Jim grinned back. “Just joking.”

"Yeah. You can stop now." They both looked down at his plate, loaded with twelve different kinds of dishes.

Jim smiled. "Well, there you go. You can try a little bit of everything." He slapped him on the back.

Matt just stared at the plate a moment, trying not to shake his head. "I won't have to buy supper tonight. That's for sure." He forced a smile, but his eyes were tired.

"Good. Then when you're finished you can come back for some dessert," Jim laughed, draping his arm over his shoulder again and pulling him along. "Follow me to a ripping game of Baptist baseball." He guided him out of the kitchen.

"Thank you!" he called over his shoulder. Man, he hadn't said that in ages. "This is very generous!" Huh, maybe there was hope for reforming his speech after all.

"Wait a minute!" Jim stopped on a dime. Matt turned and watched Jim hurry back into the kitchen. "Forgot something." *You're kidding.* Jim hurried back with a beautiful triangle of juicy, ruby red watermelon. "Wouldn't be a church picnic without it." Since there was no place to put it, he put on top of the BBQ since that seemed more logical than the pistachio salad or the cheesy mashed potatoes.

"Thanks." Matt had to laugh.

"Now, let's go outside and watch some baseball." He started toward the door again.

"Sounds...like...a...plan." Matt followed, trying to balance his plate so the watermelon didn't fall off.

"Want some punch?" Matt just gave him a look. "I'll even carry it." Jim grinned.

"I think... I'm... good."

After getting Matt settled watching the game, Jim went off to see if he could find Jack. To his surprise, he found him sitting in the grass at the end of the driveway. "What are doing over here all alone?" Jim slapped him on the shoulder and sat down next to him.

"My dad's comin'... or at least he said he was. Of course, you can't count on that."

"Ready to go home?"

"I was ready to go five minutes after I got here," he mumbled.

"Sorry you're not having a good time." Jack grunted and looked away. "Where's Taylor?" Jim couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Far away from here...I hope."

Jim let himself look surprised. "That's a switch."

"That's the way it always should have been."

"You two have a fight or something?"

"She won't *take care* of the baby."

Jim raised his eyebrows. "You mean kill it." Jack rolled his eyes. "Ja-ack." Jim rubbed his hand through his hair. "You've got to know that's not right."

"I'm not getting stuck paying child support for eighteen years to a girl I don't even love."

Jim rubbed his hand through his hair again. "Jack if you didn't love her, why'd you...." Jack looked away. Jim didn't know what to say. He wasn't even sure if he should encourage the relationship in hopes they would get married and keep the family together or discourage it because Jack wasn't saved and he didn't love her. He prayed for wisdom.

"What'd you want anyway?"

"Well," Jim rubbed his face and turned back to him. "Someone got their tires slashed today..."

Jack's stare threw daggers. "And you think I did it."

"I didn't say that. I'm just trying to find out who did and why. You know you were involved in it last time." He said the last statement quieter.

"So, naturally, you came to seek out the big bad sinner who must be responsible."

"We're all sinners." Jack rolled his eyes again. "I just thought you might know who did it." Jim studied his face.

"Well, I don't, Sherlock." A car pulled up. "That's my ride." Jack got up.

"Look, Jack," Jim put his hand on his shoulder and walked over with him. "I'm not accusing anyone. Really, I hope you didn't have anything to do with it. I'd like to think you changed."

Jack gritted his teeth and turned toward Jim. "Well, I haven't. In fact, I applaud whoever had the guts to do it." His eyes shot daggers then he looked away. "But it wasn't me."

"I hope not." Jim's voice was soft. He opened the car door for Jack. "See you another day."

"Don't hold your breath. I'm not comin' back." He got in and slammed the door.

Jim just stood there and watched sadly as they drove off. He sent up a prayer for him... for Taylor... and for the baby as he watched them leave.

Speeding a little more than was safe, Melinda rushed home. Pulling into her drive, she rolled her eyes as she noticed a familiar car parked on her curb. *I don't have time for this.* She pressed her head back against the seat and thrust the shifter hard into park. She had called the hospital to let them know she might be a little late, but a little had meant just the time it took to get home and change not... A shadow passed over her window. She knew he was standing there so she got out. "Carlos." Her voice was cool as she leaned back against her open door.

"Baby." He put his hand up to the side of her face that was reflecting the waning sunshine.

She grabbed his wrist and forced it down. "What do you want?"

"I *want* to apologize. You aren't gonna make this easy, are you?"

"Look, Carlos. I have to get to work. I'm late already."

"Late?" Carlos stepped back and leaned his arm on her roof. "Late? Or you just don't want to talk to me?"

"Late!" She banged her finger on her watch. "You know when the evening shift starts! I should have been there ten minutes ago." She slammed the door.

"Huh." He gave a half smirk. "They're gonna be mad."

"Yeah." She headed for the house. "And this sure isn't helping."

"Tomorrow?" He followed her.

"I'm visiting my parents tomorrow." She walked faster.

"Okay. What time the next day?" He followed her up the steps.

"In the morning. I have to start getting ready for work 'round eight." She stopped at the door, not unlocking it until he left.

"Fine. It's a date then." He stopped walking at the bottom of the stairs.

She gave a nod and waited for him to walk away before hurrying to open the door and rush in.

Jim, sitting on the bench with Jess, smiled at Derrick as he collapsed down in the dirt beside him, leaning his neck back on the bench, closing his eyes. "And so ends the last grueling game of Baptist baseball for another year. After all, when the pitcher conks out, the game must be over."

That got a reaction. Even Jess, who was sleepily hanging on Jim's arm, had to laugh when Derrick sat straight up and insisted, "I did *not* conk out."

"Alright." Jim didn't sound convinced.

"I was the last one to leave... practically."

"Okay."

"I kept going when my entire outfield deserted me!"

"I know."

"I didn't throw in the towel when the third baseman left!"

"You're right."

"I even managed to hold it together when my first baseman split, but what do you expect me to do when my catcher goes home? Use a boomerang?"

Dr. Fredricks, just finishing his peach pie, choked on a laugh. "No, what you need," Jess added, "is one of those stand-up trampolines with a spring to it. So when it hits it, it just bounces right back to you."

"Why don't I just throw a yo-yo."

"No. What you need," Dr. Fredricks contributed. "is to throw the ball so the other guy can hit it," he stated dryly.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Derrick flopped back down, hitting his head harder than intended on the bench. "Ouch."

"Here you are, Monster." Melinda quickly set down a dish of wet cat food. She had named him cookie monster when he was little after his love for treats, but as he grew up the name seemed even more suitable to describe his frequent, destructive habits. "You be good for once," she yelled to him while grabbing her purse and keys. Oblivious to her, Monster continued wolfing down his food.

Dr. Fredricks reached into the cooler of ice and grabbed a pop at the same time as Wade. "Hey, Wade." He even gave a smile for free, but Wade didn't return it.

"Hi." Wade didn't make eye contact.

"Haven't seen you in a long time."

"Yeah well, I don't hang around the ER much anymore." He popped the lid on his root beer.

Matt nodded. "Find another job, yet?"

"Nope." Wade took a long swig.

Coming up from behind, Jim slapped Wade on the shoulder. "You will." Then he reached down for a pop.

"That's seeming less and less likely."

Derrick came over and reached for an orange soda. "You stayin' for the evening service?" He nodded toward the large white tent.

"No." Wade looked down as he took another drink. "Mellissa isn't feeling very well, and she has to go to work early in the morning." He felt ashamed stating so blatantly that his wife was supporting them even if everyone did already know it.

Jim slapped him on the back. "You'll find something, buddy. Just hang in there."

"Yeah, right." He turned and walked away, tossing his can in the trash on the way to the parking lot."

Taylor came over and stood by her dad. Jim nodded toward her to acknowledge her. "Hi," she replied, returning the nod.

"How's your little miracle doin'?" Jim asked. She stared at him blankly. "The baby," he clarified.

"Oh." She looked down and rubbed her tummy. "Oh, fine, I guess."

Matt reached down, grabbed another pop, and handed it to her. She didn't even try to hide her surprise at the thoughtful gesture. "Uh, thanks." She looked at the flavor just to be more surprised that he had gotten her favorite kind. *What's the matter with him?* She found herself asking that a lot lately. It was the strangest thing, but he almost seemed like he was actually becoming... nice... or something.

"Know what it is, yet?" Derrick asked.

Taylor shook her head. "We gotta get an ultrasound scheduled, so she can find out," Matt added.

"What do you want?" Jim asked. "Or does it matter?" She shrugged.

"I could go for a girl," Matt said, trying to get his daughter interested.

She just gave him a look. She knew he was against abortion, but this was getting ridiculous. He was almost beginning to act like a grandpa or something! She didn't expect that he could even tolerate a baby in the house. Up until recently, he barely tolerated *her*! She kept expecting him to bring up the idea of adoption, but he never did.

"You staying for the service?" Jim asked Matt as Jess walked up beside him and grabbed his arm.

"Yeah, I guess so. Taylor would probably like to stay for the hayride later." Taylor gave him a sideways glance and crossed her arms. Sure. She didn't mind staying for the hayride, but since when had he gotten so solicitous? Didn't he have to go to work again or something. Which also made her wonder while she was on the subject, why he was cutting back his hours so much lately. Last week he had only worked forty-two hours! That had to be a record. She was so used to him working sixty plus. It kinda scared her, like maybe they were heading for foreclosure or the food pantry soon. Piano music resonating from the large tent brought her back. Everyone started milling over there. So, she followed her dad. She wasn't accustomed to it, but she supposed she could get used to it, at least for now.

"Hear anything from the police late-ly?" Mellissa leaned her head back against her car seat.

Wade shook his head as he pulled out of the church parking lot. "I'll call them tomorrow."

"Why don't those wicked men.... Why don't they just give us our baby back? What could they possibly hope to gain? It's all over. The drug operation's been taken down. Anybody who is anybody is in jail! What do they want, and why don't they ask for it?!"

Wade couldn't help answering those questions in his mind with the probability that either Davy was dead or they sold him, but he wouldn't say it out loud. He wouldn't rob hope from his wife... or himself. They needed it. They had to know one way of the other. He refused to let up on the police. He refused to give up hope. He wanted their baby back... for his wife... and himself. He owed her that and a lot more.

Jess wrinkled her nose as she watched Derrick light his marshmallow on fire and then turn it so the fire charred the entire circumference before he finally blew it out. Then she shook her head skeptically as he sandwiched it into a S'more and took a big bite. He loved it, though.

She turned back to the blazing fire and watched it roar. The chilly night sent a brief shiver up her spine. She pulled her

coat closer around her. It was especially cold for October, but that made the fire even more appreciated. She looked up, feeling Jim's presence as he walked up behind her. "That fire's goin' great." He put his hands on her shoulders and started massaging her.

"Um hum." She leaned her head back and looked into his face. "How was the hayride?"

"Good. Exciting as usual. You should have come again."

"I was good with going once. Someday that guy's gonna crash that thing."

"That's what makes it fun." Jim sat on the ground next to her. "Besides we could have taken the horse-drawn one. That's a lot calmer than the tractor."

"True," She smiled at him. "but I like it here." She put her hands up to the fire. "Nice and toasty." She smiled across the fire at Martha Riley who was all wrapped up in a blanket with her husband.

"I guess it is getting a little chilly." He leaned back against the log Jess was sitting on and looked over at Derrick. "At least I thought *you* would have gone again."

"I already went twice," He put another marshmallow on his stick, "almost missed the S'mores." He placed it in the fire and let it ignite.

"Derrick, you're a health nut. You don't like junk food, remember."

"That's why I got to eat it now." He slowly spun his marshmallow around. "I wouldn't buy this stuff for myself." He blew it out. "Just trying to be polite."

"That makes no sense." Jim sunk down further leaning his head against the log and closing his eyes. "We should be going pretty soon, honey. It's getting late."

"Yeah." Jess gazed into the glowing flames one more time. Glancing at the young man collecting the hymnals they had used to sing around the fire, she slowly got up off the log they had drug over for a bench. She brushed herself off and looked at Jim.

Jim stretched as he got up. "Okay. Let's go. Morgan still in the nurse?"

"I guess so, unless Mrs. Franklin took them into the fellowship hall."

He nodded and put his arm around her as he glanced at Derrick who was laying on the ground next to the fire, hands behind his head, staring at the sky. "See ya later." Sometimes he had to remind himself that Derrick wasn't just part of the extended family that came and left when they did. They went to a lot of places together, ever since he had started renting their hayloft as a place to live... work, church, the hardware store, the feed shop. It just made sense in some cases to go together and split the price of gas. He had been skeptical at first that Derrick could be happy living in a hayloft, but he had managed to turn it into a nice little home. He had a pull-out bed couch, a refrigerator, a bookcase, some exercise equipment, a few space heaters and a TV. Then downstairs they had their viewing room off the arena with the kitchen and the bathroom. Derrick returned a half wave but didn't get up.

As they walked hand in hand across the grassy field, the smell of horses greeted Jess. She turned to see the hay wagon approaching in the distance. She smiled at all the people gathering around it as it came to a stop. The kids petted the horses and tried to reach the jingle bells on their harness to jangle them. A couple parents lifted a few of them up. She was grateful for the family that donated the two Clydesdales and the wagon every year to help make this a memorable event. This picnic was always a special time at a special place with some special people.

Jim opened the door for Jess as they reached the building. Sighing and smiling, she looked at Jim as she went in. "It's been a good day."

He nodded. "Yeah, it has."

"Will you get Morgan, while I..." She pointed toward the restroom.

"Sure." They split, and Jim started walking down the hall. Halfway, he saw the kids coming out of the fellowship hall back

toward the nursery.

“Daddy!” When Morgan saw him, she split from the group and came running to him. Jim knelt down and opened his arms, catching her in a big hug. “How’s my little cowpoke?”

“We made pumpkins!” She held up her orange, paper pumpkin.

Jim smiled at her. “Well, isn’t that pretty.” He lifted her off the ground and looked toward the teacher. “Thank you, Mrs. Franklin!” He waved to the lady down the hall, trying to restraighten her line of impatient youngsters. She returned the wave as she gathered a few strays. He smiled and turned to go. Morgan chattered on about making the pumpkin as they went down the hall, but by time they hit the foyer and rejoined Jess, she had run out of steam, laid her little head on Jim’s shoulder, and was nearly fast asleep. By the time, they got out to the car, she was.

Rise and Ride

Ring... Ring... Ring... Startled awake by the telephone, Melinda rolled over rubbing her eyes as she looked at the alarm clock, four twenty-seven am. *Who in the world would be calling at...* Fear thrust her heart into turbo speed as she jumped from her bed and grabbed her phone from her nightstand. "Hello!"

"Melinda." The voice was shaky and sobbing. It was her mom's - no doubt about that.

"Mom. What's wrong?" she asked, ready for combat... though she had a feeling the battle was already over.

"It's your dad."

"Dad? What's wrong? What happ..."

"Your father's... gone."

Gone. Her heart sank. Her body froze. She felt numb. She couldn't speak. "How... wha... what happened?" She tried to calm her voice.

"In his sleep. I wa-oke up and..." She broke into tears. Melinda tried to hold back the tears but couldn't. For several minutes, they both just sat there and cried, uttering words here and there, but never completing a full sentence until finally her mom, Maggie, finally able to control her sobs, said, "It was best."

"He *was* in a... a lot of pain," Melinda sniffed.

"He was only going to get worse." Maggie paused. "He went... went peacefully."

"Oh, Mom." Melinda cried again.

"It was the Lord's time. He's in heaven now." She tried to be strong.

"I never got to say 'goodbye,'" Melinda's voice held tears. "I was coming tomorrow."

"I know, honey."

It didn't help. "I never got to say, 'goodbye!'" She wept.

Sweating and gasping, Trent woke up with a start. Not understanding the fear that woke him, he looked all around. Breathing hard, he took the glass of water from the nightstand and drank it quickly. He figured he must have had a nightmare, but he couldn't remember it. His heart thudded. His hands trembled. He rubbed them together. Sweat dripped down his neck. He didn't know why. He glanced over at his wife stirring beside him. "Trent?" She only partway opened her eyes.

"Go back to sleep, honey. I'm sorry I woke you." He said it in a loud whisper trying not to wake her further.

"Where are you going?" she yawned.

"Just gonna get some milk." He backed toward their door. "Can't sleep."

"Oh. Okay," she replied groggily, rolling back over.

Grabbing his shirt off his dresser, he put it on as he went down the hallway. He felt an overwhelming sense of urgency to check on everyone to make sure they were okay. He was afraid something was wrong, but he didn't know what. First, he went into the boys' room. He gazed for a few moments at John on the top bunk. Then he knelt beside little Timmy's bed on the bottom bunk watching the steady rise and fall of his chest for several moments. After he was satisfied they were both alright, he pulled his covers a little higher on Timmy and got up to go.

“Dad?” Timmy woke up.

Trent turned back around. “Go back to sleep, Timmy.”

Timmy sat up a little. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Go back to sleep, Son.” Trent glanced at John then turned and headed toward the door.

“Dad?” John, the oldest, sat up.

“Go back to sleep!” He tried, unsuccessfully to keep the edge off his voice as he went out the door. Shutting it, he stepped to the side, leaned back against the wall, and ran his shaky hand through his hair. He was still sweating. Why couldn’t he shake this feeling of panic? He didn’t understand it. Standing from the wall, he started toward the girl’s room. He had to make sure everyone was okay.

Absentmindedly drinking her coffee, Melinda stared half dazed out her patio door. Knowing how late she had gotten off work, her mom had insisted that she get a couple hours sleep before driving the long way there. However, even her mom’s insistence hadn’t made her able to sleep. Memory, after memory, after memory kept flooding her mind. She had been an only child, and her parents had smothered her with love and affection.

At the moment, it seemed as though her dad had had no faults. She loved him and missed him so much. She knew it was best for him to go. He was so sick. Still, she wished he could have stayed longer. What if she ever did marry? He wouldn’t be there to... She imagined him walking her down the aisle and again burst into tears. *He’s in a better place.* She kept telling herself that... but she missed him.... She would for a long time.

Sitting on a bale of hay on the opposite side of the loft from his ‘apartment,’ Derrick tied his shoe and sucked in a deep breath of the fresh cut hay that they had stacked only last week. Also last week, he had found out that Kara Lee would be coming home today...well... last night to be exact. He happened to know the first thing she always did the very next morning was come over here for a sunrise ride. Stretching, he got up and walked back through his apartment to the ladder. Today, he just happened to feel like a sunrise ride, himself. Of course, he had hornswoggled Jim into going with him, so it looked natural... just two guys out exercising their horses... a little earlier than normal.

He went down the ladder and toward the tack room. Secretly, he hoped Kara Lee *would be* coming, but he refused to admit it even to himself. He had told Jim that he needed to get his stallion used to the sights and sounds of early morning, specifically the blinding light of a rising winter sun. Jim had looked a little suspicious, but he had fallen for it. It wasn’t a lie. It just wasn’t the whole story.

Stopping at the tack room, Derrick pulled up the roll-up, metal door. Pausing a moment, he stared at the halters and leads. Then shrugging to himself, he grabbed three of them. *Might as well saddle them all up just in case.*

“Wade?” Mellissa rolled over when she felt him get up. She opened her eyes as she heard him get his clothes from the chest of drawers. “Where are you going?” she yawned, glancing at the clock.

“Just want to get an early start so I can do my run and get cleaned up before....” His voice trailed off as he pulled out his shirt and jammed the drawer shut. “I have a job interview at eight.”

“A job interview?” Mellissa sat up and switched the lamp on. “That’s super! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Slipped my mind.” He didn’t look at her. He just kept getting his clothes from the other drawers.

“How could something that important slip your mind?” She paused, staring at him a moment. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Noth-ing.” He thrust another drawer shut.

“Okay.” She crossed her arms. “What am I going to think is wrong with it?”

He turned and looked at her. "It's for a security officer at the mall."

"What?!" She sprang forward on her knees. "You quit your other job because you couldn't take death and dying! How are you ever going to kill someone? I mean if you have to."

"I probably won't ever have to."

"How can you say that?" She threw her hands up. "That mall's always having robberies! I take it it's not the dinky one here in town."

"No, it's the one in a... a," he pointed in that direction.

"How can you even think of working there? It's always in the news!"

"Al-ways... a couple times a year."

"Yeah, well, how long do you plan to work there, and it's more than a couple."

Leaning back against the dresser, he turned around and looked at her. "No one's going to get hurt."

Crossing her arms, she plopped back down, propped up on her pillow. "**They** aren't, that's for sure! They're all perfectly safe. You're the one's that gonna get **killed!**"

Angrily snatching his clothes off the dresser, he went into the bathroom and slammed the door. "I already lost a baby!" She got up and called after him. "Now you're gonna make me lose you, too!" She heard the shower water turn on. "Why not make life worse for everyone... as if things weren't bad enough!" she yelled outside the door. She heard the shower door slam. "UHH!" She threw her hands up in exasperation then crossed her arms and fell back against the door.

Seeing Jim come out of his house and start walking toward the barn, Derrick hid Muchacho, Kara Lee's horse, in a stall he had covered with a blanket.

"Hi, Derrick," Jim yawned groggily, as he meandered into the barn. "Remind me again why we have to start so early. It's barely dawn." Hands in his pockets, he leaned his shoulder against a nearby stall door.

Derrick smiled. "Horses are all saddled." He held up the reins.

"Wonderful." He yawned again, closing his eyes. "I seem to recall pointing out that sunsets are just as beautiful as sunrises, but I don't remember your answer. I'm sure you had one, but..." They both turned toward the open barn doors simultaneously at the sound of gravel spurting up in Jim's driveway and watched as a hot pink jeep went blazing by. "Never mind. I get it now," Jim mumbled, rubbing his face and wondering how he had gotten himself hogtied into chaperoning.

"Howdy folks." Kara Lee sprang into the barn. "What're you blokes doin' up so early?"

"Good question." Jim mumbled, leaning his head back against the cold metal bars and closing his eyes again.

"Just wanted to get out and exercise our horses while it's still morning." Derrick slapped the stallion standing next to him on the chest.

Jim rolled his eyes. *While it's still morning, it's barely dawn!*

"There's just something magical about early mornings, isn't there... frosty and cold, all the birds just waking up, the sun just peaking over the horizon. I just love 'em!" She bounced into the tack room and grabbed a halter.

Magical. Wonderful. Jim rubbed his face again. *Then you two can keep 'em while I go back to bed.*

"Hey, as long as we're all riding anyway, why don't we go together?" Kara Lee looked as if she had had a brainstorm. Jim just stared at Derrick, wondering how he would react to her epiphany.

"Sounds good," Derrick said, walking over to a stall covered with a hanging blanket. "Actually, I was kind of hoping you'd feel that way." He opened the stall and lead out her perfectly groomed and saddled horse. Gazing down, Jim just shook his head

for a few moments.

“Hey! How’d you know I was coming today?”

“Heard you were coming back last night.” He led her horse to her. “Just figured you’d come ride like usual.” *Naturally.* Jim crossed his arms, remembering Jess was the one that had mentioned when Kara Lee would be back. *My own wife. The traitor. She did this to me.*

“Wow! Am I that predictable?” She took the reins. “Well, thanks for saddling him.” She rubbed Muchacho’s shiny, brown coat. “He looks great.” She ran her fingers through his recently shampooed mane. “Smells good, too.”

“Yeah, well, mine needed a bath anyway. Figured I might as well do two.”

Uh huh. Jim resisted the urge to roll his eyes and ask if Danny was groomed.

“Find a name for your big guy yet?” She stepped closer to his stallion and rubbed its face.

“Not yet.”

“Well.” She rubbed its thick black neck, roughly. “We’ll just have to remedy that this morning.”

“Sure you don’t mind the company on your ride?” Derrick backed his horse up a step. Leaning against the stall, Jim just smiled, convinced that this was the most ridiculously planned date he had ever witnessed... al-though it did seem to be working out alright.

“No. Not at all.”

“Good. After you.” Derrick waited for her to start leading her horse out then he turned to Jim and whispered. “Yours is cross-tied over there.” He thumbed over his shoulder and then quickly followed her.

Mumbling, Jim trudged over to Danny and began untying him. “Up at the crack of dawn... no breakfast... no shower.” Danny nickered at him. “You either, huh?” He looked the horse in the eye. “He washes her horse till it shines, but does he even let mine near the water? No.” Danny nickered again. “Well, come on, Ole Boy.” He started leading him out. “I guess, we’ll just have ta put up with him... temporarily.”

Finishing with her hair, Melinda put the comb down and stared into the mirror, still remembering. She didn’t know why she’d even bothered. Between shaking hands and crying eyes, her hair looked no better than when she started. Honestly, she didn’t care. She just wanted to get through her morning routine and go. She needed to be with her mom right now... desperately.

Still deep in thought, her brow furrowed when she thought she heard her patio door slide open softly. She looked up, but then shook her head, figuring it was probably just her house settling. It was always making weird noises. She sprayed her hair and grabbed her purse from the chair. She wasn’t looking forward to the long drive alone, just her and her memories, but she was grateful that her mom didn’t live any further than she did. She was grateful she was close enough to drive there and back in one day if she needed.

She made her way to the kitchen. She still had to feed the cat, and she guessed she’d grab a couple of energy bars to take with her even though she knew she wouldn’t eat them. Walking in, she gasped and stopped short, gazing at bloody pawprints all over the linoleum. *What has that cat gotten himself into, now? ...and is this his blood or the blood of some defenseless rodent?* She walked around the kitchen looking for her cat. “Monster?” Leaning back against the counter, she stared at the pawprints. Then her eyes lifted to the patio door and her brow furrowed. *It’s open.* She walked over and slid it shut. It was only open wide enough for a cat to get in. *How in the world...* She looked over her shoulder. Chills raced up her spine. *Even if I did forget to lock it, there’s no way that cat got it open by himself. Did he?* She walked back and stared down at the pawprints. *Although he can get the cupboard open, and he did get the treat drawer open that one time.* “Monster?”

She walked into the living room. “Monster?” She couldn’t believe she was actually calling him. Even on his best days, he never came when he was called. “Monster?” She glanced under the end table and behind the couch. *I don’t have time for this.* “Monster?” Her phone began to ring. She snatched it from her pocket. *Mom.* Racing back in the kitchen, she slammed the patio

door shut, locked it, and grabbed her purse. *I'm coming.* She answered the phone as she hurried out the front door. "Mom..."

"So, you were in Charleston? Is that what Jess said?" Derrick turned his horse right at the fork in the trail. Kara Lee followed him.

"Yeah, covering the protests. Things are a mess down there. You probably saw some of my clips on the news. I sold at least one to each of the three major news stations."

"You work for all of them?"

"I work for no one. Corporations fight each other for *my* work."

Derrick glanced at her but didn't answer. He wondered if it was true. If it was, it was impressive.

"Wow. That's great!" Jim nudged Danny a little faster. "What were they? I'll have to tell Jess."

She turned in the saddle to look at Jim. "Well one..." She jumped, getting interrupted by a blood-curdling whinny. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Derrick's horse rear up and then start bucking. Eyes widening, she quickly backed her horse up and took him behind a tree, hoping the sentiments of Derrick's horse didn't spread.

Derrick yanked hard, trying desperately to get his horse's head around. It took a while, but he was finally "successful." The horse did a quick 360, spinning Derrick out of the saddle, and right off...well, partially off. His feet, both of them, were still stuck in the stirrups tangled on top the horse's back. His arms grasped around the horse's neck, and he clung to his side as the horse took off full gallop. "Hey, stop! Will ya?" He reached one arm back to tug on the stirrup, trying to get his foot free. The command went unheeded as the powerful black stallion stiffened his neck and bolted. *Not again. Someday...* He promised himself. He would get this animal under control. It wouldn't be today, though. He desperately yanked his foot trying to get it free. It didn't work. Clinging tightly to the horse's iron neck, he glanced back to see dirt flying as Jim rode furiously after him. He really had no desire to be rescued. He tried to heft himself back in the saddle with his legs, but his tangled feet couldn't get traction.

Sucking himself in, Derrick clung closer to the horse as they flew in between two excessively close giant trees. The bark flew off as his back brushed against one. He glanced back at Jim and Danny. He concluded the difference between Danny and his horse was that Jim's horse seemed to have this weird access to a common sense that kept him from killing himself... and his rider. He sure wished his horse would acquire it. "Hey! Stop!" He rolled his eyes and held on tighter as they left the trail and began galloping through the scratching, low hanging twigs and branches. He only hoped that one of the branches didn't turn into being a full blown lo-og. He held tighter as they launched off the ground and soared over a fallen tree. He didn't notice himself dying in the process, but his grip did jolt a little loose. So, he grabbed a hunk of black mane and pulled himself back up.

"Derrick!" He heard his name being yelled in the distance, but judging from the distance, he was not effectively being rescued. *Oh no.* Feeling himself slide backwards, Derrick turned his head to try and see what hill were they climbing, and why? Why never became apparent. His arms burned as he held tighter. It wasn't easy to keep himself up, but it was a whole lot less painful than letting go and dangling upside down. He only hoped that this crazy locomotive would run out of stream by time it reached the top of the hill.

He didn't. So, down they went. Leap! Thud. Leap! Thud. Leap! Thud. And... Leap! SPLASH! Coughing, Derrick choked on a mouthful of water. Expelling it just in time to get a gasp of air before his head dunked under again. Reaching up, he punched the animal's neck several times. Finally, the horse stepped on higher ground and Derrick resurfaced. "What is wrong with you!" he gasped. Reaching for the saddle horn, he grabbed it and, using the buoyancy from the water, pulled himself back onto the horse's back. Leaning on the black's strong neck, he quickly untangled his legs as the horse made his way to shore.

Holding tight to the reins, he guided the prancing stallion over to Jim and Kara Lee. "Thought you broke that pony," Kara Lee announced when he got close.

"Yeah, well," he coughed, trying to get the prancing horse to stand still but only succeeding to get him going in a circle. "He's a lot better than he was."

"I think he needs some more work, Cowboy."

“Definite possibility.” He got him stopped. “Ever see what spooked him?”

“No idea.”

“Probably just a deer or something,” Jim concluded.

“Or his shadow.” Derrick gave the horse a look. “He spooks at that, too.” Easing the reins, he let the horse eat some grass to calm his nerves.

Jim laughed. “Maybe he just needs a little more time to adjust to Illinois livin’.”

“Ye-ah.” He looked down at the horse. “After all I’ve done for you, given you a nice home, an easy life, plenty of good hay, a lot of money... a lot of time. What do I get out of it?” He frowned at the horse. “Aggravation.” The stallion glanced at him, tossed his head, grunted, and continued eating.

“He’s probably mad at you for breaking up his happy home.” Kara Lee suggested, nudging Muchacho to go.

“What happy home?” Derrick tightened the reins to bring the black’s head up and followed.

“Sure. He probably has a wife and kids out west.” She looked back at him.

Derrick shook his head. “Then they marry young out there because he was only a yearling when I got him.”

“Well, there you go.” She guided Muchacho around some branches and between two trees. “He was probably in love with a gorgeous bay mare, and you broke his heart forever when you thrust the two of them apart.” She leaned back as Muchacho started climbing the hill.

“Yeah right, like any mare would have this jughead.” He held onto the horn as his horse started to climb.

“You would,” Jim added as he came up beside him on Danny.

“Yeah well, I fully intend to knock some common sense into his head... somehow.” He coughed again.

“Well, you can keep trying.” Kara Lee laughed as Muchacho leapt up from the hillside onto the level ground above.

“Yeah.” Derrick’s eyes widened as the black gave a modified buck, whinnied, and then reared straight up and slightly backwards, his back hooves sliding on the muddy hillside. Derrick hung on but had a sickening feeling his mount was going to fall backwards, and they were both going to go tumbling down the hill. Kara Lee’s mouth dropped. Jim kicked Danny to get out of the way. Everyone held their breath until the stallion got his footing, leaned forward, slammed his front hooves down, and bounded the last few feet to the top of the hill.

After a few moments, Jim caught his breath and let Danny climb the rest of the way to the top. “Now that was a bobcat,” Jim announced as he rejoined Derrick, who was leaning on his saddle horn trying to remember how to breathe, and Kara Lee, who was sitting stiff as a board, stunned.

“Huh?” Derrick sat up a little straighter.

“I said it was a bobcat,” Jim reiterated in a light-hearted voice, pointing toward the cat bounding into the bushes. He was kind of surprised he was recovering from the shock so much quicker than everyone else. Although he supposed it had been a near-death experience for Derrick. He wondered if his life had flashed in front of his eyes while he and his horse were tilted backwards.

“Oh.” Derrick straightened the rest of the way up. “At least it was more than his shadow this time.” His voice was soft and strained. Glancing at Kara Lee, who still looked stunned, he nudged his stallion to resume walking. Jim and Kara followed him back to the trail.

Melinda wiped her tear-drained eyes and sniffed as she turned her car into her parent’s driveway. For a minute, she just sat there staring at the house. It seemed bigger now, emptier... missing someone. She watched her mom walk out the front door and stand on the porch, all alone. Somehow, she looked considerably more frail than last week. Her shoulders slumped. She

seemed sad and sort of depressed.

Pushing the car door open, Melinda slowly got out and walked toward the porch. When they met, neither said a word. There was nothing more to say. They simply embraced and walked inside.

Jim pulled Danny to the side of the trail as Derrick and Kara Lee raced past him full speed. Jim smiled. Apparently, they had both recovered. Jim knew his mouth must have dropped when Derrick suggested they all race around the circular loop trail. Jim, still considering earlier events, had declined. Kara Lee surprisingly had accepted the challenge. Jim watched as they rounded the bend neck and neck. They had agreed on three laps around the circle. This was their last loop, and so far, they seemed pretty evenly matched. Derrick's horse was more athletic, but Kara Lee was obviously a more experienced rider. Derrick had lost quite a bit of time when his horse had stopped to buck and kick at a timid turtle bunkered in its shell in the middle of the trail.

Nudging Danny into a canter, Jim let him run to the finish spot and then guided him off the trail to wait for the racers. Staring down the dirt path covered with orange and yellow leaves, he tried to figure out who he was rooting for. He figured Kara Lee was probably a shoe-in. She'd been riding ever since she was a little girl, including jumping, and he happened to know that there were several logs across the trail. Derrick, on the other hand, tended to nearly fall off every time his horse jumped, but what he lacked in experience he made up for in determination and athleticism. He wondered if either one of them was getting tired. It was nearly eleven o' clock. They'd been riding for hours. He doubted Derrick was. Leaning forward on his saddle horn, Jim decided just to wait and see.

Soon the sound of pounding horse hooves filtered through the forest. Jim stood up in his stirrups trying to see around the bend. All he could see was the flashing outline of the horses behind the trees and falling leaves. He could tell that one had an obvious lead, but which? Finally, they came around the bend. It was Derrick. Jim had to double take, surprised. "Go, Derrick! Go! He was closing in fast on the finish line, but he was also off center with one foot out of the stirrup and struggling to stay on. If the horse stepped to the side, Derrick's winning bid would literally go down in the dirt. Kara Lee was coming fast, but Derrick was flying, faster and faster till he crossed the finish where he pulled back hard to stop. The stallion skidded to a stop and spun to the right, sending Derrick flying off in the other direction, landing with a hard thud on the ground.

"Stop!" Jim yelled as Muchacho came charging in, right at Derrick. Derrick rolled out of the way, but the horse veered in his direction. Kara Lee didn't get him stopped, but luckily, he jumped over Derrick when he got to him. Sitting up, Derrick leaned back against his hands and sighed. "This is not my day."

Jim threw up his hands in humor. "But hey, you won the race! What more do you want?"

Kara Lee, breathing hard, got her horse turned around and came back. "Hey, I'm really sorry."

"Trying to take me out Kara Lee Cummings! After I saddled that horse for you and everything." His breath steamed even in the forty-degree weather.

She laughed. "I'm really sorry. I didn't turn him toward you."

"Sure." Getting up, Derrick picked up some dirt and tossed it toward her. "After a few months with that horse, I'm kinda get used to the dirt."

Jim choked on a laugh. "At least your foot didn't get stuck in the stirrup this time."

"Yeaah." Derrick went over to his horse, who was among the trees eating grass. He swung up in the saddle, and let the horse take off at a trot back down the trail. Jim followed.

"Hey, wait up." Kara nudged Muchacho to trot. He trotted a few feet, but then returned to a walk. She rubbed his sweat-drenched neck. "Alright ol' boy. You deserve a rest. We're almost home anyway. What you need is some good oats and a rub down." Muchacho snorted and bobbed his head. She smiled and rubbed him harder.

Coming off the trail, Kara let Muchacho amble down the driveway. She could see Jim and Derrick standing by the barn waiting, arms crossed, leaning against the wall, holding the reins to their horses. "Okay. Okay. I can take a hint. You guys didn't have to wait *that* long." They both just stared, grinning. "Remember, Muchacho hasn't been ridden in two weeks." No reaction. "How much stamina do you think you'd have for running... with a full-pack, I might add... if you hadn't done it in two weeks!"

Jim just smiled standing away from the barn. "Jess just texted me that she's making lunch, and she would like it if you... and Derrick..." He thumbed over his shoulder. "would join us."

"Sounds good. Gotta take care of my horse first... but then so do you... since you didn't do it while you were waitin' *all that time*." She dismounted.

Jim grunted a laugh as he led his horse past her into the barn. "Mine won't take long."

Derrick waited for her to go first. "I'll help you out, if you like."

"Whatever you want. I'm gonna wash him off again. He's sweatin' like a pig." She led him in between the tack room and the wall and cross-tied him.

"Why don't you let me take care of the horses. Then, you can go..." Derrick offered.

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of my own horse!" She snapped, reaching to the wall and snatching the cross tie, clipping it with enough force to show irritation. Derrick took his horse around the tack room and cross-tied it across from her. Then he quickly unsaddled his horse, grabbed the brush from the floor, and started brushing his stallion, who remarkably looked pretty dried out.

"All your hard work bathing these horses didn't last long." She took off the bridle and swept her hand down her pony's neck wiping off a stream of dirty sweat.

He shrugged. "Easy come. Easy go." He kept brushing.

"You gonna wash him off?" She picked up the hose and pointed it in his direction.

The stallion stepped back, pulling on the ropes. "Nah. Don't think so." Derrick raked the comb through his mane. "He's not crazy about water on his best days. Between the shower this mornin' and then the stream, he might get hydrophobic if I push it." He sent her a playful smile.

"I see." She started to loosen the cinch on her saddle.

Derrick brushed down his stallion a few more strokes, then threw the brush and comb back in the tack room, unhooked his horse, and led him out toward the pasture.

Jim glanced at Kara, noticing she looked a little sorry he left. He took Danny to Derrick's spot and cross-tied him. He noticed Kara Lee didn't finish unsaddling Muchacho. She brushed him a little and otherwise occupied time until she heard Derrick come back in the barn. "Hey!" She yelled in his direction. "Could you help me with this saddle? The cinch seems stuck. She quickly pulled it tighter. Jim choked on a laugh and tried to look busy so that it wasn't so obvious how readily available he was to help.

Derrick hung his halter in the tack room then came over. He didn't say anything. He just walked over, yanked the cinch loose with one tug, gave Kara Lee a 'yeah right' look, and took the saddle to the tack room. She smiled, nervously. "Well, that was easy," she chirped loud enough for him to hear. "Guess I need to get back into strength training." Jim smiled again at her nervousness as she resumed brushing. "You, you must have gotten up early to get all these horses ready this morning," she yelled toward him, inviting him to come back and finish the conversation. "or did you wash them last night?"

He slowly came back. "No. This morning. Didn't get home till late last night." He stopped near Muchacho's shoulder and watched her comb his tail.

"O-oh? What where you doing, painting the town red?" Her voice was disapproving.

"No, not exactly." Derrick smiled at her assumption. "We were all at a church picnic last night." He glanced at Jim for confirmation.

Jim nodded as he slid Danny's saddle off and took it to the tack room. "Highlight of the year."

"I like picnics." She dropped Muchacho's tail, stepped closer to Derrick, and leaned against Muchacho in a rather suggestive pose, apparently wanting Derrick to grab her and kiss her.

Jim emerged from the tack room and watched. Derrick cleared his throat and backed up. Walking over to the water, he turned it on and picked up the hose. Kara shrugged with her eyes and took the hose from him. "Do you go for church picnics?" Derrick cleared his throat.

"I don't know. Never been to one." She sprayed the horse's sweaty neck.

"Church, or church picnic?"

She gave him a look. "Of course I've been to church. I'm not a heathen." She sprayed the water up and down Muchacho's side.

"What are you... denomination, I mean."

"Ehhh." She tilted her hand back and forth. "I was raised Baptist, but I've been to a lot of churches in my line of work."

Derrick let himself look surprised. "How many churches wind up in the news?"

She glanced at him, squatting down to spray Muchacho's legs. "Quite a few."

"So, you're a Baptist?" Derrick turned to grin at Jim when she wasn't looking. Jim just shook his head.

"Guess so. That's where my parents took us growing up, and it was important to Mom that we didn't change denominations." She stood up and took the hose around to the other side of the horse.

"Yeah, but they don't all believe the same thing." Derrick followed her. "What do you believe?"

"I told you I was Baptist," she snapped.

Jim looked the other way. *Now, that sounded like rock solid Christianity.*

Derrick didn't respond for several moments. Standing next to Muchacho's nose, he rubbed the horse's face. "So, how 'bout comin' next Sunday." He looked at the horse's face instead of hers.

Rolling her eyes and turning, she put her finger over the nozzle, aimed the hose at Derrick, and sprayed him full force in the face and chest. "Hey!" Derrick ducked under Muchacho's neck. Kara Lee stopped the attack but laughed hysterically. "Just thought you needed to cool off." She kept laughing but put the hose back on Muchacho.

Derrick came out from behind Muchacho neck and rested his arms on the horse's back, looking over him to her. "You do that to everyone who invites you to church?" He gave her a questioning look.

She shook her head still laughing lightly yet looking down, obviously thinking about something else. "I'll go with you."

He nodded, a little confused. "Good." Then, wiping off some of the water, he thumbed toward the loft. "I think I'll go change."

"Good idea, Cowboy." She, still chuckling, continued washing Muchacho, not watching Derrick leave. He seized that opportunity to snatch the hose from the ground and yank it out of her hands. "Derrick!" she screamed, her eyes widening as she saw him choke up on the hose. "No-o-o!" She raced past Jim and hid behind Danny. Derrick pursued.

"Hey! Don't get us wet!" Jim insisted.

She went around behind Danny. Derrick dodged to the other side in the front and sprayed her. Kara screamed, jumping behind Danny and darting in the other direction, but Derrick also jumped back and intercepted her, hitting her dead-center, full blast. She screamed again, covered her face, and ducked under Danny's stomach. Derrick took his finger from the nozzle, letting the stream of water fall. It was his turn to laugh. "You Jerk! You think this is funny!" She jumped out from under Danny. "I'll... I'll..." She came running at him and tried to pull the hose from his hands, but she couldn't take it.

Jim turned off the hose. Coming up to them, he put a hand on each of their shoulders. "I'll tell Jess to move lunch outside... so you both can... dry off." With that, he slapped them both on the back, unhooked Danny, and led him outside.

Obviously sad and weary, Maggie set two sandwiches on the table and then sat down across from her daughter. "I have

something I have to tell you.”

Melinda kept staring out the window. “What’s that?”

Maggie sniffed, looking in the other direction. “Your dad must have known his time was coming. The night before he.... He made me promise.”

Melinda turned to look at her. “Promise what?”

Biting her nail, Maggie got up and started walking the other way then turned around sharply. “You have a brother.”

“Wha-at?” Melinda stood up.

Maggie hurried out to the living room. Melinda followed her. Stopping at the desk, she unlocked a little compartment and pulled out some papers. She handed the top one to Melinda. “He goes to your church. He’s a police officer, now.”

Melinda looked down at the paper, read it, studied it... reread it several times. Then, she looked up. “Trent?”

Maggie nodded profusely. “He’s our son.”

Feeling lightheaded, Melinda sat down and tried to figure out if she was hearing things or just plain losing it. For a moment, she just stared down at the paper and then looked up with pleading eyes. “Wha- whaaat?”

Maggie knelt down on the floor next to her and took her hand. “I was eighteen. So was your father. We were all set to get married when I got pregnant with Trent. We were living together.” She looked guilty. “I know it was wrong, but...” She put her hands in the air. “We had a fight...” She looked away. “...a bad one. He enlisted, and I was alone. I didn’t even have a job at the time, and well, I couldn’t go back to my family.” She looked her in the eye. “I had to give him up for adoption. It was the only way.”

“I have a brother?” Her voice was a disbelieving whisper, and her look far away. “Not even a half-brother.” She looked back at her mom.

Maggie shook her head, wiping away silent tears, and got up to sit in the chair next to her daughter. “After his enlistment was up, he came back to look for me. He wanted to find out what had happened to us.” She bit her lip and gave half a smile. “Well, I was still single.”

“And you forgave him just like that?”

Maggie nodded slowly, staring into the distance. “It took some work... but he had changed.... I had changed... and we were ready to love each other.”

“And you kept track of Trent all these years?” Melinda’s mind felt like it was swimming.

“No.” Maggie shook her head. “I had no idea what had happened to him until two years ago when I came to visit you. He... a... pulled me over for speeding.” She gave a light smile and wiped away another tear. “He looks so much like his dad did at that age. It’s remarkable.”

Melinda desperately tried to picture Trent. “I never noticed.” She stared down at the paper. “Of course, I only see him at church... occasionally at work.” She looked back up. “Are you sure he’s the same one?”

Maggie nodded. “I did my research.”

Melinda did a double take, still unable to believe it. “Do you know anything about him?”

Maggie looked down. “I’m ashamed to say that *I have* watched him. There’s a vacant farm on a hill. You can see his yard perfectly with binoculars. I love watching him play with his kids. He looks like he turned out to be a fine... young man.” Her voice broke.

“How’d you know where he lives?”

“I followed him home from the police station one night. I even followed him to church once. You weren’t there, must have been working, but it did my heart good to see how he was with his family... to see I hadn’t ruined his life, that he had

turned out... decent." She sniffed back tears.

"Wow!" Melinda leaned back hard against her chair.

"I know," Maggie nodded. "It's a lot to swallow."

"What are the odds?"

"I know it's strange." Maggie stood up, walked over to her end table and gently picked up her little angel figurine. Gazing at it, she mumbled, "Maybe not so strange."

Melinda stared into space. "We end up going to the same church... the church I grew up in." She paused. "All that time growing up... do you think we lived in the same town?"

"I don't know."

"They're not one of the families I know real well."

"Maybe that will change, now."

Melinda looked up sharply. "Are you going to tell him?"

Fear filled Maggie's eyes as she glanced back. "I only promised your father to tell you."

Melinda raised her eyebrows. "Well, I'm glad you did that at least. Still, I'd think he'd like to know, I guess. I don't know. I wonder if his parents ever told him he was adopted."

"I'm just so glad he's saved. I prayed so long for that." She grasped the angel a little tighter. "Your father became a Christian while he was enlisted, and when he came back, he showed me the way. I had always had a religious background, but I never really knew Jesus. I wasn't part of His family." She stared at the angel a moment longer than set it down and walked back over.

Melinda thought a moment then looked her mom in the eye. "You need to tell him."

Maggie met her gaze and held it. "Can you tell me how he will react... that he'll forgive? Can you promise me he won't hate me... and you?"

Melinda thought a few minutes and then shook her head. "No." There were a few moments of silence as Melinda studied the paper. "You know those kids are your grandchildren."

"No." She shook her head. "I gave them up when I gave him up. I have no right to intrude in his life."

Melinda shrugged and looked away. "Well, I'm glad you finally told me."

"Oh, Melinda," Maggie knelt down again and took Melinda's hand. "It was never our intention to deceive you. The subject just never came up. We both knew we'd tell you someday. It's just... till two years ago we had no idea what even happened to him."

"Yeah." Melinda stared out the window at some blowing leaves, trying desperately to process all this new information.

"Here we go." Jess walked down the porch steps with her tray of sandwiches and fruit salad. She watched the action at the picnic table as she approached. Derrick and Kara were chatting... or debating, at one end of the table, occasionally glancing at her. When she approached, Derrick got up to help her set the stuff on the table. Jim sat at the other end... in his own world... staring off into the distance, thinking...again. She knew what about, too. He'd had another nightmare last night. She wished he would discuss it with her. She sat down next to him and leaned against his shoulder, hoping to bring him back to the land of the living.

Startling alert, Jim rubbed his hand through his hair, sat up straighter and smiled at her. "You got lunch ready?"

"Um hum." She wrapped her arm around his.

"I was, a... going to come help you." He rubbed his hand through his hair again, ruffling it.

"These look great." Kara Lee leaned forward on the table, sitting on her knees as she picked out the perfect one.

Derrick just grabbed one. "Yeah, they do."

"Did you all have a good ride?" Jess asked as she put a scoop of pasta salad on her plate and handed the bowl to Jim.

"Yeah. It was nice." Derrick took a bite.

"How'd that happen?" she nodded toward his scratched-up face and split lip.

"Oh... just..."

"Oh, just a loco horse and a crazy cowboy," Kara Lee interrupted.

"What happened this time?"

"Nothing." Derrick shook his head.

"Hey, there's a name for his horse." Jim stood up and grabbed a couple sandwiches. "Loco."

"That fits." Jess took the sandwich Jim handed to her.

Derrick gave them a look. "Short for locomotive cause he's a runner."

"You'd better explain that to anyone who's gonna ride him." Jess smiled.

"A locomotive with no brakes," Kara laughed, taking a bite of her sandwich. "And *don't* let *anyone* ride him!" She laughed, nearly choking on her sandwich. "You might be liable."

"Hey, we beat you!" Derrick abandon the idea of eating to defend his mount.

"Luck." Kara handed him the pasta salad, giving him a look.

"Yeah, but how'd you..." Jess waved her sandwich at his split lip.

"I hit it on the saddle when I was under the water."

"Ohhh." Totally confused, she went back to eating her sandwich and made a mental note to ask Jim later. Jim laughed at her acceptance of the answer but didn't offer to explain.

Cook or Can't

Wade looked over at his papers on the passenger's seat... *employment papers*. After months of searching ev-er-y-where, every employment agency, every factory, every 'Help Wanted' sign, he'd finally accepted a job. Granted, he'd come within inches of his wife throwing him out on the street, but in the end, he'd been able to pacify her anger by offering to drive her to work and make dinner later. He smiled to himself. She had practically made him swear to peanut butter sandwiches. She still had this insane notion that he couldn't cook with a stove. *Honestly, a few mishaps and everyone is against me... culinarily speaking*. And he did mean ev-ery-one. It had even cost him a job opportunity at a restaurant. All the young manager did was take one look at him and laugh. *"My Dad's a firefighter," he said. "He pointed you out to me at the last fireman's picnic." I mean, how rude. The guy doesn't even explain, just turns around laughing and walks away... as if it was implied or something.*

Hitting his blinker, Wade veered into the left lane to pass a semi. He'd show her. He'd make her the best, succulent meal she'd ever tasted. She would forget all about being mad at him. His heart sank with a tinge of worry. He felt bad that she was so concerned about this new job.... He sure hoped she didn't have reason. *I'm a fireman. I'm tough. I'm used to taking charge. I'm a champion of the underdog. I'll have no problem detaining a crook or a bully.*

Swallowing hard, he hit the blinker and went back into the right lane. In the back of his mind he had to wonder, same as Mellissa, if it came right down to the wire... if he had to shoot... kill or be killed... could he do it? *I'm good with a gun. ... But can you kill?* He hit the blinkers and merged onto the exit, not able to answer himself. After months and months of getting rejected, it just felt so good to have the word "employee" beside his name.

"I sure do love you, Mom." Standing on the porch, Melinda wrapped her mom in a big hug. "I'll be back Wednesday morning to help you get everything ready for the funeral... and the visitation Thursday."

Wiping her teary eye, Maggie nodded. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Honey." She rubbed the side of Melinda's arm.

"Well, you won't have to find out." She smiled through her own tears and turned to go.

"Melinda?" Maggie stopped her. "What are you going to do about Trent?"

Melinda didn't turn around. "I don't know." She thought a moment. "Maybe nothing."

Whistling, Wade opened the refrigerator. To get back in Mellissa's good graces, he had decided to surprise her with a world class meal. He scowled. Surprise would be an understatement since she was under the mistaken impression that he couldn't make anything more advanced than cereal. He snatched the raw hamburger indignantly, convinced that her sentiments were completely unjustified. Although, just to be on the safe side, he decided to try it her way... *one recipe... no additions... no revision*. He grabbed the cottage cheese from the top shelf. *Tonight is going to be different... no criticism*. He grabbed the eggs and parmesan cheese and then closed the refrigerator.

Tonight... He balanced everything precariously in his hands and took them over to the counter. *If anything goes wrong, it's all on the recipe*. He spun around and headed for the pantry. *I'm gonna follow that thing to the last, least, tiniest degree... to the minutest detail... and if anything happens....* He snatched the noodles and spaghetti sauce from the pantry... and a pan when

he went by the cupboard. *This is going to be the best lasagna she has ever tasted.* He plopped the pan in the sink, turned on the water with one hand, dropped the ingredients on the counter with the other, and closed the lower cupboard door with his foot. Turning off the water, he took the pan to the stove, opened the pasta box, turned on the burner, and dumped in the pasta. *Done and Done.*

He whistled as he went back to the fridge and grabbed all the stuff for *'one delicious side salad.'* *You gotcha cucumber. You gatcha green pepper. You gotcha onion. You gotcha cheddar... whoops.* He dropped a tomato on the way, but everything else made it to the counter.

After the salad was done, he got the brownie mix and stirred it together with the water and egg and oil. *Hot fudge Sundays here I come.* He started to fist pump himself, but instead jumped ten feet and wacked his hand on the edge of the counter in surprise as the noodle water spirted up and crackled over on the burner. Holding his hand, hunched over in pain, he raced to the stove just as cascades of water bubbled over the edge. "Noo!" He yelled, grabbing the hot handle and narrowly escaped another cascade. Shaking his burned hand, he turned off the burner and grabbed the pasta box in outrage. "The recipe distinctly said, 'high.'" He read the box. "Ha! Medium-high! See you don't know everything," he shouted toward the recipe, and then raised his eyebrows. "Uh oh." He kept reading. "You didn't say anything about boiling the water first either!" He looked in pot at the big lump of floating noodle. *Well, they're still there, anyway.* Once he'd been boiling potatoes, walked away for a 'few' minutes, and when he can back, they were half gone. These noodles had just kinda lumped all together into one... for some reason. He could fix that. Nodding to himself, he fished out the giant noodle with a slotted spoon and stared at it, trying to decide how to unglob it. Burning his wrist on the steam, he jerked his hand back, causing the noodles to plop on the stove. He quickly transferred to a plate. "Youch!" Boiling water splatted on his hand just as the preheated oven beeped. Annoyed, he kicked it. "Oh, shut up!"

Dripping with sweat, he moved himself and the noodles to the other side of the kitchen. Then calmly he tried to unglue the stack, longing for those bygone days when he could just run to the store and buy another pack. The first noodle ripped in half. Stomping his foot and snapping his neck, he gently pulled the next noodle, ripping it in thirds, the middle still stuck on the pile. Gritting his teeth and turning his head, he glared at the little recipe, who seemed to be sitting indignantly propped up by the salt canister as if trying to say, "I would think everyone would know that naturally you boil the water **first.**"

Merging onto the interstate, Melinda's mind raced from her mom to her dad to Trent and the secret that had been kept for so many years. She couldn't decide if it was better to tell Trent or just leave things the way they were. Everything was fine this way, and it almost seemed a shame to stir things up. She'd heard stories about simple family matters escalating into a big mess... and this was anything but simple.

Trent is a kind, happy family man. He must have been raised well. He must have had a good life. Besides, how would his adopted mother feel about having to share him with his birth mother so many years later... so out of the blue. That family is his family. This family is mine.

She thought for a minute wondering how she would even tell him. She really didn't even know him that well. She couldn't just walk up to him in church and say, "Hey, just wanted to let you know. You're my brother."

And what about me? Do I really want a brother? ...a stranger out of the blue to share our life, our history, maybe even decisions about mom? Do I really want to share her? He's already got a mom. And what if he isn't kind about it? What if he doesn't want to join the family? What if he rejects us? That would hurt Mom deeply. She's over it now. Why open old wounds?

Tired and weary, Mellissa scuffed in the door, tossed her purse next to the desk and her keys on top of it. Then, she stopped short at that smell again... that decidedly obvious burnt kitchen smell. Indignant, she crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. *So much for peanut butter sandwiches.* "Wa-ade!" She charged into the kitchen, but stopped short at the table, a pretty table, all set with her good dishes, a tablecloth, napkins, even a rose for the center piece. "Aww, Wade." Her face and voice softened. She stepped closer and gazed at a gorgeous lasagna, green beans, garlic bread, and side salad. "It's beautiful." She touched the edge of the table and looked up at Wade.

"I told you I can cook." He unintentionally puffed his chest out.

She smiled at him, then stared back at the table. "Yeah? When did that happen?"

Walking over, he pulled out the chair for her. "Allow me?"

Still smiling, she started to sit down, but then upon realization, plopped down. Elbows hitting the table, she threw her face in her hands. "You got the job!"

Wade half grimaced and glared off in the distance. "That didn't last long." Slowly, he made his way to his chair and sat down.

She lifted her face from her hands, shaking her head and giving him a remorseful look. "Oh, Wade!" She covered her face again. "After you get killed, we'll never be able to do this again!" She kept her face covered, and Wade wondered if she was crying.

Staring indignantly, he replied, "Then we might as well enjoy it tonight. After all, I did go to all this work to..."

"Wa-a-ade!" She plopped her arms down on the table, face buried in them, shaking her head. "I can't take any more." Her voice was muffled.

Crossing his arms, he replied gruffly "I never even said I got the job."

"You didn't?" She looked up, hopefully.

He glared at her. "I prefer not to disclose that information."

She just stared back a minute then plopped her face back down into her arms and started to cry. "Oh, Wade!"

Wade felt like crying too but for a different reason. He sighed. "I even rescued the brownies from burning. The recipe said to cook them for thirty-five minutes and at twenty-five...."

"Oh, Wade!" Face buried; she shook her head. "I love you!"

Nodding, Wade plopped back in his chair and tossed his fork on his plate. "That's good. ... You know, I even put hamburger in the lasagna this time."

"Oh, Wade!" She looked up briefly with tear stained eyes then plopped back down and resumed sobbing.

Wade looked away. "Oh-h-h... brother."

Fear in the Night

It was dark when Melinda got home, and the night was turning stormy. Wind pushed against her as she got out of her car and headed up the sidewalk. She could hardly see through her blowing hair as she reached the door and searched through her purse for her keys. Finally finding them, she jammed them in the keyhole and opened the door, holding it tight to keep it from banging against the wall. She had to push it hard against the wind to get it closed. She was so glad to get into her nice, cozy house. She just felt like falling on the couch and curling up with an afghan and pillow for a week. That was until she flipped on the lights.

As the light turned on, her mouth dropped. Chills raced up her spine as she gazed at a path of splattered blood and bloody pawprints. Every nerve in her body wanted to run back to her car. Instead, she followed the tracks. A strong rush of wind stopped her. She turned and stared at the blowing curtain. She went toward it even though the blood didn't go that way. Overcome with eerie emotions, she pulled back the curtain, feeling as though someone was watching her. Just as she did, lightning flashed, illuminating a large, jagged hole in the middle of the pane. Her heart jumped as thunder rumbled in the distance.

She took a deep breath and turned. Her heart felt like it was pounding out of her chest as she went back toward the trail of blood. She grabbed the poker as she went past the fireplace. She followed the trail to the kitchen. Stopping in the doorway, she reached up to turn on the light, but lightning flashed first, illuminating jagged red writing on the wall. Her eyes widened. Her mouth went dry. It flashed again, illuminating the dead body of her cat on the floor. Thunder crashed. Her whole body shook as she hit the light switch.

Walking toward it, she stared at the sign, almost unable to read it. Lightning flashed. **YOU'RE NEXT!** Fear tingled threw her body. Thunder crashed.

Gasping, she spun around as she heard the patio door slide open. Lightning nearly blinded her. The curtain blew forward. Her eyes got even wider. Her voice screamed. She froze. Nothing happened. The curtain kept blowing. The lightning kept flashing. The thunder kept crashing. Rain began pelting in. For a moment, she just stared, mesmerized. Then her breathing got heavier and faster. Her heart resumed turbo speed. Her pressure was so high it felt like the blood would burst her arteries.

Suddenly, she turned and ran... just ran! But before she could get to the front door, darkness overcame her, and she fell to the ground.

"That was delicious." Mellissa folded her napkin and set it on the table next to her plate. "I kinda liked how you cut the noodles into squares. Different but good."

"Yeah. It was kind of a last-minute decision."

"Well, it was great." She started to get up.

"Wait a minute." Wade hopped up. "We have brownie hot fudge sundaes for dessert."

"Wade," Mellissa smiled, turning toward him. "It was great, but I really don't think I can eat another bite."

"They're homemade," he paused, "from a box."

"How 'bout tomorrow?"

"Okay." He came back over and sat down.

"I must say." She looked at the table, smoothing a wrinkle from the tablecloth. "You've certainly outdone yourself. This is *without a doubt* the best meal you have ever made." Wade looked at her questioningly, not sure if that was a compliment or not, in lieu of what she thought about his 'other' meals. "When... when do you start your job?" She didn't look at him.

"Wednesday."

"Hmm." She looked up and stared at him in regret.

"It's not *that* dangerous," he spoke softly.

Shrugging, she put her elbows on the table, brought her hands up and rested her chin on them. "When you decide it is, it will probably be too late."

"I'm good with a gun." He looked the other way.

"But you won't use it!"

Wade tried not to roll his eyes. *Here we go... round Two.*

Groggy, eyes still closed, Melinda slowly began to wake up. First, she was disoriented, not knowing where she was. Then suddenly she remembered. Everything flashed through her mind almost at once. She wondered if she was alive or dead. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Hi, you awake?"

She jumped at Trent's voice before looking up at him, then around at the couch she was lying on, the room, the two other cops. "What happened?"

"That is a very good question. One we hoped you could answer." His eyes were soft and caring.

"How'd you get here?" She sat up, rubbing her face. Her head throbbed.

"Just take it easy. The paramedics are on their way."

"I don't need them. I just fainted." She continued rubbing her face.

"Your neighbor called us. He heard you scream."

"Did I scream?" She looked up and stared at the blowing curtain. "That window's broken."

Trent looked over his shoulder. "We saw that."

"Did you see the kitchen?"

"Yeah. It's very... interesting."

"I could think of a better adjective than that." She glanced toward it. "Everything was like this when I got home." She lifted the palms of her hands up. "I don't know why." She started to cry. "I don't... I don't understand." She kept sobbing.

Trent handed her a Kleenex. "What's more disturbing," He rested his hand on his gun belt. "is that I got a robo call at home about this."

"What?" She looked up at him through concerned, tear-stained eyes.

"Just a robotic voice that said I better get over here, or you were going to be killed. It gave me your address. I called some backup, and we got here right at the same time as the responders to your neighbor's report."

"That's so weird." She put her head down and rubbed her face with her hands. "I've got to be dreaming."

"You're not dreaming." He walked over toward the window. "The medics are here."

She shook her head and looked up. "Tell them to go, please. I can't handle anything more right now. Please, I'm fine."

"You want to sign a release form?"

"Yes, please."

"You want to go get it?" He addressed one of the other officers.

"Sure."

"I don't suppose you can figure out where the call came from."

"Mexico. You know anyone one in Mexico?" He got a paper and pencil. She shook her head. "I didn't think so." He sat down on the coffee table. "So, let's start making a list of all you do know."

She raised her hands in a shrug. "I don't know anything!"

"Enemies?"

"All of them?" she mumbled, rubbing the bump on her head. He raised his eyebrows and glanced at his fellow officer. "I mean none! I mean, I'm a nurse! I've been the attending nurse when people have died. I've had irate family members. It's impossible to know how many people have something against me."

"Let's start with the ones you know." His voice was disapproving.

She glared at him, wondering if he thought she was the type of nurse that unhooked life support systems or something. She answered indignantly. "I don't know anyone who would...!" She gazed away. "Well, wait... nooo."

"What?"

"Nothing. He wouldn't..."

"I investigate a lot of nothings," he stated matter-a-factly. "Tell me."

"The only person I currently know who's mad at me is Carlos, but he wouldn't..."

"Carlos Martinez?"

"Yeah, but he wouldn't..." She motioned around. "Wait. Do you know him?"

"Some from work. He came to church with you once or twice, didn't he?"

"Yeah. That doesn't mean he did it!"

"Yes, I didn't assume the church indoctrinated him to..."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I mean.... Listen to us! He didn't do this! He would've had to completely and totally snap to..."

"What does he have against you?" He kept writing.

"We broke up. You know that. Half the church knows that."

"Anything else?"

"No. Just that time he got arrested for practically breaking down my door when he was drunk. You know about that, too."

"Yeah. Anything else?"

"No." She looked away and then jerked her attention back. "He didn't do this!"

“Anyone else?”

“Not that I know of. Maybe this guy got the wrong house.” Trent gave her a look. “Well, I don’t know! You know Carlos. Do you think he’s capable of something like this?”

Trent shrugged. “We have to investigate every possibility.” He looked up. “Do you *have* any other possibilities?”

“Not that I can think of,” she mumbled.

“Try.”

Melinda pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “He’s supposed to come over tomorrow.”

Trent looked up. “Why?”

“Just to talk. He wanted to reconcile.”

“Well keep that date.” He pointed his pencil at her.

“Wha-at?” She didn’t try to conceal her surprise.

“We’ll be here.” He thumbed his pencil at the other guys in the room. It was just then that they noticed the young cop standing over them with the clipboard. “Oh, yeah.” He took the clipboard. “You want to sign that, then?” He handed it to her.

“Yes.” She signed it and handed it back. “Thank you.” She smiled and nodded to the young cop as he turned to take it to the paramedics. He nodded in return.

“Just what do you want us to talk about in front of half the police force?”

He smiled. “Anything. Anything that would help us know if he did it or not. A confession would be great!”

“He didn’t do it!”

Trent smiled. “Honestly,” He stood up. “I doubt he did either, but until you can come up with another suspect, he’s all we’ve got to go on.” He put the paper in his pocket. “What about tonight? Do you have somewhere else to stay, or if you like, I can have a team guard your house tonight.”

She lifted her hands in a shrug. “I don’t want to stay here, but I sure don’t want to put anyone else in danger. How good are your guards?”

“Good.”

“Guess that’s all I can do.”

“I can only keep them here tonight, though. After that, you’ll have to find somewhere else to stay or hire your own private guards. She nodded.

“No,” Jim mumbled, thrashing around in bed from one side to the other. “No, don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

Practically getting bounced out of bed, Jess woke up and rolled over. “Jim?” He didn’t wake up. From the nightlight, she could see droplets of sweat covering his face. Sitting up, she turned on the lamp. “Jim?” She touched his sweat-drenched arm, but he kept thrashing back and forth and mumbling. So, she grabbed the front of his shirt and tried to pull him forward. “Wake up!”

Just as she yanked him toward her, he forcefully rolled over the other way, pulling her with him, over top of him, and with a flying splat onto the ground. *Ouch.* Sitting up Indian style on the floor and crossing her arms, she stared at him accusingly as he woke up and groggily focused on her. “What are you doing down there?”

“Goo-ood question.” She indignantly tossed her hair behind her shoulders. “It certainly wasn’t my idea.”

Rubbing his face, Jim sat up and leaned back against the headboard, sighing. “What a night.” Tilting his head back, he

stared up at the ceiling.

“Jim?” Jess got up, crawled over him, and sat next to him on the bed. “What’s wrong?” He took his eyes from the ceiling and looked at her, but she couldn’t read him. Looking down at her hands, she spoke softly. “I don’t have any secrets from you.” She glanced up. Abruptly, Jim turned his head toward the wall and didn’t answer. “You have this secret you’ve always kept from me, and I don’t think that’s right.”

“Why dig up the past?”

“I *think* it’s already dug up.” She laughed sarcastically.

“I just want to forget it.”

“You’re not.” He looked at her. She took his hand with both of her and lifted it. “Maybe I can help?”

“I a...” He swallowed hard. “It was a...” He blinked his eyes closed. “It was just... Actually, it’s not important.” Jess gave him a look. “I’ll a...” He jumped out of bed. “tell you later.” He snatched his day clothes from off the dresser and left the room.

Abortion? ...Or Not?

“Aren’t you ready for school yet?” Dr. Fredricks took a sip of coffee, but didn’t look up from his medical book as Taylor came in.

“Obviously not.” She plopped down on the chair across from him and tried to find a comfortable position.

He looked up at her. “Don’t talk to me like that.” Taylor felt like rolling her eyes but decided against it. After staring angrily a moment, Matt got up and walked over to the stove. “One or two?” He held up the frying pan with a couple of already

cooked eggs in it.

She wrinkled her nose and looked away. "Just some bacon and a piece of toast."

Raising his eyebrows, he dropped some bread in the toaster and grabbed the pan of bacon off the back burner, taking it over to her.

"Thank you," she grumbled, dishing out three pieces with her fork. He took it back to the stove. Repeatedly repositioning herself, she watched her dad make the toast, bring it over, and then sit down, engrossing himself in his book as if he had never left it.

"I'll sure be glad when this baby comes," she griped. He grunted. "Well? Won't you?" she snapped, annoyed.

"Yeah." He didn't look up. "Especially if it improves your disposition."

She rolled her eyes and looked away. "I wish I wasn't having this baby." No reaction. She glared at him. "I wish I'd never gotten pregnant!"

Looking up, unimpressed, he made eye contact. "It's a little late to be thinking about that now."

She rolled her eyes and her head and then met his gaze with a defiant, "No!"

His eyes turned cold and hard. "Don't start that again."

"I can start that whenever I want. I can do it whenever I want! It's my choice, and you can't stop me!"

"I can, and I will. You will not live in this house if you kill that baby!"

"What are you going to do? Throw me out on the street?"

"If you kill that baby!"

"I'm underage," she sneered.

"I don't care!" He yelled in anger.

She huffed and looked away. "You never did."

That squelched his anger a little. After a moment, he looked away, closed his book, and got up. "I have to go."

"Of course." She snapped a piece of bacon in half. "That's what you do best. Just leave. Go. Run away to your hospital."

Stopping in the doorway, he slammed his hand against the doorpost in frustration. "What do you need?"

"A better father," she mumbled, spreading jam on her toast.

Turning around, he motioned impatiently with his hand. "Come on! If you need something, spit it out. I've got to go!"

"No-o! What would I possibly want from you?" she hissed.

"Fine." He turned around and went out to the garage, slamming the door on the way out.

"Fine." She chucked the other piece of toast in the trash. "Can't you even make toast without burning it?"

Yawning as she walked in the kitchen, Jess was glad to see Jim there, sitting at the table. She had gone back to sleep after he left, but then had gotten worried about him when she woke up. She sat down across from him. "You should have woken me up, so I could've gotten you a decent breakfast." She stared at the cereal he was eating. He shook his head. "You didn't come back to bed last night." He shook his head again and took another bite. "Why not?"

"Wasn't tired." He'd sat on the porch steps from about three-thirty until the sun rose, thinking. He'd watched it for a while and then took Danny out for a morning ride. That always made him feel better, and today was no exception.

"You want ta talk, yet?"

"No." He stood up and got his coat. "I'm gonna go."

"It's only 6:15. You don't have to be there for forty-five minutes."

He leaned down and kissed her. "See you tomorrow."

She watched him walk out the door. "Bye."

"Ready to go?" Jim walked into the kitchen/arena viewing room in the barn.

Derrick looked up from his Bible to Jim and then down at the toast in front of him. "No."

"Then bring it with you?"

Derrick stood up. "You sure are in a hurry this morning."

"You agreed to carpool. If you want to drive yourself, fine."

"I can drive myself. You're the one that wanted to save money."

"Fine. Then let's go." He turned around and yanked the door open.

"Alright. Hold on." Derrick got up, grabbed his coat with one and his toast with the other. "Talk about being in a good mood this morning."

"I just want to get going."

Derrick walked toward him. "Afraid you'll miss out on a rubbish fire?" Jim gave him an unimpressed look that caused Derrick to smile. "Okay, I'm ready." Toast in his mouth, he zipped his coat as he walked past him out the door. "By all means, let's get going."

Taylor sighed as she set down the curling iron and began pulling back the front portion of her hair. Just getting ready for school now days was getting to be an ordeal. Sometimes... at night... when she stopped to think... she found herself caring for this nameless baby growing inside of her. Other times... like now... it was a real pain. Slamming her hand down on the counter, she let her hair fall and then started over. She didn't know if she could put up with this for another three months. She just wanted the pregnancy to be over. She wanted to be back to normal. She was sick of feeling sick when she saw breakfast. She was sick of being so... fat. She slammed the hairbrush down and let her hair fall again.

Ding... Dong...

First, she glanced in the direction of the door. Then, she banged her head down on her arm. *Not Mrs. Sanders... not this morning.... That woman wouldn't be happy if she owned the Empire State building.*

Ding... Dong...

Slowly she pushed herself up and started toward the door. *Nobody's home.*

Ding... Dong...

She headed down the hall. *What in the world can be wrong now? There's noo dog barking. We had to sell it because of you.*

Ding... Dong...

Hold your horses. I'm coming. How 'bout if I give you a legitimate complaint for once... like assault. That would almost be worth the jail time.

Ding... Dong...

Reaching the front door, she swung it open ready to lay into whoever... "Jack?"

"Hi!" He grinned. "Wow, you look like you're out for blood."

She relaxed her stance a little. "What are you doing here?"

His face grew serious. "We have to get some things worked out." He walked past her into the house.

"What things?" She turned around and closed the door, leaning back against it.

"That." He pointed toward her stomach. "We have to take care of it before things go any further."

A shade of sadness swept over her face as she looked down at her tummy. "What do you mean take care of it?"

"I made an appointment for you today at an abortion clinic in Chicago. There's no more time for talk... or 'thinking about it'. It's all set up. We need to do it today."

"Why?"

"Because today's the only day I can take you. You know I don't have a license anymore."

"Since when has that stopped you," she mumbled.

He grinned. "I know right, but I wouldn't want to get you trouble. A friend of mine... and yours offered us a ride for today." He pointed toward her stomach again. "We're running out of time. If you don't take care of it soon, you're going to be stuck with that thing for life."

"It's not a thing. It's a baby." She looked down at her stomach and began rubbing it, trying to feel it move.

"It's a disaster! You're not just going to have that brat for a few years as a baby. It's going to be with you the rest of your life! From the moment it's born, you won't be able to go anywhere... for the next... at least twelve years! No more good times with us. You'll be an old lady... a doting mother. Is that what you want?" He stared disgustedly a moment. She looked helpless but unsure. "Instead of going to the lake, you'll be dragging that screaming kid to the dentist's office. Instead of cutting loose to dance, you'll be sitting on a bench watching the three-year-olds at the park... all alone... because no guy's gonna want to be saddled with *that* responsibility!" He pointed again.

"What about you? It's your baby, too!"

"Not me. No." He shook his head, turned around, walked away, and then walking back to stare her in the eye. "I'm going to live. I'm going to have a life of my own. I am going to spend my money on me, not some brat. I deserve it... and so do you. You won't be young long. Don't put yourself through that. Don't ruin your whole life on something that could be taken care of in a couple of hours." He stepped closer to her and lifted her face with her hands. "You're so beautiful. Don't throw it all away."

Her eyes met his. Tears streamed down her face. "But I'll always know that I killed it. How can I live with that?"

"Baby, it's not alive." He pulled her closer into a hug. "It's not alive until it breathes. You've got to believe that."

Crying, she buried her face in his shoulder. "But how do I explain it?"

"You won't have to. No one will care. This type of thing happens every day."

"My dad...."

"He's right." A voice boomed from the doorway.

Startled, she turned sharply toward the gruff voice. The baby jumped inside of her. "Mark?" She did a double take, wondering if she was dreaming.

He stepped in and closed the door behind him. "We have an appointment for you at three-thirty. Keep it. It's the most humane thing to do. You could never provide a good life for that baby. At best, it would be a painful existence for both of you."

"Where'd you come from? Why are you here?"

"Dad didn't tell you I was coming to visit? I'm not surprised." He gave a sour laugh. "I bet he says he'll help you take care of that baby if you have it. Look at his family. We are all doing our best to stay away from him, and if one of us does come for a visit... Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he kicks me out."

"He won't kick you out." She looked down and spoke softly, secretly unsure.

He shrugged. "Let's hope not, but you do have to admit that any kind of relationship with him is virtually impossible. Where is he? Already gone?"

"He's at work."

Rolling his eyes, Mark wagged his head back and forth. "Of course."

Ding Dong...

Nervously, Melinda glanced at Trent who gave her a nod. Swallowing hard, she rubbed her sweaty hands on the sides of her jeans. Exhaling, she walked to the door. "Hi." She just stared at him.

"Hi!" Grinning, Carlos thrust a mammoth bouquet of roses at her.

She forced a smile as she accepted them. "Thanks." Reluctantly, she stepped to the side. "You want to come in?"

"Sure." He happily waltzed in and sat down on the couch. "So," he extended his arms both ways across the back of the couch. "what's new?"

She raised her eyebrows as she walked over and set the flowers on the table. *Oh, nothing much just the same old run of the mill death threats, dead cat, blood splattered house, broken window stuff that happens every day. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?* She shrugged, sitting down in the recliner across from him instead of next to him on the couch like he apparently wanted. "What about you?"

"O-oh... work." He took his arms down and leaned forward on his knees. "After all, I don't have a girlfriend to hang out with on my days off... anymore." He clapped his fist into his hand.

"Oom." She nodded, stiffly.

"Since my 'girlfriend' all of a sudden turned into an ice queen." He stood up and walked toward the fireplace. She stood, feeling uneasy.

"Were you um..." She spoke too softly.

Carlos turned around sharply. "One time... one time I got a little drunk. Don't you think you've made me pay enough for that? It was your fault it happened to begin with."

"My fault?" She put her hands on her hips. "How do you figure that?"

"The way you were treating me."

"No."

"Sure. You take up religion, and suddenly I'm trash."

"Religion's been a part of me a lot longer than that."

"Yeah, well, you couldn't tell it, and that's the way it should be."

"That's not the way it's going to be, not anymore." Her heart practically pounded out of her chest, but she was too mad to be silent.

"You pious..." He stepped into her space. She refused to back up. Trent, who was hiding behind the kitchen wall, pulled

out his gun. Melinda was afraid fear may have entered her eyes. After a moment, Carlos turned and walked back toward the fireplace. "Maybe this is a waste of time."

"Maybe it is."

He turned back around to face her. "I love you." She didn't answer. She didn't know how. He turned back around and leaned forward, both hands against the mantle. "You shouldn't lead someone on all that time if you think you're gonna change your mind." She didn't answer. He turned around in anger. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Were you here last night?"

"What?"

"Were you here?"

"You ought to know the answer to that. Was I?" The officer in the kitchen that was taking notes dropped his pencil. Carlos heard it. "What was that?"

"Answer me!"

"No! ... Why?"

"Are you sure?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Just go."

"Fine." He stomped toward the door, but then turned around. "Are you gonna explain?"

"NO! Just go!"

"Fine." He slammed the door on his way out.

Feeling shaky, Melinda quickly sat down, rubbing her face in her hands. She looked up as Trent came in with another officer. "Sorry."

"You did fine."

"I just couldn't take it any longer." Trent didn't answer. "Wasn't much help, was it?"

Trent shrugged. "It gave us some insight."

"Not much. Did the fingerprinting help any?"

"Mostly yours and Carlos's. We got a few sets that weren't on file, but that doesn't help us any."

"On the patio door?"

"He's been out that patio door, hasn't he?"

She shrugged. "Yeah."

"Whoever this guy is, he could have worn gloves."

"Or it could be Carlos."

"Yeah."

"Car-rls, how's it going? You're late, my friend." Miles, slapped Carlos on the shoulder as he walked past. Jim looked over his shoulder as he continued washing the squad with Derrick.

“Shut up.” Carlos slammed the door as he came in the bay.

“Sorry.” Miles stopped walking and looked back. “I was just joking. I know Clay didn’t mind staying over his shift to cover for you.”

Carlos stopped abruptly. His eyes shot daggers in Miles direction, but he didn’t speak. He glared at Jim and Derrick a moment and then continued on to the locker room.

“I wonder what’s wrong with him?” Jim looked at Derrick. Derrick just shrugged and went back to scrubbing.

“Hey! Melinda!” Mary, the RN in charge smiled sweetly... very sweetly... too sweetly. Melinda returned a scowl. She was no mood for giving favors. So instead of stopping to chat, she walked faster, trying to avoid confrontation... epic failure. “Wait a minute... just a minute.” The middle-aged, heavy-set nurse jogged up behind her. “I have to tell you about a slight scheduling change.

What happened to asking. Melinda was sure she looked very unimpressed as she stopped and crossed her arms. “I’m supposed to be in pediatrics.”

“Yes, Honey. That was the original plan. However, you are now in Emergency.” Mary offered her the clipboard.

Melinda just stared and scowled. “I am in no mood for Emergency.”

“Well, that’s the good thing about moods, honey.” She put the clipboard in her hand. “They are always subject to change. There’s some coffee in the lounge.” She nudged her in the right direction.

“Why the change?” she grumbled.

“To be honest.” She looked down. “We need someone to work with Dr. Fredricks.” Melinda exaggeratedly rolled her eyes in response. “He’s apparently in one of his moods today. The nurse assigned to him, the new girl, Jenny, is crying her eyes out in the lounge.” Melinda rolled her eyes. “The only way we could get her to stay was to give her your spot in pediatrics.” She patted her arm. “And you’re so good with people! Honey, it’s your gift.” Shooting her a winning smile undeterred by Melinda’s gaze, Mary slapped Melinda’s arm and turned to go.”

“This isn’t permanent!” It was half statement, half question.

“Oh, no, no. I doubt it.”

“How long?”

She turned back, sympathy replacing her smile. “I’m not sure.”

Melinda advance toward her. “I. Am. Not. Making a career out of working with that man! He’s rude...”

“I know.”

“Egotistical!”

“I know.”

“Demeaning!”

Mary nodded.

“Perfectionistic!”

“Only sometimes.”

Melinda glared.

“Look, honey. You’re the best one to work with him... for now. Jenny was hired as an ER nurse. We’ll get her back there.” She grinned. “Thanks so much. You’re the best.” She turned to hurry off.

“Hey, what about the other ER nurses?”

“Oh, no, no, no. Wouldn’t work, honey. Sorry,” she pointed at her watch. “got to go. Really busy today.”

Grumbling and muttering, Melinda headed for the ER. *If he tries to pick a fight with me today, he’d better be prepared to duck cause I’m not gonna....*

After scrolling through her missed calls, Taylor set her phone down on her lap and glanced at Jack next to her in the backseat of the car and then up at Mark in the front, driving. “Dad keeps calling me.” Her eyes were serious.

“I haven’t heard anything.”

“I put it on silent.”

“Well, either answer it next time or turn the phone off.”

“Answer him?”

“Tell him you’re fine. You just didn’t feel good enough to go to school.”

“He’s a doctor, Mark. He’s going to want more specifics than that.”

“Tell him, morning sickness.”

She rolled her eyes and looked out the window. “The way he’s acting, I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to come home to make sure the baby’s alright.” As soon as she said it her heart sank. She had meant it in a derogatory “he’s so annoying” way, but when she heard the words her stomach tightened, and she bit her lip. Her dad was a nearly sounding like a grandpa sometimes. She couldn’t figure it, and yet.... The baby kicked her, only succeeding to increase her emotions. A tear rolled down her cheek. She tried to convince herself that this was the best thing... that she was doing it for Jack... that she was taking care of herself... that she was doing what was right. *Jack will leave me if I don’t. Maybe this way he will stay. Maybe we can get married. Maybe we can have a baby together later... one that will be loved... not an accident.*

“Hello... Doc-ctor.” Melinda trudged up beside Matt, who was busy stitching up a patient’s arm. “I will be...”

Without looking at her, Dr. Fredricks grabbed the thick folder from off the table beside him with his free hand and slammed it down on the bed in front of her just barely missing the patient. “Number five needs blood drawn for six different labs. If you can’t read my writing, Maggie knows, and she’s printing the labels.” She picked up the folder. “Number eight needs normal saline IV drip. Number 12 is waiting for an EKG. An orderly is supposed to be bringing down the machine. I wouldn’t count on that though.” He flopped another smaller file on top of the open folder in her hands. “Number seven needs to be prepared for stitches, and I will be in room five as soon as I’m finished here.” He put in the last stitch and began tying it off. For a moment, she just stared at him with her mouth open. “Hurry up, nurse. Stop sleeping on your feet!” His voice was gruff, and he didn’t look at her. She turned and hurried out the door. Part of her felt like saluting, the other part of her felt like crying. This was going to be some day. She just hoped she remembered everything because it would kill her to have to swallow her pride and ask him to repeat it.

For a few moments, Melinda just walked down the hall, half dazed, half studying the charts... what she could read of them. *The busier the day, the sloppier that guy’s handwriting gets.* She stopped short at the group of nurses in the breakroom. “Hey, any of you not on break?” They all looked at her skeptically. “Come on, guys, we haven’t even hit the busy time, yet. If I don’t get this case load down, I’m gonna be sunk.”

“We all have doctors we’re working with,” a young lady leaning against the wall, stated as she took another sip of coffee.

Melinda turned and looked at her. “Come on, Kate. Help me out. How many nurses does that dreamboat have answering his beckon call? Do a good deed.”

“I’m with Dr. Mathews not Dr. Kruz.” She walked over to the sink and dumped out the rest of her coffee and then made

her way back to Melinda. "What do you need?"

"An EKG in twelve?" She asked questioningly as she handed her the file. "You can give the results to me. I'll mediate between the staff and the good doctor."

"Mediate nothing." Kate flipped through the file. "You're signing your name to this, honey. Jenny practically got her head bit off for forgetting a middle initial on one label. If I help you out here, I don't want any credit."

Melinda nodded. "Okay." No one else volunteered. She couldn't help grumbling as she went to find Maggie for the blood sample labels. This was beginning to be a trend. They had dumped her off on Dr. Fredricks two times last week, once the week before, and three times the week before that. *I'm beginning to forget what the pediatric department looks like! Every time he's in a bad mood, it's call good ole Melinda. Yank her right off the pediatric floor if necessary.*

"Hey! Melinda!" Melinda turned around, rolling her eyes at the old familiar bellow of their resident grumpy doctor. "I could use some help in here."

"Sure. I have absolutely nothing else to do," she muttered under her breath as she headed back toward the room. *Whatever temperament improvement the guy gained from receiving Christ, he lost from his daughter's pregnancy. Still the same old grouch.*

Sitting in a chair checking the internet on his phone, Jim breathed in a long whiff of the succulent beef stew simmering on the stove. He wondered how much longer it had to cook because the smell was making him really hungry, not to mention the fact lunch had already been delayed by a call. He watched Dan as he finished washing the grapes for the fruit salad and then walked over to put the cornbread in the oven. Jim smiled, knowing that meant it wouldn't be long now. He took a deep breath. Dan's cooking always smelled so good... nothing like Wade's used to... when they even let him try. He sure hoped they didn't get another call before...."

"Will you knock it off and stop soliciting your religion around here!" Jim jumped at Carlos's angry voice interrupting the silence. Puzzled, he watched Carlos head toward Derrick who had been quietly reading on the couch. Derrick looked up just as Carlos snatched his Bible from his hands.

"Hey, what are you doin'?" He sat up.

He cursed Derrick. "This is a religion free zone!" He threw the Bible over the table and into the corner trashcan. Derrick stood up and took a swing at Carlos, but Carlos ducked. Jim jumped to his feet, unsure if he should stop Derrick or help him. Dan stopped stirring his stew and turned around to watch, spoon in hand.

Carlos swung at Derrick. Derrick blocked it and lunged forward, tackling Carlos to the ground. Carlos punched Derrick's ear with his fist as he fell. On top of him, Derrick held him down with one hand and raised his other fist just as the Captain's yell came from the office. "What's going on in there?" Derrick jumped up and then so did Carlos. Carlos quickly tucked in his shirt, and Derrick turned so that his bloody ear was facing the wall just as the captain walked in. He stopped in the doorway and looked around. "What fell?"

No one answered, so Jim did. "Carlos threw a book in the trash." It was the truth... partially. So, why'd he feel guilty for saying it.

"Oh." Cap looked from face to face, suspiciously. Then he turned around and walked back to his office. Derrick and Carlos just glared, staring each other down.

Calmly, Dan walked over to the kitchen trash, took the Bible out, and wiped it off with his sleeve. Walking over, he handed it to Derrick, gave Carlos a dirty look, and headed back to the kitchen. Jim, remembering he'd been holding his breath for too long, took a deep breath and sat back down. Finally, Carlos broke the stare down, turned around, and walked away. When he did, Derrick reopened his Bible and sat back down.

Melinda did a double take when she walked by the breakroom and saw Dr. Fredricks sitting at the table, his cellphone in front of him, hanging his head. She wondered if he was sick or something. The only times she'd ever seen him in the breakroom

were after a severe emotional trauma or after he'd been working for *at least* twelve hours straight. At least they were almost caught up. She closed her folder and walked in casually. "Everything alright?"

Quickly, almost instinctively, he snapped out of his vulnerable posture and composed himself. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" He stood up as if he would leave.

"Oh, I don't know." She tossed her hair behind her shoulders and sat down. "Why don't you tell me?"

He glanced from the door to the table to the door as if trying to decide. Sitting back down at the table, he picked up his phone, clutching it. He looked down at it as he talked. "You... a... don't know...a... anyone who'd be willing to work for me, do you?" He glanced up at her. She just looked shocked. "I... a know, I'm not very popular." He looked down at his phone. "I haven't been able to find anyone." He smiled sarcastically but spoke softly. "The last guy just laughed."

She shrugged. "Well, you have to admit you wanting off work does seem a little strange. You sick or something?" She looked at him curiously.

He looked offended. "If I was, I certainly wouldn't ask off work."

Mentally, she shrugged. She knew that was true. She'd seen him work wearing a mask when he sounded like he was on the verge of pneumonia. Maybe it was because he knew no one would fill in for him. "I don't know if you've ever missed a shift?"

He shook his head. "Not here. At the old hospital. Once when Taylor had the chickenpox and a couple times right after my wife died." He spoke thoughtfully, rubbing the bridge of his nose with one hand, clutching his phone with nearly white-knuckle force with the other. "Back then, there was an older doctor that would fill in for me." He looked up and smiled tentatively. "He was a Christian. I guess I'll never really forget that." He looked down, thoughtfully. "I wish I..." His voice trailed off.

"What about today? What's wrong?"

He rubbed his hand over his face, sighing. "I can't get ahold of Taylor. Her school called at nine and told me she never showed up. I keep calling home and her cellphone. Nothing. He speed-dialed her cellphone again. Melinda looked at her watch. Nine was hours ago... right when she was coming into work. She wondered if it was anywhere near the time that he blew up at Jenny. "You only have a little more than three hours left. I'm sure you could get someone from the next shift to come in early."

"I. Can't." His voice was a growl.

Mesmerized, Taylor stared out the window at all the cars whizzing around on the four lane. The traffic just kept multiplying the closer they got to Chicago. Her attention turned to her phone as it once again lit up. She stared at the number on the caller ID. Suddenly, she just decided to answer it. "No." Jack tried to snatch it, but she pulled it away.

"Hello?"

"Taylor? It's your dad!" Dr. Fredricks jumped up, startling Melinda. He looked like he was ready for battle or something. "What's going on? Where are you?"

"I'm fine." Her heart started pounding with fear, wanting to tell him, yet desperately wanting him not to find out.

"Why'd you skip school?" He tried to stay calm.

"I haven't felt very well today." Part of her angrily wanted him to stay away. The other part of her was curious to know if he really did care enough to come home.

"Are you okay?"

"I guess." She said it quietly, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"Do you want me to come home?"

"No!" She said it too abruptly. Jack rolled his eyes at her in response.

“Why not? Taylor, what’s going on?”

Taylor bit her trembling bottom lip, trying not to cry.

“Taylor?”

“Yes?” There were tears in her voice.

“What’s going on? It sounds like you’re in a car?”

“Oh, Daddy!” She burst into tears. Jack snatched the phone and closed it.

Call ended. “Taylor!” Matt looked at his phone and then redialed, sitting back down impatiently. “Come on.” The phone went to voicemail. “No-o,” he growled, slamming the phone down on the table. Melinda jumped. Thinking, Matt stood. Leaning forward against the table with one hand, he rubbed his hand through his hair with the other. “I’m leaving.”

“What?” Melinda jumped to her feet, her mind racing. Losing Matt on a shift was more like losing two or three doctors. He could get a lot done in a short amount of time. She happened to know they staffed more doctors on days he wasn’t scheduled to work. With how busy today had been already, this was not going to be good.

“She’s going to have an abortion.” He said it more to himself.

“What?!”

“I have to find her.” He marched out of the room and charged down the hall. Melinda followed. “I have to stop her.”

Melinda jogged a few steps, trying to catch up. “We’re short staffed as it is. Dr. Kruz just finished his shift. That only leaves Dr. Matthews. He’s old. He can’t handle it without you! We’re going to have to find at least two doctors to take your place!”

“Find Dr. Kruz. Get him to stay.” He slammed his hand against the metal plate that made the doors open electronically.

“He won’t stay.”

“Where is he? I’ll talk to him.” He shoved through the next set of double doors manually.

“Wait!” She grabbed his shirt to stop him. “Over there.” She pointed toward the desk where Dr. Kruz was putting on his coat. Matt turned and charged in that direction. Melinda stayed back. She watched them converse animatedly, and then cringed when Matt grabbed the front of Dr. Kruz’s shirt, pressed him against the wall, and started to lift him. She glanced at the nurses congregating for safety behind the desk. She sighed with relief as Matt finally released him but kept arguing.

She backed out of the doorway as Dr. Kruz turned to storm off. He didn’t get far. Grabbing the front of his shirt again, Matt spun him around and slammed him against the wall. She had to wonder if he would get fired for that one. *No, they wouldn’t do that to themselves.*

“Hi, Kara.” Jess smiled weakly as she led their new chestnut foal into the barn.

Kara, who was brushing Machacho, grinned widely as she turned to see a weary Jess leading the even more weary youngster. “Halter breaking?”

“Trying to.” Jess frowned sideways at the colt as he planted all four hooves... again... and began yanking back. Jess stood firm and just glared at him until he gave up. Shaking her head, she walked closer to Kara Lee, the foal reluctantly following. “Goin’ for a ride?” She leaned her shoulder against the wall.

“Yeah.” She brushed Machacho’s mane to the side. “Not near as much fun alone, though,” she grinned. “Kinda been getting used to havin’ a riding buddy, lately.”

Jess smiled back. “Like him?”

Grinning, Kara Lee bit her lip as she looked down. “I don’t know him that well, but he is kinda cute.” She snuck a glance

at Jess.

“Well, ya aught to see a lot of each other, seein’ as he lives in the barn.” They exchanged quick glances, and then both looked away.

“Possibly.” Kara Lee started brushing again. “But ya know, I’m a pretty busy person.”

“Yeah,” Jess pushed herself off the wall. “Speaking of which, I better get going. Mellissa’s at the house watching Morgan for me, and I’ve still got one more to go.” Jess took a step forward but was yanked back by the stubborn baby equine.

“Looks like that one could still use some more work.”

Jess pulled back on the rope engaging in a serious tug-of-war. “I. Think. He’s had enough. For to-day...” The foal took one step forward, then stopped. “If we... can get... back... to the pasture.” The foal reared up and lunged forward trotting past her, yanking her along behind. “Hey! Wait a minute!”

“Jess, I think you’re losing your touch.” Kara called after her.

“This isn’t over!” Jess yelled back.

Shaking her head, Kara Lee went back to brushing her horse.

Matt pulled into his driveway, thrust the shifter into park, jumped out of the car, and ran to his house. He didn’t know why he was here. He knew Taylor wasn’t. Not only was the house dark, but she had obviously been in a car when he was talking to her. What he needed was a clue. Anything. Quickly unlocking the front door, he went in, turned on the light, and scanned the area. Right off, he didn’t see anything helpful, but he didn’t really expect to. Glancing toward the stairs, he jogged toward them, and ascended them two at a time. He figured there had to be a clue in her bedroom... a pamphlet to an abortion clinic, an address or phone number written on a scrap of paper, an address book if nothing else. Maybe one of her friends knew. He’d call every number if he had to.

Entering her room, he was surprised at how neat it was. How was he supposed to find any clues in there? He could only hope for a junk drawer. Opening her closet, he felt like he was intruding. He hadn’t been up here in ages, and when he was, he never stopped to look around. As he looked, he felt like he was learning all kinds of things about his daughter he never knew... never took time to learn. He liked some of the cute dresses she had for church. Others made him wonder if she frequented the town’s dancehalls. Closing her closet, he smiled at her pink, frilly, heart-decorated bedspread with five plush different colored heart pillows neatly arranged on top. He remembered giving her the money for it, but he had never seen what she had bought.

He walked over to the pretty, cedar, hand-carved dresser. He did remember buying that... years and years ago. It still looked the same... just as good as the day he bought it. He took a minute to look at the pictures she had stuck around the edge of the mirror... lots of friends or groups of friends... a couple selfies with Jack... one of her mother... none of him. He didn’t really expect there to be. He told himself he didn’t care. He was glad she had so many friends. He was glad she was popular. He took one of the pictures of Jack and stuck it in his pocket. If only he could find a phone number for him. He began opening the drawers... clothes... clothes... clothes.

He went over to the desk... pens... papers... highlighters... stationary... notebooks... cards... no scratch papers... no pamphlets... no clues. *How can she have an abortion without making any plans for it.* He dumped over the trashcan and went through it... tissues... a postcard from a friend on vacation... more tissues... an empty tissue box. *What was she doing, crying up here?* If she was, he refused to take credit for it. He stuffed everything back in and stood up, not knowing where to look. He needed another trashcan... or that illusive junk drawer... if she had even ever considered such a thing. He made his way to the bathroom. First, he looked through the trashcan... nothing. He inadvertently held his breath as he opened the medicine cabinet, instantly relieved it was nearly empty... nothing stronger than an aspirin. He began to close it until... *uh oh.* His heart sped up as he pulled the baggy out of the empty allergy medicine box. His heart sank... weed. He only hoped that this was all. Instantly, he began opening and emptying every box and bottle, but that was all that was there.

Ding Dong Ding... He lifted his head. *The doorbell?* His one brow furrowed. *Who would be...* He slammed the medicine cabinet, spun around, and ran for the stairs, jumping down the last few. Out of breath as he reached the door, he flung it open

just to see a rather surprised neighbor standing there, hand raised midknock. "Mrs. Sanders?" he blurted out.

"Dr. Fredricks." The older woman's voice held disapproving tones. "You know I hate to butt in, but..."

"Actually, Mrs. Sanders," He put his hand near the top of the doorframe and leaned against it. "this is one time that I do not mind at all. Tell me everything you know."

Her eyebrows jumped in surprise. He half wondered if she was going to get in a huff and walk away. However, her curiosity clearly overruled the impulse. "Well, with all the activity around here this morning, I was just wondering... is your daughter alright?"

"Frankly, right now, I don't know. Do you know where she is?"

"Well, I must say I had to wonder when she rode off with those two young fellows after missing the school bus."

Better than a watchdog. He made a mental note to thank the Lord for nosey neighbors. "What boys?"

"One was that young man who comes around quite often."

"Jack."

"The other looked very much like your son, of course I could be wrong. He *was* quite far away."

What happened to your binoculars?! I'll buy you some new ones! ... "Mark?" He looked up, mulling it over. He didn't understand....

"I believe so. Were you aware he was coming?"

"No, a, the other boy what did he look like?"

"Your daughter's age, medium build, dark hair, motorcycle jacket."

"Jack." He turned and looked back inside. "If only I could figure out his telephone number."

"Don't you know his last name? As much as he hangs around your daughter, I would think...."

"No, Mrs. Sanders, I don't know." He stared off into the distance, trying to figure out how Mark fit into all this... and where he came from. Why had he suddenly shown up again?

"Dr. Fredricks, are you alright?"

He shook his head and then refocused on her. "Do you have any idea where they might of gone?"

"How would I know that?"

Why Mrs. Sanders, I'm disappointed in you. I thought you at least had the living room bugged. What kind of eavesdropper are you? How come you know about everything else, except what...?

"What about her bedroom... a pamphlet, business cards, a phone number?"

"I looked."

"Why don't you let me...." She walked past him. "You keep looking." She grabbed the telephone book from off the end table. "I'll call around." She grabbed the cordless phone and sat down on the couch."

"Who are you going to call?"

"Abortion clinics, pregnancy centers. Do you have any phone numbers for her other friends?"

"No. She must have them in her phone."

"Call the school."

"What?"

"They'll know her friends."

"But will they tell me?" He took his cellphone out of his pocket and sat down on the coffee table.

"Try to muster up some of that medical school charm," she mumbled.

For a few moments, he just stared at the phone instead of dialing it. "It's got to be too late. If they left this morning... She's probably..."

"Young man! This is no time to give up on your daughter. You have no idea when she made the appointment. If it was a last-minute decision, she might very well have gotten a late appointment."

"They probably..."

"Young man! Stop jabbering and start calling!" She began dialing her own phone. *Yes ma'am!* He opened the internet on his phone and typed in the school. "Hello. I was wondering if you could help me. I'm looking for a young girl who is considering ending her pregnancy, possible with coercion from her boyfriend. Could you tell me if she happens to have an appointment there? Her name is Taylor Fredricks. Look here young lady! This girl is only sixteen years old, and if you.... .. I see. Uh huh. Uh huh. Uh huh. It's only fair to warn you Miss that I am not used to being lied to, and if I find out you have told me any untruths or that this girl has been harmed in any way under your care, I will have the law on your steps so fast it'll make your head spin! Uh huh. Uh huh. Okay. Well, thank you very much. Uh huh, goodbye."

Dr. Fredricks, who was on hold, took his cell phone away from his mouth. "Anything?"

"She gave me a few numbers." She finished writing and began dialing.

"Hello," Dr. Fredricks began after getting off hold. "Yes, this is Dr. Fredricks. My daughter attends your school. She was absent today, and I'm seeking to locate her or her boyfriend, Jack. I was wondering if you could help me out with phone numbers of some of her friends... I mean, or their parents or if..." He started his spiel before getting interrupted. "I understand that, but my daughter's safety could be at risk. Uh huh." He rolled his eyes. "Well, tell me this is there a Jack there at school today? I don't have a last name. Uh huh. Yeah." He rolled his eyes again. "I can't ask her. She's not here. If she were here, I wouldn't be calling you." His voice got lower and slower with each word. "What about her other friends. Uh huh. Sometime all that red tape's gonna hang you." Mrs. Sanders stopped talking, looked at him, and started shaking her head animatedly. He didn't listen. "Look, Miss Priss, all your highfaluting, snob-nose rules mean very little to me when they don't take into account human life! Now, I don't know what numbskull wrote those formula answers you were forced to memorize so that you could get a paycheck being a human robotic answering machine, but I highly suggest if you want to keep that fluff-brained job.... Hello? Hello?" He slammed the phone on the table, and then looked up at Mrs. Sanders staring at him.

"Well, you handled that brilliantly."

"She must have been standing in line with the chickens when the Lord was handing out brains," he mumbled. "Let me call one of those." He grabbed her paper off the table.

She tried to snatch it back but didn't succeed. "Not the top one."

"What?"

"Do not dial that top phone number, young man!"

"Fine." He dialed the bottom one. "Hi, my name is Dr. Fredricks, and I need to know if my daughter is scheduled for an abortion there today. Her name's Taylor." Mrs. Sanders shook her head. "What do you mean you can't tell me? I am her father! I have a right to know! Of course, I can't prove it over the telephone! ...unless you let me talk to her! Is she there? Just tell me if she's there!"

Mrs. Sanders began rubbing the bridge of her nose while shaking her head. "Because I said so! She's only sixteen, and she is not getting an abortion! She doesn't know what she's doing! Because it's murder that's why!" Mrs. Sanders covered her face with her hands, still shaking her head. "Hello? Hello?"

Mrs. Sanders looked up at him. "Young man, I think you had better let me take care of the phone calling from now on."

"I'm not young."

“Was she there?” She looked at him skeptically.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “It didn’t really sound like it.”

“You’d better go back to digging through trashcans and let me handle this.”

He just glared at her as she took her paper back and dialed. “Respect your elders, young man. Hello? This is an emergency. I have to get a hold of Taylor Fredricks immediately! Can you tell me if she’s checked in yet? I see. Well, when do you expect her? I see. Thank you so much. No. I’ll call back then. Thank you. I have to go! Thank you!” She kept her voice urgent until she hung up. Then she turned very professional as she ripped off the top half of the paper and handed it to Dr. Fredricks. Her appointment is in fifteen minutes. She’s not there yet.” Dr. Fredricks just sat there in shock. “Did you hear me?” Her voice was high-pitch. “Hurry up!” She clapped her hands together as she stood up. “You haven’t much time!” He stood up. “Fifteen minutes!” She clapped her hands again. “Let’s go!” She pushed him toward the door.

“Okay, well, I mean, lock the door on your way out, and thank you!” He started to turn back, but she pushed him through the front door.

“This is no time for small talk. Now, you get yourself going, and be there for your little girl... for once in your life, GO!” She slammed the door shut behind him. For a second, it felt strange that she had just shut him out of his own house while she was still in there, but he dismissed the feeling and ran down the steps to his car. Afterall, it was Mrs. Sanders, and he had more important worries. How was he going to get over two hours away in fifteen minutes... without getting a ticket!

Jim kicked a clump of cornstalk roots aside and stepped on another clod of dirt, flattening it. He glanced at the little blue sedan with the crumpled front end as the mechanic hooked it up to his tow truck. It was still steaming under the front hood, but not enough to be a danger, especially in this plowed under field. The dried grass near the creek had caught fire, but they were able to contain it before it jumped over into the unharvested field... thankfully. That golden dried out corn would have gone up like paper and spread mercilessly. He was sure glad the boy hadn’t flipped his car a few seconds later. Not only would it have set off a rampant inferno, it would have probably cooked the kid as well.

As things stood now, it looked like the kid would be fine in a few months. They’d had to use the jaws to get him out, and it looked like he might have a couple of broken ribs, but it wasn’t near as bad as it could have been. All the blood from the gash on his leg had made things look worse than they were.

He kicked another clump of dirt as he made his way to the road. Today was the first day he really understood what Wade had been feeling like. As he worked to free the boy, the moaning and groaning started to get to him. He didn’t usually ever get emotionally involved. He chalked this one up to his own recent near brush with death. Still, he had firmly told himself to knock it off and then did. He didn’t want to end up like Wade and lose his chosen profession, and he didn’t see that happening.

He trudged over a grassy section and then back into the dirt. Honestly, he wasn’t really squeamish at all. Some people thought he was because of his insistence to never apply for EMT training, but that wasn’t the reason. The reason was that he refused to accept that kind of responsibility... to take someone else’s life into his hands. Rescuing them from fire was one thing, but getting involved in medical care, in keeping them alive, was another, and it wasn’t for him. After what had happened to his mother as a child, he had always wanted to stay as far away from medicine or the medical field as he could. He’d been doing a pretty good job, too. Up until a few months ago when he’d been forced to... restrained... drugged... unable to... He stopped and stared as the memories flashed back through his mind... the struggle to stay awake... the struggle to get free... the struggle to get out... to get away... and he couldn’t. His heart rate and breathing quickened as he remembered. He started to feel panic creeping in.

“Hey, you okay?”

Jim jumped inside at the voice beside him as it brought him back to reality. “Sure. Why not?” Jim walked down into the ditch and then up the other side.

“Why don’t you let me look at that arm?” Miles followed him.

Jim glanced down at his arm. He’d forgotten he had hit it against the metal car frame and burned it. He didn’t really care. He wasn’t the most careful person in the world. He had already burned that particular arm so many times in his career it was

becoming a habit. He glanced over at the captain. He supposed he would probably hear it from him for not having his fire coat on. He'd come to realize a long time ago that he had a real problem with rules... not as much as Derrick, though. He wished Derrick was still here, instead of being the one to take the patient in; then at least, he would have an ally.

"Hey, don't ignore me." Miles was still following... *unfortunately*.

"It's fine." Jim quickly grabbed his rolled-up shirt sleeve and pulled it down to conceal the burn continuing at an even more rapid pace toward the engine.

"Why don't you let a paramedic decide that?" Miles reached for his arm. Jim pulled away, but Miles grabbed in his upper arm, above the 4-inch burn, and held it.

Jim reacted by swinging it back, letting his fist slam into Miles's shoulder and his forearm into his chest. "Let go. I said, 'It's fine.'" His teeth were clenched.

Dan, who'd been watching, stepped up next to them, glancing back and forth between their combative faces. "What's going on?" Neither answered. They just continued staring each other down, anger igniting more every second. After a moment, Dan grabbed Miles' wrist and pulled his grip free from Jim's arm. Miles' glared at Dan, who returned a warning glance then a smile. "Leave the man alone. Let him make his own decisions."

"He's not thinking rationally."

Dan's smile faded. "You need to back off." After a moment, Miles backed up and walked away. Dan watched him. "He's going to talk to the captain." Jim rolled his eyes. "You may have to concede." Dan smiled at that prospect.

"It's none of their business," Jim grumbled.

"When in Rome..." Dan grabbed his arm and pushed up his sleeve. "Oh, yeah. You're gonna have ta concede."

Jim jerked his arm back and shoved the sleeve back down. "It's none of *your* business either."

Dan put his hands up like, 'ok-ay' and walked away. Now if he could only get the captain to do the same thing. Looking over at the captain and Miles walking toward him, he groaned inwardly. There were just some days he just felt like running home to mama... which only made him remember how she died.

Nodding, Taylor stared a few moments longer at the hard, unfeeling nurse behind the counter. "What?" the nurse growled. Taylor quickly looked away and slowly shook her head as to say, 'nothing.' "Here." The nurse handed her some papers. "Fill these out and bring them back."

Nodding and taking the papers, Taylor walked back over to Jack, who was sitting on the couch. She scowled when she saw him reading a playboy magazine. Looking up at her, he closed the magazine and flopped it back on the pile. "They don't have much to read here." She picked up a golfing guide and tossed it in his lap. He smiled. "You all set?"

She held up the papers as she sat down. "I have to fill out these forms." She readjusted her position a couple of times to get comfortable. "I can't believe they would have something like that in a doctor's office. What if a child should see it?"

Jack smiled again. "I don't think there'd be any children in here."

"Yeah." She stared down at her tummy. "I guess not." She paused. "They may come in, but they never come out, do they?" She looked around and whispered to him. "This place kinda gives me the creeps. It feels so... dead."

"Don't be ridiculous." Jack laughed. "Quit talking like that things alive. It's just like your liver... or an extra kidney." He flipped through the golf guide.

"Where's Mark?" She looked around. "Didn't he come in with you?"

"No. Said he was gonna drive around while he waited."

Taylor rolled her eyes. "Convenient. I can't change my mind because there's no way to get home." She rubbed her

tummy, trying to feel her baby move.

“We’re not here for you to change your mind.”

“I’m surprised you let a stranger just drive off and leave *you* here,” she said, thoughtfully.

“He’s not a stranger. He’s your brother.”

“He isn’t a stranger, is he?” She stared off thoughtfully. “How long have you two been planning this?”

“What are you talking about?”

She jerked her attention back toward him. “I’m talking about that brother of mine. He’ll do anything to hurt our dad, and he thinks killing my baby will do it. He set this whole thing up, didn’t he?”

“You’re crazy,” but the answer was in his eyes.

“I want to go home.” She stood up.

“Sit down and be rational.”

“Rational? You had this whole thing planned out, didn’t you?”

“That’s not true. We are doing this for you... so you don’t have to be an old lady before you reach twenty,” he said tentatively then his voice gained strength. “You want to drop out of school? Get a minimum wage job for the rest of your life? Spend every spare moment living for that kid? You have it and *both* your lives will be trash! It’s more merciful to let it go.”

Sitting down, she stared down at the paper, feeling confused and depressed. “I wonder if they bury him afterwards.”

Jack rolled his eyes, exaggeratedly. “How many times do I have to tell you, it’s not alive, yet!”

“Then what do they do with him, just throw him in the trash?”

“You don’t know it’s a him. You’ve never had an ultrasound.”

“I want to know.” She rubbed her tummy.

Frustrated, Jack rubbed his face with his hands. “It’s just like removing your tonsils. It’s not alive.”

She felt the baby kick her. “It sure feels like it is.”

“Just fill out the paper!”

“Why? Why is this so important to you? It’s my baby, not yours! It’s *my* responsibility. If I want to wreck *my* life, it’s *my* choice!”

“Fine.” Jack stood up. “But don’t expect any help from me! You’re going to have to be a slave to your father the rest of your life because no guy’s gonna want you... if he even wants you. He may change his mind once he starts living with that brat. Just remember, once it’s born, you can’t get rid of it. You’re stuck with it for the next eighteen years!”

Tears welled in Taylor’s eyes. “I don’t know what to do.” She put her face in her hands and cried, shaking her head. “I don’t know what to do!”

A nurse came toward them. “Is everything okay over here?” Jack didn’t answer. He just shrugged toward Taylor and walked around agitatedly. “Honey, are you alright?” The nurse sat down and put her arm around her.

Taylor stopped crying but looked at her with tear-filled eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

The nurse gently pushed Taylor’s blonde hair back behind her ear. “We don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to. You’re just so young and pretty to be a mother already. Wait a few years, honey. You’re not ready for this responsibility.” Taylor just stared at her a moment. She wasn’t like the other nurse. She seemed to care. “Here let me help you with that.” She gently took the clipboard from Taylor’s hands and began helping her fill it out.

Matt stomped on the gas as soon as the light turned green. He was still over an hour away, and she was already fifteen minutes into her appointment. He knew he was going to be too late, but he refused to give up. Glancing behind him and hitting his blinkers, he went over to the left lane to pass a semi, gripping the wheel with white-knuckle force as if that would make him go faster. He didn't want to see this baby die... not his grandbaby. He'd seen enough death. Most of it was unpreventable. Most of it was mourned. Most of the time lots of people, lots of time, lots of money, lots of talent went into preventing it! Why did he feel like he was the only one fighting for this baby's life? He went back into the right lane and accelerated even more. He wanted this baby. He'd decided a long time ago he'd be willing to adopt it if Taylor wouldn't raise it. Maybe he couldn't save Sandra, but he sure could try and save her grandbaby. He wasn't accustomed to praying when trouble came, but now that he had accepted Christ, it seemed like the right thing to do. Maybe it would even help. *God... save that baby's life.* He hit the top of the steering wheel, choking back tears. *Don't let my daughter do this thing. Don't let her do it.*

"Taylor Fredrick?" The nurse called.

Slowly Taylor got up, glancing back at Jack as she walked. He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll be right here waiting for you."

She nodded, but her heart sped up and fear nearly paralyzed her as she slowly made her way to the nurse and followed her back. The further she walked the more fearful she got. The hall seemed ghostly still. She felt dark and haunted... haunted by dead babies... babies that would never cry... never eat... never walk... never say, 'Mama'... never taste a birthday cake... never hit a balloon... never learn their abc's... never go to school... never... never anything... never forever. She wasn't sure if it was just her, but it felt like the baby was shaking inside of her... shaking with fear... fear of what she was going to have done to it. It kicked her. Her heart paused and then raced.

"In here, please." The nurse opened the exam room door and pointed in with her pen.

"No!" Taylor screamed and ran past her.

"Miss!" The nurse followed her quickly but didn't run.

"No!" Taylor glanced back but kept going.

"What's going on?" a doctor bellowed as they went past.

Seeing a fire exit, Taylor went even faster, not even pausing as she plowed through it, sending alarms blaring.

Derrick stepped out of the hospital into the ambulance bay just as his squad pulled in and Jim got shoved out the passenger's side door. "What are you doing here?" Derrick asked, glancing at Jim then toward Miles, who was coming around the front of the squad. Jim just stared at the door to the hospital almost in a trance. Derrick could see his body slowly start to shake. "Jim, you're being ridiculous." Jim's body only shook harder. "Come on, snap out of it." Derrick slammed the palm of his hand into Jim's shoulder shoving him back. Jim looked at him, but only momentarily before returning his gaze to the door. "What's the matter with him?" Derrick inquired as Miles walked up beside them.

"Emotional problems, I'd say," Mile's replied matter-a-factly.

"I know that. He wouldn't be if you hadn't of brought him here." He paused. "Why did you?"

"Avoidance is not a resolution. He needs to reconcile himself to his own feelings and overcome them. Otherwise, he can never hope for a normal existence, especially within this profession."

"That's why you brought him here?" Derrick asked, dryly.

"He burnt his arm." Miles motioned to it.

Derrick grabbed his wrist and pushed up his sleeve. "Yeah, you did. How come no one else knew about this?"

“Three guesses.” Miles walked up behind Jim and shoved him toward the door hard, making him fall against the wall. Jim caught himself on the wall then spun around looking combative... but so did Miles.

Derrick looked from one to the other a couple of times before stepping in between them just as they simultaneously started toward each other. “Come on, guys. Knock it off.” Derrick put his hand in the middle of Jim’s chest, pushing him back a little. Keeping his hand there, he turned toward Miles. “I’ll go with him. Why don’t you start the paperwork?”

Irritated, Miles crossed his arms and leaned back a little. “Coddling him will not provide solution to deeper inner conflicts that should be addressed in a timely matter before....”

Jim stiffened pushing against Derrick’s hand. Derrick pushed back but kept his eyes on Miles. “Ple-ase?”

Throwing his hands up, Miles turned back, muttering as he went to the squad. Derrick gave Jim a dirty look and lowered his hand. Jim stepped back but looked indignant. Derrick let his face soften. “You know, you really need to get over this.”

Gritting his teeth, Jim cracked his neck. Really, everything in him wanted to punch Derrick and run for it. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do it. They walked toward the door.

Just as they got to the hallway, Melinda came racing by. “Hey, Melinda,” Derrick tried to stop her. Jim’s heart sank. He felt very claustrophobic.

“Oh. Hey Derrick, what’s up?” She didn’t stop walking until abruptly she turned around. “Wait. Jim, what are you doing here?” She leaned to the side, trying to see him behind Derrick... almost hiding behind Derrick.

Jim didn’t answer so Derrick grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him forward. “He burned his arm.” Derrick shoved the sleeve up, revealing the blistered and raw skin.

Melinda gasped. “Ohhh-a, you did.”

“It’s fine.” Jim jerked his arm back and pushed down the sleeve.

“Don’t do that.” Melinda stepped closer. “You’ll get it infected with all that soot.” She looked at him for permission and then carefully began rolling it up. She could feel his arm shaking under the sleeve. Glancing up, she watched him eyeing the door. “Why don’t you relax?”

Jim heard her but didn’t acknowledge it. After last night’s dreams and all he’d gone through at hospitals lately, it was enough to seriously make him consider quitting his job. After his discussion with the captain, he knew that if he walked out now, that’s just what he would be doing. He glanced at Derrick, not exactly sure he would *let* him just quit his job and walk out. The thought of which made him even more nervous. He stared at Derrick not exactly sure he could take him.

“Come on.” Jim looked at Melinda who was tugging on his other sleeve to lead him. “Come on.” She motioned for him to come.

He didn’t move until someone gave him a friendly shove from behind. “Derrick!” He planted his feet.

Derrick walked up beside him and smiled. “Just trying to give a helping hand.”

“Yeah, with you as a friend, who needs enemies?” he muttered, but he started walking when Derrick did and followed them reluctantly to a room.

City Search

Matt parked, yanked the keys out, threw open the door, and started jogging toward the clinic almost all in the same moment. Reaching the sidewalk, he slowed to a walk and tried to regain his composure. Craning his neck and circling his head, he took deep breaths of the cool autumn breeze and tried to calm down as he walked in.

"I'm looking for my daughter," he blurted out when he reached the front desk. "Taylor Fredricks."

The nurse looked up and raised her eyebrows when she heard the name. "*She* is no longer here." She looked annoyed.

"But she was?"

"Oh yeah, she was. She ran out the fire escape and turned the entire building into *utter* chaos."

"She didn't have the abortion then?" He knew he sounded hopeful.

The nurse gave him a dirty look. "No. She did not." *Oh good.* Relief swept over him. *Thank you, God.*

"Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"No," she said flatly as she returned to her paperwork.

"Please." He grabbed her wrist. "She could be in danger." The nurse stared but didn't answer. He gritted his teeth. "She's all I got. If anything happens to her, I swear..."

"She just ran out alone. She didn't leave with the guy she came with," she spoke softly and then stopped.

Matt looked at her questioningly. "What'd he do?"

"I think, he called his mom." Her voice was cool, and she shook her head as she looked back down at her papers. "They were discussing going to look for her."

"So, they're out looking for her?"

She shrugged, not looking up. "The kid wanted to."

"What about the guy that dropped them off?"

She shrugged again. "He dropped them off and left."

"Thank you." He backed up as he spoke and then turned and jogged out the door to his car. Now he just had to find her. *God, help me find her. Keep the baby safe. Please.*

Lonely and frightened, Taylor shivered as she stopped at the crosswalk. For a moment, she just stood and stared, unsure whether to turn or go straight. She didn't know where to go or what to do. All she felt like doing was crying, but she knew that wouldn't solve any of her current problems. She stared at the stop sign through teary eyes. She couldn't go back to that clinic which meant she couldn't have a life with Jack. Mark didn't really want her around. She really didn't want to go live at a shelter.

She knew her dad was going to hate her after what she tried to do.

Seeing an old, green, paint-chipped bench a few yards away, she decided to go sit down and reevaluate her life. *So many questions.* She stared down at the old stained and cracked sidewalk as she went. *Go home? Run away? Find Jack? Ask her brother to let her live with him? Apologize to Dad? Go back to the abortion clinic? Give birth and put the baby up for adoption? That might satisfy Jack. That might be okay with Dad. Maybe. But what about now?* She plopped down on the bench and rested her hand on her stomach. She closed her eyes, exhausted. Even if she did want to decide between calling Jack or her dad, she didn't have a cell phone. Jack had hers. She was in a bad section of town and until she got out of it, she really didn't even feel safe asking to use a phone at a gas station, even if there was one which there wasn't. Remembering the neighborhood, she opened her eyes to make sure no one was around. She looked around at the houses... paint chipped, bricks crumbling, windows broken, one even had a tarp over the roof.

Feeling someone staring at her, she gasped and turned. At the end of her gaze, were two excessively tattooed men, sitting on their decomposing front steps smoking, laughing, and staring.

Matt turned another corner in his car. *Where is she?* He knew she couldn't get far in her condition, but he also knew he'd been down almost all the streets near the clinic. He'd been doing this for nearly an hour and hadn't seen any sign of any of them. Part of him hoped the boys hadn't found her first, but the greater part just wanted her to be safe. He knew this was no neighborhood for her to be wandering around in. Still, he didn't know how to contact them to ask. He had already called Mrs. Sanders and asked her to call him if anyone came home. She said she would, so until that time, he planned to keep looking even if it took all night. He only hoped she didn't run off with Jack. Picking up his phone, he hit redial and waited. Hers was still off. He smacked the steering wheel. "Where are you?"

Not totally rested, but increasingly afraid of the two men staring at her, Taylor decided to get up and keep walking. If only she would come to a store or a restaurant or even a gas station, she would stop and ask to borrow their phone. *If only I could find one.*

After a few moments, she glanced back at the two men just to see them get up and start following her. Her heart jumped into turbo speed. She refused to speculate on their intentions. Instead she focused on trying to get out of there. She walked just as fast as she could. She tried to run, but she couldn't. She kept looking for a creative way out or for someone to help her. She couldn't find anything. They kept coming. Even though they weren't running, they were gaining on her.

Scared, crying, breathing hard, she began again to run. She had to, but her body just wouldn't allow what was needed. The two men started to jog behind her, enough to keep up the pressure, but they didn't advance on her for quite a while until one went wide around her and then turned blocking the way, forcing her to turn... into a dark, dead-end ally.

Gasping for air, eyes wide, she skidded to a stop, blocked by a high wooden fence. Heart pounding, she turned toward every direction, desperately looking for an escape route. The two men rejoined and began closing in on her. Taylor did the only thing she could. She threw her head back and screamed as loud and as shrill as she could, again and again.

Matt slammed on the brakes and rolled down his window. He thought he heard.... He did. Stomping on the gas, he advanced toward the screams. Getting close, he slowed, looking closely down each street, squinting to see though the dimness of dusk. He didn't see her. *Come on, scream again.* She did. He slammed on the brakes. *Here. It has to be right here.* He looked around. Nothing. He got out. *God help me find her.* He walked around. *There's nothing here. Just an ally with an old fence.* She screamed again. He turned toward it. *The fence!*

"No! Go away!" She screamed again as the evil men got even closer. "Leave me alone!" They were nearly five feet from her. "Go!" She screamed again. Four feet.

Matt raced down the ally, faster than he'd run in years. As he neared the fence, he looked desperately for a crate or a trashcan, something to get him over the top. Just then, Taylor let out a blood-cuddling scream causing him to ditch the idea entirely and go for broke. Asking for every ounce of energy, he took a running leap up, grabbed the top of the fence, and thrust himself over. Twisting in the air, he managed to tackle the one that had a hold of Taylor. The other one backed up, momentarily. After rolling over with the guy he'd tackled a few times, Matt got on top long enough to smash his fist into the man's face, stunning him long enough for Matt to be able to stand, grab his daughter's arm and back up.

After a moment, the man got up again with a vengeance. Matt reached behind his back and grabbed his revolver. "Get out of here!" He yelled breathlessly, aiming his firearm. "I mean it!"

One put up his hands. They both started backing up. "Look, man, we were just tryin' to have some fun."

"Not with my daughter." His eyes were steel.

"Sorry, man. Take it easy. We didn't mean any..." They backed faster as they got to the end of the alley and then turned and took off.

Shaky, Taylor headed over to an old wooden crate and sat down. After a little bit, Matt returned his gun to his holster and walked over to his daughter. She didn't look up, so he knelt down on one knee beside her. "Are you alright?" She nodded, starting to cry. "The baby?"

She nodded again. "I think so." Then, she burst into tears. She wanted to fall into someone's arms. She wanted someone to hold her, but since there was no one available, she just covered her face and cried into her hands.

Matt didn't know what to do. When things started getting emotional at the hospital, he usually walked out. He couldn't do that here, so he just waited. *Thank you for keeping them safe.*

"Hi, Melinda."

Absorbed in her charts on the computer, Melinda jumped. Carlos, who was leaning his shoulder against the wall just smiled. "Carlos." Somehow, she wasn't afraid of him. This just seemed like normal. "What are you doing here?"

"Came to get Jim."

"Oh. He's going back to work?"

"Called and said he was."

"Hmm. Okay. He's in room seventeen." She went back to the computer.

"Mel-in-da." He put his hand on her shoulder. She stiffened and looked up. "Can't we patch things up?"

"I don't know. I doubt it." She stared straight ahead.

"I'm willing to make an effort. Can't we talk?"

Shrugging, she looked at her watch. "It *is* past the time for my break," She looked up at him. "but don't you have to get back?"

"Ehh. Let 'em sweat." He grinned.

"Car-los, you shouldn't..."

"Quick cup of coffee. They can't deny me that. Besides, Jim could use the extra rest."

"Quick." She got up and walked with him to the lounge. She couldn't help being curious. She just didn't think he was a loony, psychopathic murderer. She didn't think she could know someone that long and that well and not know if he was... deranged. Still, she wanted to be sure. Part of her secretly wished it was him because the fear of the unknown seemed almost too much to bear. The thought of some unknown, unnamed villain lurking in the shadows somewhere out there sent chills up her spine. Carlos opened the door for her. She gave him a look rather than smiling. She didn't know her own mind. *Is he guilty or*

innocent?

They both headed toward the coffee. "I got it," Carlos said, walking faster. "So," She sat down. "what do you want to talk about?" she asked softly.

"Getting back together." He glanced over his shoulder as he finished filling the last cup. She didn't answer. "Look, Melinda," he brought the mugs over and set them on the table. "I love you... more than anyone I've ever loved. You're religious, and that's fine. We don't have to believe exactly the same thing to love each other."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"No. It's not. Opposites attract."

"In some ways. I don't want to fall in love with a man that I'm going to see in hell someday."

"Oh, come on, Melinda. You really think God is going to send me to hell someday just because I'm not religious. I'm a good person."

"But not perfect."

"Neither are you!"

"But I've been forgiven... and so can you." She looked at him.

He stood up. "I didn't come here to discuss religion."

"It's part of who I am."

"We were together for a long time without you bashing a Bible at me. What happened?"

"I was wrong."

"We were happy! Now all we do is fight."

"Maybe because you're trying to hold onto something that can't work."

He sat back down and took her hand. "Do you love me?"

"I care about you."

"Do you love me?"

"It can't work."

He stood up again, getting agitated. "Look, I'm sorry I ever said anything about taking the next step... if you're not ready for it. Can't we just go back to the way things were?"

"No." She stood up. "Don't you see. That was just the point where we found out it couldn't work. You believe in trying marriage out first, and I believe that is sin."

"So," he spoke softly, "You just want to get married?"

"No... not anymore."

"If that's what this was all about, I'm willing to...."

"It's not. It's about having different beliefs."

"You should have known that in the beginning!" He turned his back on her and walked away. "You shouldn't lead a guy on like that and then throw him away like a piece of trash when it's convenient!"

"That's not what happened."

"Yeah, well, it sure looks like it!" He turned around sharply. "You just think I'm not good enough for you."

"That's not true."

Getting angry, he started talking fast and cursing, repeating himself except for adding expletives.

"Stop it." She slammed her mug down, causing some of the coffee to spill.

He turned and began staring her down, his face hot with anger. "You're nothing but a..." He cursed her out.

"Get out!" She pointed toward the door. "Get out of my life!"

"Fine, but you'll be sorry. Believe me, you'll be sorry." He punched open the door and left. Shivers ran through her body.

"Dad?" Matt pushed the car tire to make it go all the way on. He was rapidly becoming convinced that he should have held those two punks for the police. Letting them go had cost him two tires, two hours at last count, and nearly a two-mile walk to get another tire since he only had one spare. Then there was Taylor complaining the whole time that he should have roadside assistance. "Dad!"

"I'm going as fast as I can." *Stop whining.*

"Could you come here, please?"

"In a minute." He wasn't about to let the stupid tire fall off after he had finally gotten it in place. So, he grabbed the wrench and tightened the first lug nut.

"Oh oww!" He heard his daughter yell. *Oh no.* He knew this would be way to early. "Oww!" He tightened the second one faster... the third one even faster. With the fourth, he felt like the Hulk as he yanked it around. "Oww!"

"Has your water broke?" He yelled over his shoulder as he opened the trunk and tossed the tools back in.

"No, not yet." She was breathing fast.

"Breathe slower. Try to relax." He prayed it was false labor. He'd gone through too much today for that baby to lose it now. Still, it might survive, even being born this early. Slamming the trunk, he hurried to the driver's side and got in, grabbing his seat belt simultaneously. "Maybe it's not too late to stop it. We aren't that far from a hospital." He stomped the accelerator but tried to keep it smooth.

"Maybe it isn't meant to be."

"Maybe it is. Maybe it's your own stupidity today that's going to cost this child it's life."

"What about *my* life?"

"It's not more important than his," he muttered.

She turned her head and stared out the window. "Not to you anyway."

"Not at all. You both have the same rights. You created that life. Now, you're responsible for it, whether you like it or not."

"Says you."

"No. That's the way things are."

"I don't agree... not till it's born."

"That might be tonight, and it might be disabled because of you!"

"Then maybe I should have just gone through with the abortion. Maybe it would have been better."

Matt's voice softened with curiosity. "Why didn't you?"

"I don't know." She kept staring out the window. "Why do you care?"

Matt's throat tightened, unable to say how he really felt. "It's the right thing to do."

She rolled her eyes. "Everything's so black and white with you. Not everyone agrees with your ideas on right and wrong."

"If you don't think it's wrong, why didn't you go through with it?" He merged into the right lane, stopped briefly on red and then turned.

"I don't know." She rubbed her stomach. "It felt like death in there." She cradled her tummy as if trying to hold the baby. "I don't want him to die." She spoke softly.

"That makes two of us," he mumbled back as he took the car around a semi.

Nightmare

"Hold it!" Melinda chased down and blocked Dr. Kruz as he headed for an exit. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Home, Melinda, Home."

"Home!"

"Yes, home. You know that place where tired and weary doctors go to relax and recharge for the next day?" He looked at his watch. "Which won't be for long, now."

"Relax. You want to relax while the rest of us...."

"Last I heard it wasn't outlawed. Besides...." He let his head wearily fall back and hit the wall. "I've been here twice as long as you have."

"We need you! Just think of all those people in need."

"Yeah, like me. I am in serious need of food and sleep. You'll still have two doctors. That's all you would have had if Doctor Fredricks would have stayed. Besides he would have been gone by now anyway," he mumbled, letting his eyes close.

"No! He would stay! Dr. Mathews isn't going to last much longer, and it's too busy for just one!"

"You've had plenty of time to find more."

"I tried! I was lucky to get him. There's only two hours before the next shift change."

"There you go, think positive." He slapped her arm, and then turned to go."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Sorry, but I have to get some sleep before tomorrow. Tomorrow's going to be rough."

She stared after him blankly. "What's tomorrow?"

"Halloween." He went out the door.

Oh no. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

"Don't worry. We'll make it." Dr. Mathews walked up behind her.

She responded by spinning around and pointing her pen at him. "You can't leave until I can find a replacement."

He smiled. "I'm not going anywhere. We're all in this together." His eyes were tired.

"I'm sorry. I know you've had it rough today."

Smiling, he momentarily put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Don't worry, honey, we'll make it." They both started to walk.

"Yeah?" she mumbled. "That's yet to be seen. If I ever get my hands on that Dr. Fredricks, I'll..."

"Hey, Melinda!" an orderly called to her. "One of your deserters came back."

"Really? Which one?"

"Dr. Fredricks."

"Yes." She did a fist bump.

"I'm not sure if he's working though. You may have to convince him."

"Oh, I'll convince him." She marched toward the waiting room. Part of her was concerned for his daughter and curious about why he was here if it wasn't to work, but the other part of her was on a mission to advocate for the heart, asthma, and gunshot patients that would surely be coming within the next couple of hours.

"Hey, Melinda," Dr. Jackson, Taylor's obstetrician, raced past as she got near the waiting room.

"Hi," Melinda stopped when she reached Matt and thumbed over her shoulder toward Dr. Jackson. "What's going on?"

"Taylor's in labor... maybe false, though"

"Oh, I hope so. Where was she?"

"In Chicago, near an abortion clinic. She changed her mind."

"Well, that's something at least. Now if they can just save the baby."

"Yeah. How are things here?"

I thought you'd never ask. "Not good. Dr. Kruz just left. I got Dr. Diaz to come in, but Dr. Mathews is about at the end of his rope. We've got five waiting to be seen, two being seen now, and three in ambulances on the way. Make that *three* being seen, if you count your daughter."

He gave her a tired smile. "Do you need some help?"

"Oh, yes!" She nodded. "We really do." He nodded and followed her down the hall.

Hearing someone mumbling and thrashing in the bunk beside him, Derrick woke up. Groggily, he turned and watched Jim toss a few moments before deciding to get up. "Jim," he whispered, plopping down on the side of his bed. It didn't wake him up. So, Derrick just sat there a moment, trying to hear what he was mumbling.

All Derrick could make out was, “No,” “I’m sorry,” and “Don’t go.”

“Jim.” He took his arm and yanked him back as he tried to roll over again. “Jim, wake up.”

“Huh?” Jim blinked his eyes open as stinging sweat dripped in from his forehead. He wiped it off with his arm. “Derrick?” He rolled on his side and propped himself up on his forearm. Shaking his head once, he tried to bring himself back to reality. “Sorry.” He rubbed his face. “I guess I was dreaming.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for waking me up.” Jim got up and grabbed his shirt. “I think I’ll get a snack.”

Derrick followed him. “Might as well too, now that I’m up.”

Jim shrugged. He felt like he should tell Derrick to go back to bed, but at the same time, he wanted the company... someone to keep him in present reality so his mind didn’t keep going back to those terrible days when.... “Want some orange juice?” Jim asked walking to the refrigerator.

“Sure.” Derrick rubbed his face as he sat down at the table and then ran his hand through his hair, making it even more messy than it was.

Jim got the glasses and the juice and set them on the table, before plopped down in the chair across from Derrick. “What a night.” He sprawled out, letting his head fall back against the top of the chair.

“Yeah. It sounded like it. Wanna talk about it?” Derrick grabbed the carton of juice.

“Not really.” Jim stared at the carton, starting to flash back.

“Why not?” Derrick slammed the juice down, attempting to bring him back.

Jim cracked his neck. “I haven’t even told Jess.”

“That’s okay. I won’t tell.”

“It’s not like... I mean, there’s no reason why she shouldn’t know.”

“Then why haven’t you told her?” He took a drink.

“I don’t know.” Jim stared at the glass. “She’ll think I’m a coward.”

“Oh, then there’s definitely no danger in telling me. ... I already think that.” He gave a playful sideways grin.

“Oh, yeah?” Jim threw the salt at him.

“No-o.” He smiled, but then his face grew serious. “And she wouldn’t believe that any more than I would.”

Jim rubbed his face again. “It’s fear, I guess. Fear that the same thing will happen to her. Fear that I’ll stop loving her from fear I’ll lose her. I’ve started to tell her a few times, but every time I look into her eyes, I remember that time she was in the hospital... the time I almost lost her... and then I just want to forget, but the more I try, the more I remember. I can’t even sleep without....” His voice trailed off.

“Who’d you lose?” Jim just stared at him. “I do have a little bit of experience with losing someone.” Derrick gave a pain-filled half smile.

“Yeah.” Jim thought a moment about Derrick’s own experience with his young wife. “It was my mom. It’s just the way it happened that seemed so unjust. We needed her.”

I know that feeling. “Tell me about it. How old were you?”

“Eight.”

“I can guess where she died, but what’d she die of?”

“Doctors.”

Derrick just stared a moment, waiting for elaboration. “Come again.”

“An overdose of a bad drug combination. Apparently the two they gave her didn’t mix. I was only a kid. I don’t know if it was the doctor that prescribed wrong or the nurse that administered wrong. All I knew was that they killed her. It was supposed to be so routine. After all, three-year-olds get their tonsils out. All I had to do was wait with Dad until mom was out of surgery. It never occurred to me that there might be a mistake or that mom was even in danger. This was just to make her feel better, so she didn’t get sore throats so often. Simple.”

“It’s funny how kids think everything’s so simple. They get it in their mind what life’s supposed to be like and then they expect it.”

Jim paused, thinking. “It just seemed so cruel. She didn’t deserve that.”

“Who does?”

“Our family was so close. Our family centered around mom. She’s the one that made every day happy. Then all of a sudden, with no warning, she was gone. One minute, she was fine... healthy... strong... and the next, the doctor says she wants to see us one last time. The day before she’s running and laughing, and then suddenly she’s hemorrhaging and suffocating and convulsing... and then she’s gone... forever... and we were all alone. Dad couldn’t take it. He left. My uncle raised me. He wasn’t married. I always said I would never marry.” He forced a smile. “Somehow, Jess changed my mind.”

“I was young when I lost my parents.”

“At least you didn’t have to watch them die.”

“No. I heard my mom screaming in the next room while I was trying to get my sister out. I had to decide between helping her and getting my sister to safety. I knew she said she’d die for us kids, so I saved my sister first. I thought I could make it back for her. I tried.” He shrugged. “There are just some things we can’t control. If it’s their time to go, it’s their time. You told me that.”

“I doubt I said that. I don’t buy it. Deaths can be prevented... like you saved your sister.”

“But I couldn’t save my mother. There was no way.”

“Are you sure about that?” Jim mumbled, staring into space.

“Yes.” Derrick’s voice was firm. His posture stiffened. His face hardened. “Maybe I could have prevented my wife’s death but not my mom’s. There was no way back into the house.”

Jim rubbed his face. “I’m sorry Derrick. I didn’t mean to bring back old memories for you. Somehow when it’s another person all the common platitudes work. Only God knows. He has a reason for everything. He’s given us all a story, and there are some things we don’t have any control over. How we’re born and how we die are two of them.” He paused. “Now tell me how to believe it.”

Derrick looked a little shocked. “That God has a reason for everything?”

“No. That we don’t have any control over it.”

“Oh.” He paused. “I can’t.” He paused. “I believe we do.... to some extent. I couldn’t make a career at saving lives if I didn’t. I don’t believe that suicide is God’s will, yet people do it. You’re the one that always told me that nothing can happen without God’s okay.” His voice was growing more tentative.

Jim huffed a light tentative laugh. “You know that old story about the guy that was going to jump off a building or something, and another guy went up to talk him out of it, and by time they got done talking they both jumped? I have a feeling that is where this conversation is heading. By time we get done with it, you’re going to start dreaming about Monica again.”

Derrick looked away sharply. “That’s in the past.” He turned back. “And what happened to your mom is in the past.”

“She’s in the past, but what happened to her can still happen.”

"Then get over being afraid to die!" Derrick wished his voice hadn't sounded so demanding, especially when he saw Jim's expression. "You do what you can, right? The people around you hopefully do what they can. You pray about your choices, and then before you start, and while your doing it, right? Then that's all you can do, right?"

Jim nodded his head, but his face was still noncommittal. "Right."

Derrick rolled his eyes and tried again. "Was your mother a Christian?" Jim shook his head. "Well, there you go. You told me that you have to pray a lot about things if you don't want them to go sour. Did she?" Jim just stared at him, so Derrick continued. "My mom didn't either."

"But your wife was." Jim's voice was soft and his eyes pleading. "And Dr. Fredrick's wife was."

Derrick accidentally rolled his eyes as he stood up, took the orange juice back to the fridge, accidentally slammed the door, and turned back around. "Let me give you a little free advice from Monica. You can't fix the past, and you can't change the future until you get to it. So, in the meantime stop worrying about it!"

Dr. Jackson wearily walked down the hall, removing her mask when she came to the counter where Dr. Fredricks was standing. He turned toward her. "Are they going to be okay?"

"Taylor will be fine. How her baby does will depend on her. For now, the contractions and bleeding have stopped. We'll want to keep her at least tomorrow, but if she remains stable, she should be able to go home in a day or two... and home is what I mean! She will likely have to be on bedrest until the baby comes."

"January?!" He felt stupid for the outburst of emotion, but he couldn't help it.

She tried to hold back a smile. "Yes, doctor. That's when the baby's due."

Matt meant to lean back against the wall, but kind of fell onto it instead. *January. That's more than two months away!* He seriously contemplated getting a second opinion. Not only would *he* have to do absolutely everything around the house, but he knew after one week with nothing to do, Taylor would be impossible to live with. He'd probably even have to hire a tutor for her schooling. His mind raced from one problem to the next, trying to come up with solutions, but the only thing he could come up with, at the moment, was strangling Jack... at least that would make him feel better.

"Hi, Doctor."

Matt looked up to see that Dr. Jackson had left and Melinda was standing there. "Hi. Are you still here? The shift changed over three hours ago."

"I know." She plopped down against the wall across from him. "I'm nearing the end of my rope."

"You should go home. No one expects you to stay. You've done more than your share."

"Everyone has today. How's your daughter doing?"

"She'll make it. They're going to put her on bed rest until the baby comes," he spoke quietly, reverting back to his own thoughts.

She nodded, yawning. "I should go," She rummaged through her purse for her keys. "before I'm too tired to drive home."

"Yeah." He looked at her. "Get some rest. Afterall, tomorrow's Halloween."

"I know," she stated dryly as she pulled out her keys. "Don't remind me. I may faint from exhaustion right now instead of waiting for tomorrow."

He smiled. "You'll make it."

"Yeah." Her gaze drifted away, and then jerked back at him almost in panic. "You're working tomorrow, aren't you?" She hadn't meant to sound so urgent. Still, it was no secret that, even if no one liked working with him, when Dr. Fredricks wasn't

there the whole place turned into an understaffed chaotic mess... and she wasn't just thinking about today.

Matt felt like puffing out his chest. He'd worked hard for his reputation, and he liked it when people acknowledged it. "Oh, sure. Same place. Same time."

Same time coming in maybe, but she was betting he'd stay over like he usually did when it was busy. "You'd better go then too. Seven 'o clock is only a few hours away."

"Yeah." He looked at his watch. "I may just sleep in my office since Taylor's not home anyway."

She nodded sleepily as she found her car key on the ring. "Well, see ya tomorrow." She turned to go.

"Be safe."

She nodded as she walked to the exit, but the phrase made her feel apprehensive. Home sweet home didn't feel that safe anymore... not after last night. One thing, at least she knew Carlos was guarded by a fleet of firefighters while he finished the rest of his shift tonight... if it was Carlos, which she wasn't at all sure of.

Halloween

When Melinda got home, she was dead tired. Part of her wanted to fall down on the couch and sleep for a week; the other part felt too tired to sleep. Remembering she hadn't had supper, she decided to go in the kitchen and grab a snack and then try to find a late-night news program. As she got some crackers and cheese, she glanced around the kitchen, half checking nervously, half grateful that everything seemed to be in order. She wasn't about to take safety for granted anymore. She tried to find peace in the fact that the police had promised to patrol her neighborhood regularly. She was supposed to find peace in the fact that Carlos was at work, since everyone thought he was the stalker. She figured after the way he'd talked to her earlier that she should be one-hundred percent convinced, too... but she wasn't.

After getting her snack, she sat down on the couch and absentmindedly began flipping through TV channels. The more she passed, the sleepier she got. Stopping on an animal show, her eyes got very heavy, and she ended up falling asleep before the first commercial.

The next thing she knew it was morning, and the blaring welcome to the morning newscast startled her awake. Absentmindedly feeling the couch, she found the remote and turned it off. She was a little surprised she'd fallen asleep with the TV on. She didn't usually do that. *Boy, must have really been tired last night.*

Getting up, she slowly made her way to the kitchen, plugged in the coffee pot, dumped in two scoops of grounds, and poured in the water. For a few moments, she just waited there, listening to the percolating sounds of the machine and staring out the window. A whistling blue jay and the glittering sunshine on long, frosty blades of grass brought a brief smile to her face... until her eyes lifted to her garage and bright red paint glistening on the door. Curiosity forced her to go investigate, but she took a long kitchen knife with her just in case. Getting close, she froze as soon as she could make out the red words. Right there in big, red, gothic letters with drips that resembled blood, her garage door wished her a Happy Halloween. Chills ran up and down her spine. She tried to tell herself it was just the neighbor kids, but after the incident a night ago, she didn't really believe that. Her eyes glanced every which way as she backed toward her house and into the door.

Biting her lip, she stopped mid-kitchen and jumped at a loud shriek and ghostly scream followed by blaring, eerie Halloween music. Eyes wide, clutching the kitchen knife, she slowly ventured into the living room, ready for battle, but nothing was there... just the TV. It was back on, switched to a different channel, playing a creepy horror movie. She kept looking around. *Someone has to be in here. The TV wouldn't just do that on its own.* Overcome with fear, she snatched her cell phone off the table and darted outside, dialing Trent as soon as she got in her car. No answer. Glancing at the clock, she dialed again. *Nearly ten. It could be Carlos. He got off work at... but he couldn't have painted the garage in broad daylight.* She looked over both shoulders and sank lower in her seat. No answer. She hung up and dialed 911.

Wade leaned against the wall, watching the masses of people charging here and there in the mall, looking for anything suspicious. Actually, lots of people looked a little shady to him. He wasn't sure who to suspect as a potential risk. While he tried to determine which ones looked more like criminals, his mind wandered to Mellissa. He guessed she was at work right now. He hadn't talked to her this morning at all. He'd practically tip-toed out of the bedroom, gotten ready in silence, and snuck out of the house. He'd even opted for breakfast on the way rather than risk waking her and starting the day with the fourth battle of World War III. So far, his day had gone pretty well. Nothing had happened. *Now, if things could just stay that way...* Before he could finish his thought, his radio went off calling him to Marticello's Arts and Crafts... shoplifting. *Here we go.*

Jim guided Danny, his buckskin gelding, off the secluded gravel road, down the ditch, and back up into the harvested soybean field. He shivered as the cool breeze whipped through his half-unbuttoned jean jacket. In the distance the bright, blue sky met in perfect contrast with waving golden cornstalks still waiting for harvest. Asking Danny to turn, he walked him slowly by the tall, blowing grass of the ditch before coming to the trees and creek lining the far side of the property line. Golden leaves

floated down from the trees and blew across the field.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to soak in every moment of the day's beauty. He loved riding in this field after harvest, especially when the farmer planted soybeans, so he didn't have to maneuver around leftover stumps of corn. Turning Danny to walk next to the creek, he looked up at the leaves drifted down all around him. He stopped for a few minutes to watch a couple cardinals chasing each other through the nearly bare branches and a ladderback woodpecker pecking its way around a maple. The sound of the wind rustling through the leaves relaxed him.

Jim nudged Danny forward just as a small doe who'd been drinking at the creek jumped up the ravine and bounded into the woods. Holding the reins with one hand, he repositioned his leather cowboy hat with the other, causing some leaves that had drifted down on the rim to fall off. He rode slowly by the creek for about a mile until he reached the golden corn field he had seen in the distance.

The sun warmed the side of his face while the breeze chilled his neck. He never felt so alive as he did on the back of his horse. He squeezed his legs, causing Danny to accelerate to a gallop. Staying in sync with the movement of the horse, he felt like he was flying every time Danny's hooves powered off the ground with a lope through the air. Momentarily, he closed his eyes and let the feeling take him. He could barely feel Danny's hooves touch in between strides. It almost felt as if he weren't coming down. Maybe they were flying. The breeze and the sun together sent chills down through his body. It was almost a disappointment when they reached the other side. Turning him, they walked for a moment next to the waving pines. Then he cantered up the small hill. At the top, he could see the lay of the land for miles, including one small rider, galloping toward him. She had the unmistakable frame and bouncing ponytail of his favorite cowgirl, Jess. Smiling to himself, he leaned against the saddle horn and waited for her to get there.

"Howdy," she said with a grin as she pulled her mare to a stop. "Gorgeous day, isn't it?" Jim nodded slowly, waiting for the rest of the story. "Oh, Derrick came to ride, and he offered to watch Morgan for a bit so that I could come and join you. He even saddled butterscotch for me."

Jim nodded again. He had to half smile, but also half grit his teeth to himself. *The man is devious.* And as far as Jim was concerned, he had no right to go prearranging meetings for him and his wife to talk.

"Sure was nice of him, wasn't it?"

I could think of a different description myself.

"It's been a while... since we've ridden together, I mean."

"That it has."

"Wanna go?" She leaned forward in her saddle and gave him a playful grin.

"Let's go." He slapped his reins, and they both took off in a gallop across the field.

After getting up from his morning nap that also doubled as his night's sleep, Matt started his day by checking on his daughter. "Doing alright?" he asked after coming in her room.

Picking up the remote she muted the TV. "Of course." Her voice sounded bitter. "Isn't that part of the requirements?"

"No-o."

"Huh." She gave a bitter laugh. "When did that change?"

He raises his palms in irritation. "All I wanted to know is if there was anything wrong... anything you wanted me to do."

She rolled over, turning her back to him. "There are a million things wrong. There is nothing you can do."

"Fine." He turned to leave, but then stopped door in hand. "Just have the baby!" He turned back around sharply. "You can put yourself out that much. I will find a family that will love it... or I'll raise it."

She turned back over to face him. "You never loved me!" Her voice was in shock that he would suggest he would love

the baby... even though that wasn't what he said.

His voice softened. "I do."

She laughed again. "You never loved me."

"I've done a lot for you! I've worked hard to give you everything you needed and most of what you wanted."

"You have done your duty. So, take your silver bullet and lea-ve." She turned her back on him again.

He paused a minute, and then turned back toward the door, opening it. His voice softened, but he didn't look back. "I'm sorry." He walked out.

Taylor lifted her bed to sit up and looked down at her blanket thoughtfully. Part of her wanted to hurt him, hurt him bad, throw everything she had at him and make him pay. The other part of her sort of admired him. Everything he said he was going to do, he did. He was strong. As far as his job, he could out do anyone in hours, most people in skill... and absolutely *no one* in bedside manner. She was sure he could raise the baby and give it everything it needed. Actually, her life had been quite comfortable for a rich latch-key kid. But the kid would never have a real birthday party or know how most people celebrate Christmas.

"Finally." Jack walked in, looking over his shoulder as he closed the door. "I thought your old man would never leave. Doesn't he ever go home? He was here last night... practically guarding your room. I finally gave up and went home."

"You give up too easily. He was working last night... with me for maybe a half an hour twice."

"Naw. It was longer than that." He came and sat down in the chair next to her bed. "What happened?" He put his hands up.

"What happened?! Where were you? My dad had to find me. I didn't even have my cell phone! You took it!"

"Like it was my responsibility to find you! You're the one that took off like a spoiled kid! Besides, I looked. Where was I supposed to look? By time I decided your brother wasn't coming back with the car, and I wasn't going to be able to get a hold of him...."

"You didn't have to wait! I was walking!" she exclaimed.

"No running... running away! ... What was I supposed to do without a car? Were you planning for us to walk home? Then we both would have been stranded," he argued.

"So, you prefer I be stranded all alone!"

"It was your choice! No one asked you to fly off the handle! Besides you should be old enough to take care of yourself! You shouldn't need to be rescued like a little girl!"

Her eyes shot daggers at him. She paused. "What do you mean my brother never came back?"

"He never did?" He walked away. "I had to call my mother to come get me. She was mad enough to kill, and I'm not kidding. He turned back around. His voice softened. "I'm leaving." He walked back toward the bed.

"What?"

"I told you I would if you decided to have that kid. I don't want anything to do with it."

Her face crumpled, but she tried not to cry. "I thought you loved me!"

"I love you, not that baby. I'm not going to be a dad. I'm not going to turn in my life and get tied down. I love *you*, but I wouldn't marry you. I won't be tied down."

Tears streamed down her face. "Where are you going?"

"Florida. My dad's down there."

"You don't have to leave, Jack. We won't bother you."

"I'm leaving." He walked toward the door. "I made up my mind."

"Don't you even want to know what it looks like?!"

"No." He turned around. "I just want to forget that it ever happened."

"What if I give it up for adoption?"

"Good. That'd be best for both of you." He turned back around and grabbed the door handle.

"When are you leaving?!"

"Soon." He didn't turn around. "You won't see me again." He went out. Taylor burst into tears.

"I think you should stay somewhere else for a while." Trent followed Melinda out to her car.

"Where? In a hotel? My family's too far away to commute to work."

"Take a leave from work."

"For how long?"

"Until we can arrest a suspect."

"How long is that?" Trent looked away. "You can't insist it was Carlos. He was at work."

"Not this morning. He could have hired someone to paint the garage."

She turned toward him sharply. "You're grasping at straws. You've got no reason to think it was him!"

"I've got no reason to think it was anyone else!"

"It is Halloween. Maybe it was just a coincidence."

"The TV coming back on a different channel?"

She sat down in the driver's seat. "Maybe I accidently switched channels instead of turning off the power. Maybe that channel just wasn't getting a signal when I switched it. I was just waking up." She looked up at him.

He shrugged. "I'll still have the boys finish the sweep of the house, and we'll check the remote for fingerprints. I still think you should stay somewhere else."

"Maybe I'll get a security system installed."

"My mom has one of those. It works, but a professional would be able to disarm it."

Melinda wanted to say. That's not your real mom, but she didn't. "Well, no professional would know anything about me."

"Let's hope not."

"I don't need a big brother," she muttered as she slammed her car door.

"What?" He yelled from outside.

"Nothing!"

"Don't 'oh brother' me! I'm just trying to look out for you!"

"Don't bother." She jerked the shifter in reverse and pushed the gas harder than she had intended.

Leaning against Jim's arm, Jess stared down at the rippling stream as they sat together in the grass at the edge of the field. "This was a wonderful ride. We ought to find a way to do it more often."

"Yeah, we should." His voice was soft. "You know I just can't picture Derrick babysitting."

"When I first got pregnant, I couldn't picture you babysitting either." She smiled when Jim gave her a look. "I do hope he's doing alright. I wasn't planning to be gone this long. This day's just too hard to give up."

"I'm sure he's fine." He meant to say, "Why don't you go check on them?" in attempt to avoid the impending conversation, but honestly, he didn't really want her to go.

"I sure do miss you when you're at work." She picked up his arm and put it around her.

He pulled her closer. "Yeah, but I get more days off than a normal person would."

"That's true." She snuggled up to him. "I just hope you're always here. That you always come home. I don't think I could make it without you."

He glanced at her, surprised. "Since when did you start worrying about that?"

"I've always worried about that. I guess it's part of being a fireman's wife. You do have a dangerous job."

"It doesn't take a dangerous job to kill someone. In fact, I doubt if it makes that much of a difference at all." He spoke thoughtfully.

She nodded. "How well do I know that. Danger's everywhere, and it sure does seem to find us. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, though. It keeps life interesting." She paused. "We both like danger... as long as nothing happens." She paused again. "More than likely nothing ever will."

Releasing his grip, he turned sharply to look at her. "Did Derrick tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Did he?!"

"No, he didn't tell me anything. Exactly what are we talking about?"

"Nothing." He turned away, afraid he had accidentally opened the door to the impending conversation when she had simply been out for a ride.

"What nothing?" She rolled onto her knees and put her hands on her hips. "You just admitted it. Something is bothering you. You told your friend, and you won't tell your wife." She crossed her arms.

"There's nothing to tell! There's nothing bothering me!" He stood up.

"Oh, I can tell." She stood. "It's 'not been bothering' you a lot lately."

"Why does it matter?!"

"Because I don't have any secrets from you!"

"This doesn't affect you!" He threw his hands up.

"Oh, doesn't it? What else haven't you told me?"

"Oh, come on." He grabbed Danny and swung up on him.

She snatched one of his reins. "I'm glad you and Derrick are such good friends. You can just sleep out in the barn with him!" She threw the rein back, hitting the horse and sending him off in a fast gallop... in the wrong direction. Swinging up on Butterscotch, she determined to beat her husband home and bolt the door. If he was going to stubbornly refuse to let loose of the moldy secret, she was going to dedicate herself to changing his mind. Her whole marriage she had been trying to find out

what happened before he came to live with his Uncle, and the time was NOW! She kicked Butterscotch even faster.

Matt knocked at Taylor's door, but then just went in when there was no answer. He could tell she'd been crying. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter." Her voice was hard.

"Something happened." He walked up and stood next to her bed. "The nurse said Jack was here."

"He just told me he's leaving. That should make you happy!" Her voice was accusatory.

Matt nodded. "Where was he last night?"

She turned away. "I don't want to talk about last night."

"And you still love him, even after he abandoned you, even though he's going to leave you!"

Her voice softened, and she spoke mostly to herself. "I really thought he'd marry me." Tears streamed down her face again.

Matt sat down on the bed. "I wish I had an opinion about that, but I don't even know him other than a first name." He paused, staring off. "I sure haven't seen anything positive from him, but then you've been going right along too. I'd like to say I'd help you two out if he stuck around and you got married, but that's taking a lot for granted."

"Like what?"

"That he'll commit to marriage and won't just leave when the going gets tough. That he's willing to work. That he loves you. That he respects the sanctity of life. So far, he's answered, 'no,' to all of those."

"He said he's going to leave... if..."

"If you don't kill your baby." She glanced at him, surprised he figured that out. "I know how that type thinks."

"He's not a type. He's a person."

"So's the baby." She looked away. "How can you love someone that thinks *that* little of life? How can you think so little of it?" He shook his head and stood up. "I don't understand."

"I'm not going to abort the baby."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." She rubbed her tummy, almost smiling. "They did an ultrasound today."

"I'm glad you changed your mind." There was no edge on his voice, even though she expected it. He sat back down. "It's a boy, isn't it?" He smiled.

She gave him a look back. "It's a boy."

"Can I see the pictures?"

"I'm supposed to get them tomorrow." She cocked her head in interest, genuinely surprised they made it through a whole conversation without fighting.

Matt stood up. "I need to get back. The ER was already starting to fill up. I can't wait to see what tonight brings."

"You going to keep working through the afternoon and tonight?"

He swallowed hard, then shrugged. "There's no reason to go home."

"Why not?" Her eyes were question marks.

"No one's there." He stared at the door then glanced at her. "That's how I felt after your mother died. I tried to stay

away from the house... and the memories.” He could see realization set in on her face. “I was wrong. I held onto it way too long. I hurt all my children. I’m sorry.”

Taylor just stared. She didn’t know what to say. She’d never heard him talk like that. Matt didn’t wait too long for a response. Her expression told him she understood. So, he left.

Heart rate increasing, Wade tried to stand still behind his handcuffed, eight-teen year old suspect who was sitting impatiently on the curve. He tried to portray a confident demeanor, but the more the young man’s eyes darted back and forth looking for an escape route the more nervous he got. The young female earlier had been bad enough with her yelling and cursing, but as he stared at this guy’s protruding muscles, the only outlook he could see for himself was... blood. In fact, he was sure his own urge to head for the hills was twice as strong as the crook’s. Apparently not, because while he stared down the road in eager anticipation of a cop car, the suspect jumped up and bolted. “Hey! Get back here!” *Like that’s going to happen.* Wade rolled his eyes at himself as he took off after him and chased him through the cars in the parking lot. He was sure the suspect wasn’t supposed to be able to run in handcuffs, yet somehow, the young man hadn’t gotten that message. They zigged around one car and then zagged around another, next to a few, and then up and over the hood of one that was parked too close to the one in front of it. *Will you... Ouch!* Wade hopped a few steps in reaction to banging his knee on one of the side mirrors. *Uh oh.*

Wade about froze when he saw a shiny, black car speeding toward them, driven by a similar looking young man. His suspect bolted toward it. *Nooo!* Wade could see his career vanishing before his eyes... on his very first day no less! He charged after the suspect, but he was pretty far behind. What he needed was... *Yes!* The suspect tripped and fell down... but quickly rolled over and got back up. Still, he was down just long enough for Wade to catch up and with a flying leap, tackle him. Even handcuffed, the suspect put up a strong defense, just strong enough to keep Wade busy until his friend jumped from the car, thrust Wade up, and threw a massive blow into his face, his stomach, and then his face again. Seeing stars, Wade fell back onto the pavement as the two jumped into their car and sped off. Coming to his senses, he heard sirens approaching in the distance. Sitting up, He watched as the police car practically collided with the black car barreling out of the parking lot and then pursued it out of sight.

Wade let out a sigh to try and calm himself. His whole body shook as he tried to stand up. A car honked at him to get out of the way. He stumbled backwards and fell back against the hood of a parked sedan. Standing up, he forced his legs to hold him. He refused to give his wife the satisfaction of being right... or the guy that had trained him yesterday... the one that was sure he wasn’t going to last out the day. He looked at his watch... one hour left. He’d make it. Stumbling, he caught himself on a car window. That was, unless he got fired first.

“Who’s next?” Matt rubbed his face wearily as he walked up to the nurse’s desk. One nurse stopped typing and looked up at him. “We have ... room 2a... knife laceration... drunk while pumpkin carving; room four... lacerations, abrasions, and concussion... hit while crossing the street; room five... burn victim; room seven... broken hip... due to removing t.p. from her tree; room twelve... dislocated shoulder; room thirteen... multiple burns and intoxication. You’d never guess what happened to him. And then in the ward...”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll start with four.” He spoke loudly over the noise and stepped out of the way seconds before being flattened by a charging nurse with a crash cart. “Where’s Dr. Henderson?”

“Room three. Peanut Allergy.”

“Dr. Martin?”

“Room six. Hand laceration... courtesy of another pumpkin.”

“And a knife.” She nodded. “I’ll be in four.”

Jim put a couple more meatballs on his plate of spaghetti and tossed salad and followed Jess into the living room.

“Someone’s hungry tonight.” Jess smiled, eyeing his plate as he set it on the TV tray in front of the couch.

"Between riding this morning, stacking hay while I was locked out of the house," he gave her a look. "working with the yearling, and then training the barrel racers for your shindig coming up, don't you think I have a right?"

"It's not *my* shindig. You're a youth leader, too." Jess set her two plates on the end table, sat down on the other side of the couch, and then held Morgan's arm as she crawled up on the cushion in between them. "Here you go, baby." Jess handed Morgan her plate.

"Tha-nk you." Morgan scooted back and then put the plate down in her lap.

Jim muted the TV as it went to commercial, and Jess reached for her notebook. "Now then, we need to start making plans."

"You had plans... barrel racing. Remember?"

"Besides that. We only have a few short weeks before a hundred or more kids converge on this little homestead expecting a full day jampacked with fun on the farm."

"Ranch."

"Be that as it may. What are we going to do for it?" Jim just unmuted the TV. "Jim!" Jess playfully turned toward him with her hands on her hips. "You are not cooperating."

Smiling, Morgan quit eating and turned toward her daddy. "Yeah, Daddy, Cooo-perate."

"I think you mean recuperate, and I'm not."

Jess crossed her arms. "You can still sleep out in the barn."

"Come on, Jess."

"I mean it. You've been impossible all week. No, make that all month. In fact, ever since..."

"Jessica!"

"And I'm getting a little tired of it. Whatever's bothering you, I hope you get over it, and you might as well sleep in the barn since you find talking to Derrick so much more enlightening then speaking to your wife!"

"Fine!" Grabbing his plate, he stood up, snatched his coat from the table, and stomped out the door toward the barn.

"Wa-a-de." Mellissa kicked his shoe.

"Huh?" Wade jerked awake, sitting straight up on the couch.

"Supper's ready." She looked tired.

"Oh," Wade rubbed his face. "We could just eat it in here."

"You can at least sit at the table with me!" she snapped.

"O-kay." He stood up and followed her into the kitchen. "It was just a suggestion."

"I could think of plenty of suggestions myself," she mumbled, grabbing the soup from off the counter and setting down next to the pretty plate of quartered patty melts. "How was work?"

"Just fine." Wade grinned. *Terrible just terrible.* "How was yours?"

"Same as always."

"Dinner looks great." Wade pulled out her chair for her and then sat down himself.

"Did anything happen?" She set her small bowl of salad in the middle of her plate and reached for the dressing.

He contemplated the consequences of telling her the details about his traumatic first solo day. "Oh, just the usual. "

She put her napkin on her lap. "How can you have a usual when it's your first day?"

I don't know, after about the fourth arrest, it was starting to feel pretty normal, and I'm on a first name basis with the cop on that beat, now. "I guess I meant, what you might expect for a security guard at the mall."

"What's that?" She stared down at her salad.

Wade nearly lost it and rolled his eyes, but he forced a smile instead. "I had a girl 'bout in her twenties try to lift some expensive paint and some brushes from an arts and craft store. Said she needed it for a college project that was due tomorrow. I don't think she'll even be attending that class, now." He picked up four sandwich quarters and put them on his plate.

"They arrested her?"

"Yeah. That was pretty expensive stuff. Had real gold flecks in it." *...besides the fact that she took a swing at the officer and kicked me!*

"Hmm." She crunched crackers on her salad and then poured the dressing over it. "Mine was pretty slow and boring. All I did was try to decipher and type handwritten notes, speeches, and what not... all... day... long."

"Sorry." He took a big bite of sandwich.

"You talk to the police today?"

Every other hour! He shook his head slowly. "Didn't have a chance." She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure nothing's changed from yesterday if they had any new information about Davy, they'd call us."

"You have to keep on them or else they'll quit."

"There not quitting. They'll find him."

"You're sure of that, huh?"

"I'm sure."

Exhausted, Melinda let out a long sigh as she plopped back against the wall, closed her eyes, and let her head fall back. More reserved, Matt leaned his arm on top of the filing cabinet across from her. "I know what you mean."

She nodded but didn't open her eyes. "Fifteen minutes and my time is put in... my shift is up... my sanity... can return."

Matt grunted, smiling. "Ever get your break?" She shook her head. "Me either. Why not spend your last few minutes winding down before you have to drive home?"

"Um... Um..." She thought fast, trying to decide. She was kind of surprised. It was totally out of character for him to suggest a break to anyone, which must have meant that he wanted to be in her company as much as she wanted to be in his... which she didn't want. After her break up with Carlos, she had practically vowed off men entirely. "Um, sure." She mentally rolled her eyes and could have kicked herself, but instead turned and walked with him to the break room.

"Besides it looks like you could use something to keep you awake on your drive home."

"True." She yawned, rubbing her face. "You know, I hate to point this out, but you don't even need a break, you could just leave. You're already on how many hours overtime?"

He smiled. "A few, but they need the extra help, and there's no reason to go home. Might as well sleep in my office again."

She nodded, stumbling over her own feet as she went into the lounge. Matt reached out but didn't need to catch her. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she yawned, making her way to the table and plopping down.

Matt smiled as he went over to pour the coffee. "At least you won't have any trouble going to sleep tonight."

"Yeah. Didn't last night either." She rubbed her face. "Sometimes I wish I was more of a light sleeper."

"Oh? How come?" He poured cream in hers but left his black.

"Oh, some guy's been harassing me."

"What do you mean harassing you?" His brow furrowed as he walked over with the mugs.

She looked at him questioningly. "Well, I haven't really been telling people, but I've never known you to be one to talk."

"I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

"Well, it's kinda weird. First at the picnic someone slashed my tires. I'm not saying that wasn't a prank. I just don't know who would want to do it, you know."

"Yeah, go on."

"Well, then someone broke into my house while I was gone at work. They didn't take anything... not that I have anything worth stealing, but they killed my cat and wrote a threatening note on my wall with its blood."

"What did it say?"

"Um... You're next." She tried to wave off the anger rising in his face. "I called the police and everything."

"Anything else?"

She wasn't quite sure how to respond to stern face and gritted teeth. "Well, last night someone painted 'Happy Halloween' on my garage door, and someone may have been inside my house again this morning. I'm not sure."

"You're not going back there!"

She was sure shock showed on her face, but she didn't care. "Oh yes, I am!" *What in the world makes him think that he has the right to...*

"No, you're not."

"It's my home. I'm an adult, and I'm getting a little sick of everyone thinking they know what is best for me! I am capable of making my own decisions! I have been for years!"

"Apparently, you're not, if those are the stupid kind of decisions you come up with!"

"Well, thank you very much for all the advice, and the coffee!" She slid the cup back to him. "And I don't like it without cream in it." She stood up.

"It's got cream in it!" He stood up and reached for her arm. "Wait." She jerked her arm free of his grasp. "Stay at my house."

"No." She turned away.

He followed her and then swung in front and blocked the door. "Don't be foolish. Look. Here." He got his keys out of his pocket and began taking the house key off the ring. "This is the only key I've got with me. I won't even be able to get in. No one will know where you're at. You'll be safe."

She crossed her arms and didn't answer just glared at him. Stepping aside, he put the key in the pocket of her scrubs. As soon as he was away, she stomped off down the hallway, her thick, blonde ponytail bouncing all the way.

"Be careful," he whispered after her, stepping onto the doorway and watching her go.

“What are you doing out here?” Derrick asked as he walked in the arena viewing room in the barn. Jim just glared at him from the couch. “Or do you just prefer a dusty barn to your nice comfortable home?” Derrick joked, sensing Jim had had a fight with his wife.

Jim sat up a little, letting himself get easily insulted, even though he knew what Derrick meant. “Look, if you don’t like it here, your more than welcome to leave!”

“Wow, are you touchy.” Jim rolled his eyes and laid back down. “I wasn’t talking about me. Why? Do you want me to?” Derrick grew serious.

“Do what you want.”

Craning his neck and putting his hands in his pockets, Derrick sighed. “What’s wrong?”

“You mean you don’t know? I thought you knew everything.”

Derrick just stared a moment. “Either you told Jess and she’s mad because you waited so long to tell her something so simple, or....”

“It’s not simple.”

“Why not?”

Jim rubbed his face roughly once. “It’s hard to talk about, alright?”

“You did fine with me.” Derrick turned a chair around and sat down on it backwards.

“She’ll think I’m being childish. I shouldn’t still be having dreams about somethings that been done and over with for years.”

“That’s all the dream are about... your mother.”

“No.” Jim cupped his hands over his face as if he had a headache.

“Bout what I figured.” Derrick rested his forearms on the back of the chair. “How can you risk your life as much as you do and be afraid of dying?”

“I’m not *afraid* of dying... so much as being tortured beforehand.”

Derrick kind of wagged his head back and forth, contemplating. “They saved your life.”

Jim rolled onto his side and leaned on his forearm. “I wouldn’t have made it if you hadn’t brought me back here. I’m sure of that. I was at the end. Have you ever been tied down... drugged... so sick you’re hallucinating?”

“No,” Derrick answered, thoughtfully. “What about Jess? They saved her life.”

Jim looked down. “I’ll never forget that moment when she coded.”

“But they brought her back.”

“Yeah.” He stared down at the ground, thoughtfully, then jerked his gaze back up, his eyes pleading. “How do you know they didn’t cause it?”

“Ji-m, come on,” his voice was soft. Jim looked away, then plopped back down on his back. “You’re still here. You’re both still here. You might not be if it wasn’t for them.”

“I know.” Jim rubbed his face. “It’s just the images. They keep replaying... over and over.” Derrick looked down at his arm still draped over the back of the chair, not knowing how to respond. “I’ll tell her,” Jim insisted. “I will. Just let me do it in my own time.”

“Sure.” Derrick looked up and forced a smile. “Did she really kick you out of the house?”

Jim started to nod, but then stopped himself. “I left!”

“Sure.” Derrick grinned. “Sure.”

Jim threw a pillow at him. “Why don’t you go back to your loft?”

“I’ve got a checkerboard up there.”

“Monopoly?”

“Yeah. Got that, too.”

“Good. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night.”

Melinda slowly pulled her car up to her house and looked around for anything unusual. The whole way home, she had debated whether to go to Matt’s house or her own. She’d been to his house a couple of times after Taylor’s accident to bring them a meal. It was a very nice house, but it didn’t have her stuff in it. She concluded she at least needed to go home and get a few things first and then she would decide.

Slowly pulling the keys out of ignition, she got out. Chills ran up her spine as she glanced at the blood red greeting on her garage door. The cool night air went right through her and chilled her bones. Most of the ride home, she had been too mad to be scared... mad at that stubborn, egotistical, dictatorial... She jumped as a cat yowled in the distance. *But then on the other hand, maybe he was right.* The keys rattled against her shaky hand as she pulled them out of her purse and tried to fit the right one in the keyhole. Soon as it unlocked, she yanked open the door and ducked inside.

She told herself she was being ridiculous. It was probably just Carlos, and she was sure he wasn’t a murderer, just a bit kooky at times. It felt so good to be in her nice warm home... her own home... with her own couch and fireplace. She looked around. Everything looked quiet and normal.

Though about ready to fall over from exhaustion, she walked from room to room, making inspection. Everything seemed normal. Coming back to her couch, she sat down. It felt so good to sit down. She knew she should go to Matt’s house. She would... in a couple minutes. Curling her feet up beside her, her head naturally fell down on the pillow, and in that same moment, she was fast asleep.

Death or Rescue

Matt yawned as he set down his stethoscope on top his desk and reached to turn off his lamp. *What a day. Actually, the last two days haven't been...* He opened his cellphone as he sat down on his couch. He guessed he'd call Melinda just to make sure she got there alright. He laid back and kicked off his shoes while he dialed. He was confident she had the commonsense to be at his house. That was until, he heard his own voice on his answering machine. Sitting up, he quickly dialed her cellphone. No answer. He tried again. No answer. Putting his shoes back on, he got up, grabbed his jacket and headed out the door.

"Doctor, are you coming back to work?" A nurse ran up to him hopefully with a chart.

"No." He didn't look at her. He just kept charging toward the door.

"Doctor Fredricks!" Another nurse ran up to him. He ignored her, slamming his hand into the button that opened the doors. "Doctor?" He kept going.

"What's up with him?" A male orderly asked the nurse. She shrugged.

"Are you leaving?" the receptionist called after him. "What should I tell your daughter?"

"I'll be back before she wakes up, or I'll call." He didn't turn to look at her.

The nippy October breeze sent a shiver through him as he went out the door. He zipped up his jacket with one hand and pressed the remote to unlock his car with the other. He was at least going to make sure she was alright, and likely try very hard again to insist she stay elsewhere.

He got in his car and started off. He didn't know why he felt this strong sense of responsibility toward her. Almost, if not always, his motto for life was 'live and let live,' but there were sometimes... some people that it just twisted his stomach to think of them dying or even being in danger. His daughter, of course, was at the top of the list... Jim... Derrick... sometimes Wade... a couple of his fellow doctors from the past... a young chaplain from the last hospital where he worked... one cop he'd known years ago... He stopped at a stop sign. ...and now apparently, he could add Melinda to the list.

Normally, he didn't get on too well with the nurses. In fact, about ninety percent of them he'd pretty much labeled as incompetent. Melinda was about the only one he could manage to get through an entire shift without incident. Maybe that's why he had become emotionally attached to her. She was good at what she did. She learned a doctor's expectation fast, and her attitude was remarkable. He couldn't believe anyone could actually have a legitimate reason for seeking to harm her.

Melinda woke up suddenly, coughing and choking. Rolling off the couch, she gagged as she hit the floor... *Gas!* Grabbing the coffee table, she got up and staggered for the kitchen. The stove was off. She pulled it out a ways. The gas line looked fine. Spinning around, coughing, she stumbled into the patio door. Leaning against it, she tried to pull it open, but it was stuck. She unlocked and relocked it... nothing. She pulled with all her might... nothing. Grabbing her frying pan from off the counter, she hurled it toward the glass. It just bounced off. Choking, eyes watering, she began to panic,

No-o-o! She turned and ran for the front door, falling into it. Unlocking it with one hand, she yanked with the other... then with both of them... yanking... pulling... shaking... nothing... lock... unlock... relock... unlock... nothing. Coughing violently, she turned toward a wooden chair. Her vision blurred. She'd have to... have to break the... Wheezing, she lifted the chair. *God, help... m-e-e.* Darkness overtook her, and she fell limply to the ground.

Matt cracked his neck as he pulled into Melinda's driveway. His whole body was twitching with urgency, yet he felt he needed to be calm. Her light was on, *which must mean she's awake and just not answering her phone.* He prepared for the possibility that she just didn't want to hear from him.

Collecting his thoughts into a reasonable and orderly argument, he walked to the door, totally prepared to win the debate. He rang the doorbell... nothing. He tried again... nothing. He sniffed the air... *gas? ... GAS!* "Melinda!" He shook the doorknob. "Melinda!" Twisting, shaking, yanking, he tried to break it off. Nothing.

He ran to the window, trying to see in between the curtains. He could just barely make out a body, choking in the middle of the floor. He ran back to the door and with one mammoth twist and pull, broke the doorknob off in his hand, but the door didn't open. *Why?* He pounded his fist against it. The frame cracked. He slammed his shoulder into the middle of the door and then his fist again and again. The wood cracked and splintered. He kicked it... one, two, three times. The boards broke apart. He slammed his palm into the side. It hit something metal. He fingered it, unable to see in the dark. *A deadbolt?* It was a deadbolt on the outside. He unlocked it. The door opened. He ran inside, coughing. *Don't let her be dead!* He fell to his knees beside her. "Melinda!" She was still breathing... choking... gagging... barely. Gathering her in his arms, he lifted her and ran out. He half expected the house to explode behind him, but it didn't. Lying her in the grass, he got out his cellphone and dialed 911.

He didn't want to leave her, but he had to. Talking to the operator, he got up and started racing to the adjacent houses. He made his distress call a quick one and then began pounding on houses, getting everyone up to evacuate.

"You sure change your mind a lot." Jim sat back down on the couch. He was beginning to feel like a yoyo swinging from house to barn and back to house.

"I didn't change my mind exactly. I just got lonely." Jess curled up next to him. "You may not be the most perfect husband in the world, but I'm sort of attached to ya." She didn't look up at him just started studying her list again.

Jim smiled at her. "So how are the plans progressing?"

She glanced up at him. "Well, we've got archery, a bean bag toss, darts at balloons, lasso contest, horse races, wagon ride, pumpkin painting, saddle-up contest, and barrel racing. Any other ideas?" She chewed the top of her pen as she talked, studying the paper.

"Don't you think we have enough?"

She shrugged. "It's got to last all night long."

"I think it *will.*" She started to respond. "Shh." Jim got up and walked toward his scanner.

“What’s the matter?”

He turned the volume up. “There’s a gas leak.”

“A gas leak!”

“That’s Melinda’s address.”

“Melinda from church?”

“Yeah. That’s weird.”

“It sure is. I hope the gas company...”

“I hope it was an accident.” He stared, thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?”

“I guess she’s been having some trouble lately.”

“Trouble?”

“They’ve been questioning Carlos. He’s none too happy about being considered a suspect.”

“What kind of trouble?” Jess sat up straight.

“Death threats, I guess.” He stared into the distance thoughtfully. “I think I’ll run over there.”

“What?” Jess jumped up. “It’s gas! It could blow up!”

“There are other firefighters there by now.”

“Good! Then they don’t need you.”

“I’ll be fine.” He walked toward the door, grabbing his coat on the way.

Jess followed close behind. “Jim, I, I, I, don’t think...”

Jim turned around. “What?”

She paused a moment, staring into his eyes. “Be careful.”

He gave her a kiss. “I will.” Then he headed out the door. Jess watched him go. He met Derrick mid-driveway. They talked a moment and then both headed for Jim’s truck. She figured he heard it on his scanner, too. She sighed. So much for seeing her husband the rest of the night... or morning. She glanced at her watch. It was already past two. She wasn’t going to bed though... not now. She headed back for the living room. Now, she had to pray for her husband... and for all of their safety.

By the time Jim and Derrick got there, a lot of the activity was over. People were going back into their homes and a lot of the emergency vehicles were leaving. Jim noticed Trent standing by a police car when he got out. “There’s Trent.” Jim pointed as he walked by Derrick.

“Yeah.” Derrick acknowledged him but continued walking in the other direction. Jim followed Derrick’s gaze to the ambulance and figured Melinda was probably in there, but he kept walking toward Trent. “Hey, Trent.”

“Jim.” Trent looked at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Heard it on the scanner. Melinda gonna be alright?”

“Yeah. They say she will be.”

“What happened?” Trent looked at him questioningly. Jim leaned back against the car, facing Trent and crossing his arms. “Heard a lot of rumors about her.” He thumbed toward Melinda’s direction. “How many are true?”

Trent shrugged with his eyes. "Someone locked her in her house and then pumped it full of gas."

Jim looked confused. "How do you lock someone inside their house?"

"He wedged the patio door with a broomstick, turned the deadbolt around on the front door so it locked from the outside, and took the lightbulb from her porchlight. So, it was dark, and she couldn't see it."

"You really think Carlos would do something like that?"

"Right now, he's the only suspect."

"Yeah, well." Jim stared toward the ambulance. "I think you better keep looking."

"You can't be sure it's not him. No one can."

"He was at work when...."

"I know that!"

"Then come up with someone else!"

"We are exploring all possibilities... and I don't have to account to you." Trent turned away.

"I know." Jim's voice softened. "Just don't put Melinda's life in danger by chasing the wrong guy."

Trent turned back. "Just you don't put her life in danger by getting all head up that he is the wrong guy and standing in the way of justice by protecting him."

"I respect the law."

"Sometimes." Trent leaned against the hood of his car. "How much time have you been spending around Derrick lately?"

Jim smiled. "Derrick respects the law, too."

Trent shook his head. "That guy's a rebel."

Jim laughed. "Speaking of which." Jim's eyes lifted to Derrick coming toward them.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's got a scanner, too." Trent rolled his eyes. "Looks like Melinda's with him. Who's the other guy?" Jim squinted in the darkness.

"Probably Dr. Fredricks."

"What's he doing here?"

"He found her. Apparently, she told him the story. He called her, and when she didn't answer the phone, he got worried."

"Huh. Never knew him to get worried about anything." They both walked a little way to meet them. Jim nodded to Melinda, "Doin' okay?"

"I'm alright, now. I wasn't sure if I would be, there for a minute."

Jim nodded sympathetically, then punched Matt in the arm. "Hear you're the hero of this story."

"No." Matt shook his head.

"Hey. What happened to your hand?" Jim nodded toward the bandage.

"Oh, it's not bad. Just cut a little."

"Besides being black and blue." Trent smiled. "He tried punching his way through the door when he couldn't get it

open.”

“Rea-ly.” Jim nodded in respect. “Remind me not to underestimate you brainy types, anymore. What’s the door look like?”

Trent laughed and then tapped Jim on the shoulder to get him to turn around. When he did, he shone his flashlight on the battered, half demolished door.

Jim whistled. “Wow.”

“I wouldn’t want to do it again.” Matt rubbed his bandaged hand.

“Neither of you going to the hospital?” Trent nodded toward the departing ambulance.

“No.” Matt shook his head.

“Where are you going to stay?” Trent’s voice was firm, almost reproving for not listening to him earlier.

“Um, Matt said I could stay at his house.” She pointed toward him.

All three guys looked at him. Matt smiled. “I’ve a been camping out in my office since Taylor got hurt.” He quickly explained. “I wish I could offer you to stay as long as you need. I could use a nurse for Taylor. She’ll be on bedrest when she gets out.”

“Right now, I’d take it, but it’s impractical for you to live out of your office that long.”

“You could always bunk with me in the barn,” Derrick joked, lightly punching Matt in the arm. Trent laughed.

“Seriously though, you could,” Jim added. “Derrick stays in the loft, but we’ve got a viewing room with a pullout couch, a TV, fridge, stove, and shower.... It’s heated.”

“You have to share the fridge and the shower, though.” Derrick started sounding defensive of his space.

“I could handle that.” Matt shrugged.

Trent laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding. Have you ever seen how that redneck lives?” He thumbed toward Derrick. Jim and Derrick simultaneously crossed their arms and let themselves look offended. “No offence,” Trent added.

Matt gave a light laugh and spoke softly. “Oh. It won’t be for long.”

Not with such a determined detective on the case.” Jim added. “You should have this whole matter cleared up in no time.” Trent’s face faded to worry. “I have complete confidence in you.” Jim slapped Trent on the back.

“Just don’t anyone mention where she’s at... to anyone! I’ll escort you both home tonight and brief you on how to drive so you’re not followed. If this guy finds out where you’re staying, we’re right back to where we started.”

“Wade?” Mellissa rolled over in bed and turned on the lamp. “What are you doing?” she yawned, watching him tie his running shoes.

“I just feel like a run this morning.” He seriously needed to get out some excess energy and emotion.

“What time is it?” she yawned again.

“About four.” He tied his other shoe.

“It’s still dark out.”

“I like running in the dark. I’ve done it before. Go back to sleep.” He got up and grabbed his water bottle.

“Won’t it make you awfully tired for work?”

“No.” He went toward the door.

“Will you be back to eat breakfast with me?”

“Probably. I’ll try.”

“Have fun.” She fell back against her pillow and reached up to turn off the lamp.

Wade walked out, not bothering to turn on the lights in the rooms he walked through. Some people don’t like the dark, but he wasn’t one of them. He enjoyed the peace and the stillness. He took a deep breath, the cool breeze refreshing him as he walked out the front door into the night. He looked up at the stairs as he walked down his frosty driveway. All but one of the other houses on the block were dark.

When he reached the road, he took off running. His body calmed with each stride. He felt so free when he ran, as if he was leaving all his cares and worries behind. He hoped he hadn’t bitten off more than he could chew with this new job but yet, it *was* a job... a good job with good pay... and he was thankful for it. He felt like he had to have something. His unemployment check was about to run out. They couldn’t survive on just Mellissa’s paycheck, and he’d looked everywhere for a job. People just weren’t hiring. He’d even swallowed his pride and applied at a fast food restaurant, but apparently, they didn’t want him either. He’d about gotten desperate enough to go begging for his old job back, even though he doubted they would give it to him. Everyone knew he was burned out, which meant people wouldn’t have confidence in him in an emergency. Still, at this new job, he had very little confidence in himself. At least no one else knew. *I can get the job done*. He jogged off the road when he saw a car coming then jogged back on. I can *make* it work.

“Turn here.” Trent directed.

Matt turned the car again. He was sure with all this twisting and turning though town that anyone remotely interested in following them was either lost, completely confused, or dying from a headache.

“Left here,” Trent directed. In fact, Matt had gotten lost a few times himself. Trent glanced back at Melinda, lying down and covered up in the back seat. “Make sure you do this every night, and don’t turn in unless there aren’t any cars around anywhere.

“Alright.” She responded. “What will probably happen is I’ll run out of gas.”

“Fill it up every day. Okay stop.”

Matt jammed on the brakes, but not hard enough to cause them to squeal. “Why?”

“We’re here.” Matt nodded toward his house.

“Oh... yeah... we are.” Matt turned in to driveway, and hit the garage door button.

Melinda started to take the blanket off and sit up. “Wait till were all the way in and the door’s back down.

“You know,” Melinda laid back down on the floor but didn’t cover her head. “I’m going to have to sit up to drive to work.”

“I’ll find you a loner car with tinted windows.”

“Will you have it here before I need to leave for work?”

“I’ll try to have it here by nine.”

“When you go to work or the grocery store try to park in a spot where there aren’t any people around to connect you with the car. Don’t park the car alone. That’d be more conspicuous. Just try not to be seen getting in and out of it. Don’t forget this guy could be watching you. If you can keep him from finding out which is your car, maybe you can keep him from following you home.”

“Okay.” They all got out.

“And don’t let anyone in,” Matt added. “Remember you’re not really here.” Matt opened the trunk. “Not my son either.

If he starts hanging around, call me. I'll have to talk to Taylor about that, too."

They all grabbed a bag. Melinda sighed. "I'm sorry to be taking over your life like this."

Matt jerked out a second suitcase and followed them to the house. "It was my idea, remember?"

She nodded. "And thank you for it."

"Forget it." He unlocked the house, and they all went in.

"You *do* have a nice house," Melinda said, looking around.

"I like it." Matt took the bags over to the living room and set them down.

"With a home like this I would think you'd spend more time in it."

A house doesn't make a home. He stared across the room at his wife's picture, pain entering his eyes.

"Nice of you to share your apartment," Jim grinned, knowing Derrick's inclination to remain a loner.

"I was joking." Derrick tossed a blanket on the couch next to the sheets and pillow.

"Don't worry. He works a lot of hours, and so do you. You'll probably never see each other."

"Ahh, I don't mind the guy." Derrick sat down on the table, putting his foot on the top of the chair.

Jim smiled. "I doubt he'd go for that."

Derrick looked down at his foot on the top of the chair. "Too bad. If he's going to live in a barn, he'd better get used to acting like it."

Jim laughed as he began to sweep. "Okay."

"I'm kind of surprised, he'd go for a barn. He can probably afford a big fancy hotel room."

"I don't think he's the extravagant type."

"Apparently not."

Jim moved a chair. "Besides, it's better this way. If people notice him at a hotel, they are going to start wondering why."

"That's true." Derrick put a fresh pillowcase on the pillow. "Interesting, the doc's being so helpful. He doesn't usually care to get involved."

"Yeah." Jim moved the chair back and swept the dirt toward the middle. "He's changed a lot since he's gotten saved, though. Reminds me of someone else I know." He smiled and yanked the chair out from under Derrick's foot.

Derrick smiled back and got up. "Don't think he's got anything against Melinda either." He walked to the fridge and opened it. "Think they're falling in love?"

"Don't know." He went to get the dustpan. "It's possible."

"I'm sure that'll go over well with Carlos." He got some of his stuff out of the fridge and started writing his name on them.

"You think the doc could be in danger, too?"

"Doubt it. Of course, I doubt it's Carlos. Could be wrong, though."

"Who else?"

"You'd have to ask Melinda that?"

Jim stared at Derrick, labeling his sprouted bread and organic hotdogs. "What are you doing?"

"Mind if I claim a few things that are mine?"

"Derrick, you couldn't pay anyone to eat that stuff."

Derrick got his protein powder from the cupboard. "Most the stuff I wouldn't mind, but some of it's hard to get. You know I order the bread in bulk from the co-op."

"I also know no one in their right mind would eat it."

"Be interesting if they did get together." He reached for his organic peanut butter while trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, it would be. I'm not sure he's over his old wife yet, though."

"How do you *get over* losing your wife?" Derrick stared thoughtfully into the cupboard.

"Ever think you might marry again?"

Derrick stared a moment longer. "I don't know. ... Doubt it." He grabbed a bag of mini chocolate candies and tossed them to Jim. "Here. Put these by his bed."

Jim caught 'em. "For my money, I'd rather see you eat them." Derrick rolled his eyes. "Where'd you get 'em anyway?"

"Won 'em at the picnic at church."

"Ohhh." Jim stared a moment at the bag. "Didn't think you'd waste your money on such a dietetic disaster." Derrick chucked a box of Kleenex at him. Jim blocked it, and then started laughing.

"You need anything, you let me know." Matt said, while stuffing a few food items in a bag, yet leaving a lot for her. "You make me a list when you need groceries, and I can get them when I get mine... so you don't have to be wandering around town."

Melinda crossed her arms, leaning back against the counter. "I'll never get used to that..." She rolled her eyes. He looked at her, questioningly. "...trying to live incognito."

"It won't be for long." Trent handed Matt a box of crackers.

"Is that a promise?" Melinda looked at him disapprovingly.

"I'm doing my best."

Melinda resisted the urge to suggest that that didn't seem good enough. Matt zipped up his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and went to get his other two stuffed gym bags. Trent got one and followed him to the garage. "You ready?"

"Just about. I have to go back in and get my books."

"Don't you have books at your office?" Trent put his bag in the trunk.

"Yes." Matt tossed his bags in and went back inside. "Not the same ones as I have here." Trent went back to the passenger's seat. He wasn't accustomed to that side of the car, but neither was Matt accustomed to driving incognito. He would have to learn.

Matt smiled at Melinda as he went in. She was kneeling on the counter, putting some of her food on the top shelf of the cupboard. She smiled back. "Help yourself to anything I have," he offered as he went to get his medical books off the table.

"That's nice of you." She turned toward him. "I'm beginning to think you're not half as rough as you put on."

"Don't believe it." Not looking at her, he picked up his books.

"Wait!" She jumped down and ran into the living room. He turned around and waited for her. "You forgot one." She held a Bible up in the air.

He grimaced, momentarily. She'd picked up his wife's Bible. He hadn't opened it since she died. For Melinda's sake, he forced his feelings aside and smiled. "Oh yeah, thanks. I've been trying to get in the habit of reading the Bible every morning. Sometimes I don't have time, but I try."

"You should make time." She put the Bible on the top the stack of other books he was carrying.

He shrugged with his eyes. "You're right. I do have one in my office." He turned to go. "Oh." He stopped in the doorway. "We usually leave the curtains open upstairs, so if you go up there, you probably want to close them before you turn on the lights."

She nodded. "Thank you for telling me"

"You want me to close them?" He pointed toward the stairs.

"No, that's okay. I got it. Have um a good night in the barn."

"Yeah." He shrugged. "At least, it'll be something a little different." He went out.

"That's for sure," she mumbled, not realizing he liked different.

"Well, I think that's about it." Jim picked up the trash bag and headed for the door.

"When's his daughter due anyway?" Derrick mumbled, following him.

Jim smiled, turning back. "Derrick. You just have to get used to the idea. I'm layin' odds, you'll even be lonely when he leaves."

Derrick leaned back against the doorpost. "Don't count on it."

Jim laughed. "I think it's sometime in January." Derrick nodded, but he didn't smile. "I doubt Melinda will be in danger that long."

Derrick nodded. "He'll still probably want a nurse to stay with his daughter," he grumbled.

"True. Maybe just while he's at work, though. I doubt Melinda's going to want to be away from her home that long."

"Why's a rich doctor want to live in a barn anyway? He can probably afford to buy a whole 'nother house, or at least rent one." Derrick began staring off into the distance.

"Too permanent. He's probably hoping this will be over in a couple of days. Either way," Jim slapped him on the arm, trying to bring him back from his far away thoughts, "you'll be fine. Get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning."

Derrick smiled. "Morning? It's practically morning, now," he mumbled. Deep in his own thoughts, he looked around the room. "You know, I could always make the living conditions undesirable. For his own good, of course. How do you turn the hot water off?"

Jim whacked him. "Der-rick! Go to sleep. You're losing it!"

"Turn here."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Why do we have to go through all this. It doesn't matter if anyone follows me! No one'd be crazy enough to be following me at this time of night anyway! They're all sleeping!"

"You never know."

"Know what!" He stopped sharply at a red light.

"Left here. Besides what if someone does find out you are staying in Jim's barn. Don't you think they'll find it a little strange?"

“No one will care. They all think I’m a little strange anyway.”

Trent gave him a look. “Turn here,” he directed in his deepest, disapproving tone. He turned sharply, causing the tires to squeal. “You need to calm down.”

“Calm down? I haven’t slept in over twenty-four hours, and that was nothing more than a long nap! I have to go back to work in a few hours. I’ve barely eaten, and you’ve got me driving so many circles around this town that I’m lost! Wherever we are going, I want to be there, now!”

“Right here.”

“Now!” He squealed around the turn. “Or I’m stopping the car here to sleep!”

“Left.” He turned left, and the tires hit gravel. “This is Jim’s road. Just follow it down about a mile.”

“Fine.” He sped up. “I’m not doing this every day!”

“Matt...”

“I’m not!” Gravel skidded as they went around a turn too fast.

Trent decided not to speak until they got there. “Here it is.” Matt turned into the driveway. “Park by the barn.”

“I know where to park!”

Trent threw his hands up. “Al-right.” Matt started to force open his car door. “Wait.”

“What?!”

“Just wait. I’ll go in first.” He started to pull his gun out.

“Oh, come on!”

“I’ve got my reasons. Humor me.”

Matt pulled his door back shut with a slam as Trent got out. He watched him walk a little way, but then he let his eyes fall shut and his head fell back against the seat, asleep instantly.

Jim came out and met Trent as he was coming in, gun drawn. Sarcastically, he put his hands up. “I live here, remember.” He smiled.

“Don’t start with me.” He went around him.

Jim turned. “There’s no one in there.” Trent just gave him a dirty look and kept going. “Except Derrick! Don’t shot him!” Jim called after him and then decided to go out and see Matt. The cool air woke him up a little more as he walked over to the car. “Hey, Matt.” No one answered so he knocked on the window. “Hey, you awake?”

Matt woke up. “I am now,” he muttered, opening the door and getting out. Standing up, he lost his balance and fell back against the car. Jim grabbed the front of his jacket to catch him, but quickly let go. “You okay?”

“Fine.”

“Been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“Long couple of days.” He rubbed his face to try and wake himself up.

Trent came back out of the barn holstering his gun as he walked. He didn’t talk as he approached them, just opened the car door and popped the trunk. They all walked to the back, grabbed something and went in without speaking. Jim opened the arena room door for the others. They all put everything down and just stared at each other a moment, until Jim broke the silence. “Well, get some sleep, friend.” Jim slapped Matt’s arm. “See ya tomorrow.” Matt nodded, and Jim headed out. Trent followed.

“Well, Trent.” They both stopped walking in front of his car. “Get some sleep. Thanks for keeping everyone safe.” They

shook hands.

"I was beginning to think no one appreciated it." He glanced toward the barn.

"Well, Matt... he's had a rough few days. I appreciate all your hard work, and I'm sure Melinda and Matt do too. Ya just have to give 'em some time."

"Yeaah. Get some sleep yourself." Trent headed for the driver's side door.

"Yeah. See ya, buddy." Jim smiled as he walked toward his house and noticed his light was still on. His wife was waiting up for him. ... He just hoped she was done being mad at him because there was *absolutely* no more room for him in the barn.

Munching on a cracker, Melinda pushed open the roll top desk. Part of her felt guilty for being nosey, but the greater part was curious. 1st she took the bills out of the first cubby and began thumbing through them. He was very organized. The first cubby was for monthly bills. The second cubby was for annual bills. And the third cubby was for organizations wanting a charitable donation. On each envelope, he had written the company name, the amount due, and the due date. She tried to put them back exactly as they were, figuring he was the type that'd notice if there was a change. She found it interesting that even with two of them living here, their electric bill was still way less than hers. She made a mental note to turn off the lights better while she was here.

Opening the top side drawer, her eyes softened as she pulled out a cheerful looking photo album with a picture of his family on front. She studied the photo. She hadn't known he had four kids. Taylor was really the baby of the bunch. She was only a toddler in the photo while the rest of the kids looked to be in their early teens. She tried to determine which of the two boys was Mark, but she finally gave up. She studied Matt and his wife. She was beautiful, and they looked very much in love. He had his arm around her, and she stood so close you couldn't get a dime between them. The joyous smile on her face was almost haunting. They looked like a happy, cheerful family. She was saddened that it had to change. Her heart ached for him. Then in another moment, she felt a slight tinge of jealousy at his big family and previously happy home. Maybe it hadn't lasted long, but at least, he had had one. He must have married young. He wasn't that much older than her, and he had a grown family. She'd never had anyone but herself... and her parents. She put the photo album back. Tears stung her eyes as she realized he was about to become a grandfather, and she'd never even loved a man. *Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?*

Pulling back the covers, Jim sighed lightly as he got into bed. Jess put her book down and looked at him. "Everyone all settled?"

Jim nodded. "Seems to be. You don't really mind, do you?"

"Mind? Oh no. Why should I mind? I always wanted to run a boarding house." Clear sarcasm.

"Jess, it's only for a short time, and they're all the way in the barn."

"I don't really mind, but you could have called first. We're supposed to make these kinds of decisions together."

"I called."

"After it was all set."

"So, if I had called, what would you have said?" She just glared at him. "See, I just saved you the trouble." He pulled the blanket up as he laid down."

"I suppose it's okay this time." She propped herself. "But if you find one more stray and bring him home, I'll... I'll..." She shook her finger at him.

He kissed her to interrupt her sentence. "Scouts honor."

"O-kay." She somewhat smiled. "Make sure."

He laid back down. "Or at least I'll call first." She whacked him with her pillow. "Good-night, Jess."

Going Home

Yawning, Melinda tied her robe tightly around herself as she made her way downstairs and into the kitchen. She couldn't believe Matt was bringing Taylor home today, even if it was a week later than he had expected. She ran her hand through her hair and looked around, groaning. *I've got to get this place cleaned up... soon.* Matt had kept everything so immaculate. *The clean freak.* She gazed at the sink. *He's probably the type that doesn't even allow one dish to stay in the sink overnight, much less a whole sink full.* To her chagrin, her gaze drifted to the floor. It wasn't too bad, but she did need to mop it, and *while I'm at it, I should wash out the fridge... the cupboards... around the trashcan. Then after all that, I can start on the living room.* She started to feel a little faint, realizing she had put things off way too long. Breathing deeply, she went over and poured herself a cup of coffee. She needed the comfort... and the caffeine.

She poured herself some cereal and dumped orange juice on it because she was all out of milk. Then she went and sat down at the table, gazing at the picture of her dad she had propped up against the center piece. She made the mistake of staring at it too long and a stray tear began to form. She wiped it away and fought to keep it from multiplying... but couldn't. She had loved her dad so much. Her mind went back to the funeral... seeing him lying there so lifeless and still... gone forever... at least on this earth. She thought he was a Christian. She hoped he was. He wasn't a churchgoer like her and mom, but he said that he believed in Jesus. He said that he had accepted Christ as a kid, but he never elaborated on it. She hoped with all her heart it was true. She wished she hadn't been so absorbed with her own life. She wished she had talked with him more about it. She wished she knew. When she thought about the possibility that he was in... She couldn't think about it. She got too scared. He was such a good man, and she loved him so. *Oh, God was he saved? Please tell me if he was saved.*

"Getting ready to leave me?" Mellissa asked, walking into the kitchen.

Wade looked up from his cereal. "I'm going to work."

"You're going to an early grave," she muttered, tying her robe tighter.

"I'm going to work just like most of our married life up until recently."

"Up until recently, you've never made yourself a human target."

"I've always had a dangerous job." He went back to eating.

"I've already lost a son. I don't want to lose a husband, too."

"We haven't lost our son."

She threw her hands up. "Well, look around. I don't see him anywhere!"

Wade stood up and took his bowl to the sink, dumping the rest out. "They'll find him."

"Well, they don't seem to be making too much progress, do they?"

Gritting his teeth, Wade leaned against the sink. "They'll find him." Mellissa didn't answer. Leaning back against the pantry, she stared into the distance, brow furrowed. Wade started to walk out.

"Wade?" He stopped but didn't look at her. "Don't go." He hesitated a moment but then kept walking.

“Nother day, another dollar.” Dan closed his locker door.

“Tell me about it.” Carlos tightened his belt.

“Back to the old grindstone,” Jim grinned, trying to give a lighthearted spin, but was only greeted with dirty looks... from everyone except Derrick, who smiled and slapped him on the shoulder as he walked past him out the door. “How ‘bout some breakfast? I’m cookin.”

Carlos rolled his eyes, threw his other shirt in the locker, slammed the door, and walked out. More reserved, Jim put his shoe up on the bench and began tying it, deciding just to shut up. Dan gave a half smile and slapped Jim on the neck as he walked past. “You got the dishes, too?” Jim looked up but didn’t respond as he watched him leave.

BURRRUZZZ...

They all raced to the bay and into their vehicles in a matter of seconds. Lights flashing, engines roaring, sirens blaring, they were off, out the bay, and down the street toward a small farm on the edge of town.

Every muscle in Jim’s body twitched with nervous energy as they approached the plume of smoke billowing ominously in the distance. He listened to the radio traffic in the background. The commotion of other engine companies being dispatched only boosted his energy. He tightened his strap on his helmet as they turned into the drive. He pulled his oxygen tank closer but didn’t lift it when he saw it was a barn. The building was too badly engulfed to go after animals, but he would take it just in case someone was trapped.

The engine came to a stop by a frantic crowd of family and neighbors, pacing, yelling, and crying all at once, making the whole situation inaudible. When the firefighters emerged from their trucks, the entire clan descended on them, yelling something about Julian. “Hold it! Hold it!” Cap shouted over the crowd. “Is someone trapped in there?” He pointed toward the barn.

“Yes, my son!” An older man cried out. “Please, please save him!”

“The loft!” The man’s wife yelled. “He likes to spend time lying in the loft!” She pointed. “Hurry! Please hurry!”

Jim was ready so was Derrick. Dan had a line. Carlos was at the truck. Miles had a burn victim, so Jim nodded to Derrick, and they went ahead to the barn. Jim stared at the building as they approached, unsure they would be able to get up to the loft. It looked like where the fire started. The lower half was less engulfed, but the upper half was dancing with flames. “Ready?” Jim yelled, pulling up his mask. Derrick, who already had his up, returned a thumbs up.

Dan and Carlos had the water charged and the line ready. “Go get ‘em boys.” Dan yelled coming up close behind them, hose in tow. Derrick and Jim charged in as Dan sprayed around them. Jim ran straight to the loft. Derrick paused a moment to swing open the stall door to a spooked horse but left it to him to run out. Sprinting, he quickly caught up with Jim who was already halfway up the ladder. Heart racing, he quickly climbed up behind. The higher they got, the louder the crackling fire became. They both knew there was very little time before the roof would go.

Jim crawled onto the landing first. His heart jolted and raced as he realized the loft felt shaky. “It’s going to cave soon!” He yelled back to Derrick, hoping he heard him. Nodding, Derrick pointed for himself to go one way and Jim the other. “No!” Jim shook his head, not wanting to split up. The thick smoke made visibility near zero except for the ominous red glow around the edges. Not being able to use the walls as a guide greatly increased the probability of getting lost. “Let’s stay together!” Derrick nodded but started off quickly. Jim grabbed hold on him and let him lead the way. He swept his free hand across the floor, searching the area next to him as far as he could reach. He knew Derrick was doing the same on the other side. He came up with nothing as the boards beneath him got spongier and spongier. Jim knew the same was happening to the roof above them. The heat was becoming unbearable as Derrick stayed dangerously close to the killer orange glow.

Derrick stopped abruptly. “What’s wrong?” Jim yelled as loud as he could over the noise though almost sure he couldn’t hear him. Derrick started crawling again faster. Jim heard debris crashing from the roof in the corner. Heart jolting, Jim whacked Derrick and pulled back on him hard to let him know they needed to go, now. Derrick nodded, turned, and sprint crawled across the loft to the ladder.

Jim continued sweeping the area as they went. Until almost there, his arm hit a soft spot and went right through... all the

way through to his shoulder. He quickly moved over, shoving Derrick, hoping they didn't both go through.

"Go!" Derrick shoved him to the ladder. Jim sprint crawled to it and the practically fell down it. Partway down, he noticed Derrick wasn't coming. "Derrick!" Shaking his head, he tried to go back up but almost felt too weak. He mustered the strength until a couple flaming timbers fell down across the opening. Startled, he jumped back... off the ladder and crashed to the ground. "Derrick!" He scrambled back up the ladder. *God, don't let him be trapped! Don't let him get killed.*

Derrick crawled as fast as he could... no belly crawl this time but on all fours as fast as he could. The heat beat down hard. He knew the opening was blocked so there was no turning back even if he wanted to, and he didn't want to. He'd seen a shadow... a shadow next to the orange glow... a shadow of the boy. It seemed impossible that he was alive... but then lots of things were. He liked to challenge death... challenge it and win. He was close. He knew he had to be. He went faster. His hand went through the floor. He jerked to the side, accidentally thrusting his knee through and then most his leg. He pulled it out and then went more carefully, not wanting to slow down but knowing that he had to. He focused on breathing. The heat made him feel faint. It was at this moment, he finally realized that when people called him crazy, they knew what they were talking about. *Almost there.* He knew he was almost.... He had to be almost... thump. He ran into the... he ran his hand along the figure... the boy. He found him! Now they just had to get out. He grabbed him with one arm and started crawling back... back to the hole he had made with his leg... the only way out. When he got there, he punched around it with his gloved hand, widening it. The charred wood fell almost too easily. Fire that was creeping along underneath started shooting up through the hole. Still, they had to go for broke! Grabbing the boy around the waist, he yanked him forward then jumped. Charred wood splinted and flew as they broke through. Midair, he lunged forward to avoid the metal stall door beneath him but didn't quite make it. His legs hit hard, making him land even harder on his shoulder. He forced himself not to land on the boy or drop him.

Rolling onto his back, he jumped to his feet. His first inclination was to grab the boy and run for the door, but instead he put his oxygen on the boy and ran over to the loft ladder. He was glad he did because Jim was still there using a two by four to try to break away the flaming beams obstructing the loft. "Jim!" Derrick coughed, reaching up with his free hand to grab his pant leg.

Jim looked back. "Derrick!" He jumped down backwards, and they both started booking it toward the door. Derrick grabbed the kid on the way. Almost there, a large deafening crack sounded above them. They forced themselves faster. The roof started to go! They sprinted. An even louder crack sounded as they reached the doorway. They lunged forward as the entire structure crumbled into a gigantic fireball behind them. Jim hit the dirt, trying to avoid the flying debris. Derrick, kid on his shoulders, kept running all the way to the squad. Starting to shake inside, his one leg buckled beneath him, but he didn't fall. He set the boy down next to Miles and the gathering crowd by the squad and waited to hear if he was still alive. Amazingly, he was. Nodding in satisfaction, he made his way over to a distant tree and allowed himself to collapse beside it. Relaxing in the solitude, he let himself calm down.

After a few minutes and after reassuring everyone he was fine, Jim made his way over to the tree and sat down across from Derrick. First, they said nothing. Jim flipped his helmet around in his hands. Derrick rubbed his hand through his hair and then pulled his knee up to his chest and rested his arm on it. "Well, we got away with it." Jim broke the silence.

"Yeah." Derrick stared at the distance fire, listening to the sound of approaching sirens.

"Barely," Jim added, half smiling.

"That's all it takes." Derrick returned a partial smile but didn't look at him, keeping his eyes fixed on the blaze.

"Maybe." Jim leaned back against an old bench and closed his eyes. "I'd feel a lot better if things weren't always so close."

"It was the only way to get the boy out."

Jim looked back at the squad and almost whispered. "He's not going to make it."

"Then at least we recovered the body."

"We almost all died."

"You were supposed to leave," Derrick replied matter-a-factly, still not looking at him.

“Leave you?”

“Yeah. I can take care of myself... and if I can’t, that’s on me.”

“You’ve saved my life before.”

“I don’t want no one risking their life for me.” He coughed.

“Yeah, well, you really don’t have much to say about that.”

Derrick rolled his eyes and then fixed them on Jim. “What were you going to do?” He coughed.

“With you?” Jim smiled at him and shook his head. “I never know.”

Derrick smiled and looked the other way. “Seriously, don’t come back for me again. I had a partner get killed that way, remember?”

“I remember.” Jim looked at him. “Maybe you should learn to stop going off alone.”

“Maybe.” His words said, “Yes,” but his face said, “No.”

Jim knocked his helmet on the ground. “Well. Thank you, Lord, for protecting us.”

“Yeah.”

Leading the colt inside the barn, Jess nearly collided with Dr. Fredricks, who was coming out of his room engrossed in one of his thick medical books. “Oh, hi,” she said startled as she backed up.

“Oh, sorry.” He looked up from his book and backed up.

She smiled. “Where are you going mid-paragraph?”

He closed his book on his finger, keeping his spot. “I thought I’d read outside. Need to leave in about an hour to get Taylor.”

“I’m sure she’ll be glad to be going to home.”

He nodded and started to go. “Probably.”

Jess began leading the colt away but then turned back. “Is this the first day you’ve had off since you came here?”

He thought back. “I think I had one other one, but I spent most the day at the hospital with Taylor,” He shrugged. “and helped out a little when things got busy.”

Jess had to smile. “If you worked, it doesn’t count as a day off.”

“Oh. ... Well....” He looked down.

Jess started leading the foal again. “Well, hope everything goes well taking her home.” She stopped walking. “You should stick around and watch a movie with her or something.” She expected his reaction to be insulted, like *of course*. Instead, it seemed to dawn on him like a foreign concept. “A movie... not a documentary on how to remove an infected appendix.”

He smiled at that. “How about Brain Surgery Made Simple?”

Jess let her eyes widen. “I don’t think *you* should be watching that one! I sure wouldn’t want a brain surgeon that expected his job to be simple.”

He smiled again. “Don’t worry. That’s one field I’ve never had the desire to pursue.”

“Mommy! Mommy!” Morgan came running from the tack room with excitement. “Look!” She proudly held a horseshoe with both hands, trying to lift it up for her mommy to see.

“O-o-oh... look what you’ve found!” Jess loosened her grip on the lead and knelt down to Morgan’s level. “What have

you got there?"

"A shoe."

"A horseshoe?" Jess took it and began admiring it before giving it back. "Well, will you look at that."

Matt smiled at the interaction, slightly missing those bygone days. "You two have fun." He headed for the door.

Jess looked up, still smiling. "Thanks."

Humming along, Melinda vacuumed in sync with the peppy Christian tune playing from her mp3 player. It wasn't rock. She didn't do that, but she did like her songs to have a little pep in them, especially when she needed energy for arduous labor. She classified it as energetically classical... if there was such a thing. She picked a chair as the song switched to *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder* and spun around with it as the music started. She made a mental note to try and calm down, but she just felt good today. She didn't know why. Her life was still in as much danger as ever, but she was beginning to feel safe here. When she first came, she was afraid to make any noise... no TV... no radio... nothing. She wanted to be able to hear every sound, notice anything strange, be ready in case something was about to happen... but nothing did, and as time passed, she began to feel quite safe and at home here. She was still very careful not to be seen coming and going. On days she had to work, she left before the sun came up and returned after it was dark. The administrator had been very understanding about rearranging her hours...especially with that cock-eyed story she had given him. It wasn't a lie... but it didn't make much sense either.

She glanced at the clock, only two hours left. She hoped she made it in time. She wanted the house to be sparkling and with a beautiful lunch out on the table welcoming Taylor home. She sure hoped they would get along. She wanted to make a great first impression. There'd been some complications, and Taylor had to stay in hospital for about two weeks. She was sure she would be very ready to come home.

Two weeks. She couldn't believe she'd been here two weeks already. She shoved the recliner over with a little extra force. *Trent... my long lost brother... you sure are taking your own sweet time finding my villain.* She rolled her eyes and hit the on button on the vacuum. She had expected better things. *Two weeks and nothing.* She shoved the chair back. *What's he expect me to do? Live the rest of my life here?* Granted she had no complaints. It was nicer than her place, but it wasn't home. Actually, it was the principle of the thing. She abhorred living in fear. She moved the coffee table. Not that Trent seemed lazy really, just totally ineffective. When he had come this morning, she had expected more promising news, or at least some glimmer of hope. Two weeks and all he had come up with was that he didn't have enough evidence to accuse Carlos, and if it wasn't Carlos, he had no other suspects. She moved the table back. *No leads... No ideas... No help!* The only family feeling she had toward him right now was the urge to disown him.

Matt put his car in park and then returned his hand to the wheel, thinking a moment. He really wanted this to go well... for once. Anymore it seemed like everything he said was wrong. All their conversations seemed to contain at least one argument. *Her decisions just seem so stupid. Maybe I just don't understand her.* No, he understood, that was the problem. He just didn't know how to explain things diplomatically. *She's just so emotional.* He would think he should be able to have an honest opinion without her crying about it. Of course... he guessed he had that effect on a lot of women. He just wished he could figure her out. She could stubbornly dig into a ridiculous idea so hard it was totally frustrating. Other times, her opinions changed more often than TV commercials. He made up his mind to speak as little as possible... which he knew was only going to get him accused of not caring again.

He took the keys out of the ignition and opened the door. Pausing a moment, he remembered he was going to pray before he went in. *Lord, help me say the right thing.* He got out. *Or help me keep my mouth shut.* He threw the door closed and went into the hospital, engrossed in his own thoughts most of the way.

No sooner was he in the corridor, and he was spotted by an old friend. "Hey, Matt!" He turned toward the voice to see Jim and Derrick walking toward him.

"What happened to you?" He asked as Jim stopped in front of him.

"Oh, just a slight run in with a fire, nothing major." Jim tried to wipe away some of the smoke stain from his face with his

sleeve. "Now if you could just sign a release form for me to go back to work, I could quit cluttering up your hospital hallway."

Matt glanced at Derrick walking up behind him. "You, too, huh?"

Derrick shrugged, coughing from the smoke he'd inhaled. "At least we gave the boy a chance."

"Hmm. Not good, huh?"

"Critical."

"How old was he?"

"Is he," Derrick corrected. "preteen."

"Too bad."

There was a moment of thoughtful silence from everyone before Jim broke it. "Yeah, we got a lot of work to do out there on the streets." Jim slapped the doctor's arm. "So, if you'd just sign a release..."

"I'm not signed in to work."

"Oh, well, that's easy enough to fix." Matt just gave him a look. "All you have to do is work long enough to sign the form."

"No. I have to work long enough to make sure you two are alright to go back to work before I can sign the form."

"We're fine." They both said together.

"Jim," Matt rubbed his face, semi-wearily, "there are probably half a dozen doctors that could..."

"Actually, there are only a few... on this floor anyway, and they all look a little..." He wagged his head back and forth. What he wanted to say was, "incompetent."

"They all have reputable degrees following lengthy, arduous learning, that required..."

"I know that one of them at least prescribed the wrong drug for a guy and then didn't even realize it till the guy'd been taking it for like..."

"That was ten years ago! He was right out of med school, and it didn't happen here. How'd you find out about it?"

"I have my sources," he stated proudly.

"Jim," Matt's voice was weary. "I'm not above making a mistake."

Jim looked a little shocked. "Have you?"

Matt thought a moment. "Not that I'm aware of, but I ought to tell you, 'yes,' so that you'll..."

"Good," Jim interrupted. "And you won't be making one today either if you just take our word that we are fine, and sign the paper that says so." Jim looked way too hopeful.

"I'm **not** working today," Matt replied gruffly. Jim purposely let his face fall.

Derrick choked on a laugh. "You want the new odds on how soon you're going to be homeless, Doc?"

"Jim, the best way to conquer your fears is to face them."

Jim looked away, purposefully dejected. "Some way to treat your community heroes, your friend, your landlord."

Matt sighed exaggeratedly, rolled his eyes, and backhanded the door next to him, swinging it in.

Jim's smile widened, and he slapped the doctor's arm as he walked in. "You're the best. They don't make 'em like you anymore."

"Tell me about it." Derrick followed Jim in. "Hey, what are you doing?" Matt grabbed Derrick's arm.

"Two's as easy as one." Derrick coughed. "All you have to do is sign the paper." He coughed again.

Matt just glared at him. "You two aren't good for each other. You just aren't good for each other!" Matt shook his head. "You rub off on each other like...."

"Yeah, think of all those sterling qualities I've instilled in him," Jim yelled from inside.

"Yeaah. Derrick...!" Matt pulled Derrick back as he tried to go forward into the room.

"Doc, it's a buy one get one free deal."

"Yeah, I buy his story and get you free."

Derrick shrugged. "You're right. You're busy. It's your day off. You don't need to be bothered. I understand. So, if you'll just sign the paper," He held it out. "then you won't have to...."

"Just Get in there." Matt shoved him inside the room. Mumbling something about young whipper-snappers as he walked over to the desk to sign in to work. "Think they're getting off easy, do they? I ought to put them both on sick leave just to show 'em."

"Taylor, I'm telling you, it's what you need to do." Mark patted her hand gently and looked into her eyes. "Think of yourself. Think about your future."

"Everyone keeps telling me that." Taylor pushed herself up higher in the inclined bed. "Everyone keeps telling me to abort this baby." She rubbed her tummy. "You, Jack, my nurse, even the doctor suggested it," She leaned forward, looking deep into his eyes. "but it's not right, Mark. You know it's not right... to kill this little guy." She leaned back, gazing at her tummy as she rubbed it. "You know it's not right."

"Why?" He leaned back in his chair. "Because Daddy said it wasn't?" He nearly spit out the words. "Are you going to be his pawn forever?"

"I'm nobody's pawn."

"You're acting like it."

"Everyone keeps saying, 'What about my future?' but what about his?" She looked at her stomach. "You've never been in a place that felt so much like death as that...."

"It's not alive until it can breathe on its own."

"I don't believe that."

"Because *Daddy* told you different?"

"No-o-o. I can think for myself."

"Ha!"

"At least he cares about the baby. He cares enough to support it instead of destroying it."

"Until he thinks you're ready to take on the responsibility on your own."

"No. He offered to adopt it himself."

"And you'd let him do it?"

"It'd be the answer to all your arguments. I'd no longer be tied down." She tossed her head.

"You'd allow him to raise your child? You want that kid to have to go through all we had to?"

"Oh, and I suppose you'd rather be dead?"

He stood to his feet in anger. "Sometimes!"

"You can't mean that."

"I do mean it!"

"He took care of us." She spoke softly.

"He never loved us! He was just doing his duty." He started pacing.

"I always thought that. Maybe he's just incapable of showing it. He did risk his life twice to save mine, once when I fell in the river and then when you guys just *left me* in Chicago."

"We couldn't find you. Besides, that still was his duty."

"He found me, and he had a lot less to go on than you guys did."

"He didn't love us! If he did, he would have been around!" He stopped pacing next to the door just as Matt walked in.

"What's going on, here?" Mark reacted by turning and swinging at him. Matt dodged it, stepping to the side a few times to get further in. "I could hear you halfway down the hall."

"I wasn't yelling," Taylor clarified.

"They had to call me out of an examination to come up here. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"You're working?" Taylor's face fell.

"No! I mean yes, but no."

"See! He's working. Of course, he's working. That's always been more important than us, and don't you forget it!"

"You li-ar." He stepped toward Mark. "I left work the other day to go find her when you abandoned her in one of the worst sections of town. You want to kill the baby, and you don't care anything about the mother either!" Mark swung again. Matt ducked it, and then shoved Mark back, hard against the wall.

Shaking his head, Mark stepped forward. "I didn't abandon her."

"Really? When I found her, she was all alone in Chicago... inner city... in an ally... trapped with two guys, who were closing in on her!"

"That was her fault!" He pointed. "**She** ran out!"

Matt took a step forward. "You're making war on a baby! You just want to get even with me by killing my grandchild."

"You've lost your mind."

"Then prove me wrong! Leave... the baby... alone," he gritted his teeth.

"You're not fit to take care of a baby," Mark growled.

Anger ignited in Matt's stomach. "Get out of here." Advancing on Mark, he grabbed the front of his shirt and threw him toward the door.

Mark hit the doorframe, lunged forward, and rammed into Matt, pushing him back against the wall, and then attacked him with an onslaught of punches to his chest and midsection."

"Stop it!" Taylor screamed.

Matt doubled forward in reaction to about the fifth blow, causing Mark to stop momentarily, which was long enough for him to step out of range. "You're making war with a baby!" Matt yelled breathlessly, still partially doubled over, holding his stomach and leaning against a nearby chair.

“You enjoy ruining people’s lives!”

Two security guards came in with a nurse. “What’s going on in here?” one of them asked, angrily.

Mark stiffened, trying to look calmer. Matt tried to straighten but didn’t make it the whole way. “Everything’s fine,” Matt’s voice sounded strained. Mark made his way toward the door but stopped in front of the men that were blocking the way. They waited a minute, looking from person to person and then stepped aside to let Mark out. The other guard turned after him. “Are you leaving?” It was nearly a warning.

“Yes.” Mark kept walking.

Leaning against the back of the chair, Matt made his way around to the front and sat down. He felt like he should say something. The nurse just kept staring in complete shock. The security guards had warning in their eyes. One of them left, Matt figured he was going to make sure Mark found the door. He wondered if the other one was going to offer to escort him out. “I think I can handle it from here.” The security guard addressed the wide-eyed nurse. Nodding, she turned around glancing over as she left. The security guard walked further in. “I think we need to talk.”

Matt stood up. Leaning against the bed rail with one hand, he took a few steps forward, “Can it be a little later.” The guard just looked at him disapprovingly, so he continued. “I’m supposed to take Taylor home today, and I’m already a couple hours late.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow when I come into work.” The guard crossed his arm. “Look, I took a day off to get my daughter back home, and the day’s practically half over.” He straightened all the way and stepped away from the bed.

The guard hesitated a moment. “Okay.” He headed for the door but then turned around before going out. “But only because... I’ve never seen you take a day off before.” He smiled and then pointed at him. “Tomorrow.” Matt nodded, and the guard walked out.

“You’re in trouble?” Taylor questioned. Glancing at her, he sat back down and slowly ran his hand back and forth through his hair then stared off into the distance. “You okay?” she asked, softly.

Not answering, Matt craned his head back, looking up at the ceiling and then back at her. “Do you want an abortion, or do you want to save the baby?”

“I want to have the baby.”

Matt gave a half-smile. “Then I’ll help you both... whatever you need.”

“You’ve changed.” She gazed at him, questioningly.

“Jesus changed me.”

“Yeah. I don’t know.” She looked away. “Still, maybe you haven’t been such a terrible father.”

“Glad someone thinks so... momentarily anyway.” He leaned down on his knees and straightened, cracking his back.

“You may have to convince Mark though.” She rubbed her face wearily. “Life’s getting way to confusing and complicated.”

“Tell me about it,” he muttered. “Hopefully, he’ll go home soon. He’s got to have a job somewhere.”

“You don’t want him around, do you... your own son?” Her voice was accusatory.

“Not if his only purpose to being here is to cause trouble.” His voice was weary.

“Well, I think he’s gonna be around for a while?”

“What do ya mean?”

She shrugged. “He wants to stay with us until I have to baby.”

“Whaat?” Matt accidently jumped to his feet in surprise.

“Like I said, he wants to stay with us.”

“Well, he’s not going to.” Matt pounded the top of the chair with a clenched fist.

“He may already be there.”

“Did you give him a key?” His eyes were angry.

“No. I meant he’d probably be waiting outside.”

Matt grabbed her overnight bag. “Well, I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” He started throwing stuff in. “You didn’t tell him about Melinda?”

“No... but a... I’d like to see how you’re going to stop him from going inside.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” He slapped the last shirt in.

“You two *shouldn’t* fight.”

“No kidding.”

She paused a minute. “If it comes to that, make sure he starts it.” Her voice sounded a little worried, enough to make Matt look at her questioningly. “Well, I doubt you’d have him thrown in jail.” She paused. “He might want you....” Her voice was hesitant.

“Don’t worry about it,” he mumbled, reaching for the cosmetic bag. “He won’t come in while I’m there. If I’m not just don’t answer the door. I doubt he’ll try to break it down. ... I hope.” He put her hairbrush and floss in and then began to zip it up.

“What if he does?”

“Call the police.” He yanked the zipper shut on the overnight bag.

“I couldn’t do that to my own brother.”

“He doesn’t care about you. All he wants to force me to be all alone.” Matt yanked the wheelchair over.

“I don’t know. I can’t believe that.” Her voice was tentative. “I mean he wouldn’t be angry enough to....” She turned to look at him sharply. “Besides you aren’t hardly ever going to be there, are you? I’m mean with Melinda there and you... stay-ing in the barn?”

“I’ll be there as much as I can as long as he’s around. Hopefully, he won’t be.”

“Yeah. Then you can stay away, permanently.”

He rolled his eyes and yanked the computer bag off the bed, propping it up by the overnight bag on the floor. “Let’s go.”

Rolling her eyes in response, she slid to the side and pushed herself out of the bed. He helped her into the chair. “I think he’s just angry. He’ll calm down.” She didn’t sound sure.

Matt set the overnight bag in her lap and flung the cosmetic bag and laptop case over his shoulder. “He left home over five years ago. Apparently, he hasn’t calmed down yet.”

“He will,” Taylor stated confidently as Matt wheeled her out.

Leaning on the outside stirrup, Jess clicked her tongue as she brought her horse around a barrel and then took off full speed toward the one on the other side of the arena, rounded it and came back. “Hey, Jess!” Kara Lee yelled from outside the arena gate. Jess jammed on the brakes, causing the horse to kick up a huge cloud of dust as it stopped. Coughing on the dust, she smiled and trotted over. “You’re back?” She smiled at Muchacho who had his head over the gate, trying to reach her horse, Butterscotch. Then she glanced at Kara, who stood beside him.

“Yeah... for a little while anyway.”

“Did it go well?”

“A-ahh.” She bobbed her head back and forth as if trying to decide. “It was exhausting.” Muchacho nipped at butterscotch. Jess pulled Butterscotch’s reins to get her to back up.

“Will we see your segment on the news?”

“No... not unless you have cable.” Kara made Muchacho back up when he nipped again.

“Oh.... No.”

“I didn’t think so. You spend too much time out in the barn for TV.” She reached out to pet the blaze on Jess’s horse’s face.

“Yeah. News and that’s about it... an occasional DVD, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Kara Lee continued stroking the horse. Jess waited, wondering why she had called her over. “Well, just wanted to say hello. Muchacho give you any trouble while I was gone?” She slapped her horse’s shoulder.

“No. Just fine like usual. He seems a little grumpy today though.”

“Yeah, I told him I’d be leaving again soon. He just can’t stand to be away from me.” She rubbed Muchacho’s neck.

“Oh, is that it?” Jess smiled.

“Yeah. Poor guy. But I gotta work to support him, so oh well. See ya, around.” Kara turned to go but then stopped abruptly. “Oh, by the way, is Derrick around?”

I see. Jess smiled to herself. “No. He’s working today.”

“Oh.” Kara nodded. “Just wanted to say, ‘hi.’ Don’t think I’m going to be around too long this time, already got another assignment in the works. Gonna start on it tomorrow.”

“That’s great! I mean that you got another assignment no that your leaving of course.”

Kara smiled. “Yeah. Thanks. Maybe I’ll get a chance to come over tomorrow before I leave.”

Jess smiled. “Yeah. Derrick should be around tomorrow. I think he’s planning to split wood with Jim.”

“To ride Muchacho.” Kara Lee clarified, trying to hold back her own smile.

“Uh huh. Sure. Still, he must enjoy your company. I’ve never seen him go riding with any other girl. In fact, I’ve never seen him do *anything* with any other girls.” She thought out loud.

“As good looking as he is? I’d think he’d have half a dozen chicks milling around him.”

“No.” She paused, and her voice softened. “He had a wife once. She died. I don’t, a, think he’d take another relationship lightly.”

“Oh really?” She ran her finger along the top of the metal gate. “Well, maybe he just needs to learn to lighten up a little.”

Jess shrugged “I don’t know. I don’t think he’ll give up his heart again very easily. I hope nobody ever tries to lead him on.” Jess’s eyes held question marks.

Kara nodded, choking up on Muchacho’s reins and pulling him back from annoying Jess’s horse again. “What happened to his wife? I mean, how’d she die?”

Jess thought a moment. “You’d better ask him.”

Kara nodded. “You think he’d tell me.”

Jess shrugged. “I don’t know, but if you watch his eyes, you’ll see how much she meant to him.”

Kara Lee jerked back as if she'd been hit by something. "You don't think very well of me, do you?" Her eyes were fiery though she nervously scraped the chipped paint from the gate with her fingernail.

"What do you mean?" Jess repositioned herself in the saddle.

"You think I'm trying to lead him on!"

"You said that, not me." Jess tried not to look nervous even though her pulse was quickening.

"You think you're better than me! You think that he's better than me!" She whacked Muchacho on the nose when he bit at her.

"No, I don't." Jess shook her head adamantly. "I think he's a Christian, are you?"

"Yes, I'm a Christian." Kara looked a little offended. "I believe in God. I was baptized."

"As an adult or as baby?" Jess tried not to sound skeptical.

"What *expletive* difference does that make?" Kara's eyes flashed with anger.

"The difference between your choice and your mother's." Jess backed her horse up. This was her house, so why did she feel like running away. "I mean do you believe in Jesus?"

"Sure. He was a good man! He did miracles! He was a great teacher. He's dead!"

Uh oh. Not a Christian. "He's not dead. He rose again."

"He's not here on this earth, is he?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, sort of?"

"He's in heaven, right?"

"Ye-ah."

"Well, people in heaven are usually classified as..."

"Dead." Jess thought a moment. This is why she didn't enjoy conversations with Kara Lee. Couldn't she ever just take a person's word for it? "Okay. I take that back."

"You do that," she stated flatly.

"Wait. No, I don't! He's not dead because he didn't die after he rose again. He ascended. Besides, you can pray to him, and he'll answer prayer! He's here on this earth because he lives inside those that are His!" Jess was doing her best, despite the fact her heart was pounding out of her chest.

"Uh huh. Sure."

Jess tried again. "Well, he's not dead! He didn't die. He went up to heaven in the clouds." She felt herself getting even more defensive.

"Uh huh." Jess couldn't tell if that was an agreement or an acknowledgement. "I suppose he won't like me unless I start going to church."

Who? Derrick or Jesus? "You mean Derrick?"

"Who else would I be talking about?" Kara snapped.

Jess glanced at the barrels longingly. She needed another round to calm her down. "I doubt that will change his mind," Jess muttered, messing with Butterscotch's mane, yet watching Kara's reaction from the corner of her eye.

"Why not?" Kara yelled in exasperation.

"I think he'll be able to tell if you're just going through the motions... if it's not real."

"If he loves me, he won't care." Kara nearly spit out the words. Jess let her expression show she didn't agree. "Well, what's he expect?"

"A sister in Christ."

"I don't get that." Kara shook her head and bopped Muchacho again when he started chewing on the wooden post holding up the gate.

"You don't know Jesus."

"I know who he was," she spoke quietly.

"But you don't know who he is."

"He *is* alive, and you have to believe He rose from the dead. *'If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. (Rom 10:9) You have to be willing to talk to Him and let Him talk to you. You have to call on Him to be saved. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Rom. 10:13) Being a Christian is about having a relationship with Jesus. There's a spot in the Bible that says, Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many shall say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. (Math. 7:21-23) You have to do the will of the Father and be born again into His family. People can effectively go through the motions, even preach in the name of the Lord and not really know him. Most the time you can tell the difference between someone who's actually talking to Jesus and someone who's just reciting a prayer they've memorized.'*" Jess stopped talking. Kara didn't respond. Jess backed Butterscotch up again. She wanted to look at her watch and say, "My, my, look at the time. I'd better finish up with this horse so I can go put supper on," but she wasn't wearing a watch, and it wasn't time for supper.

"Yeah well," Kara backed up her horse. "I haven't gone to church in a while. I'm not really up to date on all that stuff." Jess nodded. "I better get Muchacho saddled and get out on my ride if I'm going to go." She spoke softly and gave a partial smile.

Jess returned a smile. "Yeah. Have a good ride!" Spinning her own horse around, she nudged her, and she took off in a fast gallop across the arena and around the first barrel.

If We can Get in the Door

Taylor sighed as their house came into view. "It is good to be home again." She leaned back against the seat and looked around, content until... "Uh oh."

"What?" Matt glanced over at her.

She nodded toward a black car parked near the end of their property line. "Someone beat us home."

"Is that Mark's car?"

"Yep." Matt got out his cellphone. "What are you going to do?"

"Call Melinda and tell her to hide in the basement just in case he gets in... but he's **not** getting in."

"Oh." Taylor sighed in relief. "I thought you were calling the cops."

"Don't tempt me... Hi, Melinda...." He talked fast. When he got done, he put his phone back on his belt and turned to Taylor. "I gave the garage door opener to Melinda, so will have to go in the front. Don't think me a coward, but let's hurry up and get in there before...."

Taylor, who was staring in the window, interrupted. "He's already getting out."

"Great." Matt turned, grabbed the bags from the backseat and nearly ran toward the front door. He set them down on the porch and turned to go back for Taylor who was out but leaning unsteadily against the door for support. Knowing he wasn't going to beat Mark back to the car, he stiffened, regained his stern demeanor and walked calmly back. Glancing at Mark approaching, he put his arm around Taylor and supported her toward the house.

"So, Dad...." Mark came to a stop beside them, smirk on his face.

"Mark, just leave. You're not welcome here right now." Matt kept his eyes fixed on the house as they continued toward it.

"That's a fine thing to say to your son." Mark followed. "Are you disowning me, now?"

"No. I'm just not in the mood for you, now." Matt helped Taylor up the porch steps.

"Oh, well, that's nothing new." Taylor's leg buckled and she stumbled. Instead of reaching out for her, Mark backed away. Matt yanked her back up and helped her over to a wicker chair to sit down as he unlocked the door.

"So, how's my room lookin'? Been in there lately, Dad?" Mark leaned against a pillar holding up the porch roof.

Matt didn't look at him as he helped Taylor back up, all while trying to stay in front of the door so Mark couldn't plow through. "It's not your room anymore."

"You didn't give it to someone else, did you? I mean I know you're in high social demand but...." His voice was very

sarcastic.

“Let’s just say it’s serving a better purpose.”

“Come on, you guys,” Taylor mumbled as she strained to stand up, leaning on her father’s arm. “Knock it off, will ya.”

“You’re not saying you’d turn your own son out on the street sleep?”

“I don’t care where you sleep.” He opened the door. “Wherever you have been staying, go home!” He thrust Taylor inside next to a table she could lean against then stood firm in the doorway, holding onto either side of the frame to block Mark as he tried to come in.

“Come on, Dad! You gonna make me sleep in my car?”

“Let’s put it this way.” Matt stared deep into his son’s eyes and then shrugged. “Yes.” He swung inside and slammed the door, bolting in as Mark fell against it and tried to yank it open. Banging on it, Mark yelled violent threats and raging cursings. Matt tried to ignore it as he helped his daughter over to the recliner.

“You left my bags outside,” she reminded him.

“Yeah. I’ll get ‘em later.”

“You really going to make him sleep in his car?”

“He can get a hotel room.” Matt looked around, pleased with how nice everything looked, as he searched for the TV remote for his daughter. When he found it, he stared at it a moment, noticing even it had been washed, before he handed it to Taylor. “Hungry?”

“Famished.”

“I’ll see what I can find for us to eat.” After the banging stopped, Matt walked over to the window and watched Mark stomp off back to his car. Letting the curtain fall back, he turned back toward the kitchen. “I’ll tell Melinda she can come out of hiding.”

“Hey, could you get the lamp on your way by?”

He turned it on and headed for the basement. Halfway down the old, wooden steps, he noticed Melinda sitting on a dusty box of old books. “Coast is clear.”

“Good.” Dusting herself off, she got up and headed up the stairs. “This is not the type of basement I expected from you.”

“I know, but we got a good deal on the house because of it. I always meant to finish it, but the rest of the house is so big, there just really never was a need.”

She walked past him. “What about the need to keep the spiders and mice at bay.” Reaching the top, she spun back around to face him, eyes widening. “*Do you* have any mice down here?”

He stopped, nearly running into her, backed up, and thought before answering. “Only friendly ones.”

She gasped, spinning back around and charging through the door to the safety of the carpeted hallway. “Well, give it plenty of thought before sending me down there again! Next time I might not come back!”

Shaking his head, Matt followed her out and closed the door. “Have you eaten, yet? I was just going to make Taylor and me some lunch.” He followed her down the hall.

“Oh, let me make it!” She turned back toward him. “I had something special all planned, but I got so involved in tidying up, I didn’t have time.”

“I noticed. The house looks very nice.” He followed her to the kitchen.

“Thanks.” Considering how immaculate the house was when she got there, she was surprised he noticed, but glad he did.

“What did you have in mind for lunch?” He watched her walk over to a crockpot and lift the lid, but he didn’t smell anything.

“I had in mind, Italian beef and potatoes, but obviously, it’s not done, yet.” She put the lid back on. “It’ll probably be a few hours at least.”

“That’s okay. We can have it for supper.” He watched her opened the refrigerator and gaze at the near barren shelves. He walked over next to her. “Looks like you need some groceries. You’ll have to make me a list. Taylor will probably have one for me, too.”

“Yeah.” She tried to match up the ingredients in the fridge into an edible meal, but all she was coming up with was lentil and green pepper soup. *Green peppers*. She grabbed the bag of green peppers, hamburger from the freezer, onions from the pantry, and tortillas from the cupboard. “How ‘bout steak fajitas?” She asked grabbing a frying pan from under the stove.

“Sounds good. How ‘bout...?” He took out a can of pineapple from the cupboard, a couple bananas from the counter, and the grapes from the fridge. “How ‘bout a fruit salad to go with it?”

“Sounds great! I think there’s some raspberries in the freezer, too.” He nodded, going back to find them. She put the hamburger in the pan to fry and began cutting the tops off the green peppers. “You’re a little later than you’d thought you’d be? I mean I’m glad because it gave me a chance to finish up, but did everything go alright... I mean with Mark and everything?”

He thought as he filled a bowl with water and started washing the grapes. “I had to finish some work... and there was a bit of a fight with Mark before we left.”

“Not literally, I hope.”

“Yeah, literally.” He stiffened, remembering his bruised stomach.

“You okay?” She turned toward him, noticing the hint of pain in his eye.

“Yeah.” He resisted the urge to put his hand to his stomach and continued washing the grapes.

“I heard him banging on the door. He sounds like a very angry young man.”

“You’re given to understatements.” He took the grapes from the water and put them in a salad bowl as Melinda began washing the peppers under the faucet.

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“We’ve been *talking* all morning.”

“I didn’t mean arguing. I meant talking, explaining things to him.”

“First of all, I don’t know exactly what his problem is. Secondly, I can’t change the past.” Matt went to find the can opener for the pineapple. “Thirdly, I wouldn’t know what to say.” He started opening the can.

“You could try praying about it?” She spoke quietly, putting the peppers on the cutting board and beginning to slice them.

“Hey, Trent.” A fellow officer swung his head in the office door. “Ready to go check out that lead?”

“Yeah, in a couple of minutes.” Trent finished pouring his coffee. “I have to check the emails first.”

“K. Five or ten?”

“Yeah, one of the two.” He put his coffee on a coaster and sat down.

The officer just gave him a look, slapped the inside of the wall, said, “K,” and left. Trent didn’t look up at him, just quickly opened his email. The day had been so busy from the get go, Trent welcomed the opportunity to sit down at his desk. However, knowing his young whipper-snapper partner was raring to go, he didn’t tarry.

One email caught his attention right away because of return email address – lalwayswin@greatmail.com. He clicked on it. It was short, written in caps and big, red, gothic letters.

~YOU'RE GOOD~

~BUT I'm BETTER!~

~I'll find her.~

~I ALWAYS WIN!!!~

Startled, Trent read through it a couple of times, searching his brain to connect it to a case. He had a couple people in witness protection. One was a young man who was going to be transported to LA to witness against a drug lord, but the people after him, hopefully couldn't locate him all the way over here, and besides, the note clearly referred to a female.

They had an older lady they were protecting while she waited to testify against a gangbanger, but a threatening email just didn't seem to fit her scenario. He bet it had something to do with Melinda... the mystery case – no tangible suspects – no known enemies – no leads.

Trent read through the note again, trying to figure out what was going on... the strange signature *I always win*. There was only one other person in his life, he'd ever heard use that phrase, and that was a little down and out snitch named Kip Sandervauh. Well, he wasn't so little, but he seemed like it. He lived on the streets, begged, never held a job down for more than a week, basically made a living listening to gossip and ratting people out. There was some talk he was working both ends - working for an organization and ratting out their competition to the police, - but it was never more than rumors.

Trent took a drink of hot coffee as he mulled it over. About ten years ago, the guy just disappeared... went totally off the radar. Trent had never heard of him again. He'd always figured he'd gotten himself killed. Even if he hadn't, there was no possible way he could be connected to Melinda, could he?

"And so, the two heroes return," Carlos greeted Derrick and Jim as they came back in the door.

"Where?" Jim joked looking around.

Carlos slapped his arm. "Talk to ya a minute?" He nodded back toward the bay.

"Sure." Jim followed him out, curious.

Carlos turned around when they got to the squad, partially leaning back against it. "You know this thing about Melinda has really been tearing me up. I'm afraid she hates me now. I really messed up, trying to push for... you know... things she wasn't ready for. Then that incident when I got drunk and went over and started banging on her door." He looked down and shook his head. "I shouldn't drink." He looked back up. "Now..." He paused. "She's either loosing her mind and dreaming things up, or she's angry and trying to take me out! I'm leaning more toward the second one."

Jim knew his face must have looked confused. Afterall, he was under the impression it was the other way around. "What are you talking about?"

"She's got the cops investigating me. They said, she thought I was stalking her."

Yeah. Are you?

"You know me. You know I wouldn't do something like that. I can't even find her! I wanted to talk and explain things to her. Tell her how I feel, but I don't know where she's at. She won't answer her phone, and every time I go to her house, she's not home... even real early in the morning. Do you know where she's at?"

Ye-ess... "Why don't you try talking to her at work if you can't catch her at home?"

He sighed. "I tried that once. It didn't go real well. She talked with me, but she was too tired and cranky. Usually, she doesn't have time to talk. Lately, if I ask for her at the hospital, no one can seem to find her. They say she's working, but no one can locate her. It's like she vanished! Either that or she's doing a real good job of avoiding me." Jim chuckled. "Seriously. Her house looks abandoned! Have you been over there? No one's even mowing the grass. It's like she's hiding or something. Are the cops hiding her for some reason? What's going on?"

"Why do you expect me to know?" Jim was starting to sweat. How had Carlos connected him with Melinda's disappearance?

"You know everything that goes on."

Jim tried to smile. "That's an overstatement."

"Look. I need to know where she's at. I need to know what's going on!"

"Maybe you should just try and stay away from her for a while," Jim suggested, then stepped back in surprise at the sudden anger that entered Carlos's eyes.

"She's still my girl!"

"Maybe she doesn't want to be anymore."

"She's got no right to dump me after everything I've done for her!"

Jim stiffened. "She's got every right."

Carlos's eyes narrowed. "What do you know about this?"

"I know that if a girl wants you to leave her alone, you should respect her wishes."

"I'll never get her back if I just let her go!"

"Well, maybe it's over."

"It's not over!" He gritted his teeth. "I won't let it be over!"

"Now it's smelling good." Matt walked in the kitchen, book in hand, holding his place with his finger.

"Doesn't it?" Melinda stood over the open crockpot, pulling the meat apart with two forks. "Nice and tender, too. I think this meal is going to turn out ju-ust perfect."

"Need any help?" Matt started to walk over.

"You don't have to. I can manage."

"I don't mind." He tossed the book on the table. "What else do you have going on?"

"Well, the coleslaw and leftover fruit salad are all ready and in the fridge. The rolls are just about to come out of the oven and then they can go in a basket. All I really have left to do is mash the potatoes."

"I can do that." Matt took the pot off stove and began draining it.

"Thanks." Melinda kept pulling the meat apart. "How long have you lived here? This looks like a very nice, newer home." She looked around.

"About ten years, but it wasn't new when we got it." He went to the fridge to get the butter and milk. "After my wife died, we needed a change, so we moved here."

"Running away from memories?" She went to the stove to get a pan. He didn't answer. He just dumped the butter and milk into the potatoes and went to look for the beaters. "How'd she die?" Melinda continued as she poured the meat juice into the pan.

"Cancer." His answer was abrupt and void of emotion.

"Sorry." Her voice was soft as she put the pan on the stove to heat and went to look for the cornstarch.

"It was a long time ago." He tried to sound objective, but his voice was strained.

Melinda thoughtfully stirred the cornstarch in water as she listened to the whirring of the beaters in the background. She knew he must feel terrible being a doctor and not being able to save his own wife. When the whirring stopped, the silence seemed awkward and nearly deafening, so Melinda tried to change the subject, but didn't end up getting too far away from the original topic. "So, where'd you live back then?" She slowly poured the cornstarch paste into the meat juice and began whisking it in.

"Kentucky. I worked at a hospital in relatively small town in the smoky mountains."

"Oh, I bet that was beautiful. Did you live in town or out in the country?"

"On the edge of town." He dumped the steaming mashed potatoes in a nice China dish and cut off a generous slab of butter for on top.

Melinda jumped as the oven buzzed loudly behind her. She jumped, spun around, turned off the timer, and took out the rolls. "Don't those look good. I hope you and Taylor are hungry." She gazed at her dinner proudly as she slid the cookie sheet on top the stove.

"As good as this smells? A person'd have to be crazy not to be!"

Melinda smiled and nodded with satisfaction as she took the thickened gravy off the burner. She so wanted to make a good impression, and she hoped this helped.

Work Can Kill

“Thank you.” Grabbing his food, Wade tried to find a spot in the packed food court, which was increasingly difficult. He knew he should have eaten earlier. He wanted to enjoy his brief breaks. They were rapidly becoming the only good part of his day.

At least, he was bringing home a paycheck, and these days he would do just about anything for that privilege. Once the unemployment stopped, the fridge got instantly emptier and the house payment started getting paid late or not at all. He was starting to get desperate when this job came along. Payday made everything he hated about this job endurable. He just wished it wasn't such an opposite of his last job. He used to be the hero that everyone ran up and thanked. Now, he felt like the proverbial killjoy. He couldn't remember the last time he said something positive. *... I'm sorry, no smoking inside. Could I see your ID please? No drinking outside the bar. I'm going to have to detain you until we can settle this matter with the police. Yes, shoplifting is still a crime even if the item is under ten bucks. Yes, you can go to jail for it. Shooting up is always frowned upon, even if you are hiding behind a philodendron (or whatever that plant was.) No, you can't try to push your girlfriend down the escalator, no matter how mad you are. Fist fighting in the middle of a display case of China will not win you a person-of-the-year award. Move along, friend; you're loitering.*

Wade plopped down at the first and probably only vacant table he could find. What he really wanted to say to the entire population was, “Just stop being stupid in general!”

“Hey, Wade.” A man, he didn't see, walked up behind him and slapped him on the shoulder. Wade froze. For a split second, he wasn't sure whether to jump up and pull his gun, flip the guy over top of him on the table, or turn around and tackle him. While he was trying to decide, Pastor Thomas removed his hand and walked in front of him. “Don't I even rate a, 'Hi?'” He stood across the table from him. “How's the new job going?”

Wade let out a deep breath and tried to stabilize his heartrate. “Fine.”

“You look a little tense.”

Well, what do you expect, sneaking up on me like that! “No, you just surprised me is all.” Just then, Wade noticed the tray of food the pastor was carrying. “Want to join me?”

"I was hoping you'd ask." The pastor set down his tray and pulled out the chair, accidentally squeaking it across the linoleum. "I don't think there's another empty table around here anywhere."

"Tell me about it." Wade unwrapped his hamburger.

"Mind if I pray for our food?"

"Oh, sure." Wade quickly rewrapped the burger, feeling stupid for forgetting. Pastor Thomas not only prayed for their food, but he prayed for Wade, for Mellissa, for both their jobs, and for their baby to be found quickly.

"Thanks." Wade smiled, amazed at how much better he felt after the pastor prayed. He almost felt peaceful which was quite the contrast to his current occupation. Actually, he'd been all tied up in knots for months, but at this moment, he felt warm and loved. "So, how'd you end up here?" Wade tried to start the conversation.

"I have no idea where, but my wife and daughter are around here somewhere. Our daughter came back for a couple of days, and nothing would do but those two had to come shopping. We've already been here three hours. I lost them over there somewhere," He pointed in the general direction of three clothing stores. "about an hour ago... somewhere between the dresses and the blue jeans. All I know was that we were all on the second floor when they vanished."

"And you'd like to report a missing person." Wade smiled.

"Nah. This happens all the time. They'll turn up eventually... when they need someone to pay the bill." Pastor stated dryly, as unwrapped his sub.

Wade choked on a laugh. "Why don't you call them?"

"I a, left my cellphone at home. I discovered this midway through the dress shirts. Never mosey over to the men's department if you want to keep track of your wife and daughter."

Wade smiled as he took a bite. "I'll have to remember that."

"So how are things going here?" Pastor slapped Wade's arm, lightly.

"Fine." Wade nodded, looking down. "It's a job, and I'm grateful for it."

Pastor nodded. "I'm sure. Any plans for the future?"

Wade shrugged. "Just keep chuggin' along, I guess."

"Are you still looking, or have you settled on this one for now?"

"I guess you could say I'm still looking." He paused. "I don't have much time for that anymore. Why do you know of anything?"

Pastor shook his head. "Sorry. I wish I did. I'll keep praying about it." Wade nodded, wishing he felt like that was doing any good, but at the moment, he didn't. Of course, he knew he hadn't been praying much himself. "Any word on Davy, yet?"

Wade shook his head as he chewed. "A while back they thought he might be traveling with a woman in a cartel down in Mexico, but lately all they will tell me is they're still investigating."

"What about the man who took him? Isn't he in jail?"

Wade nodded. "He's not talking. They say they've investigated every place that could be associated with him. They think he must have had a third party holding the baby, and when things went south, they probably just dumped him the first place they could pick up a few bucks."

Pastor shook his head while he finished chewing. "So, now it's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Someone knows... somewhere." Wade's voice was soft. He stared off a moment then took another bite.

"God knows."

"But will he tell *us*?" Wade tried to keep his voice from sounding bitter.

"He will... in His own good time."

"STOP! I've been robbed! Stop them!" A man ran out of the corner restaurant, yelling and pointing toward a younger man and women who were running away. The girl held a sack, and the guy had a gun. "Stop them!" The male robber spun around and fired. Everyone collectively gasped and hit the dirt. The restaurant owner yelled out in pain and fell to the ground, hit. Wade started to run toward him, but the owner kept pointing toward the robber yelling, "Get them!" Reluctantly, Wade turned around and ran after them, wishing beyond hope that there was a real cop around somewhere. There wasn't... only him. Pastor Thomas hurried over to the wounded man, instructing a lady with a cellphone to call 911.

Heart jumping into turbo speed, Wade weaved through the tables, jumped over a chair, and turned the corner in hot pursuit. The two robbers were as fast as he was, and though he was keeping up, he wasn't gaining on them. People gasped and screamed, scattering as the robbers ran through. Some hit the dirt. Wade just hurdled them and kept going.

Seeing a fenced-in circle up ahead, Wade decided to go around the opposite way. The robbers went left so he went right. Sprinting with all his might, he got around first and headed them off. "Stop!" He pulled his gun, but his hand was shaking. The two skidded to a stop, turned, hurdled the fence, and raced down a dim hallway until they were trapped at the end. Knowing the hallway was a dead end, Wade followed, walking. Gun drawn, sweating like a pig, heart beating out of his chest, he closed in. It was all he could do to keep his entire body from shaking. He couldn't tell if the robber had his gun drawn until he got close. He had it out, but not aimed. Wade tried his best to conceal his fear and not let it show on his face. He didn't know if he was succeeding. "Put your hands in the air! Put your hands in the air, now!" Wade kept his gun aimed squarely at the male figure, prepared to fire. He expected to, but to his surprise, the man slowly set the gun on the ground. "Now! Put your hands in the air!" Wade cringed when he heard his voice shake. The man smiled when he heard it, but still slowly, almost sarcastically raised his hands. The girl didn't. "You too!" Wade yelled but didn't turn the gun. She ignored him, still clutching the bag.

"Look, man, why don't you let us go? You're only going to get yourself hurt." The man took a step forward.

"Stop!" Wade raised his gun a little higher.

The man stopped then shrugged but kept his hands up. "Look, man, what if we give you the money back?" He nodded toward the girl. The girl nodded back and started walking toward Wade, holding out the bag. "Stop!" He yelled at her but didn't turn the gun. She kept walking, slowly, and set the bag a little to the side of him. "Here's your stupid money! Why don't you take it and go!"

"Go back!" Wade yelled at her. "By your boyfriend!"

She put her hands on her hips. "You gonna shoot me if I don't?"

Wade glanced at her but didn't turn his gun. Quick as a flash, she grabbed a small revolver from under her shirt and fired three times. The close impact hit Wade's chest and sent him flying backwards.

Hesitating a moment, the girl stared at Wade's unconscious body. Then kicking his gun away, she returned hers to her belt, and grabbed the money, and took off running. Her boyfriend retrieved his weapon and followed close behind. They made it almost to the end of the hallway when they ran into Pastor Thomas blocking the way, gun drawn. "Hold it!" They both stopped. The man instantly put his hands up, gun under his jacket. The girl didn't. "Both

of you.” He turned the gun toward her.

“You wouldn’t shoot a girl, would you?” She put her hands on her hips.

“In a minute.” Pastor’s eyes were steel as they stared into hers. Her face fell, and her eyes changed to fear. In that moment, the man let his hands fall, and then quick as a flash reached for his gun. Pastor turned and fired, hitting him dead center in the heart. The girl’s mouth dropped. “You killed him!” She turned toward her boyfriend.

“Hold it!” Pastor returned his aim to her. “Drop your weapon.”

“I don’t have one!” she screamed.

“Do it, now!” He stepped toward her.

“You killed him!” She fell onto her boyfriend, screaming his name and shaking him. “You killed him!” Bent over him, she reached for her gun and pulled it out, but before she could aim it, Pastor Thomas fired, hitting her in the wrist, causing her to drop the gun. He grabbed both their guns and quickly searched the guy for other weapons, even though he wouldn’t be using them. Weakly, the girl cursed him over and over.

Pastor pulled her away from her dead boyfriend’s body, demanded her phone, forced her to walk with him toward Wade, and dialed 911 on the way. Pastor groaned when he saw Wade, lying on the ground unconscious, bleeding profusely. Keeping a strong hold on the girl, he leaned down and took the handcuffs from off Wade’s belt. The girl spit on Wade in distain. Pastor gritted his teeth and forced himself not to react to it. He cuffed her, forced her to sit down, took his handkerchief from his pocket and knelt down next to Wade. Praying the whole time, he pressed the folded handkerchief firmly against the bullet holes in Wade’s chest right above his heart. He kept his eyes fixed on the rise and fall of Wade’s abdomen for reassurance he was still breathing and prayed that help would arrive in time.

“That’s my railroad!” Taylor exclaimed as Melinda landed on her space.

“I know. I know,” Melinda grumbled. “What’s the charge?”

“Seventy even.”

Melinda looked at her minute cash accumulation dejectedly. “How ‘bout a senior discount? I’m older than I look.”

“Nope.” Taylor held out her hand. “Pay up.”

“No mercy.” Melinda painstakingly counted out the cash.

Matt smiled at their interaction. He was glad they were getting along so well. *Ring, a ling, ding, ding... Ring a ling ding ding...* Matt pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Hello?... uh huh... okay. How long ago? Where? Uh huh. I’m be there as soon as I can.” Matt got to his feet. All eyes were on him, trying to figure out the conversation. “Okay... Okay... I’ll be right there.” Taylor’s face fell as he hung up. “You have to go to work.”

“Wade’s been shot.”

Melinda’s mouth dropped. “Our Wade from church and....”

“Yes, and it doesn’t sound good.” Matt went to the closet to get his coat. “They’re transporting him now.” Concern showed on his face.

“Oh no.” Melinda looked shocked. “You never really think that will happen to someone you know.”

“He took on a dangerous job.” Matt knelt with one knee on the sofa in order to pull back the curtain and look out the front window. “Mark’s still out there.” He stood back up. “Just be prepared. He might try something when I

leave.” He looked past Melinda and sternly at Taylor. “Don’t let him in.”

Taylor tossed her head. “I’ll do my best.”

“Your *best* better be good enough to keep him from getting in that door.” Taylor’s face looked either angry or defiant. He didn’t know which. “You’d better make sure you’re hidden if he comes to the door.” He looked at Melinda. She nodded. Giving them both a warning glance, he turned and headed for the door. He prayed as he locked it for everyone’s safety and that Melinda’s secret would not be discovered. On his way to his car, he prayed for Wade, for his life to be saved, and for wisdom for himself.”

Lord, please help Wade. Please spare this young man’s life. Please, keep him here for his wife, she desperately needs him... and his baby, wherever he’s at... you know, Lord. Please keep this little family together. Please bring their baby back to them. Please keep Wade safe. You know, he’s loved. Please give him longer, and use him in this life, whatever it is that you’d have him to do. Eyes closed, holding Wade’s hand tightly, Pastor Thomas prayed earnestly for him in the ambulance. He’d tried to stay out of the way of the EMTs, but they didn’t seem to mind him being there, so he had just decided to pray and let them tell him to move if they needed him to. So engulfed in his prayer, he barely heard the blaring of the sirens or noticed the feeling of the vehicle’s high speed. He was afraid to let go of Wade... afraid to quit praying... pleading for his life. He felt one of the EMTs tap on his shoulder. “We’re pulling in Pastor.” Opening his eyes, the pastor nodded as he got up, but his mind kept praying, even as they came to a stop and began unloading Wade.

Mellissa’s hand involuntarily shook as she set the dinner plates on the table. She had this terrible feeling. She’d been worrying about Wade all day long. No, she’d been worrying about him ever since he got that stupid job, enough that she called him at least three times a day, usually quelling her jitters until the next time she talked to him. Today was the first day he didn’t answer. Well, that’s not quite true. He answered this morning and at lunch, but tonight.... He heart sped up to think about it. She’d called him three times, and it just rang and rang, increasing her panic on every occasion. She desperately wanted to try one more time, but she was on the verge of hyperventilating now, and she was afraid one more....

Bring-ring...Bring-ring...Bring... The noise from the phone so startled her, she jumped at least a foot, but she grabbed it as soon as she landed, nearly falling on the table as she dove for it. *Wade!* The caller ID said Wade. “Wade? What happened? Are you okay? I was so...!”

“Mellissa it’s not Wade. It’s Pastor Thomas.”

“Pastor? How’d you get Wade’s phone?” She didn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer it earlier, but...”

“What’s going on?” Her voice shook with fear.

“I don’t exactly know how to say this other than laying it on the line. Wade’s been shot.”

“No.” Her voice sounded as weak as her legs felt. Her knee buckled almost causing her to fall. She caught herself on the table. “I knew this was going to happen. ... Oh, God, please, help him.” She felt faint, but she resisted it.

“I’d like to say everything’s going to be okay, but I just don’t know. They just got him here to the hospital. He’s still breathing on his own, and they say his heart is strong. He’s not awake.”

“Where’d the bullet.... Where’d he get hit?”

“Above his heart... right above. They’re still in there. Got shot twice. Broke one rib at least. He’s lost a lot of

blood, but the EMTs sounded positive. I haven't heard from any doctors. Like I said we just got here. I wanted to call you first thing."

"Did... did they get the guys that did it?"

"Yes."

Mellissa started to sob. "Oh, Wa-ade."

"Mellissa listen to me. I texted my wife. She's on her way to pick you up. I don't think it's a good idea for you to drive. She should be there in about fifteen minutes. She was up in Rockford... with me."

"Were you there when it happened?" She sobbed as she talked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you stop it!"

"I tried... I.... I got there too late. I'm sorry."

"What good does it do for you to carry that gun around all the time... if you can't even help one of your own when he needs it!"

"Mellissa, calm down."

"Wade, oh, Wade! God, help him! Please, God, help my husband! Don't let him die! ... Please, dear Jesus don't let him die. God, don't let him die!"

Gritting his teeth and rubbing his face, Pastor Thomas swayed to the side, feeling faint. Catching himself on the wall, he eased himself down into a waiting room chair and wiped the dripping sweat from his face with his sleeve. "Let's pray." She quieted her crying but didn't stop completely. "Mellissa? I said let's pray together for your husband."

She sniffed back her remaining tears. "Okay. You start."

"Lord, please keep Wade safe. Please keep him safe for Mellissa." Jess prayed out loud in the passenger's seat of their car while Jim drove. She was glad Jim had come back to pick her up after he'd gotten off work. She was too upset to drive.

"Father, please be with Wade right now. Don't let anything happen to him. There are so many people on this earth that love him and need him. Please help him to be alright. Give the doctors wisdom and help him not to have any permanent damage." Jim put on his blinkers and turned from the gravel road onto the highway as he finished praying.

"Lord, please be with Mellissa, too. Help her not to panic. Please give her peace that everything will be alright. Please help everything to be alright. She already lost her baby... or at least for now. Please don't let her lose her husband, too," Jess pleaded.

"Lord, please encourage Wade right now... whether he's conscious or not. Strengthen his spirit... and body. Help him to fight... and please..." He gritted his teeth. "Don't let the doctors make a mistake."

When Uninvited Company Won't Leave

Losing interest in their game, Melinda stared off into the distance, not even paying attention to where Taylor was moving. "It's your turn?" Taylor looked at her inquisitively.

"Oh, sorry." Melinda took the dice and rolled them.

"You know this could be a very bad business move on my part, but don't you want your rent? The space I just landed on has three houses on it."

Melinda looked down at the space. "Oh, sorry. I guess my head just isn't in the game anymore. I already rolled the dice anyway."

"That's okay. I didn't really want to pay it anyway. Where is it, your mind, I mean?"

"Oh, I was just thinking..." Melinda got up.

Ding, Dong, Ding...

Melinda jumped, heart racing. Taylor looked at the door. "Don't worry. I'll take care of him." She thumbed over her shoulder. "Why don't you go in the other room, just in case." He stopped ringing and started knocking. Melinda started to say something, then just left instead. "Mark!" Taylor yelled over the knocking. "What do you want?"

He stopped knocking. "Can I come in?"

"No!"

"Come on. Where do you come off acting like our father? I just want to talk to you!"

"I don't."

"Come on, Taylor, open up. What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Lately, I have no idea!"

"That's my home, too!" Taylor didn't answer. "Come on. It's cold out here!"

"Why don't you go to a hotel?"

"I don't have enough money!"

"Why don't you ask dad for some?"

Mark laughed bitterly. "You really think he cares if I freeze? He's probably enjoying it!"

"I doubt it."

"Okay. Let me in, and I'll ask him when he gets home!"

"A... why don't you wait in your car, and I'll ask him!"

"And waste the little bit of gas I have left on heat!"

"What have you *been* doing?"

"I'll tell you what I could do. I could call social services and report that you were alone here all night when you were supposed to be on bed rest!"

"I'm not an invalid! I am resting!"

"Clear case of neglect if you ask me!"

"Oh, come on!"

"Do I call them tomorrow?"

"I haven't been alone anyway! You've been here the whole time!"

"I can't get in the door!"

Taylor rolled her eyes, leaned back, and stared up at the ceiling, not knowing what to do. "The key's in the flowerpot!"

Leaning forward against the kitchen wall, listening, Melinda rolled her eyes so big, her whole head rolled along with it. *Grea-at! Back down to the mouse-eaten basement.* She eyed the hallway but decided to wait and listen a little longer. She figured she could still get down there without being seen, even if he did come in the living room. Closing her eyes, she prayed as she heard the front door squeak open.

Mark looked around, as he walked in.

"What's the matter?"

He shrugged. "It never looked this good when I lived here."

"That's because you were a pig." She repositioned herself in the chair. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Just to make sure you're doing okay."

She rolled her eyes, exaggeratedly. "Oh, brother. That's why you forced your way in here?"

"I didn't *force* my way in."

"What would you call it?" She looked at the monopoly board, hoping he wouldn't notice it... or the three piles

of money.

"I had to make sure you were okay."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You never know. You almost died last year because of his neglect."

"Come again?" Her mind raced for what he was talking about, finally deciding it was the incident at the river. Her heart tightened with fear. The thought, of her freedom being restricted more than it already was, scared her to death.

"It'd be safer for you." He stared down at the board.

"Mark, you're scaring me. I wish you'd leave."

"I've got every right to be here," he mumbled, not looking at her.

"Besides you're the one that abandoned me in Chicago!" She tried to draw his attention away from the board game.

"I did not! You're the one that ran away. All you had to do was walk back to the car."

"You took the car!"

"I was coming back."

"You didn't!"

"I did, too! When I got there, you were both GONE!"

"Did you even ask them what happened?"

"YES, I ASKED THEM!"

Taylor looked away, deciding not to continue with the conversation. She wished he'd go away. There were a few minutes of silence between them, neither looking in the other's direction. Mark finally broke it. "Look, I didn't come here to argue."

"Why did you come here?" She looked at him sharply.

He looked down at the board, not answering. "Hey, what's with the board game and three stacks of money?" He picked up the third one.

"It's the bank."

He just looked at her. "The bank only has eight hundred and fifty-nine dollars?"

Well, that didn't work. Her mind raced. "Promise you won't laugh." He just stared at her. "I was playing myself, and it's more challenging when there's three of me." She figured that was more believable than saying she was playing with Dad. He nodded and seemed to buy it. "You want to play with me?"

"No." He flipped the edge of the board, causing houses and money to go flying.

Taylor scowled at him. "I wish you would go."

"I'm not going anywhere. This is my home, too."

Taylor sat up, suddenly scared. "Not anymore. Dad doesn't want you here."

“Tough.”

“You just going to sit there until he gets back.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s going to cause a huge fight!” He shrugged. “If you care anything for me, you’d leave.”

Mark stood up. Gritting his teeth and shaking his head, he walked away, slapping his fist in his hand. “No.”

“Maybe, I’ll call the police, and get them to make you leave.” Still shaking his head, he picked up her cellphone from off the table beside her. “You’ve got no right to take that?”

“There’s no use getting excited.” He sat back down. “I’m staying.”

Behind the wall, Melinda closed her eyes and swallowed hard, unsure if there was anything she could do.

Taylor just gave Mark the death stare the whole time he sat there until finally, he got up and said, “I think I’ll find something to eat.”

“Help, yourself.” Taylor mumbled, rolling her eyes.

Melinda’s eyes got wide and her heart jumped into turbo speed. She started toward the stairs, but suddenly remembered that the door squeaked. Panic set in as she looked furiously from place to place, looking for somewhere to hide. *The garage!* Walking as quickly and as quietly as she could, she headed toward it, sure she wasn’t going to make it on time. She nearly plowed into a chair but swerved just in time just nicking it. It scratched a couple inches across the floor. She could only hope he didn’t hear it.

“Hey, wait!” Taylor stopped her brother, just in time. “Why don’t you get me something, too. You know, just so I’m not neglected.”

He smirked at her. “What do you want?”

“A... a let me see. How ‘bout... No, I think...”

Slowing as she got to the garage door, Melinda tried to steady her hand, so she could open it without noise. *Don’t let it squeak, Lord. Don’t let it squeak.* Slowly, she opened it. It didn’t squeak. She allowed a shallow amount of relief as she raced through, softly closed it, and ran to hide behind a trashcan.

Mellissa stood to her feet when she saw Dr. Fredricks coming, then so did Jim, Jess, Pastor, and Mrs. Thomas.

“He’s out of surgery. The bullets have been removed and the aorta has been repaired, although it did suffer severe damage. Infection is always a possibility. The next couple of days will be critical. He’ll be in a medically induced coma to help him recover, but you’ll be able to see him shortly. A nurse will come out to get you.”

Putting her hands over her face, Mellissa burst into tears. Sitting back down, her whole body shook as she cried. Mrs. Thomas and Jess sat down at the same time on either side, both holding her in a hug.

Trent’s brow furrowed as he walked to his door. *Why are all the lights off.* It was late but not that late. He released the safety strap on his sidearm as he opened the door. He reached for the light switch. It didn’t work. He put his hand on his gun as he closed the door. “Teresa?”

Suddenly, his wife and three kids came running out from behind the couch, yelling all at once and piling into him, holding onto him in a group hug. He couldn’t understand any of them, even his wife. “Wait a minute! Wait a

minute!” He yelled over the noise. They all quieted down. “Teresa, what’s going on?”

“This guy... this guy... he, he, he...”

“What guy?”

“I don’t know. I... I didn’t see him, but he, he, he...”

“Okay, just calm down.” He put his arm around her and walked her over to the couch, sitting her down. “Now, relax, and tell me what’s going on?” His head naturally turned, glancing in every direction as he talked. All the kids gathered around, starting to talk simultaneously again. “Shhh...” He tried to quiet them down. “Now, Mommy’s going to tell me what happened.” He looked at each of them and then back to his wife.

“This guy... this guy called on the phone. The first time I didn’t get it because I was giving Timmy his bath.” She talked fast. “He called back right after. This time I got it. He said, ‘You’re dead,’ and then started laughing. I hung up.”

“How’d you know it was the same guy?” Trent interrupted.

“Because he called back! He said I wouldn’t hang up on him if I knew who he was. I hung up. He kept calling back over and over again, wait for the answering machine to pick up, then hang up and call back... for more than an hour.”

Anger and rage clouded Trent’s face at once. Gritting his teeth, he stared off into the distance. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“My cellphone was gone. I couldn’t find it anywhere. The other phone wouldn’t call out.”

“You should have left.”

“I was afraid he was outside. All of a sudden, there was this loud noise, and the lights went out.”

BRR-ING! BRR-ING! Everyone but Trent gasped and jumped. All the kids gathered around him, holding onto him. Trent motioned them behind the couch, drew his gun, looking around in every direction as he went to the phone. He picked it up. “Hello.”

The answer came from a mechanically altered voice. He couldn’t tell if it was a recording or not. “Wait for it, cop. You’ll be sorry yet for what you did. You’re not the only one that can make war on women. Just wait. You’ll be sorry. Send them away. I’ll find them. Stay here. I’ll make you pay. You can’t see me, but I’m here.” He started laughing. “Just wait. You’ll pay.” Click. Dial tone.

“Wait, who...?” Trent started to speak just as the dial tone sounded. His kids started curiously emerging from behind the couch.

“What’d he say?” John, the oldest, blurted out in concern.

Trent started toward them. “Get back behind the couch.” He shoed his kids in that direction. “I’m going to look around.”

“Be careful, Trent,” Teresa pleaded, holding Mary, her littlest girl, tightly as she took her back behind the couch.

Tears pooled in Mellissa’s eyes as she walked into Wade’s room alone. “Oh, Wade.” She stared into her husband’s unconscious face. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all the hateful things I said. I’m sorry for all the silly arguments. I’m sorry for not loving you every minute I had a chance.” Sitting down, she started crying again. “Why did you have to take this stupid job? Why?” She sobbed. “I need you more than money. I love you.” She grabbed his hand. “Don’t

leave me. I love you. I need you,” she cried. “I need you.”

Matt wiped the sweat from his forehead as he guided his car around the curve. He couldn't believe it was only thirty-four degrees, and he was sweating. He couldn't believe he was getting this emotionally involved with a patient. He couldn't stop praying for Wade and his family. The young man was just too young to die... too good to die this way... too loved to be taken away. Normally, he would have stayed longer even through there was nothing else he could do, but tonight he had to get back to his own family turmoil. He tried calling Taylor a couple of times, but the phone only went to voicemail. He'd finally resorted to calling Mrs. Sanders and found out that Mark was inside but that according to her binoculars Taylor looked fine. He had wondered why Mark had opened the living room curtains but then decided it was so he could see him coming home. He rolled his eyes. Just what he always wanted, Mark waiting up for him inside his home. Was this day ever going to end?

Matt stared into Mark's empty car as he drove past, illogically wishing Mark to be in it. No such luck. Groaning inwardly, he slowly pulled into his driveway. *Time for World War III.*

Standing on her toes, Melinda peered out the garage window, not sure if she was glad that Matt was home or not. She would sure be happy to get back into a nice, warm house as opposed to a frosty garage, *but there's inevitably going to be a confrontation of epic proportions probably rivalling the Civil War when those opposite forces come in contact.* She watched him get out of his car. This was one day she wished he'd come in the garage, so she could try to prepare him, maybe even calm him down, but he didn't. Some day she was going to figure out the rhyme or reason to why sometimes he parked in the garage and sometimes he didn't. So far, it was still a mystery. She watched him walk toward the house, wishing the two of them could politely agree to disagree and part ways, but she knew that wasn't going to happen. She braced herself for the impending explosion.

“Mark.” Matt, wearily, walked in his house and shut the door behind him. “Do you just enjoy making life difficult?”

Mark, standing up, smiled, glancing over at Taylor. “Yours? Yes.” Taylor, who had been sleeping, yawned as she woke back up.

“I figured.” Matt's face was stern. “Now, leave.” He pointed toward the door. Mark stiffened, and his face hardened.

“He doesn't have enough money for a hotel room.” Taylor interrupted, trying to mediate.

“Oh, really?” Matt wasn't buying it. Mark just grinned, tellingly. “Then get out.”

“I didn't come here just to get thrown out.” Mark walked behind the plush navy chair and leaned the back of it.

“Why did you come here?”

“To protect Taylor.” He stood straighter and motioned toward her.

“Give me a break! Your superiority is sickening, especially for a guy who....”

“Da-ad,” Taylor interrupted him. “Can't you guys talk for two seconds without yelling?”

“You don't care about anyone but yourself!” Mark accused.

“You're as blind as you are stupid!” Matt yelled back. “You are not staying! If you need money for a hotel, I will

call the hotel and pay for a room!”

“And if I don’t go?” His voice started soft then changed to a yell. “Who’s going to throw me out?!”

“I am.” Matt took a step forward. Mark took two steps forward.

“Dad! Calm down!” Taylor, on the edge of her seat, leaned against the arm of her recliner, looking back and forth between them. “Mark, please!”

“He started it!” Mark pointed toward his father.

“Just leave!” Taylor begged.

“Tell him to leave!”

“It’s *his* house!”

“Yeah, well, it shouldn’t be!” Mark approached his dad. “It should be Mom’s! She’s the one that deserves to live not you! You killed her!”

Matt grabbed the front of Mark’s shirt. Mark swung. “Stop it!” Taylor yelled. Matt ducked. Mark clenched his fist tighter and brought it up into his dad’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Matt put his leg behind Mark’s and pushed him backwards over it, causing him to fall to the ground.

Mark barely stayed down long enough for his whole body to hit the carpet. In a flash, he was back up with his hands up on Matt’s shoulders, inching them toward his throat. Matt grabbed both Mark’s arms, forcing them away from his neck. Weak and tired, for a moment, he was a little afraid his adrenaline wasn’t going to give him enough strength to do it, but he got them apart and off his shoulders.

Then in an instant, Matt deliver a crushing blow that landed with a thud, midface on Mark. Mark, staggered backwards, but he didn’t fall. Matt didn’t know whether to let him recover or go at him with everything he had. Maybe he could finish him while he was dazed. He didn’t want to hurt his son, but he *knew* his son wanted to hurt him. While he debated, Mark recovered and came back at him. He clenched his fist and tried to return the exact blow. Matt blocked it with his forearm and stepped to the side. Mark retaliated with a surprise sidekick to Matt’s thigh. It hurt, but Matt didn’t lose his balance. So, Mark tried again, kicking him in the hip. This time, he fell, but as soon as he hit the floor, he spun himself around and slammed his foot into the back of Mark’s knee, causing Mark to fall.

Taylor started to get emotional. Standing to her feet yet leaning against the arm of the chair, she didn’t know what to do other than yell. “Stop it! Dad, stop it! Mark!” Seeing her phone that had fallen out of Mark’s pocket, she leaned against the coffee table for support and tried to get to it. She wasn’t sure if she should call the police or not. She was afraid that they were going to kill each other, but she also knew that whatever happened was probably going to be long over by time the police got there. They couldn’t last that long, could they? She watched them wrestle on the ground. One minute her dad was on the top, the next minute Mark was. When Mark was on top, he would generally throw a punch, trying to finish off Matt, but instead it would give Matt the opportunity to set him off balance and flip him over. Leaning against the table, she knelt down and reached for the phone then watched as her dad once again got on top.

Straddling Mark, Matt had him pinned, but then he didn’t know what to do. He had to get him out the door somehow. Accidentally, loosening his grip, Mark flipped him over and got on top. Matt struggled the whole way down but couldn’t break free. Urgency set in as he remembered Mark going for his throat earlier, so it was no surprise when he tried it again. The more his hands drew in closer, the more urgent Matt got to get his knees up. “Mark, stop!” Taylor screamed, standing over him with the phone, unsure whether to call on it or use it to whack him over the head. Matt got one knee up and used it to pry Mark loose. Getting his foot in Mark’s stomach, he forced him up until his grip broke free. Then he kicked him back against the wall, hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Without pausing, Matt jumped up, grabbed Mark, and thrust him toward the door. Mark stumbled to the ground a few feet from the door then stood back up. "Open it!" Matt yelled to Taylor, who was still standing nearby. She hurried to open it. Matt grabbed Mark by the shirt. Mark swung, connecting hard with Matt's jaw. Matt's head snapped back, but he didn't allow it to faze him. Stomping on Mark's instep, he slammed his fist into Mark's stomach at the same time. Mark doubled over. Matt tried to shove him out, but Mark lunged back ramming his shoulder hard into Matt's diaphragm causing all the air in Matt lungs escaped him.

In the same breath as Matt gasped for air, he ran forward, ramming Mark with his shoulder, causing them both to go tumbling out the door. Matt landed on top of Mark, flipped him over, put one knee on his back, and held down his neck, desperately trying to replenish his own oxygen supply during the brief respite. It didn't last. Mark thrust his elbow back, connecting hard with Matt's cheekbone, the impact blurring his vision. He jumped off Mark and ran inside the house.

Soon as he was inside, he deadbolted the door and fell against it in exhaustion. Taylor knelt one knee on the couch and watched as Mark slowly pushed himself up and limped back to his car. "Did he get up?" Matt's voice was breathless.

Taylor nodded, closing the curtains and standing away from the couch. "Do you think he'll...." Her shaky voice trailed off.

"I don't know," he muttered, closing his eyes and shaking his head. Feeling weak, he let himself slide down against the door to the ground. He didn't lose consciousness, but feeling too weak to even break his fall, he just lay there, focusing on breathing; even that felt like an effort right now.

Taylor sat down on the couch, just shaking her head, trying to understand. Melinda reemerged from the kitchen, phone in one hand, rolling pin in the other. "I didn't know whether or not to call the police."

Taylor held up her phone. "Ditto." She smiled at the rolling pin.

"Oh," Melinda set it down and walked over. "Well, I couldn't see what was going on very well, and what I heard sure didn't sound good." She knelt down next to Matt and picked up his wrist, checking his pulse. He blinked his eyes open and looked at her. "Are you okay?"

"Never felt better in my life," he mumbled, closing his eyes again.

"Maybe I should have given *you* the rolling pin. You want us to call someone?"

No." He shook his head once, looked at her a moment, then slowly tried to sit up. Groaning, he only made it halfway and then laid back down. Closing his eyes again, he mumbled, "One of you look out the window and see what Mark's doing."

Melinda got up and went over to the window. Pulling back the curtain, she peered out and looked around, but didn't see anything. "He's gone." Matt nodded. Melinda returned and knelt down next to him. "Are you sure you're okay? Maybe we should call..."

"I'm fine," he said dogmatically but didn't open his eyes.

"Are you sure?" She pressed her hand on his bruised midsection, expecting it to generate a response, which it did.

He jerked away from the pain and rolled onto his side, looking up at her. "Just go away and leave me alone for a few minutes. I'll be fine." He looked at Taylor. "Both of you." He rolled back onto his back.

"If we leave you alone, you're going to fall asleep here," Melinda pointed out.

"Is that a crime?" He closed his eyes.

"On the floor?"

"Girl, I've been sleeping in a barn the last few weeks. At least this is a habitable place for humans."

"O-kay." Slapping her hands on her pants, she got up, went over to the couch, and helped Taylor back to her recliner. Then she went to the kitchen to try and find an icepack for Matt's rapidly swelling face.

When she returned, he was already asleep. So, grabbing the afghan from the couch on her way past, she laid it over him, and then sitting next to him, she held the icepack against the inflamed cheekbone on his face.

"Trent?" Teresa turned over in bed.

"Huh?" He grunted groggily.

"Wake up!" She grabbed his arm and pulled him back and forth.

"Okay, I'm awake!" He turned on his back, but he didn't open his eyes.

"How in the world can you sleep at a time like this?"

"Teresa, there are so many cops outside, a trained terrorist couldn't get in if he wanted to."

"How do you know this guy isn't one?"

"Even if he is, he can't get in." Trent rolled back over.

She wacked him on the back. "Wake up and protect your family."

"There are guards outside to do that." He rolled over and looked at her. "If you want me to be able to find this guy, you have to let me sleep so I can think in the morning."

"You, yourself, said that he was probably right outside tonight."

"All the more reason, I need sleep to be able to find out who he is."

"I can tell you who he is. He's a murderer and a stalker and..."

"Three hours, Teresa. That's all I need is three hours." He rolled back over.

Jess stared out her passenger's side window at the starry sky just starting to light into dawn. "I just hope Mellissa's going to be okay tonight. She sure looked scared, didn't she?"

"She had a right." Jim gave Jess a knowing glance, letting his eyes rest on her a little longer than was safe while he was driving. "I know how she feels." He looked back to the road. "She'll make it... with the Lord's help."

"I hope Wade does." She continued to stare out the window. "I hope this doesn't strain their marriage even more. They've been through so much already."

"I would think it would make it stronger."

"I don't know why he refuses to listen to her. Well, she was right. What she was afraid of happened, and he'll still stubbornly insist..."

"You don't know what he'll do."

“You have to admit he gets some crazy ideas sometimes.”

“To him, it didn’t seem crazy. He thought he could do it.”

“And if he’d listened to someone else, he wouldn’t be lying half dead in a hospital right now.” Jess insisted. Jim shrugged.

“Mellissa?” Though still out of it, Wade called to her. Nearly asleep in a nearby chair, Mellissa figured she was dreaming. She repositioned herself but didn’t get up. “Mellissa?”

Opening her eyes, she looked at him and then got up and walked over to his bed. “Wade?” He didn’t answer or acknowledge her, so she sat down on the bed and took his free hand, the one that wasn’t wired in IVs. “I love you, Wade.” Unconscious, he didn’t respond, except he closed his hand around hers, squeezing it weakly. “Oh, Wade.” Tears again began streaming down her face. *Lord, please protect him. Save my husband’s life... please. Please, oh, please, save my husband’s life!*

Local Mediator

Hearing knocking on their door, Jim rolled over in bed and looked at the clock. *Wow.* That was his normal reaction to sleeping this late, but then he remembered what time he got to bed. “Go see who’s at the door,” Jess mumbled, elbowing him groggily before going back to sleep.

“Okay. Okay,” Jim mumbled, sitting up then swaying as he stood up. Shaking his head, he practically stumbled into the chest of drawers as he reached for his shirt. Still mumbling and rubbing his face, he put it on as he walked down the hallway, down the stairs, and to the front door. Staring at Derrick as he opened the door, he rubbed his face again and muttered, “What?”

“I was wondering how Wade was doing. Aren’t you up, yet?”

“You can see I’m up.”

“Barely.”

Jim just glared at him. “I only recently got to sleep.”

“So, you were at the hospital all night then. Is he bad?”

“He isn’t good.”

“Oh.” Leaning against the doorpost, Derrick momentarily looked down. “That’s too bad.”

“We won’t stop praying till he’s better.” Jim didn’t like Derrick’s implication that he might not recover.

Derrick nodded. “Sure. How’s his wife doing?”

Jim shrugged. “About what you’d expect, I guess.” She was a lot better when he finally got out of surgery.”

Derrick nodded. “He got shot twice?”

Yawning, Jim nodded. “And there was extensive arterial damage.”

Derrick shook his head and mildly punched the doorpost. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He turned to go. He wanted to say he’d be praying for him, but he didn’t feel comfortable saying it. He would be doing it, though.

“You should stop by the hospital and visit him!” Jim called after him.

Derrick stopped but didn’t turn around. “Ahh. Don’t want ta intrude.” Actually, he didn’t want to slow Wade’s recovery process by his presence. They never really had been friends. They respected each other’s distance.

Jim grunted an acknowledgement and went back in. “See ya around.” Derrick returned a slight wave. “Don’t want to intrude,” Jim muttered to himself as he half closed his eyes and retraced his steps to his bedroom. “That’s why you come and wake up a poor man in the midst of a dead sleep just to ask him something you could of found out at the hospital.” His mumbling trailed off into inaudible grumbles as he neared his room and fell back into bed, not bothering to take his shirt off.

“Goo-ood morn-ing, everyone!” Melinda sprang into the living room and turned on the lights since she couldn’t open the curtains.

“Do-o-n’t,” Taylor whined, pulling the afghan over her head, obviously not wanting to wake up, yet.

“It’s morning!” Melinda chimed cheerfully, slapping her hands on her hips. “Actually, almost noon.”

“Don’t remind me.” Taylor pulled down the afghan and looked at her. “It was morning when we went to sleep.”

“What would you like for breakfast?”

“Don’t care.”

“Okay. I’ll just have to let your dad decide then.” Melinda headed for the door, where Matt was still sleeping on the floor.

“You do that.” Taylor pulled the afghan back over her face.

“Hey, Matt?” Melinda knelt down beside him and gently shook his arm. Groaning Matt rolled over on his back but didn’t open his eyes. “Good morning!” She smiled when he blinked his eyes open to look at her.

“What’s good about it?” He groaned again, rubbing his forehead.

She smiled. "You look like you have a hangover."

"I feel like I have a hangover." He squinted his eyes closed. "son inflicted, though."

"He did do a good job." She turned his head to get a better look at the swollen lump on his cheekbone. "At least it wasn't high enough to give you a black eye."

"Sure. Let's count our blessings," he grumbled, grimacing as he sat up. "Is he back yet?"

"I don't know." She got up, went over to the window, and pulled the curtain back a tiny bit. "Yeah. He's back."

Matt nodded, grabbing onto the door handle. "I figured." He grimaced as he pulled himself to his feet. "What time is it?"

She pulled her phone out of her pocket. "A little before noon. You aren't going to try to...." Her voice trailed off.

Grimacing again, he pushed himself away from the door and walked toward the living room. "I've never been this late for work before."

"You've never been late ever." Melinda followed him. "You can't possibly be thinking of going to work today."

He picked up his phone from the coffee table and lighted the screen to see thirteen missed calls from the hospital. He groaned inwardly. "I better call them." He started dialing and walking into the other room. "Could you make me a sandwich to take with me?"

"I shouldn't have even woken you up," she muttered going into the kitchen.

"Okay, Timmy, up you go." Trent lifted his littlest guy up into the minivan and buckled him in his car seat. "John, why don't you sit in the way back," Trent said as he walked around to the other side of the van.

"I always sit in the back," John complained. "I should be old enough to sit in the front seat, and you won't even let me sit in the middle."

"Just do it. I don't feel like changing the booster seat today." Grumbling, John got in and crawled to the way back seat. "Up you go, Mary." He lifted his little girl up into the booster seat. Glancing over his shoulder, he turned, seeing his wife coming out of the house, Mary's Cinderella suitcase in one hand and her own overnight bag in the other. "Is that the last of them?" He asked, heading for the back of the van and opening the hatch.

"There's two more," she replied, gazing into the distance.

"There isn't room for two more." He hefted one on top of the cooler and then started to rearrange the other side.

"Someone's watching us." She continued to stare into the distance.

Putting his hand on his weapon, Trent stepped back and looked all around. He couldn't see or sense anything. So, he just nodded toward the two cops at the end of the drive. "We're safe."

Teresa didn't look convinced. "Do you know where we're going, yet?"

"I won't know that until we get there. Safe houses are always kept top secret."

"What if he follows us?"

"He won't. These guys are professionals at hiding people. It's all they do. They'll be bringing me over after

work.”

“I know. What about ‘till we meet them? We still have the hour drive up to the Rockford police station, and then we have to wait there until...” She knew she sounded redundant, but she was in no mood for logic.

“Teresa.” Turning to face her, he put his hands on her shoulders. “You’re going to be fine. You’re going to have a unit following you up there, and you can have an officer drive our van if you want.”

She shook her head, stepping closer to lean on him. “I’ll drive.”

“Okay.” He put his arms around her. “Then just relax. You’ll be fine, and maybe...” she looked up at him, still in his embrace. He looked down. “Maybe I’ll untangle this mystery and catch this guy today.”

“Then we could come home tonight?”

“Could be.” He gave her a kiss. “But first I have to get to work.”

“I know.” Nodding, she forced a smile. Then pushing away, she headed for the driver’s seat. “I hope you do figure it out soon.”

Trent nodded. “Me too.”

Beep! Beep! Beep! “Mel-lis-sa,” Wade gasped breathlessly, reaching for her.

Mellissa startled awake, nearly jumping from her chair. “Wade!” She threw herself at his bed side. “GOD, NO! WADE! NURSE! NURSE!” She fumbled for the button to press, eyes widening as she watched Wade gasp for air. “NURSE!” His face went pale. Then, so did Mellissa’s. “God, help! NURSE!”

“Blueberry pancakes.” Melinda practically sprang into the room, grinning, plate of pancakes in one hand, a bucket full of toppings in the other. “Perfect remedy for expectant mothers and the walking wounded.” Melinda set the steaming plate of pancakes in the center of the coffee table on a placemat and started arranging the additions next to it. “Jam, butter, peanut butter, whipped cream, 100% real maple syrup.... What’ll ya have?”

“A plate?” Taylor mumbled, staring at the table.

“Oh. Yeah.” Melinda headed back toward the kitchen. “Be back in a jiffy.”

Matt glanced at his watch. “Can’t you even stop thinking about work for a couple minutes? They gave you two whole hours before you need to be there.”

“But I only have an hour left.”

“That’s plenty of time to eat,” Melinda added, coming back in with the plates.

Matt nodded as he took one from her then took out his cellphone as it began to ring. Absentmindedly, Melinda handed the plate to Taylor while watching him answer it.

“Hello?” His face almost immediately grew serious, and he started spouting medical jargon that Taylor didn’t understand but Melinda knew all too well. Urgently, he stood to his feet. “I’ll be right there.” Hanging up, he looked from Melinda to Taylor and back to Melinda. “Wade’s taken a turn for the worse.”

“Oh no.” Melinda’s face deepened with concern.

“I have to go.” Melinda nodded. Matt turned back to Taylor. “Mark’s outside. He’s going to try to get back in.” He paused. “I know I’ve said this before, but... don’t let him in!” Taylor nodded. “Call me if anything happens.” He

looked back at Melinda, who nodded. Grabbing his jacket, he headed out the door, locking it behind him.

A slight smile came to Mark's face as he watched Matt leave. He turned up his rock music as his father drove by so the beat would shake his car. He watched for a response but only saw him shake his head, which disappointed him a little. After Matt was a ways away, he turned it back down to an endurable volume. Then he stared at the house for several minutes. Slowly turning off the car, he opened his door.

"Young man!" Mark jumped, surprised by the shrill voice and the old lady rounding the back of his car and charging toward him. "I would like to know why you consider terrorizing the neighborhood a worthwhile pastime.

"Terrorizing the neighborhood?" Mark rolled his eyes.

"Mrs. Carter is afraid you're casing the neighborhood for a robbery. Mrs. McMillan thinks you're trying to set up a drug trade with the youngsters. Mrs. Tyler thinks you're a hired gun. And Mrs. Baxter thinks your stalking her daughter."

Mark gave a sour chuckle. "You may tell the local gossips that none of them are correct, and what I do or do not do is none of their *expletive* business. Which one are you?"

Stiffening, she crossed her arms. "I am not. My name is Mrs. Sanders, and I am the local mediator around here."

"Mrs. Sanders? Didn't you used to babysit my sister?"

"Yes, I did, and I must say she has a much sweeter disposition than you do."

"Yeah, well." He stepped backwards and cracked his knuckles. "You've must not of been around her too much recently." Mrs. Sanders frowned in response. Mark smiled. "Which one of you busy-bodies called the cops last night?"

"How do you know someone called them? You were long gone before they arrived."

"Oh. Was I? Must be E.S.P then. How bout you? You gonna welcome me back, long lost neighbor." He held out his arms, sarcastically.

"Welcome back." Her voice was dry and disapproving.

"Yeah." He stepped back again. "That was a long time ago."

"It certainly was." Arms still crossed, she leaned back against his car. "Why do you stay away?"

"Well, as you can see," He motioned toward the house. "I'm not really welcome."

Nodding, she looked down for a few moments. Then abruptly pushing herself off the car, she started to march off. "Come on," she ordered as she walked past.

"Huh? What?"

"I said, 'come on.'" She stopped and turned back. "Dried blood should be washed off. A split lip deserves ice. And I'm willing to bet you haven't had a bite of food yet today."

"I thought you thought I was a terrorist."

"Fiddlesticks. Besides," she wagged her head. "I'm not afraid of you?"

His eyes narrowed a little. "Maybe you should be?"

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" She charged toward the house. "Come on."

"Fine," he mumbled, pressing the remote to lock his car. *Might as well, eat **your** food.*

"Huh." Kneeling on the couch, peering out the window, Melinda let the curtain fall back. "I don't see him out there."

"You better be careful. He might see *you*," Taylor warned, lethargically staring ahead.

"Nah. I've got snooping down to a science," Melinda joked, standing up from the couch and walking over. "You know if you'd even tasted that, I could be insulted that you don't like my cooking." She stared down at the untouched plate in Taylor's lap.

"Not hungry."

"Remember you're eating for two. You might not be hungry, but the baby might be."

"Maybe he'll starve," Taylor muttered halfheartedly, looking away.

Melinda's face grew serious. "You don't mean that."

"I don't know." She glanced back. "I'm not ready to be a mother." Her eyes were nearly pleading.

"You'll learn."

"I don't want to!" Her voice broke, and she turned away. "I don't want to be tied down."

"When you look into that baby's eyes, I'm betting you won't want anyone else to touch it."

"I'll give you odds that I do." She stared into the distance again. "I never thought this would happen."

"You must of known it was a possible when you...." Melinda spoke softly.

"I was on birth control!" Taylor snapped.

"That's not always foolproof."

"Obviously."

"Taylor, a baby... a baby's a miracle."

"It's not going to stay a baby. It's going to be with me for eighteen years. When I'm the age most kids are graduating from college, this kid will be ready to start first grade."

"You'll love sending him off on his first day of school."

"What do you know about it," she snapped again. "You're in your thirties, and you've never had a family."

Melinda nodded, looking down and speaking softly. "And sometimes it gets pretty lonely."

"But you're free."

"Yeah," Melinda nodded. "Free. Free from everything... including love." Taylor looked away. "I mean, I guess not totally. I have the Lord, and he loves me, but he made people to want to be loved by other people. When that little one looks up at you with its big, bright eyes and tells you that he loves you, your heart will melt."

"I wish I had your confidence. I think I'm going to resent it."

Melinda shrugged. "I can't tell you how you're going to end up feeling. Still you chose to take the risk. Now, you have to live with it. No choice you make is going to be totally without pain. You can't tell me that you could

choose to abort the baby and live without guilt.”

“If I gave it up for adoption, it would be better off. This is not a happy home.”

“It could be. Your future is what you make of it. You don’t want to miss out. I doubt this will destroy your life. Make this little one part of your life. It’s already been part of you for months. When it’s born, hold its hand and take it with you through life. It will learn from your example and want to be like you. It will always have a special love for you because you’re its mother.”

“Mine would probably grow up to hate me.”

Melinda smiled. “I doubt it. Even so, that’s pretty much up to you.”

“Here.” Taylor held out her plate.

Melinda sighed as she took it. “Would you like something else?”

“No”

“You need to eat something. It’s way past lunch time. How ‘bout a sandwich?”

“Just leave me alone.” She rolled onto her side and pulled the afghan over her head.

“Hold still,” Mrs. Sanders ordered as she scrubbed the cut and dried blood off Mark’s forehead.

“Okay! That’s good.” Mark jerked his head away. “Don’t ever go into healthcare.”

“I was in nursing before you were born, sunny.” She marched over to her freezer.

“You-’re kidding. Where at, a war zone?”

“You’re just a big baby,” she mumbled getting out two icepacks and bringing them over.

“Why two?” He took one and lightly placed it on his swollen jaw.

“That ones for the back of your head.” Grabbing his wrist, she yanked it around to the back of his head and accidently slammed it into the lump.

Mark squinted from the pain. “Who graduated you in your bedside manner class.” Picking up the other one, he slowly and tentatively placed it on his chin.

“I have no patience for spoiled, ungrateful.... That’s for your arm!”

Mark dropped it rather than have her yank it out of his hand. She just stopped and glared at him. “O-k-ay,” he whispered forcefully, picking it back up and putting it on his bruised and swollen forearm before returning the other one to the back of his head. “Seriously, were you in the army?”

She looked at him, contemplating her answer. “For a while.”

“My sister’s in the Marines, my older sister.”

Mrs. Sanders nodded softly as she walked over to the refrigerator. “What’s your pleasure, turkey, baloney, or grilled cheese?”

“Do you really want me here?”

“Boloney, turkey, or grilled cheese?” She restated a little more forcefully.

“Grilled cheese... with turkey in it.”

“Okay.” She started pulling stuff out of the refrigerator. “A little cooperation is always appreciated.”

“A little civility would also be appreciated,” he mumbled looking the other way.

“So,” she started cutting the cheese. “Why are you here?”

“That’s my business...,” He didn’t look at her. “and only my business.”

Mellissa stood up as Dr. Fredricks came in the room just as the nurse was finishing with Wade. Matt nodded toward Mellissa then looked at the nurse, who caught his gaze and quickly rattled off Wade’s vitals as she injected some meds into his IV. Matt returned orders quickly in medical jargon that Mellissa couldn’t understand and then returned a nod to the nurse as she gathered her things and hurried out of the room. Mellissa just stared at him, puzzled. “He’s back where we want him to be,” Matt explained.

Mellissa relaxed some, leaning back a little in her chair. “What happened?”

It was times like this when Matt wished he could lie. “He had an allergic reaction to one of the medications. We tested him on it before giving him the full dose, and there was no reaction. I don’t know why he reacted this time, but of course we will discontinue its use and put it on his medical record.” Stiffening, Matt braced himself for the usual onslaught of threats and accusations. Instead she didn’t react, but staring into the distance, tears began to well in her eyes. Coming a little closer, Matt sat down on the edge of Wade’s bed, trying not to grimace from his own pain. “We’re doing everything we can to make sure he’ll come through this alright. Even with this set back, he’s doing a whole lot better than he was last night.”

She sniffed back tears but didn’t look at him. “When will he wake up?”

“In a couple of days if everything goes well.”

“What if everything doesn’t go well?” Her pleading eyes darted back and met his.

“Well,” He wouldn’t say this to everyone, but he knew he could say it to her. “It’s in God’s hands.” Nodding a few times, she looked down. Matt stood up. This time he grimaced. She cocked her head but didn’t question him. “I’ll be back in about an hour to check on him again. Why don’t you go down to the cafeteria and get some lunch? It’s after noon.” She shook her head, emphatically. “No? Well, you can ask them to send some up.”

She shook her head again. “I’m not eating until I’m sure he’s alright.”

“That could be days.”

“I don’t care.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I’ll fast and pray for him. I don’t want to lose him.” She bit her quivering lip as she stared into her husband’s unconscious face. “Not him, too.”

This time it was Dr. Fredricks that stared off into the distance as his own memories came flooding back, foreboding memories of his darkest days. He’d quit eating the last few days of Sandra’s life and for about a week afterwards. Of course, he didn’t pray. He wasn’t a Christian. He’d fainted twice, once when he was alone and once at work. One of his colleagues wanted him admitted because she thought he was suicidal, and he was. It had been Taylor who had changed his mind and made him want to live. She was only a little girl back then and she hadn’t said much, but somehow her helpless, smiling face had been enough. Late one night when the other kids were asleep, he had been sitting alone in his recliner in the dark staring off into space, thinking dark and lonely thoughts when she came tentatively down the stairs and softly into the room, teddy bear tucked under her arm. She didn’t turn on the light or announce she was there. She just quietly made her way over, crawled up on his lap, snuggled close, and said, “Daddy, I love you.” Then holding onto him tightly, she had fallen asleep in his arms. It was then he had decided he

was needed. All his kids needed a provider and a home. He couldn't just die and leave them abandon. After a few minutes, he had decided to put his arms around the little girl in his lap and hold her back. He decided to live and to provide for her until she was old enough to do for herself. The years had made him forget that night. Maybe he hadn't done a very good job. He'd kept the promise to provide. Somehow that hadn't turned out to be enough. Sometimes he wondered if someone else could have done a better job at it. Feeling someone staring at him, Matt jerked himself back into reality. Glancing at Mellissa, he smiled, got up, and left the room.

“Won't You Please Arrest My Son?”

“Oh, thank you,” Jess called after Dorothy, an older lady walking by. “Those will be great!” She nodded toward the tub of cookies in her hand.

“Where do you want them?”

“We have a pile started on the table in the viewing room.” She pointed toward it. The lady nodded and started walking in that direction. Jess turned. “Oh, Max!” She exclaimed, startled as she nearly ran into a young man carrying a bale of hay.

“Where do you want this?”

“Oh, over there.” She pointed toward the corner of the arena where there were a couple of bails tossed on their sides. “We need it to be 4 bales long and 3 high. Then we'll put the targets on.”

The young man nodded and then headed off. “Okay.”

“Thank you!” She called after him. Looking down, she crossed a few things off her list. Looking up again, she smiled at a group of giggling girls coming past, various items for various projects in their arms. Turning, her eyes settled on her husband taking refuge in the only quiet corner in the barn... the viewing room. She made her way toward him, opening the door, just as Dorothy was coming out. “Ten dozen butterscotch potato chip cookies. I hope you use them all.”

“I'm sure we will. We usually have six ladies bring cookies in, and we only have five this year. We never usually have many leftovers.”

Dorothy nodded. “Well good luck tomorrow night. I'll be praying that everyone stays safe.”

“Pray that some kids get saved, too. We're supposed to have the most teens here that we've ever had.”

Dorothy nodded. “I will.”

“Thanks!” Jess called over her shoulder as she went in. Soon as she entered, she fell back against the door, nearly slamming it shut, and sighed. “Quiet! Peace and quiet.” She let her eyes close as she leaned her head back against the door. “Finally, peace.”

Jim, who was standing in the corner eating a yogurt, smiled at her. “I was just thinking I should get back to work. How's it going out there?”

“Ohhh, everyone's *going* every which-a-way, whether or not they're going in the right direction remains to be seen.”

Jim huffed a laugh. “Well, it was nice of them to all come over and help set up.” He tossed the yogurt

container in the trash.

“True. I’d hate to have to do this all ourselves.” She blinked her eyes closed again. “I sure hope everyone enjoys it when they get here.”

Jim shrugged. “Well, they keep coming back. Ten churches this year. That’s more than ever. All the set up just seems like a lot because...”

“It’s rather disorganized?” Jess finished, her eyes questioning.

“No-o.” Jim laughed.

“Did you get the pizzas ordered for tonight?”

“Yeah.” Jim put his hand on his cellphone attached to his belt. “They’ll be ready about five.”

She nodded and then reluctantly looked over her shoulder back out the window. “I better get back to... contributing.”

He smiled, walking over and putting his hand around her. “Go get ‘em tiger.” She smiled up at him, and they both walked out together.

“Doctor.” A nurse came hurrying down the ER hallway advancing toward Matt. “We have a throat laceration in Five and Dr. Matthews can’t...”

“Okay, I’ll be right there.” Matt waved her past as he answered his ringing phone. She didn’t pause, but kept advancing toward another room and went in. “Hello?” He wasn’t sure if his voice sounded agitated or just urgent.

“Hi, Matt. It’s Melinda. Are you in the middle of something?”

“I’m in the middle of about ten different things right now.”

“Oh. Sorry. Can you call me on your next break?”

“I wasn’t planning to take a break. What do ya need?”

“It’s just this is my only day off this week, and I really have to get this done today. Otherwise, I wouldn’t bother you.”

“Come on. Out with it. I don’t have time for guessing games!”

“I’m sorry. It’s just I have these forms I need to drop off in Rockford. They’re due today, downtown. It’s been good of you to drive me into work and bring me home every day. I know it’s an inconvenience, even though we do work the same shift, now.” She talked fast. “But with Mark sitting out there every minute, how am I supposed to get out on my days off?”

“He won’t be out there forever.”

“It’s been nearly a week!”

“He’s got to leave sometimes to get food.”

“He ate with your neighbor again today. I’ve been watching.”

Closing his eyes, he mumbled. “Maybe *she* can get through to him.”

“What?”

The nurse reemerged from the room and stopped in front of Dr. Fredricks apparently shocked that he had the audacity to still be standing there. "Doctor, the patient in five is quite...."

"I know!" he snapped. "Leave me alone so I can get there!" Backing up, the nurse turned and left.

"Look, I've got too many things going on right now to figure it out. Give me a few minutes, and I'll call you back."

"Okay. Just so you know the place that needs that form, closes at five."

"Okay." Matt looked at his watch. "I'll call you back. Bye."

Mellissa rubbed her hands together nervously. Today was the day... the day they brought Wade out of the coma. He was supposed to be awake soon. The more time that past the more nervous she got. She so wanted him to be perfectly okay... to be normal, but she didn't know if that was possible... after that traumatic experience... after missing almost a week of his life in a coma... after going into cardiac arrest on the operating table... after nearly dying from an allergic reaction to medication. He'd been through so much. She wondered how much he'd remember. She wondered what she should say.

"Mellissa?" Wade groggily turned his head toward his wife.

"Wade?" Mellissa fell to her knees beside his bed and grabbed his hand. "Are you awake?"

"No." He shook his head and closed his eyes.

"Talk to me, Wade." She squeezed his hand tighter.

"Bout what?"

"Anything." She wanted to hear his voice. She wanted to know he was okay.

"What happened?"

"Don't you remember?"

He started to shake his head, but then grimacing, stopped. "Bits and pieces." His voice was hoarse and quiet. "I keep seeing a gun... over and over. Did I... Did I get shot?" He talked with his eyes shut.

"Yes." Her urgent eyes searched his confused ones as she held tightly to his hand.

"The last thing I remember is eating with Pastor Thomas." He looked up at the heart monitor.

"He was there when it happened."

"What happened?"

"A man and a woman robbed...."

"Wait. I remember." He paused, blinking his eyes shut and then open again. "Did they get away?"

"No. Pastor Thomas...a um...."

"He apprehended them." Wade stared at her. She nodded. He looked away. "Because everyone knows that when a security guard can't do his job, they call in the pastor to take over for him."

"You did your best."

“They only thing I do best is finding my way to the unemployment office.” He didn’t look at her.

“Well, you just have to find the job that’s right for you.”

“In that case, you’d better find an abandon shopping cart to put out things in when we move to the homeless district.”

Mellissa smiled at that. “Wa-de.” She had to give a light laugh. He was feeling better. “Besides this isn’t the time to be worrying about that now. I’m just so glad you’re okay. I’m glad to see this hospital stay hasn’t dented your spirits much.”

“Yeah. How long have I been in here?” He turned his head to look at her.

She didn’t know if she should answer him. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Just another bill to pay.” He looked dejected.

“We’ll manage.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“A lesser woman would say, ‘I told you so’, but I won’t. I’m just so glad you’re alright. All I want to do is hold you. Whatever it costs, it was well worth it.” Tears pooled in her eyes.

“I love you.”

Pain filled her eyes... pain for him. “Oh, and how I love you, Wade.” Her voice was strained with tears. She scooted even closer, wishing she could hug him.

His eyes softened, and he held out his free hand in a gesture that said he want a hug. Standing up and wiping her eyes, she leaned down and carefully embraced him, trying not to mess up the IV or the heart monitor wires. “I’m just so thankful you’re okay.” He held onto her so tightly, she couldn’t help her surprise... and gratitude... that he had that much strength. “Rich or poor, I just want us to be together. Whether we grow old together in a house or pushing a shopping cart down the street, it’s okay... as long as we’re together.” They kissed... long enough to make up for all the time they missed.

“This is Trent.” He answered his cellphone.

“Hi. This is Dr. Fredricks. You’re not an easy man to get a hold of.”

“Ye-aah.... Just temporary security. We’ve had some stuff going on at home.”

“Really? Can I ask what kind of stuff?”

“Just some threats about a week ago, but the case is about as mysterious as Melinda’s.”

“You think they’re connected?”

“No. I don’t think so. Pretty soon they are going to write it off as a prank and tell us to go home. I don’t know if I’m ready to go along with that or not.”

“Someday I’ll ask you what happened, but I just don’t have time right now. I need a favor in regards to Melinda.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“I need you to arrest my son.”

Trent gave his phone a look and then put it back to his ear. "Come again."

"My son showed up a while back with the *sole intention* of causing problems, and right now...."

"Wait. Does he know that she's there?"

"No, but he's sitting outside my house, and she can't get out without being seen. She's got this form she has to drop off today. I guess it's the deadline... besides being her only day off. I'd take her except I won't be out of here anywhere near in time to get her there by five."

"On what charges? I can't arrest a guy for just sitting there."

"Say you got a complaint about his loud music disturbing the peace. I'm complaining. It was rattling the windows last night. I'm surprised you didn't get a real complaint."

"I thought you were staying with Jim."

"No, a, not since Mark took up residence outside. If I don't come home at a decent time, he threatens to call the police on me... for child abandonment. I've considered hiring another nurse just for appearances sake, but then she'd have to know about the whole mess."

"Yeah. The less people that know the better."

"Yeah.... I don't trust him... even being away as much as I am." He paused. "He keeps trying to get in the house." He paused again. "Anyway, it's just a mess. Look, you don't have to take him all the way to the station just far enough that he can't walk back. Thankfully, the one thing our town still does lack is a taxi service."

Smiling, Trent shook his head. "Okay. This once."

"Look, we don't have the rental car anymore. Since I've been taking her everywhere, there wasn't any need for her to keep paying on it."

Trent nodded. "I'll go back and pick her up and take her where she needs to go."

"Trent, you're the best cop I know."

"Tell me about it. I'll call you if there are any problems with Junior."

"Why? You want me to add them to his list? He's already got more problems than I got paper."

"Don't we all."

"Doctor?" A nurse emerged from around the corner. "We need you in four."

"Okay." He nodded to her. "Look, thanks. I got to go."

"Okay. Well. I'll go... arrest your son?"

"I wish you would."

"But don't keep him"

"Ye-aaah. Well? Give me some time to think about that one?"

Trent laughed. "No. That I can't do." He paused. "I'll let you go get back to savin' lives."

Matt huffed a laugh. "Yeah. okay. Bye."

Pacing impatiently, Melinda stopped every so often to kneel on the couch and peer between the curtains.

Nothing yet. It was a quarter after four already, and if she didn't get this paper uptown today, she was gonna get....
Wait! She plopped back down on the couch and pulled back the curtain a little. *There he was.*

Sitting in his car, Mark yawned as he rolled up his sleeve. The long, purple bruise was nearly gone. He almost wished it would stay. It gave him extra incentive to stay angry... not that he needed any. Everything about that man made him mad... the way he raised his kids (or the lack of it) ... his apathy toward their mom's sickness and his ineffectiveness in helping her... his temper and his self-centeredness.... *If he...* Mark's eyes shot to the rearview mirror. Startled by police lights behind him, his heart jumped. *What now?* He stared in the mirror as Trent got out, walked up behind his car, and toward the window. He rested his arm on the center compartment between the seats, thinking momentarily about his handgun hidden inside. Sweat began forming on his temples and the back of his neck.

"Could I see your driver's license and insurance, please?" Trent asked as he came to the window.

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong."

"Can I see your driver's license and insurance, please." Trent let his voice sound a little annoyed.

"Fine." Mark slowly took his hand from off the center compartment, quickly ripped out his billfold from his back pocket, and gave the cards to Trent. "Now, will you tell me...."

"Wait here, please."

Mark rolled his eyes as Trent walked away. He wanted to jump out of the car and either start yelling at him or start running, but he forced his jumping nerves to stay in check.

After a few minutes, Trent returned, handed him his license, and asked, "Would you get out of the car, please."

"What?!" The veins on Mark's neck protruded with anger.

"Would you get out of the car, please?"

Swinging the door open nearly hitting Trent, Mark thrust himself out of the car, chucked his billfold back in the car for emphasis, making it bounce against the leather seat, and slammed the door behind him. "What's with you, cop?"

"You're wanted downtown." He was going to say 'for questioning' but he figured this way it wasn't exactly a lie.

"For what?" Mark stepped forward into Trent's space.

Trent refused to step back, but his eyes were soft. "Look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. It's up to you, but my advice to you is to not make this worse than it is. It's not a serious matter. If you go peacefully, I won't even handcuff you." Trent noticed the sweat starting to drip from Mark's forehead.

Mark just stood there. Trent's mind raced for another option if he refused to go. Technically, he didn't have any right to arrest Mark, and not being an expert on the rules of witness protection, he wasn't even sure if this was legal. However, after a few moments, Mark just relented, yelling, "Fine!" stomping off toward the car, throwing the back door open, plopping in, and slamming it shut.

Trent tried not to look shocked. Glancing up to heaven, he mentally shrugged, *Thank you*, and then casually walked back to his car and got in. Buckling up, Trent glanced in the rearview mirror at Mark who was also trying very hard to act cool but not succeeding. He looked like his body was on the verge of shaking. Trent wondered a minute, but then dismissed it and put the car in gear.

After Trent and Mark were out of sight, Melinda let the curtain fall back and stood up from the couch. Taking out her phone, she looked at the time. "He's not going to make it back in time."

"He might." Taylor, who was reading, didn't look up at her. "He's got ten minutes."

"Eight," Melinda corrected, going to get her purse.

"Well, just cause he's a cop doesn't mean he believes it's wrong to speed. You don't know how many stories I've heard from the kids at school of getting passed by police when they were going the speed limit."

"Maybe they were going somewhere important." Melinda tried to defend her idea of nonhypocritical police.

"Then they didn't have their lights on, and they weren't going really fast," Taylor mumbled.

Staring absentmindedly, Melinda headed for the kitchen. "I'm going to go wait out in the garage, so I'm ready when he gets here."

"Good luck." Taylor still didn't look up from her book.

Trent looked down at the clock nervously and went a little faster. He hoped he could get Melinda to her appointment on time. He knew losing her freedom and hiding out had to be hard on her. He didn't know what this paper or payment was, but he knew it was important to her to get it in before the deadline, so he wanted to help her. He also kinda wanted to talk to her again. He didn't know about what. He just hoped if she talked, something important would spill out. He needed something more on this case. The leads he had just weren't getting him anywhere. The more he thought about her case... the more he thought about the strange email he had gotten a while back... the more he wondered if her case related to the recent terror on his family. *But how and why?*

Seeing a fast food place up ahead, Trent slowed down and pulled out his cellphone, acting like it had vibrated, and he was answering it. "Hello? ... Really?... Are you sure? ... Okay... Okay... Is it an emergency? Okay. Right away." He 'hung' up. "Guess you lucked out." He looked in the rearview mirror.

"What?" Mark straightened.

"I've got something of greater importance right now." He pulled into the driveway, parked, and got out, opening the back door.

"You're just going to leave me here?" He got out.

"I'll be back for you."

"When?"

"Might be a while. If you have a way back, you might want to take it. Otherwise, I'll be back." He quickly got back in and drove off, hoping they would make it in time.

Angrily, Mark marched inside the fast food stop. He wished he could punch the whole world in the nose. Why did everyone have it in for him? Anger rose in his stomach like a flaming fireball. The heat seemed to rise up his chest and into his face. He bet this was his father's doing. *Good ole, dad.* Just convinced he was guilty of something. Did he really think that if a cop picked him up for no reason and then threatened to come back that he would run away? *Fat chance, Pop. I'm not running. Not till you pay!*

Hiding behind the wall, Melinda impatiently stomped her foot as she waited for Trent to pull in and the garage

door to go all the way down. Soon as it did, she raced for the passenger's seat and hopped in. "Hurry," she hit the garage door opener as she put in on the visor. "We've got forty minutes to make it to downtown Rockford, and that's impossible." She ducked down, hiding until they were a couple blocks away.

"Rockford?" He backed out. "We've got to go all the way up there? I thought you were going to drop it off in town."

"No. Can't. Won't you take me? That's why I haven't done it, yet... with all that's been going on, and it's so far away."

"I'll take you." He backed out. In fact, he was kinda of glad for more time to talk. Maybe they could come up with something. "I figured you had to be there by five."

"Five-thirty. How do you feel about speeding?"

"We'll make it."

"I'm sorry to be such a bother."

"That's okay. Truthfully, I don't mind having this time to talk. Maybe we can try to figure this thing out." Putting on his blinkers, he paused at a red light then turned right.

"I think I've told you everything I know."

"There's got to be more. Whoever this guy is, he's threatening my family too, and...."

"Your family! Why would he be threatening your family?"

"That's what I want to know. He sent me an email saying he'd find you."

"Maybe you shouldn't be helping me. Maybe you should be distancing yourself!" Her voice got higher pitch with every word.

"Just calm down." He merged onto the interstate.

"I don't want anyone else to get hurt! Why...?"

"That's what we have to figure out."

"How?" Her voice squeaked.

"I don't know." He sped up and passed a semi. "You want to pray about it?" His voice was gruff.

Surprised to hear that from someone in a professional capacity, she paused and looked at him but then nodded firmly. "Sure. You or me?"

"You can start."

Mark slammed his phone down on the table in front of him. He couldn't believe that a town this size didn't have taxi service. *How stupid can a town get.* It was a cold, windy, gray day. He had no intention of walking... especially this far away. Still, on the other hand, he didn't want to wait all day for the cop to come back, not in a place that smelled this good when he didn't have his billfold.

He picked up his phone and scrolled through his phonebook until he came to Mrs. Sanders phone number. He stared at it a long time before abruptly turning off the screen. He just couldn't bring himself to do it.

“Hey, Matt?” a colleague tried to intercept him as he left one room and started charging toward the next. Not expecting to hear his name, he stopped and turned around with the same intensity as he had been charging ahead, surprising his colleague who stopped and then approached more slowly. “Man, you need to take it easy. You’re wound as tight as a top.” Matt just stared, annoyed with the interruption when he was on a roll. “Relax.” He slapped the side of his arm. No reaction. Raising his eyebrows, the other doctor looked away and then back. “I just came to tell you if you still want an earlier appointment for your daughter’s second ultrasound, we had a cancellation.”

“When?”

“Half an hour?”

He looked at his watch. “I’d have to go get her.” He said more to himself than the other doctor. “Yeah. We’ll take it.”

“Good,” he slapped Matt’s arm again. “I hope everything works out for you.”

Trent slowed down as the yellow light turned to red. “Can you think of anything else?”

“Trent we’ve been over it and over it.”

He sped off as soon as it turned green. “There’s got to be something we’re missing. There’s got to be some connection between you and me besides church.”

Well, there is... but... She still wasn’t sure she wanted to tell him. Besides she was sure that couldn’t be the reason. No one knew. “More than likely, he knows you’re the policeman hiding me out, and he doesn’t like it.”

“Then we have to go back to your enemies... the ones you can’t think of names for.”

“I told you all I know about them, and that’s the best I can do. I really haven’t had that many people die in my care, and those three are the only ones where family got mad at the staff.”

“That you remember.”

“Yes.”

“Well. I’ll check them out,” he sighed. “Frankly, though, none of them sound like very good leads. We should be able to rule out the priest fairly quickly.” He quickly turned left on a ‘pink’ light.

She raised her eyebrows. “He was pretty upset. His father *did* die.”

Trent gave her a look. “Logistically impossible.”

“Okay. Well, maybe something will turn up from one of the other ones. You wanted every possibility.”

“We’ve got to be missing something.” He waited for a few cars to pass and then turned left into the parking lot. “It’s just that message he left me on the phone.” Speaking mostly to himself, his voice trailed off.

“What message?”

Glancing at her, he snapped back to reality. “Oh, he called me that night he came to my house... if it’s the same guy. He never referred directly to you.”

“What’d he say?”

He pulled into a parking place. “He talked about getting even and making war with women.” He spoke thoughtfully.

“That could be Carlos. He’s mad at you because you’re hiding me from him!” She said the words, but she had a hard time believing them.

“Maybe. We still don’t have any proof.”

Staring at him, Melinda felt like pursuing the topic further, but then she glanced at the clock and her heart jumped. “Well, thanks a lot. I shouldn’t be long.” She grabbed her stuff, jumped out, and literally ran for the building.

Matt walked a little slower as he pushed Taylor down the hall in a wheelchair. He *had* been on a roll but sitting down in the car had made him realize how tired he was. Stumbling, Matt caught himself on the chair leaning forward on it for support. Feeling it, Taylor turned back and looked up at him. “Are you alright?”

Stiffening, he pulled himself straight. “Yes.” He answered short and stared straight ahead. Shrugging, she turned back. Matt felt like grimacing, but he didn’t. He forced himself to stay straight. He was tired. His stomach churned. His whole body ached. He felt physically and emotionally beaten down.

“Right in here, doctor.” One nurse opened the door for him and the other took the wheelchair from him as he entered. Stopping in the open doorway, Matt let himself fall back against the post, immediately realizing, he should have controlled that better. “You okay, doctor?”

“Yeah.” His answer was trite. “When should I return for her?”

“No need. We’ll put her in a room until your shift is over.”

Nodding roughly, he backed up, “Thanks.” He turned and closed the door.

Feeling his cellphone vibrate, Trent took it from his pocket and smiled as he saw Teresa’s picture pop up on the caller ID. “Hey, Honey, how’s it going?”

“Not good.” She didn’t sound happy.

“What’s wrong?” He mentally rolled his eyes. All he wanted right now was *more* bad news.

“We’re getting kicked out.” Her voice was blunt.

Trent groaned and covered his face with his hand. “Whyyy?”

“You call them about it. I’ve talked to them till I’m blue in the face.”

“It won’t do any good. I’ve already talked with them. I thought they would at least give us a few more days.”

“Apparently not.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” His voice was consolatory then just a little defensive. “We’ve been checking every bit of information we can dig up on both Carlos and Sandervaugh.”

“What could you possibly dig up on Carlos? He’s just a firefighter, isn’t he?” Her voice was weary.

“No. He has a record... here in the states and back in Mexico.” Trent watched the people going in and out of the building as he talked.

“I didn’t know he was an immigrant. Is it him then? Does he have a history of domestic violence?”

“Sandervauh isn’t exactly innocent as a dove either.”

"I thought you said he was dead!"

"That's what the record shows."

"Then don't waste your time chasing ghosts! Can't you arrest Carlos and see if the stuff stops?"

"No." Silence prevailed for several moments. "Look, I had to help take Melinda somewhere incognito. I'll drop her off at the hospital for her shift and then come up to get you and the kids, okay?"

"I guess." She paused. "Are you sure we'll be safe at home?"

"We can stay at the hotel tonight until we figure out what we're going to do." He glanced toward the revolving doors as they started to spin. "Here she comes. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Melinda pulled her coat tighter around her and put her hands in her pockets as she walked down the parking lot. The words, 'there must be some connection between us' kept ringing through her mind. While she was sure it didn't have anything to do with Carlos's vendetta, she still felt guilty not telling him. So, while she was inside, she had worked out the most eloquent speech she could think of.

Approaching the car, a gust of wind blew her so hard it made her take a step back. Leaning into it, she managed to get the car door open. "Windy out there." She shook her long blonde hair out of her face and reached for her seat belt. "Sorry, it took a little longer, but...."

"That's okay," Trent interrupted as he backed the car out. "I'm going to drop you off at work. Then I have to go pickup my wife and kids."

"You're going home?" She looked both ways out of habit as he stopped at the edge of the parking lot before pulling onto the street.

"Yeah." He spirted the car across two busy lanes and turned into his lane. "We might just get your killer for you... when he comes after us."

Melinda swallowed hard on the anger that erupted inside of her from that statement. Gritting her teeth, she stared out the window. "It was never my intention to put your family in danger." Any decision to tell him about their own familial ties went right out the window.

"I know it." His voice was angry. There was silence for several moments. "Sometime when you get a chance, I'd like you to take a look at a few mugshots."

"Why?" She looked over at him. He continued to stare at the road. "I never saw him." She looked back out the window.

"You can't be sure of that. He's probably been stalking you for quite some time. You might have seen him around without realizing it."

Groaning in unbelief, long, blonde strands of hair fell over Melinda's hands as she bent forward and rubbed her face. "I'm not going to be able to know with all those mugshots if I saw any of them in passing." The thought of going through huge book of people and trying to see if she recalled any of them overwhelmed her.

"There's just a few I want you to look at. That email I told you about, 'I always win.'" His voice trailed off.

"What about it."

"I just want to see if you recognize the guy that may have written it."

She turned to look at him, her eyes and voice hopeful. "You think you know who it is?"

Trent just stared at the road for several moments, then he answered thoughtfully. "No." Melinda's face fell, and she went back to staring out her window. "It's just a hunch," His voice softened. "probably a bad one."

Mark picked up his phone again. He'd thrown it down after reading through all the news articles in his third news site. He was practically dying from hunger pangs brought on by the abundant good smells in the hamburger joint. He concluded he was desperate, and desperate times called for desperate measures. He swallowed hard on his pride as he dialed the numbers. He hadn't needed to be diplomatic in a while, but he was sure if he tried, he could remember how.

"Hello. This is Victoria Sanders."

Victoria?! "You know what's the problem with all you Christians? You like to preach a mean game, but you never practice what you preach!"

"Who is this?"

"Mark Fredr...."

"Son, if you went and got yourself thrown in jail, don't expect me to bail you out. Sometimes in life we make mistakes, but when we do...."

"I'm not in jail."

"You're not?" Her voice was skeptical.

"No, and what made you think...?"

"Well, I just happened to be looking out the window, and I saw Trent...."

"Happened to be looking out that window?! Lady, you're glued to that window."

"Again, why is it you called, son?"

"I'm not your son," he mumbled.

"Nothing could be more apparent. What do you need?"

"Oh, nothing. Afterall, I wouldn't expect you to lift a finger and...."

"Son, spit it out!"

"You going to give me a ride back to my car or not?!"

"A *ride*? Where are you?" She sighed.

"That first fast-food joint on the right from your street... down quite a ways on the main drag. I don't know what the name is." He strained to look. "We don't have these in California."

"I know what it is. I'll come pick you up, but then you have to make a deal with me."

"What?"

"I'll tell you when I get there."

"The stupid cop, first he comes to arrest me, doesn't tell me why, and then he just drops me off. He lies, too. He said he was going to come back. Instead, he just leaves me to rot with no food and no money." Dial tone. Mark

looked at the phone and wagged his head. "Well, thanks a lot."

Sleep... an Elusive Dream

Taylor looked up from her book and scowled at her father as he walked past her in the waiting room. "What's that for?" He stopped a few feet past her and turned around. She just rolled her eyes and looked back down. So, he stepped closer.

When he was in range, she looked back up. "Are you about done? I'm supposed to be on bed rest, you know. I gave up my room because you said that when Melinda got here, we'd be going home. Instead, she clocks in, and you both start working."

"We're short-staffed."

"You've been short-staffed for years. Every time you get caught up; somebody leaves."

He rubbed his face roughly. "Taylor, we're talking about people's lives." She rolled her eyes and looked back down at her book. Matt sighed. "Do you want to wait in my office?" She gave him a very unimpressed look. "Maybe I can find you another room." He started looking around for a nurse.

"No! That's okay." She started struggling to get up. Matt held out his hand. He didn't think she was going to take it, but when she did, he helped pull her up. "Thank you," she said rather formally. "I'll just wait in your office." She held out her hand for the key. "I wouldn't want to give you an excuse to stay any longer than what's absolutely necessary. So, please don't."

"I don't want to any more than you do." He dropped the key in her hand.

"If you didn't want to, you'd leave."

"How do you leave a child who can't breathe?"

She started to roll her eyes again and walk away, but she stopped sharply and turned back. "By trusting someone else to be able to help it." Then she turned and left.

"A child is never an 'it'." He called after her louder than he hoped. She stiffened but otherwise didn't acknowledge his cutting remark as she walked away.

Jess trudged wearily into the arena carrying one last bale of hay. Jim met her halfway and took it from her. Kicking a clump of sand to the edge and staring down at the ground, Jess followed him. Jim hefted the bale on top of the stack and then leaned back against them. "Is that all for tonight?" Jim took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

"Let's just put the balloons on this first, and then we should be pretty much set. There's still a few things, but we can finish them up in the morning... and of course cooking the food." She took a balloon from the bucket and began blowing it up.

“Yeah well, that’s *your* department,” Jim reminded her.

“True.” She handed him the balloon. “But I might need some help with the dishes.” She grinned. He didn’t. Instead, he snatched the balloon and pinned it front and center on one of the middle bales. “Have you found the darts yet?” She tied off the next one.

“Yeah. They’re in the basement.” He took it. “I’ll bring them up in the morning.”

Jess nodded as she blew. “Think we’ll get it all done in time?”

“We’d better.”

“I was kind of counting on Mellissa’s help with the cooking, but now.... I wonder how they’re doing.”

“Yeah. We should have called them today. Just wasn’t time. Sounded like Wade was going to be fine.”

Jess nodded. “I sure hope so.”

“You don’t have to have the cooking done before they get here anyway. They won’t eat until halfway through the night.”

“Yeah.” She handed him a yellow one. “Lots of people came out to help us set up. I’m glad of that.”

“Hey!” They both turned to look as Derrick called to them from the center of the arena. “Where do you want this?” he asked, standing behind a large blue barrel.

“Oh. You found the extra. Good. Where was it?”

“In your storm cellar.”

“Oh.” Jess looked confused.

“Over there in the corner.” Jim pointed. “Then we’ll bring the lasso’s out and lay them on top, and the kids can practice....”

“You do know this barrel doesn’t look anything like a cow.” Derrick rolled it in the other direction.

“That’s what they’ve got imaginations for,” Jim called after him.

Jess handed him another balloon. “Can you and Derrick finish this? I really should go in for Morgan so that Mrs. Henderson can leave. She’s been here at least an hour longer than most everyone else already.”

“She’ll appreciate the extra money, though.”

“Yeah, but still.”

Nodding, he took the balloon from her. “Go ahead.”

Smiling, she turned to go. Rubbing her dirty hands on her jeans, she walked out. Jim watched her go. He enjoyed watching her. Catching a glimpse of Derrick starting to leave, he furrowed one brow and yelled, “Hey, get back here and help me blow up these balloons!” He flicked a blue one in Derrick’s direction. Hands in his pockets and a little hunched, Derrick turned his head but didn’t answer. “Get over here.” Jim motioned for him to come.

Reluctantly, Derrick turned and trudged over in that direction, thinking about how much more he’d rather be sleeping. *Balloons*. The thought of blowing up balloons nearly made him sick, *how... childish*.

Matt glanced over at Melinda who was chatting with Mellissa as he draped his stethoscope back around his neck and removed the BP cuff from Wade’s arm. Both women stopped and looked at him when he stood up. “He’s

fine. Holding his own. I just wanted to check him right quick before we leave for the night.”

“Shouldn’t he have woken up?” Mellissa’s voice was squeaky, worried.

“No. The medicine he gets is conducive to deep sleep. I could wake him if you want, but I don’t think it’d be good for him.”

“No, not as long as you’re sure his okay.”

“He’s fine.” Feeling a little light-headed, Matt stepped back to balance himself. He wasn’t sure if anyone noticed. He hoped not. “You ready to go home?” He looked over at Melinda. Her initial expression was shock, but then she smiled and nodded cautiously.

“Oh, are you taking her home tonight?” Mellissa’s face was curious. “Her home I mean?”

Matt swallowed hard and tried not to grimace at his mistake. “Yeah... her car...is a.” Matt tried not to lie.

“Not out there at all,” Melinda laughed. “and I’m afraid it won’t be for quite some time. Had to get a ride here this morning too. Oh, the wonders of mechanics!” Melinda laughed again.

Nice save, Melinda. Matt mentally gave her a nod of respect.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Maybe....”

“No-o.” Melinda put her hand up. “Don’t worry. I’ve got it covered.” She smiled, leaning forward and embracing Mellissa. “We’ll see you a little bit later. Get some sleep.” She took a few steps away. “And don’t you worry!” She ordered, pointing her finger at her playfully.

Mellissa smiled back. “I’ll try.”

Melinda turned around, glanced at Matt, and headed for the door. Matt followed. Extremely tired, he swayed a little and wacked his shoulder on the door post on the way out. Rubbing his face vigorously, he tried to wake himself up as they made their way to his office to get Taylor. Melinda grabbed a wheelchair on the way for Taylor. Matt grabbed the wall a couple of times to steady himself.

“You better go get a couple coffees first. I’m not sure I want you driving us,” she suggested as they rounded a corner.

“I’ve got some coffee in my office. I started it when I got here. Only had a chance to get one cup.”

“On a day like today, it’s no wonder.”

“When are days like today going to end?” Coming to his office, he let his shoulder fall against the wall as he searched through his pocket for his extra key.

“I heard they’re interviewing a few nurses.”

“Doctors?” He handed her the key without explanation.

She took it and began unlocking. “No. I don’t think so.” She opened the door and held it. He went in and held it open for her and the wheelchair. Then letting it shut, he glanced over at the couch where Taylor was sleeping.

“Give me a minute before you wake Taylor up.” He headed for his office chair.

“Sure. You go sit down, and I’ll make you a nice strong cup of coffee.”

He nodded as he sat down. For a few moments, he just stared off into space. Then he let his head fall a little more and more till it was down resting on his arm. By time Melinda returned with the coffee, he was fast asleep.

“Here you go, Doctor.” She set the cup down. “Matt...” She touched his shoulder, but he didn’t stir. She glanced from Matt to Taylor back to Matt, then shrugging plopped down in the wheelchair. She guessed they’d sleep here for a while.

After a few hours, Matt groggily woke up, slowly at first, not realizing where he was and then suddenly with a jerk, looking around wildly until he remembered. After rubbing his face hard to wake up, he focused on the clock; 2:45am. *Oh, boy.* Stretching as he got up, he walked past Melinda asleep in the wheelchair and made his way over to Taylor on the couch. “Taylor?” She didn’t stir, so he reached down and shook her a little. “Taylor, wake up.” Melinda woke up...partially. Taylor just mumbled something and put her arm over her face. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her arm back down. “Taylor, wake up!”

Melinda jumped out of the wheelchair. Taylor opened her eyes and scowled. “Are you fi-nally ready to go?”

“Yes.” He offered his hand and then pulled her up. Taking a wider stance, he refused to lose balance.

When up, Taylor gave the wheelchair and Melinda a dirty look. “It beats walkin.” Melinda grinned.

“Just get in the chair,” Matt growled. “As you so kindly pointed out, you are on bedrest.”

Reluctantly, Taylor trudged toward the chair. “And seeing as you didn’t care in the least then, why are you being so accommodating now? Oh, I forget, we have your reputation to think of.” She sat down as defiantly as she could muster.

Matt lowered his standards and rolled his eyes. Melinda forced a cheerfully smile as she began pushing the chair. “Well, if we’re all ready to go.” She stopped at the door and smiled at Matt, hoping he’d come and open it. He did, but he wasn’t smiling. “Oh!” She stopped in the doorway. “Did you want your coffee?” She looked over her shoulder at the cold cup sitting on the desk.

He gave her a look. “No.” He flipped off the light and locked the door.

“Okay.” Melinda shrugged, deciding to walk the rest of the way in silence. She guessed congeniality was too much to ask for at this hour of the morning.

Reaching the car, she wheeled Taylor to the passenger’s seat and helped her in. Then she went to the back as Matt held the door open for her and crawled onto the floor of the backseat. She started to say something, but as soon as she opened her mouth, Matt tossed the blanket on top of her and slammed the door, causing her to change her mind. She only hoped that his attitude would soften sometime in the foreseeable future.

The silence was nearly deafening the rest of the way home, until almost there, Matt groaned, “Oh, no.”

Peeking out from under the blanket, Melinda glanced toward the front seat. “What’s the matter?”

Matt gritted his teeth and rolled his neck, trying to release the tension from his aching shoulders. He was so stiff and bruised from the fight last night, he sure didn’t want to do it again. “Mark’s blocking the driveway,” Taylor answered for him.

“Oh great,” Melinda reiterated. “Why don’t you just leave me here and park by the curb? Then at least you two can walk in. Bring out some more blankets.”

“No-o.” Taylor muttered. Shaking his head, Matt groaned as he got out of the car into the frosty night. It was days like today that made him tired of being a responsible adult.

Matt didn’t slam the car door, but it took restraint. What else could possibly go wrong? His teeth were clenched so tight his jaw was starting to ache. Suddenly it dawned on him, he *could* pray. He could, but he sure wasn’t

in the mood. *Please, get this idiot's car out of the way!* He felt guilty for putting a prayer that way but not enough to change it. Coming to the car, Matt tried to calm himself enough to have a civilized conversation. He knocked on the icy window. "Mark!"

Mark, who was sleeping sprawled out across the front bench seat, startled awake, but when he saw his father, his face changed to smug. "Ye-es?"

"I want to talk to you."

"So, talk."

"Are you afraid to face me like a man?"

With a wag of his head and a cock-sure smile, Mark got out of the car, shivered against the cold, crossed his arms, and leaned back against it. "Now, what?"

"What do you want?"

"To make you sorry." His glare was almost as penetrating as his father's, only his held hatred.

"I've been sorry... every day that I had to wake up without your mother beside me." Pain penetrated his eyes.

"So, you decided to take it out on us."

"I. did. the. best. I could."

"You didn't even try!"

Grimacing Matt let his head fall down and then brought it back sharply. "You need to move your car."

"No." Mark stepped forward, thrusting his palm into Matt's shoulder, trying to shove him back. Matt didn't move.

Matt's glare got even deeper. "Move the car."

Mark looked from side to side, avoiding the glare. "No." His voice softened. Then he cracked his head with a snap and glared back. "Why don't you call the cops... ag-gain?"

"I could call them, but I think they have better things to do than come all the way over here to remove a spoiled kid from...."

Mark pulled back his arm, giving Matt warning, so when he struck, Matt was able to dodge it, grab his arm, and pull him forward, away from the car, and shoved him in the other direction. In an instant, Matt jumped in the running car, locked the door, and drove it forward... two houses down... and parked it next to the curb. Mark ran after him. Matt jammed it in park, took the keys out, jumped out the passenger's side, locked it, and took off running back for his car. Mark finished running to his car, but when he realized it was locked, he turned and started booking it after his dad. "Hey! Give me back my keys!" Breathing hard, Matt ran faster. Mark was gaining on him. Matt had just enough juice to get in his car and get the lock down before Mark caught up and started yanking on the car handle. "You coward! Give me my keys back!" Mark yanked harder. Matt thrust it in drive and stomped the gas.

"Careful!" Taylor gasped grabbing the door handle as they spun out right next to Mark, barely missing him. Mark ran after them yelling and cursing all the way. Matt pushed the garage door remote and pulled in, but there wasn't time for it to close before Mark got in.

Matt jumped out and ran at Mark. "DAD!" Taylor yelled after him and then watched in the rearview mirror. Matt was running out. Mark was running in. They collided just outside the door. The door stopped when it sensed Matt go under. Taylor hit the button again. She watched the two wrestling and rolling on the ground until the door

obstructed her view.

Finally getting on top, Matt got in one good punch, good enough to stun Mark long enough for him to run to the front door and in the house. Even with unlocking the door, he made it before Mark. Mark got there seconds after and began yanking on the door handle and punching the door, cursing and yelling.

Inside, Matt fell back against the door, trying to get his breath. His lungs burned, and his heart beat like a sledge hammer. After a minute, he headed for the stairs. He planned to drop Mark's keys out the upstairs window once he got in the house, but instead he stopped at the bottom step to consider. What if he blocked him in again tomorrow? He closed his hand over the keys and turned toward the garage to get the others, deciding to think on it. Maybe he should just call the police.

Doorbell ringing off the hook, Mrs. Sanders woke up with a start. "What in the world?" Wrapping her robe around herself, she headed for her bedroom window. Opening it, she put on her glasses and peered down at Mark banging on her door. "Young man, what possesses you to...?"

Mark walked beneath her window uttering various profanities about Matt without getting to the point. After a few moments, she cut him off. "Young man, I don't intend to stand here and listen to this." She started to go back.

"Wait!" He held one hand up in a stopping motion and ran his hand through his hair with the other. "Wait!" She peered back out. "He took the keys to my car." His voice broke a little.

"What have you done now?"

"Me? *He* took *my* keys!"

"Well? What'd you do to provoke it?"

"Why's it always got to be what *I* did?"

"Good question."

"Look, Lady, it's cold out here, and I don't have any place to sleep! I'll get hypothermia!"

"Well, you're not sleeping in here," she stated very matter-of-factly.

"I need my keys back!"

"I repeat, what were you doing?"

Groaning in anger, Mark put his head down and then yanked it back up still running his hand through his hair. "I parked my car in front of his drive."

"Well, that was a pretty stupid thing to do."

"Look, Lady, I didn't come over here for your opinion!"

"No, you came for my help. If you want it, you are going to do three things. One you're going to calm down right now. Two, you are going to give me your word that you won't block your father's driveway again. Three you are going to stop calling me lady and treat your elders with some respect!" She paused. "Then I will call him."

"Fine."

"I want your word."

"Fine!"

“That’s not good enough.”

“You’ve got my word! I won’t block the old man’s driveway!”

Giving him a disapproving look, she said, “Okay,” and then went back in.

Mark walked around in a circle a couple of times trying to calm down... and stay warm. Looking around the street, he noticed a couple house lights had come on. He secretly hoped they hadn’t called the police. He told himself he didn’t care. That maybe could he get his father arrested for taking his keys... but just in case, he stepped behind a bush.

“Well, he finally left.” Melinda came back into the living from the kitchen, munching on an apple. “What are you going to do about his keys?”

“I don’t know.” Matt groaned as he slowly sat down on the couch. “I’ve got to go back to work in less than an hour.” He laid down and put his arm over his face to block the light. “Maybe I’ll give them to him then. At least I’ll be able to get out of the drive.” His voice trailed off.

“Call off. You have every right! You shouldn’t work when you’re this tired.”

“I’m only scheduled eight hours, and that’s all I’m going to work,” he mumbled.

“Sur-re,” Taylor mumbled, pulling her afghan up around her.

“Matt, you’ll kill yourself!” Melinda crossed her arms in disbelief.

“Good.”

Ring! Ring! Ring!

They all looked at the phone wondering who would be calling them at this hour. Melinda got the phone and handed it to Taylor.

“Hello. Yeah. Oh. Okay.” She put her hand over the speaker. “It’s Mrs. Sanders about Mark.”

Matt held out his hand but didn’t open his eyes. Melinda took it over to him. “Hello... yeah... okay... I doubt it... yeah, hopefully... alright bye.” He handed the phone back but still didn’t open his eyes.

“What’s up?” Melinda asked.

“Somebody’s got to throw the key back out to Mark.” He put his arm back over his face.

“What happened?” Melinda reiterated.

Matt didn’t answer. He just reached in his pocket, pulled out the key, and held it out. Coming to the couch, Melinda took the key, leaned over top him and the couch, and pulled the curtain back a tiny bit. “He’s leaning against the back of his car.”

“Just throw the key out.” Matt didn’t open his eyes.

Matt, feeling her close to him, opened one eye and watched her. She sure is pretty... with her sparkling blue eyes and thick blonde hair... thin, firm waste, that he couldn’t help noticing since she was stretched out right over top him. Feeling his gaze, she let the curtain fall back and looked down at him. He opened both eyes. She held his gaze longer than she intended, letting the nearness shoot a charge up her spine. She shivered. Butterflies flew into her stomach as she gazed into his strong, calm face, lightening into a soft smile. Suddenly nervous, she jumped back. “Um a....” She tugged her shirt down, absentmindedly. “He might see me!” Her voice was high pitch. “Um... I a

thought...um... you throw it out.” She walked backwards, nervously rubbing her hands on her pants.

Matt smiled, sat up, took the keys back, and opened the window. “Hey!” He yelled at Mark. When Mark turned his head, he threw the keys out on the lawn and then shut the window. Lying back down, he smiled at Melinda again.

“Yeah well, um...” Melinda put her hands in her back pockets and backed up. “Did you say you wanted a snack?” She turned toward Taylor, who was watching in interest. “Crackers and cheese?” She didn’t pause long enough for a response. “How ‘bout crackers and cheese, a good indulgent snack, great for the baby. Right!” She pointed at Taylor and then spun toward the kitchen.

“Pepperjack.” Taylor called after her.

“Pepperjack, great!” She spun around and pointed again. “Good choice. A person can always use some spice in their life. I’ll a...,” She slapped her leg. “go get it. Great choice!” Spinning around, she nearly ran into a wall, but jumped to the side just in time.

Matt halfway choked on a laugh, but quickly returned his arm over his face, trying to cover his smile.

Captured

“Jim, wake up!” Standing over him, Jess shoved the palms of her hands into his back. “We have a million

things to do!" She whacked him again. "So, wake up."

"Okay. Okay." Jim rubbed his face as he rolled over. "What time is it?"

"Time to get to work." She was dressed in a jean skirt and a cowboy shirt with her apron on." I made you a list." She handed him the paper.

He took it reluctantly. "You and your lists." He blinked his eyes and tried to focus on it. It looked a lot longer than he expected.

"It's the only way you can be sure you don't miss anything."

"I sure wouldn't want to do that," he mumbled, sitting up.

"Exactly." She turned to go. "If you want breakfast, you'd better hurry up because I've got to start cooking for tonight, and I need every available inch of counter space.

Mumbling many inaudible phrases in a row, he pulled himself out of bed and stumbled over to the dresser. Jess just smiled back and went downstairs.

"Hurry, kids! Daddy's got to get us packed before he can go to work. Timmy, toys go in there. John, will you take those two bags out to your father, please." She pointed. "Martha, don't play with that. Mary, will you take it away, please." She tried desperately to keep an eye on all four kids through the mirror while putting on her make-up.

"Oh, thanks, John." Trent met his son with the bags at the door and took them. Then coming a little farther, he grabbed a suitcase with his other hand. "Are you done with the hanging bag?" he asked while picking up the suitcase.

"Yes, and the cooler." She opened her eye wider to do her mascara.

"Okay. I'll get them next trip. One more trip after that should do it. You sure you don't need me to drive you to your mother's?" He reiterated as he stopped at the door.

"No. We'll be fine. He can't know where we're at, and *you* need to get back to work and find this guy so we can go home."

"I did want Melinda to look at some pictures this morning."

Teresa turned slightly. "You have a lead then?"

"I don't know." He looked guilty.

"Sandervauh?" Trent slowly nodded yes. Disappointed, she returned to doing her make-up. "Whatever happened to Carlos?"

"He's always got an alibi. The night all that happened at our house, he was at work again. If he's been doing this stuff, I sure can't figure out how. Sure, he's got the best motive, but zero opportunity. At least, as far as, I can figure."

"Just figure it out... please." She didn't look at him.

"I'm working on it," he half-mumbled as he went out the door.

Darkness... a lonely, cold, foreboding darkness... like a tunnel... with a baby crying at the end... reaching... walking... running through the tunnel...trying to find her little Davy. *Davy!* Her voice echoed through the tunnel. *Davy!* She saw him! ...saw him at the end, but she couldn't get to him. The wind was holding her back. *Davy!* She struggled,

trying to push her way through the tunnel, trying to break free from the grasping, clutching, capturing hold of evil. The harder she tried the more she got pushed back, the fainter the cry became until an evil laugh echoed from the wind behind. "Davy." The baby appeared again. A giant shadow with an evil laugh crept up behind it. "Davy." She reached, but the giant band of muscular arm from the evil figure wrapped around him and pulled him away, laughing... further and further until he was swallowed up into the darkness. "No, Davy, come back. Please! Come back!"

"Mellissa? Mellissa?" Feeling someone shaking her, she slowly woke up, but it took her a minute to realize it had only been a dream. "Dr. Fredricks." She sat up a little higher in the chair.

"Did you sleep there all night? You know we brought that bed in here for a reason."

"I must have fallen asleep." She yawned, trying to wake up.

"Must have. You were dreaming."

"Davy," she mumbled, staring out the window, then she turned back. "Are you back here again already?" She looked at her watch.

"I've been back for a while."

"Hey, doctor." Wade opened his eyes, but his voice was strained.

"Wade?" Mellissa jumped up and leaned forward against his bed rail, her normally perfectly arranged, layered, and highlighted hair falling messily into her face. She pushed it behind her ear. "Are you okay?"

"Ask the Doc, here," his voice was hoarse, but there was a smile in it.

"Well, let's see." Matt sat down and started unwrapping the blood pressure cuff.

"Young man." Startled awake and vaguely hearing someone rapping on his window, Mark groaned, mumbling something inaudible and rolled over. "Young man." The knocking continued.

Mumbling again, Mark rolled over again and looked out the window. *Mrs. Sanders*. "What do you want?" He wasn't sure if she heard him. She just stood there, one hand on her hip the other holding a plate of... *breakfast*. He sat up a little. He couldn't see what it was, but it was still steaming. Pushing his comforter down, he reached for the door handle, and staggered out, still waking up.

Mrs. Sanders pushed the plate of food toward him. He took it. Then she handed him a folded newspaper opened to the classifieds, a couple of conspicuous red circles in the general vicinity of the help wanteds. "The hardware manufacturing plant has very good..."

"I'm not looking for a job."

"I dare say you can't have an endless amount of resources. If you wish to stay here and torment your father, you are going to need..."

"Mind your own business! I can take care of myself!" he snapped.

She raised her eyebrows. "And you've lost at least ten pounds since the first time I saw you."

"That's my business! You just want to get me away from here!"

"I won't say that that wouldn't be an improvement."

That statement ignited fire in his stomach. He felt like throwing the plate back at her. He did lift it higher.

“Look, no one asked you to....”

“I don’t mean that. This silly feud between you and your father has got to stop.”

“Lady, you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know, you need to get on with your life.”

“I had a life!” He paused and looked down, thoughtfully. “...in California.”

“What happened to it?” Her voice softened a little.

He looked back up, trying to hide the pain in his eyes. “Nothing.” He put his hand to his forehead and then drew it away sharply. “You know what? Why don’t you just leave be alone?” He put the plate down on the hood. Raising her eyebrows, she turned around and started walking away. “And why don’t you take this with you!” He held out the plate.

She didn’t turn around. “I’ll be back for the plate later.”

Mumbling, he threw the newspaper on the ground, but took the food back with him.

“You know, Chrissy. I’ve told you about her. She sits in the third row at school.” John pulled the seatbelt down and looked over at his mom in the driver’s seat.

“The blonde?” Teresa looked in the rearview mirror again, swallowing hard. She didn’t know if it was just her nerves, but that dark SUV sure seemed to be following them a long time. It had even turned a couple times with them. It had been staying back, but now it was getting closer. She sped up, but then so did it.

“Yeah. Her father’s a teacher, the high school Math teacher. Well, the last day I was at school....”

“John, be quiet a minute please.” She looked in the mirror again. The SUV was right on her bumper.

“What’s the matter?” He looked in the mirror. “Mom, who are they?!”

“John, be quiet please.” Her voice was weak. She tried to keep the wheel steady, but she felt like shaking. The SUV came up fast and tapped her bumper. The car swerved.

“MOM!” John grabbed onto the cubby on the dash. The kids in the back screamed.

“John, get the phone! It’s in my purse!”

John let go and reached for her purse just as the bumpers hit again, throwing him against the dash. He yelled in reaction. The car went off into the gravel, but Teresa quickly got it back on the road. “Get the phone! GOD, HELP US! HELP US!”

CRASH! The tires squealed as she swerved just missing an oncoming semi. “JOHN, PLEASE!”

“I’m trying!” He reached for the phone again. The SUV zipped around them and then jammed on the brakes. “LOOK OUT! LOOK OUT!”

Teresa rammed into the back of it as it sped back up. The SUV didn’t swerve, but she swerved all over, nearly losing control. As soon as she regained her bearings, her eyes widened, and her heart froze as she saw the SUV nearly stopped in front of them again. She slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel, barely getting the car onto a conveniently located gravel road... too conveniently located. She sped up, trying to get away, but the SUV was hot on their trail and close behind, too close. It kept pushing them faster and faster. She was sure they were going to crash. They got farther and farther away until they were on a seemingly deserted stretch of road. Then suddenly, the SUV

dropped back. She was so shaken from the speed, she slowed down, too. She had to. She tried taking deep breaths. She felt like she was on the verge of passing out.

The kids were still screaming in the back. John took this opportunity to reach down and dump the purse, grabbing the phone. "I got it, Mom!" He held it up.

"Good, call...!" The SUV sped up fast, lightning fast. No time to react. She screamed as the car zoomed into them, throwing their van into the air and flipping it. *Lord, save my kids!* With a giant crash, it landed in the ditch. Darkness.

"All done?" Jess walked toward Jim and Derrick, who were standing in the middle of the arena. Jim looked around assessing the situation while Derrick stood arm's crossed looking satisfied.

"I think so." Jim answered questioningly.

"What? You don't want me to dust the rafters for you?" Derrick joked, sarcastically. Jim whacked him in the chest with the back of his arm. Derrick just smiled.

Then so did Jess. "Well, it looks pretty good to me," she stated, hands on her hips, looking around.

"It better," Derrick mumbled.

"Uh oh..." Jess gazed out the arena doors. "Ready or not here comes the first church van."

Jim rubbed his hands together. "Stations, men."

"And girls," Jess added, following close behind.

Faint background screams got louder and louder as John slowly woke up. Seeing the world upside down, it took him a minute to remember where he was. Slowly turning his throbbing head, he saw.... "Mom!" Releasing his seatbelt, he fell to the roof. Kneeling next to his mom, he grabbed her shoulder, shaking it. "Mom! Mom, wake up! Please!" Her body hung limply. Blood dripped from her forehead. His screaming sister in the back threatened to disorient him. "Mom." Shaking, he tried to scoot in front of her to see her face.

Just then a masked gunman appeared by her window. Yelling, John jumped back, falling against the passenger's side window. The gunman didn't speak. He opened the driver's side door, unbuckled Teresa, and snatched her out of the van. "No!" John yelled. "Leave her alone!" He started toward the man, but the gunman kicked the door shut in his face. He was afraid to open it as he watched the gunman carry his mom to the SUV. "Mom... No! Dad... God... help! Somebody, help!"

Suddenly, Timmy unbuckled, fell to the ceiling, jumped out the broken window, and began running toward the SUV yelling, "Mommy!" Spiriting up gravel, the SUV took off and sped down the road. "Mommy! Mommy!" Stopping in the middle of the road, Timmy just stood there in a daze, watching as the cloud of dust disappeared into the distance.

Rodeo

“Here you are.” Jess handed the next teen in line three darts. “Hit a red balloon, you get candy, yellow balloon a ticket for the prize table, and a blue balloon a bottle of pop.” She turned slightly as she felt Jim come up beside her. “Thought you were doing the hay stacking race? Oh, nice try.” She addressed Jim first then the girl throwing darts.

“Max took over,” Jim answered. “which works for me. I got done in somewhere between tug of war and spoke tackle. Need a breather.”

“Hey, good job! Here you go!” She held out the bucket of candy to the teen girl and then addressed the next teen. “Hi! Hit a red one, you get candy, a yellow one a ticket, and a blue one a bottle of pop.” She handed the boy the darts. “Well, you’d better get recuperated before the rodeo.” She spoke to Jim but watched the darts.

“Tell me about it.” He rubbed his face.

“Oh, nice try. You could always take over for me,” she suggested. “I really should go get the food set out. Good job! Only our second winner for a pop tonight. What kind would you like? This one? Here you go, and thanks for playing.” She went to pull the darts out.

Jim followed. “That’s very generous of you. I’ve already been offered a position at the wagon rides, the horse

rides, and the archery stand.” He yanked out a dart and handed it to her as she walked back.

“Here you go.” She handed the darts to the next boy. “Red one, you get candy; yellow, a ticket for the table; blue, a bottle of pop.” She stepped back. “Yeah?” Jess faced her husband. “But when’s the last time you had a convincing offer?” She put her arms around his neck and stared at him adoringly.

“You got me there.” He leaned in to kiss her, but she stepped back, looking away and clearing her throat. “Hey, you got one! Good job! Here’s your ticket.” Before Jim could say anything, she untied her ticket pouch and gave it to him. Then after giving him a quick kiss on the cheek, she hurried off.

Sighing, Jim set the ticket pouch on the bucket of candy and went to take the darts out of the hay. “Hey, Man.” Jim looked back toward the voice to see Derrick approaching him at a fast walk, fast for him anyway.

“Hey.” Jim handed the twelve-year-old girl the darts. “Hit one and you get something.” He turned back toward Derrick. “I thought you were so understaffed at the wagon rides.”

Hands in his pockets, Derrick leaned back against the barn wall. “The last one just took off. They’ll just make it back in time for the food in twenty minutes.”

“Really, is it that soon?” He addressed Derrick then looked at the teen. “Hey, good job! You can grab a pop.”

“Soon? It doesn’t seem soon to me. I didn’t get lunch, remember?” They both went to pull out the darts.

“Yeah. Mine was nothing to brag about either.” Jim pulled out a dart and took the ones from Derrick. “Hit a balloon, and you get a prize!” He handed the darts.

“That will give us about a half an hour while they eat and an hour or so for the service to get all this stuff tore down, the horses saddled, and the arena set up for the rodeo.” Derrick calculated.

“Aren’t we gonna eat?” Jim held out the bucket of candy for the boy.

“I thought you weren’t interested. You think we’ll have time?”

“I don’t know. Hit a balloon, and you get a prize. I could use something though.”

“Me too, but I’ve got some energy bars upstairs if all else fails.”

“Oh. That sounds thrilling... especially compared to BBQ, chili, and pumpkin bars.” He held out the candy again.

“Yeah, well, you don’t want to be too full when you ride.”

“Or too weak. Hit a balloon and get a prize. Hey, did Lance ever show up?”

“Yeah, he’s been working the pony rides.”

“Hey! Hit a blue one. Go get yourself a bottle of pop.”

“You didn’t tell him he was supposed to be aiming for blue,” Derrick mentioned, matter-a-factly.

“Yeah well, most of them should know it by now.” He went and pulled the darts out of the hay. “Hit a balloon and you get a prize. He gonna ride then?”

“Yeah. Says he will.”

“Better luck next time. Hit a balloon and you get a prize. We’re one horse short then... unless we use your horse.”

Derrick stiffened. “My horse is doing just fine!” He spoke defensively at first then his voice softened. “I can

ride him.”

Jim glanced over his shoulder and gave Derrick a look. “Don’t you think that’s a little bit risky?”

“No.” Derrick’s voice was firm but then turned a little more unsure. “He’s really been coming along lately.”

“Yeah, but he’s had a *long* way to come,” Jim reminded. “Just don’t forget this *is* supposed to be a *G rated* shindig.” Derrick just gave him a look.

“Hey, I hit a blue one!”

“Good job! Get yourself a bottle of pop, young man!” Jim gave the boy a high five. “Besides he has to have a name.” Jim glanced back at Derrick. “The announcer can’t call him Nameless all night.” Jim went to pull out the darts. Derrick stared off, contemplating. He just couldn’t name his horse, Midnight or Taffy or Licorice, but he couldn’t think of anything better. “Hit a balloon, and you get a prize.” Jim handed the darts to the next girl. “How ‘bout Killer or Wild Bill?” Jim stepped back next to Derrick.

“He’s not a killer. He’s just a bit of a Maverick.”

“Well, then there you go.” Jim went to pull the darts out. “You can get a piece of candy for that balloon, and good job.”

Derrick watched him a moment, considering. “Well, maybe,” he stated when Jim returned and handed off the darts. “at least for tonight, anyway.”

“Maverick, it is?”

“Yeah. Maverick.”

“That is if you decide for sure you want to ride him.” Jim gave a questioning glance.

“I’m riding him.” Derrick’s expression turned to stubborn.

“Okay. Well, I’ll be standing by with Iodine and bandages and my phone predialed to 911.” Jim smiled. Derrick rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. Shaking his head, Jim laughed as he went to pull the darts out.

“John, I’m scared,” Timmy whimpered, arms tightly around his legs, rocking back and forth in the ditch next to his other siblings.

“Dad will find us,” John stated confidently, standing next to Mary who sat next to Timmy and held her little sister.

“He doesn’t even know we’re in trouble,” Timmy screeched.

“He will. Maybe he already does.”

“If you hadn’t broke the phone....” Mary cried.

“I didn’t break it! It broke in the crash!” John interrupted.

“You were holding it!” Timmy insisted.

John looked away, and his voice softened. “Come on, guys. This isn’t going to help.” He walked a little way away.

“Don’t leave us!” Mary screeched.

“I’m not. I was just trying to see if there’s anyone around. If you let me go, maybe I can find a house and call

for help.”

“No!” Mary jumped up, letting her little sister fall, causing her to start crying. “Don’t leave us! Please, don’t leave us!”

“Oh. Okay.” John walked back and picked up the crying toddler. “Dad will come. I know he will.”

Trent pulled his car over to answer his cell. “This is Trent. ... Hi.... What do you mean they never got there?.... Why in the world would you wait so long to tell me? They left.... What do you mean, ‘stop at our house, first?’ She was supposed to go straight to you! ... I don’t think. ... Okay. ... Okay, I’ll go check! ... Okay! ... Then let me get off the phone so I can! ... Yes, I’ll call you back. Bye.”

He threw the phone on the passenger’s seat, thrust the shifter into drive, and spurred out onto the road, using his siren to get through traffic. He couldn’t believe Teresa would actually go back to their house alone... even for Timmy’s other medicine bottle. She would know they could get a prescription for more. *Although it is the weekend.* He stepped on it, afraid something must have happened for them to be this late.

“Please, please, let me go!” Teresa begged. She pulled against the ropes binding her arms and legs tightly to the old chair. Her voice echoed inside the dark, eerie grain bin. The dim crack of light from the slightly open door was all that illuminated portions of the gunman’s evil face. “Whatever you want, we’ll find a way!” The gunman laughed at that. “What do you want?” She yelled toward the silent figure leaning against the cold metal wall. “Please! Please, let me go... my family. I have young, young kids!” He didn’t answer. “Please, tell me what you want!” Standing away from the wall, he sneered at her, cursed, and slowly walked toward the door. “Don’t! Please, don’t leave! Please, let me go! What do you want! Let me go! Please!” Hanging her head, she started to cry as he walked out. “Please, oh, please...! Please, God help me! Help my kids. Help Trent. Please, God.” She cried harder.

Trent ran into the house. “Teresa?” He flipped the switch. No electric. “Teresa?!” He flipped on his flashlight and began searching, desperately hoping not to find any bodies. He went room to room running from one to the next, thankful to find each room empty. His heart practically beat one on top the other as he flew down the basement steps and did his search. There was no one there. He let out a breath of relief as he ran back up the steps two at a time. Just as he got to the top his phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket with shaking hands, dropping it. Kneeling down, he held it against the floor, steadying it as he pressed the button to answer. “Trent.”

“Trent, it’s Frank. We just got a report from a semi driver about an incident that might possibly have involved your wife.”

“What? Talk to me. Hurry!”

“It seems there was an SUV tailgating a van and smashing into it. The van nearly collided with the semi. The description of the van matches yours.”

“Where?! Where did this happen?” Trent jumped up and ran out of the house and toward his car as boss told him where. He mentally recited the location over and over but didn’t stop to write it down. “Thanks.” He jumped in his car.

“Neither car is there anymore, just skid marks. I have one car out there so far looking down cross streets.

“I’ll be the second.” Trent yanked down his seatbelt and turned the ignition.

“Be safe.”

“Bye.” Trent hung up and started to drive. While driving, he speed-dialed Jim.

“Hey, this is Jim.”

“Jim, it’s Trent. I don’t have time to explain. I need you and Derrick, if he’s there, to pray for me. My wife and kids... they’ve either been taken, or they’ve been in a car wreck. Whatever happened, they’re in serious trouble. Pray for them. Pray I’ll find them. You have that shindig tonight? Is the pastor there?”

“He’s around somewhere. I’ll find him. We’ll all pray.”

“Thanks, Jim.” Trent hung up and stomped the gas. It was getting dusk, and he needed to see. He had to see! *God, protect my wife and kids! Don’t take them from me! Don’t!*

“John, I’m scared.” Mary grabbed a hold of John’s pantleg, Martha in her lap.

“I know, Mary.” John sat down next to her and put his arm around her. “Dad will find us. He’s probably looking right now.”

“I’m hungry. We’ve been out here a long time.”

“I know. Just hold on a little longer, okay.”

“What if he doesn’t find us?”

“He will. He’s not just going to leave us.”

“Look!” Timmy jumped up and pointed at headlights coming down the road.

John stood up. “That’s not dad. The lights are too high for a car.”

“It’s that man!” Mary squealed. “He’s back!”

“Get down!” John pulled Timmy down to the bottom of the ditch and then Mary with Martha, too. Martha started to cry. John covered her mouth with his hand and then her body with his, trying to muffle the noise. The car went past, but then a little way down the road, slowed and turned around. “Run!” John yelled, grabbing Martha. They all jumped up and ran into the harvested field.

Trent slowed down as he approached the spot. He saw a police car slowly coming down a side road. He saw skid marks, multiple skid marks, some on the road, some in the gravel. He drove slow, but kept following the marks in the direction he knew they were heading until.... He pulled over and stopped the car, getting out to examine what looked like.... He stopped on the gravel road and stared at the deep ruts... ruts like someone had turned very sharp and very fast. He ran back for his car, got in, and drove slowly down the gravel road, using his spot lights to check the ditches until up ahead he saw the lights of a car stopped on the road. He sped toward it, stopped, and jumped out. His heart jumped when he saw his van crashed in the ditch. He walked toward the old man who seemed to be accessing the situation.

“I was just going to call you guys,” He nodded toward Trent’s uniform.

“When did this happen?” Trent walked urgently toward the vehicle.

“Well, I don’t rightly know. Just saw it myself on my way home from work.”

Trent walked down into the ditch, yanked open the crumpled van door, and shone his flashlight inside.

“There’s no one in there. I already checked.”

Trent’s heart sank as he touched the steering wheel. “There’s blood in here.”

“Well, I reckon there must have been somebody driving the car.”

“Ter-e-sa!” He stood up and yelled it at the top of his lungs. “Johnny! Timmy! Mary! Ter-e-sa!”

“You didn’t know them, did you?”

“Did you see anyone?”

“No.”

“John-ny!”

“Dad!” It was very faint and far away.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Trent stumbled away from the car and into the field. “John-ny!”

“Dad! Dad! Dad!” The voices were getting closer, and there were more voices than just John’s.

“Kids! Johnny! Mary!”

“Dad!” They started coming into view, running as fast as they could toward him. Trent ran to meet them, sliding on his knees to grasp the shorter ones when he got there. “Oh, Mary, Timmy, Martha.” He reached up and pulled John down into the hug. “Johnny.” He hugged them all and kissed the younger ones. “Where’s your mommy?” He finally asked, pulling back a little from the hug, but not letting go.

“He took her!” Mary piped up.

Trent clenched his jaw. “Who? Who took her?”

“The masked man!” Timmy added.

“What’d he look like?”

Their little faces were blank. “He was tall,” John said, standing back up.

“He had a black mask on,” Timmy added as they all stood up and started walking toward the road. Trent picked up Martha in one arm and held Mary’s hand with the other.

“Amen.” Kneeling in a circle in the viewing room, the five men who had stopped to pray for Trent raised their heads and slowly got up. They had all prayed, and the pastor had closed. There was no doubt that they felt like continuing in prayer, but they also knew that they had a responsibility to all these kids who had come, and that was also important. The evangelist was supposed to be done preaching in about ten minutes, and they still had to get the barrels set up and the horses saddled. So silently, they split up at the door and all went to do their assigned tasks.

“Tell me more about what the man looked like?” Trent glanced at John who was sitting on the gurney inside the ambulance while a paramedic bandaged his arm. Then he glanced at the other two sitting next to him on the

metal ambulance step, but not at Martha who he held in his arms.

“He was big!” Mary’s eyes got wide.

Knowing how the world looked to Mary, Trent asked, “Bigger than me?” She shrugged.

“I’d say about the same,” John added. “Maybe a little stockier. He had a ski mask on, but his arms were... looked sorta... dark like someone from Mexico, not black.”

“He wasn’t wearing gloves?” Trent’s voice was hopeful as he considered fingerprints.

“He was,” John nodded. “but he had his sleeves rolled up.” Trent nodded.

“He could have just had a dark tan,” the paramedic suggested.

“Ye-ah.” Trent leaned back against the ambulance. “So, here’s what we’ve got to go on. One man stocky and Latin American.” He thought a minute and then looked back at the paramedic. “You know if Carlos is supposed to be working tonight?”

The paramedic put the leftover tape and bandages back then closed the box. “I know at least three Carlos’s.”

“Carlos Martinez. He’s a fireman.”

“Oh, yeah.” The paramedic got up and took his box back inside the ambulance. “I don’t know.” He came back, leaned against the inside wall, and looked down at Trent on the step. “Why would you suspect him? He’s a good guy.”

“I didn’t say I suspected him. I just asked if you knew if he was working.”

The man thought a moment and then shook his head. “I know they were trying to get people to fill in over there because both Jim and Derrick took the night off. I mean, they had vacation days. I don’t get why people get all up in arms about people using their vacation days. I mean it seems to me...” He rambled as he collected his other box and supplies and then stepped back in the ambulance to put them away.

“I just wanted to know about Carlos!” Trent cringed at the anger in his voice. After all, he could just call.

“Look, man, all I know is a lot of people were taking off at that station. Maybe Carlos was one of them. I don’t know. Either way, that doesn’t make him a kidnapper.”

Trent nearly rolled his eyes. *Everyone loves Carlos.*

“You ready for this?” Jim led his horse up next to Derrick’s in the line by the gate.

“Yeah. Why not?” Derrick stared into the distance. “You have a feeling something’s up?”

Jim looked up and then back at him, confused. “You mean like with Trent?”

“Like something’s brewing.... something’s about to happen maybe?” Hardly moving his head, he looked all around.

Clueless, Jim looked around then over his shoulder. “No. Can’t say as I do.” Jim smiled. “Maybe it’s an omen you shouldn’t try to ride that loopy, brain-struck...”

Derrick broke his trance, wagged his head, and gave Jim a look. “You know, you ought to go into motivational speaking. You do wonders for a guy’s morale.” He returned his gaze forward and his thoughts to other subjects.

It was Jim’s turn to give him a look. “I just don’t know what to do when it’s the paramedic that gets hurt.”

The noise from the arena changed from the exuberant announcer to the stomping and cheering of an even

more exuberant crowd. "They must be about ready to go." Jim watched as the first horse and rider went up to the gate. "You can still back out?" Derrick turned his face toward him sharply. "Okay. You'll be the last rider for the barrel race. If he makes it through that, he should be good for the other events. Remember, it's twice around the barrels, the two jumps on the left, then three times around the barrels and the jump on the right."

"I know."

"But does he?" Jim watched the first team go out.

"We've been practicing." Derrick insisted.

"Yeah, but not with all this..." The metal gate clanged loudly as it swung shut.

Whinnying, Maverick reared up high, kicking his front legs. The horse in front of him lunged forward. Danny and Jim stepped to the side. Maverick came down, transferred his weight to his front legs, and started kicking violently behind him. "Knock it off!" Forcing his head down, Derrick tried to back him up. Jim and Danny hustled to get out of the way. Once Maverick was out of the cramped pocket, He calmed down.

"...noise," Jim looked at Derrick and finished his sentence.

Derrick gave him a look, half for the comment and half because he was plastered back against the wall like a spy. "Gonna walk him around. Try to calm him down." Derrick turned to go.

Stepping away from the wall, Jim nodded outwardly, yet... inwardly he was shaking his head. *Stubborn. If you had to choose one word to describe Derrick. That would be it. Stubborn. Still...* He leaned to the side a little to watch them round the corner. ... he had to wonder if the guy was gonna be able to pull it off. *Will be in-ter-esting.*

"Jim, you're next." The two guys in front pushed their horses to the side so that Jim could bring Danny through the middle.

Grabbing his cowboy hat from off the saddle horn and positioning it onto his head, Jim walked slowly through the other riders and through the gate and into the arena. Then, in an alarmed after thought, he jumped back and caught the gate to keep it from slamming as it swung shut. The guy on the right put his hand up to his mouth and tried desperately to keep from laughing. Jim just gave him a look, threw his shoulders back, and returned to his confident, tough-guy stance as he finished his entrance into the arena.

"Daddy! Don't leave us! Don't go!" Timmy and Mary both clung to one of Trent's hands.

Trent stopped walking. "I'm not going anywhere. I just need to talk with my boss in his office, okay?"

"NO!" They both held tighter, shaking their little heads and looking up at him.

"Can't you stay out here for a few minutes with your brother and this nice lady?" He looked over at the policewoman.

"NO!" They shook their heads, eyes pleading. Trent looked up at his captain.

"We need to talk, Trent."

"I know. They won't make trouble. They'll sit quietly." He looked down at his kids, who returned his questioning glance with exuberant nodding. The Captain shrugged and walked back into his office. Trent followed. He pulled the chair into a back corner and lifted his two youngest into it. Then he glanced at John and Timmy, instructing them to take charge. John returned a nod as Trent walked away.

"It's good to see that your kids came through this unharmed." The captain walked slowly back behind his desk.

Trent couldn't help looking slightly shocked. "I wouldn't exactly call them unharmed. They are without a mother right now, sir."

"They won't harm her if they're holding her for ransom."

"What if they're not?"

"Then they would have killed her and left the body, not taken her." He slowly pulled out his chair and sat down. "Sit down."

"I hope so." Trent sat down.

"We all do. We'll find her."

Jim's face was half curiosity and half concern as he watched Derrick walk past toward the arena with his mustang. Jim tried to toss him a confident smile, but he was afraid it looked more like uncertain fear.

"And now," the announcer began, as they walked in, "we have a dangerous duo for you young folks, a horse straight from the Rocky Mountains, born and bred in the wilds of Montana, in his nostrils the breath of danger, and we round up cowpoke the equal of Pecos Bill to ride him. I ask you ladies and gentlemen can this humble cowboy harness the spirit of the American west? Can he commune with nature? Can he harness the speed and power of this incredible creature? Ladies and gentlemen, we shall see. We shall see." Derrick gave the announcer a look as he stopped in the middle of the arena, quickly scanned the crowd, and then mounted.

Jim leaned against the arena gate. This he had to see. "Here we have it, kids," the announcer continued as Derrick galloped around the arena and then stopped at the starting line. "Derrick and his genuine mustang, Maavrick!" The crowd cheered, and Maverick reared, almost as if on cue, then as he started to bolt, Derrick pulled the right rein, spinning him around in a circle. The crowd gasped. Jim shook his head. Maybe he should have suggested to the announcer that they invoke library rules for this ride.

Derrick got Maverick back to the starting line. Maverick kicked his hind legs back, throwing Derrick forward, but he stayed on. The crowd gasped then quieted. Derrick nudged Maverick to take off... and take off he did... at lightning speeds. The crowd gasped again as whizzed toward the barrel and cornered it so tight that Derrick's stirruped foot almost touched the ground as the stallion leaned.

Without missing a beat, Maverick lunged and sprinted forward toward the other barrel rounding it just as quick and smooth. Just as Maverick took off toward the third barrel, the entire crowd broke forth in a cheer. The sound reached Maverick just about mid-arena. Jim, leaning against the gate and put his forehead down on his arm, covering his face. This time he couldn't watch. Soon as the sound reached Maverick, he reared up, kicking his front legs and whinnying. Instantly upon bringing his front hooves down, he transferred his weight and began kicking violently behind him. Clutching the saddle horn, it was all Derrick could do to hang on especially when the black started spinning as he kicked. The roars erupted louder.

"Quiet, now. Let's try to quiet down," the announcer encouraged, but his admonitions were falling on deaf ears. Suddenly the black quit kicking, threw his head all the way down, humped his back in a C, and started bucking like a bronco, all four feet off the ground. Derrick grasped even harder to the horn and tightened his legs. Falling off was not an option. Spinning, whinnying, and bucking, the horse seemed totally out of control. Derrick felt his body threaten to go weak and start shaking, but he didn't dare let it happen. He was almost positive if he fell off, he would be trampled into a million pieces. "Okay! Let's quiet down, kids. Let him get that pony under control!" The crowd quieted slightly. *God, help me get this jerk under control.*

Suddenly, the horse stopped bucking and started running as fast and as furiously as he could around the arena, soaring effortlessly over each jump. Derrick didn't even think about strategy. He just went numb and hung on.

After about three laps around the arena, Jim decided to throw out some advice. "Turn him!" Jim could see Derrick try to pull the horse's head to the side, but his neck was too stiff. "Yank it! ... Ohhh." Jim through open the arena gate and darted for the loft ladder.

"What are you doing?!" Horses and riders loitering around the gate ran for cover in nearby stalls. The Stallion came barreling toward the open gate. For a minute, Derrick thought he was going to run into it. Instead, he slowed, swerved, reared slightly, walked through it, and trotted toward the stalls. Jim gave a slight smile and wave from the ladder. Derrick jumped off, stopped the horse, gave him a look that could kill, wacked him, and yanked him toward the door leading to the outside arena. Apparently, their discussion was not over yet. Descending the ladder as Derrick and company went around the corner, Jim had to wonder if they would still be participating in the last event.

"I've got to get to the store and buy some food," Carlos mumbled to himself while staring into a semi-empty refrigerator. He picked up a thoroughly moldy block of cheese and tossed it into the trash. He tried opening the cottage cheese just to find it in the same condition. "Ohhh." Taken back by the smell, he dumped it on the way to the pantry. "There's got to be something here," he mumbled, opening the doors. *No such luck.*

His ears perked up as his scanner went off. Hearing his name, he slammed the doors shut and went over to it, turning the volume up. Swallowing hard, he stepped away, switched off the lights, and came back. Laying his hand on top the scanner, he stared into the distance, listening as the call went out... an APB with his name on it.

"And we have a winner. We have a winner," a college-aged young man announced over the loudspeaker. "By popular vote of our brilliant audience, we award Derrick and his rough and wild stallion the much-coveted people's choice award; a fine ribbon to place on his mantle, a bundle of carrots for his ever um 'faithful' steed..." The crowd laughed. "... and this year we have added a very special prize for this noteworthy occasion, one super-duper sized box of... extra-large band aids." The crowd laughed again. "Derrick, please come and accept your award." The crowd erupted into applause. Not seeing hide nor hair of Derrick anywhere, the announcer repeated the call. "Derrick, please come and accept your award." The crowd started cheering again. No Derrick... until finally the arena gate swung open and three guys shoved another guy out. Had to be Derrick. The announcer tried to choke down a laugh. "Come on, Derrick. Some guys wait their whole life for this award."

"I'll bet." Derrick lifted his head high, thrust his shoulder's back, and tilted his cowboy hat to hopefully conceal his face as he confidently strode out to center arena to accept his... bundle of carrots... and box of band aids.

"Taylor, let me in!"

"No, Mark!" Taylor yelled from the recliner.

"Come on. I just want to talk!"

"We've been through all that. Remember what happened last time? You trying to repeat yourself so soon, or do you have something else in mind?"

"All I have in mind is spending some time with my sister! I can't do that when he's here. He's unreasonable! You know that!"

"You're stubborn! I know that, too!"

"Taylor! You open this door!" He pounded on it.

“Young man!”

Oh no. Mark leaned forward against the doorframe, not looking at her. “Don’t you have a life?”

“Don’t you? You’ve been away for years. What ten years? Then, all of a sudden, you show back up with no other purpose than to sit in your car all day and pound on your father’s door at night. Don’t you know you’re terrorizing the whole neighborhood?”

“Not the whole neighborhood.” He turned around to look at her, leaning back against the door. “The ‘whole’ neighborhood isn’t near as nosy as you are.”

“Young man,” she put her hands on her hips. “This is no way to accomplish your purpose. Why don’t you calmly sit down and discuss your grievances with him?”

“Because they won’t let me in the house!”

“The only reason you want in the house is so you will have an excuse to beat up our father!” Taylor yelled from inside.

“Yeah, well, he deserves every minute of it!”

“You know, he could report you for assault,” Mrs. Sanders added.

“He won’t. To go to the police, he’d have to admit he couldn’t handle the situation on his own, and he’d never do that.”

“You sure it wasn’t him that called them yesterday?”

Mark thought a moment and then cracked his neck defiantly. “Yeah.”

“Young man, what you need is some supper.”

“Is that your solution to all of life’s problems... food?”

“The world always looks better on a full stomach.”

“Mine doesn’t,” he mumbled, staring at the door.

“Look, I happen to know you haven’t eaten a thing since I brought you breakfast this morning.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course, you do.”

“I also know you’re not going to get in that house tonight.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Therefore, I feel the best solution will be for you to stop....”

“Why don’t you go bake a cake or something!”

“I have. Why don’t you come taste it?” He just gave her a look. “Chocolate raspberry... meatloaf... mashed potatoes... coleslaw.”

“Look, Lady! I quit needing a grandma when I was two.”

“That’s fortunate because I have no intention of claiming you. Emotionally unstable young men definitely do not run in my bloodline.”

“Then what do you want?” He looked at her suspiciously.

“A little peace and quiet.” She turned around and headed for the stairs. “Come along, young man.” He just stared after her a moment, trying to make up his mind.

“Hey, bring me some, too!” Taylor yelled from inside. “Sounds a lot better than my frozen dinner!”

“Be glad to!” Mark gave an evil grin. “You gonna let me inside?”

“I’ll bring it over!” Mrs. Sanders voice had a definite disapproving tone. “Come along, young man.” Muttering, Mark followed.

“Way to go, Derrick.” One of the cowboys slapped him on the arm as he walked by with his horse toward the arena.

“Yeah, way to go.” Jim approached him with Danny. “Look, at the prize of a champion?” He snatched the box of band aids on his way past and then tossed them back over top Danny’s back.

Derrick caught them. Looking at them, he shook his head, but he tried to make his voice sound confident. “You’re just jealous.”

“No, no. That’s okay. Your riding ‘style’ might be popular, but I’d rather keep all my bones unbroken.” After pausing a moment at the gate, Jim followed the others into the arena.

“Lord, please help me! Please!” Teresa didn’t mind speaking the words out loud. She needed to hear someone’s voice, even if it was her own. The darkness and loneliness scared her half to death. She almost wished the gunman hadn’t left. Anyone’s presence would be a relief in this pitch-black tomb. The cold, quiet, damp darkness was going to drive her crazy. Why would he bring her here and then just leave? Where was he? What was he doing? It’d been hours. What’d he plan to do with her? *He isn’t just going to leave me here to starve, is he? He wouldn’t just leave me forever locked in a tomb, would he? Lord, help me! Please, help me! Help Trent to find me!*

Jim kicked his horse into a gallop, swerved to avoid an oncoming horse and rider, and then skidded to a stop inches before he ran into the fence. Without much of a pause, he swung Danny around and headed back to the gaggle of cowboys and cows mixing together in complete chaos.

There were eight cowboys and eight steers. Each had a number, and the object was to try and be the first cowboy to get your cow into the corral without using a rope. Jim was pretty sure at this rate.... “Whoa.” He pulled back on Danny, stopping him just before they collided with number seven. His was number was two.

He trotted Danny over to a group of three cows another cowboy had cornered... numbers five, eight, and three. *Hmmm...* He went back to the mix of cows and cowboys. He’d like to win something tonight. After all this was *his barn. Still though...* He hadn’t even seen his cow since.... *There it is!* He kicked Danny to a gallop and went after it just as the announcer proclaimed the first cow had been corralled.

Disappointed at the news, Jim turned briefly to see who it was. “Hey! Hey!” In that split second, a cow darted in front of him, causing Danny to turn sharply into another cowboy. “Hey!” Impact. *Ouch.* Danny’s throat rammed headlong into the side of a pinto right in front of the rider’s leg. Danny fell to his knees but then recovered, getting back up. The pinto fell on its side. Luckily, the ride was able to bail before it got squashed. “Watch it, will ya?” He grabbed his hat, shook the sand off, and then mounted just as the pinto stood back up.

“Sorry, you okay?”

“Fine.” He shot him a look and then took off in the other direction.

“Sorry,” Jim mumbled again. Then leaning against his saddle horn, he looked down at Danny. “Well, Danny, what’d you suppose happened to our cow?” Danny whinnied and snorted. Not sure what he was saying, Jim turned him back around to face the chaotic group of cows and ponies. “And do we really want to go find it?” Danny started trotting in that direction on his own, so Jim didn’t stop him. “Okay, friend, I hope you know what you are doing.”

Carlos walked slowly through the long, dew-dampened grass of the ditch. Hands in his pockets, he stared intently toward the glowing barn in the distance. It’d been a long walk from town, but he hadn’t dared drive, not with his hot license plate. He eyed the masses of busses, cars, and vans, unsure if the crowd would be to his advantage or destruction. With all those people around, it wouldn’t be hard to look natural and fit in, but then again, the more people the more chance he had of being recognized. He just wasn’t sure how many people knew he was wanted.

Hearing a rustle next to him in the pasture he jumped about ten feet, but then let himself calm down as he realized it was just a pony. He kept going, but the closer he got the more nervous he became. Still, he refused to turn back. He was convinced this was the best plan... maybe his only chance.

Meandering in the door, the noise of undistinguishable chatter greeted him. There was no one around on this side of the barn, but he was sure that wouldn’t last forever. Staying close to the wall, yet not plastered to it, he slowly and casually made his way around. He knew Derrick lived in the loft, but he wasn’t sure how to get up there.

Coming to an aisle he had to cross, he stopped abruptly when he heard a group of girls giggling and laughing around the corner. *Come on. Get lost, will ya!* It took them several minutes, but they finally dispersed. Anger welled inside of him as he finally crossed the aisle. He looked both ways for a ladder to the loft but saw nothing.

Continuing on, he crossed two more aisles. The sound of voices got louder the further he went, until finally, he peered around a corner and saw the ladder... way down at the other end with a group of guys and horses all around it. He cursed, wondering how long they were going to stay there. Stepping back from the corner, he crossed his arms, leaned back against the wall and waited... and waited for what seemed like forever until finally the chatter quieted. He pushed himself off the wall and peered back around the corner, watching until they all filed into the arena.

Carlos started to go but the stopped when he heard talking and laughing coming from the arena room next to him. He ducked back behind the wall and waited. Recognizing one of the voices as Jess, he cursed under his breath, knowing she would recognize him for sure.

Not willing to wait any longer, Carlos carefully peered around the corner and into the back window. For the moment, the group of ladies were all standing with their backs to him staring out the arena window at the action.

Hoping they wouldn’t turn and see him, Carlos made a break for the loft. Moving quickly yet smoothly, he tried not to be noticed. Reaching the top, he sighed with relief, pretty confident no one had seen him.

Wiping his sweaty hands on his pants, he made his way to a bale of hay and sat down. Looking around, he was actually impressed. Derrick had managed to turn this little hay bin into a right nice home.

Leaning back, he noticed the fridge and quickly got up to look inside. His anticipation immediately squelched, he shook his head in disappointment. *Rabbit food.* He moved the peppers and celery just to find a container of plain Greek yogurt. He didn’t even bother to see if *that* was moldy. He highly doubted it was anyway. Pushing aside the orange juice and skim milk, he found some raw eggs, a jar of pickles, and some organic peanut butter. Carlos shook his head. Finally, after an extensive search he found some turkey lunchmeat (*no nitrates*), an energy bar (*Far be it from him to own a candy bar.*), and some pineapple coconut juice (*One hundred percent juice... in a glass jar, naturally.*) Walking over to Derrick’s bed, he set the juice and lunchmeat on the nightstand, laid down, unwrapped his energy bar, and made himself comfortable as he waited.

“Now, young man.” Mrs. Sanders set down a piece of cake in front of Mark. “Now, that you’ve eaten, you feel better. You’re in a good mood. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“Nothing can go on without you knowing about it, right?” He didn’t look at her, but instead started digging into the dark, rich, frosted, chocolate cake, savoring each bite.

“I mean before you got here. What kind of life did you have in a ... a...?”

“California.”

“That’s right.” She sat down across from him.

“It was good to be away from him.” He pointed the fork toward his house.

“Then why’d you come back?” He didn’t answer. “What did you do out there... for a job, I mean?”

“None of your business.”

“Did you have a girl there?”

He stopped chewing and grinned at her. “Oh, yeah. Lots of them.”

She frowned. “I meant one in particular.”

“None of your business.” He tried to enjoy the cake despite the questionnaire.

“Okay. Your father then?”

“Neither is that.”

“Your sister seems to have a decent relationship with him. Granted, she gets left alone a lot, but still...”

“She has no kind of relationship with him. She just thinks she ‘needs’ him. Mostly because of that baby. She’ll realize different.” His voice was mean.

“With your help, no doubt.” She raised her eyebrows.

“After mom died, he pushed everyone away. He forced us to grow up alone. He deserves to grow old alone.”

“Is that what you’re after?”

“He *de-serves* to suffer like he made us suffer!”

“Don’t you think he has?”

“Not hardly.”

“You should forgive him.”

Standing up in anger, he threw the fork down. “Don’t preach to me, lady!” He held her gaze for a moment and then turned and stormed out, slamming the door as he left.

“And for our last event of the night, we have our cowboy tug of war. Let’s give our guys a rousing round of applause!” All the kids cheered and clapped as the horses and riders filed back in... until Derrick came in. Then they all got strangely quiet. Derrick just smiled. He hoped by now he had effectively gotten Maverick used to the noise.

“Green team on the left side! Blue team on the right!” Derrick lined up across from Jim. Not only did he want

to show him Jim up for his understandable yet too numerable criticisms of Maverick, but he was also ninety-nine percent sure no one else would want to go opposite him. Jim returned Derrick a cocky grin. "Now each team has a good, long length of heavy-duty rope," the announcer continued. Jim tossed the other end of his rope to Derrick and let the rest fall to the ground. "It's up to each rider how they hold onto the rope. They can use their hands, wrap it around their saddle horn, loop it around their horse's neck... Don't choke your animals, men. ...or wrap it around their own body if they have a mind to. Whichever rider gets pulled across the line first is an automatic loser. Whichever team has the most winners wins the match! Riders, take your places!"

Derrick looped his rope a fourth time around his saddle horn and looked over at Jim who was doing the same. Jim grinned up at him and patted his horse's neck, looking very sure of himself. Derrick sat up a little straighter, tossed his head, and tried to look confident, even though he wasn't. He grabbed a hunk of Maverick's mane for extra assurance. Maverick pawed the ground and bit at the horse next to him.

"Is everybody ready? Calm that horse down number three." Derrick gave the announcer a look, wondering how in the world he was supposed to do that. "Okay. Get ready. On your mark! Get set! Go!"

Horses and riders pulled back, tightening their ropes... all except Maverick who reared up, pawed the air, and then jumped back jerking Danny forward. Danny dug his front hooves in, tossed his head, and yanked back. The stallion jumped forward almost across the line. "Hey! Wait a minute!" Derrick got him stopped just in time and tried to get him to back up. Jim grinned conceitedly as Maverick made almost no progress. Derrick held tightly to the rope. He could feel it slowly slipping around the horn. He yanked it till it stopped. The horse next to him jumped over the line.

Finally, Derrick got Maverick to back up a step, pulling Danny slightly forward. Danny angled sideways trying desperately to hold his ground. When the black couldn't pull him anymore, he got slightly upset. Shaking his head violently, he kicked behind him, reared (discombobulating Danny), and then jumped back about a foot. The horse beside Maverick jumped away to the side and then stopped, looking at him in shock as if she had never witnessed such behavior in her life. The horse she ran into stepped over the line. The cowboy that got pulled over the line due to her interference threw his hat at the mare. "Hey!" Her cowboy yelled as the hat spooked her, causing her to jump back and pull the horse opposite her over the line. "Well, never mind!"

Maverick snorted and threw his head, saliva swung from his mouth as he pawed the ground. Suddenly, he reared slightly, spun around and kicked. Danny reared in reaction. Jim nearly fell off from surprise. He couldn't remember the last time Danny reared. Maverick bolted forward, pulling Danny right to the line. Jim got his bearings, got Danny stopped, and backed up a few feet. Maverick planted all four hooves, refusing to move for Derrick or Danny. Jim got Danny turned around without going over the line, but barely. Both facing forward, each horse pulled but neither moved. Standoff. Every muscle in each horse strained. The rope was so tight Jim was sure it was going to break. He had to lean sideways to keep from getting pushed off by the rope. Everyone held his ground... except for the horse next to Derrick that got pulled over the line, leaving only Derrick and Jim and one other team.

The crowd cheered in exuberant whispers. The last team, besides them, was waging a valiant war until the cinch broke on the horse next to Jim, pulling saddle and cowboy right off and over the line. *Ouch*.

The crowd roared, which spooked Derrick's horse. Losing composure, he reared. Danny, who was still pulling, lunged forward, yanking the black right off his feet. He fell with a thud on his side. The crowd responded with a collective. "Ohhhh."

Derrick grabbed the rope as it rapidly unwound from the horn and jumped back on Maverick as he stood back up. "Give it up, cowboy!" someone yelled. Holding onto the rope that was almost unwound from the horn, Maverick backed up too hard and too fast yanking the rope from Derrick's hand and the rest of the way around the horn. Derrick grasped the rope again and it yanked him from the saddle, over top Maverick's head, and ouch down right in front of him. The crowd groaned. With repentant eyes, Maverick stepped forward and put his chin down on Derrick's

shoulder as they both watched the rope go across the line.

“Well, that was a hard-fought match, boys and girls.” the announcer spoke. The crowd cheered quietly.

Derrick got up and brushed himself off. Still in the moment of solidarity, Maverick kept his head next to Derrick’s and his eyes soft. Derrick picked up the reins, roughly rubbed Maverick’s neck, and walked out together. The crowd responded with a collective, “Awww,” as they exited the arena. Jim just shook his head, gathered the rope in a circle, and trotted after them.

“Ready to go?” Matt spoke quietly as he walked up behind Melinda, who was still working at the computer.

“Yeah, I guess.” Melinda typed a little more, pressed enter twice, and slowly got up. “There’s not much more I can do here. Needs a tech guy or something.”

“Let the next shift handle it.” He backed up to let her through.

“Yeah, but I hate to leave something half done.” She put the file back in the drawer. “Let me just explain what I’ve done so far to Kelly, and then we can go.”

“Okay. I’ll be out in the car.” She nodded in response.

Friend, are You Guilty or Not?

Standing next to Jess, Jim waved to the last van as it headed out of their driveway. Soon as they were out of sight, he put his arm around Jess and stumbled a few steps back toward the barn. "They're gone. They are finally all gone, and we survived it." He let his voice sound exaggeratedly strained.

Leaning into him with her shoulder and pushing his weight off her, Jess stepped in front of him with her hands on her hips. "I'd say we more than survived. I'd say, with the Lord's help, we managed quite beautifully."

Jim conceded a nod, but responded with, "Yeah, but you didn't have to compete opposite an unruly, inconsiderate, completely wild...."

"I heard that," Derrick said, coming out of the barn.

"Oh. Derrick? I really think he was talking about the horse," Jess smiled.

Derrick gave her a look. "No kidding."

"Got him calmed down, yet?" Jim smiled, taking a step forward and putting his arm back around Jess. This time Jess liked it and leaned back against him.

"He's doing *just fine*." Derrick looked past them as a car came back into the drive. "Someone forget something, you think?"

Jim and Jess turned around together. "That looks like Trent's car." They took a few steps in that direction and then stopped as they noticed a marked police car stop and park outside their drive. Trent drove up next to them and got out. His three little ones were in the back and John was in the front. "Jim, Jess, Derrick." He nodded at each of them.

"Did they find Teresa?" Jess asked immediately.

Trent shook his head. "I have a favor to ask you. I know when you let Matt stay here that seemed to work out pretty well for his situation."

"Yeah it did... till his son showed up," Jim agreed. Derrick accidentally let his expression show that he didn't totally agree.

"You don't think so?"

Derrick glanced down, not answering right away. "Oh, he just didn't like sharing his kitchen," Jim explained.

"Yeah." Derrick confirmed. "Why? You thinkin' about movin' in, now?" Jim shot Derrick a look.

"I'd be grateful if my kids could stay here for a couple of days." His eyes were hopeful as he looked at Jim and Jess. "I *will* find Teresa. I *will* get the guy that took her. And I *will* see him behind bars within the week. But I need a safe place for my kids while I work."

Jim shrugged and looked at Jess. She glanced up at him. "Oh, sure, why not. It's the least we can do." Jim nodded in agreement.

"Thank you. Thank you both. You don't know how much I appreciate it. I know they'll feel comfortable staying with you, and I'll feel better with them being close by. If you want, the police department is willing to provide a guard for a couple days." He looked toward the police car.

Jim followed his gaze. "Actually, that might just attract attention. Word's bound to get around about a police car at our house."

Trent nodded. "It's up to you. You're probably just as good a shot anyway."

Jim gave a slight nod thoughtfully. "Maybe on the days I'm at work... in a less conspicuous location... maybe in an unmarked car. Can we think about it?"

"Sure. Just give me a call, and I'll get it set up." He turned toward the car then turned back. "You don't happen to have a photo with Carlos in it around, do you?"

"I don't..." Jim looked at Jess.

Jess shook her head, slowly. "I don't think so. Why?"

Trent shrugged. "I have face shots of Carlos, but I'm in search of one of all of him. My kids saw the man's frame, but his face was covered. I have another suspect, and I was hoping maybe my oldest could rule one of them out. I mean it wouldn't be a hundred percent, bu-ut..."

"I see." Jess nodded, rubbing her arms from the cold. "Wish we could help."

"I might have one," Derrick thought out loud.

"That'd be great. Could you see if you can find it?" Trent's face was hopeful. Derrick returned a single nod and left.

"What's the other guy look like?" Jess asked curiously.

Trent took a picture out of his wallet. "He'd be older now... if he's even still alive."

Jim took it and held it out for both him and Jess to see. Then, he put his thumb over the man's face. "He looks kind of like Carlos if you don't look at his face."

Trent stepped behind Jim and looked over his shoulder at the picture. "He's taller... and thinner."

"Yeah. Carlos is a lot more stocky," Jess agreed.

"Yeah, but that could have gained weight," Jim suggested.

"Not likely unless he changed his whole lifestyle."

Jim shrugged. They all looked up as Derrick came back out. "That was quick."

"It was in a drawer in the viewing room. Didn't have to go upstairs."

Trent took it and studied them both. Jim, Jess, and Derrick looked over his shoulder at them. "What were you guys doing, fishing?" Jim inquired.

“Pheasant hunting. We’d just got done. One of his old girlfriends took that photo.”

Jess glanced at him. “I didn’t know you guys used to hang out?”

Derrick nodded. “A long time ago.”

Trent stopped looking at the pictures and went over to the car. “Son, see if either of these two look familiar.” He handed John the photos.

John studied them both a long time. “It’s this one, I think.” He held up Carlos’s photo. Derrick couldn’t help looking surprised.

“Are you sure, son? Look again.”

“I’m sure.” He handed the photos back. “The other guy’s too tall and skinny.”

“I thought you guys said he was tall.”

John thought a moment. “Ye-ah... but not like that.” His voice was tentative.

Trent stepped away from the car and looked at the others. Derrick didn’t look convinced. “Do any of you know where he might be at?” Jim and Jess exchanged glances then shook their heads. “Derrick?” Derrick looked away. “You two used to hang out together. Where might he go?” Derrick shrugged and shook his head. Annoyed, Trent tried to stare Derrick down, but Derrick wouldn’t be stared down. “Look, we have an APB out on him and his car, but you could save us a lot of time... maybe Teresa’s life!”

Derrick’s face didn’t change. “If I think of anything, I’ll let you know.” Trent stared at him a few moments longer but didn’t say anything.

“Well, come on.” Jess motioned toward Trent’s car. “Why don’t you drive the kids up to the house, and we’ll get them settled.”

Trent started to go, but then looked back at Derrick. “If you know anything about him... and you don’t tell us....”

Derrick held his gaze. “Don’t threaten me.” They stared each other down for several moments before Trent finally broke it off and went to his car. Derrick turned and went back to the barn.

Melinda walked out of the hospital and down the sidewalk, looking around excessively. She almost felt like an undercover agent, lately... noticing everything... trying to make sure she wasn’t being watched or followed. So far at least, their secret seemed to be safe. Eyes lifting to Matt’s car by the curve, she hurried over to it, looked around again, and ducked in the back seat. “Here we go again,” she mumbled, lying down on the floor.

He reached back and dumped the quilt on her. “Heard someone’s been stalking Trent, now.”

“Yeah. Where’d you hear that? Have they found him, yet?”

“No. They have an APB out on Carlos. Do they think it’s connected with you?”

“Apparently.” Her voice was thoughtful.

Matt backed the car up. “Heard his wife’s been kidnapped.”

“You’re kidding!” She sprung up straight as a board. “Poor Teresa!” Matt reached back and shoved her back down as he drove through the parking lot to the road. “Hey! Ouch.” She rubbed her head where it smacked the door when he pushed her.

“Sorry.” He stopped and looked both ways before going out onto the street.

“Wow! That’s weird... and scar-y! You think Carlos is a serial killer?”

Matt gave a very slight smile as he pulled out onto the road. “That takes some imagination.”

“Well, something’s going on!”

“Granted. ... Maybe he plans on trading Teresa for you.”

“What?!” She sat straight up again. “No deal! ... I mean, a,” she hesitated. “of course, I want to get Teresa back.”

“I think the plan is to keep you both safe and catch the killer.” He looked up in the rearview mirror as she laid back down.

“I hope she’s okay.” Melinda’s voice held concern.

“Well, young maverick,” Derrick rubbed his horse’s neck with one hand and untied him with the other. “I don’t know whether to be happy with you for the things you did right tonight or mad for the times you almost killed me.” The stallion rested his chin on Derrick’s shoulder. “You really think that’s going to make up for it?” The black glanced at him, eyes smiling. “Come on, Maverick.” Derrick turned around and began to lead him out. “You know that wouldn’t be a half-bad name for you,” he considered as they crossed from the lighted barn into the starry night. “Fitting.” He unlatched the gated and pulled it open. “Either that or Spooky.” He led the horse into the pasture. “Although we live in hope that you’ll grow out of that. If you don’t, could call you Casper, you know, like the friendly ghost.” The black snorted softly as Derrick undid the halter. He didn’t take off running once he was free like he often did. He stuck around. “What’d ya think, Casper or Maverick?” Grunting softly, the black put his head down and started munching some grass. “Let’s go with Maverick then.”

Hoisting himself up, Derrick sat down on the gate. Sitting there enjoying the cool breeze, he watched Maverick eat. Leaning his head back, he sucked in deep breaths of fresh country air and stared at the large harvest moon hovering low in the sky. The night was clear, and the stars were many, though faint due to the magnificent moonlight. He enjoyed sitting there so much, he had to force himself to get down and go inside. However, force himself he did. He’d promised to help Jim rebuild the fence in the far pasture tomorrow, and he knew how Jim enjoyed early starts.

Yawning, he slowly made his way up the ladder to his loft, wondering if he ached this much tonight what tomorrow was gonna feel like. He rubbed his face when he reached the top. “Derrick?” Derrick jumped, spun toward the voice, pulled his revolver and had it aimed in less time than his brain could register the voice or the face. Carlos didn’t react. He just waited for Derrick to recognize him. “I didn’t know you carried. Figures, though.”

“Carlos? Man, half the town’s looking for you.” Derrick lowered his gun but didn’t holster it.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why?’”

“Just what I said. I heard they were lookin’ for me. Never heard why.”

Derrick took a few steps closer, trying to read Carlos’s face. “Guess.”

“Something happened to Melinda again? They questioned me before, saying someone broke into her house and wrote something on a wall or shed or something. Questioned me a couple of times. Seems I’m going to get blamed for everything that goes on around her even when I’m at work.”

“What about today?”

“What about it?”

“You asked for the day off. What’d you do?”

He threw his hands up. “I had a dentist appointment today! And I can prove it.” His voice change from exasperated to threatening as he stood up.

“When?”

“Ten a.m.”

“What about later in the day? Were you with anyone, or did anyone see you?”

Carlos shook his head. “Stayed in practically all day. Look!” He turned and walked away. “Either she’s doing these things herself and trying to blame me for some sick revenge or,” He turned around sharply. “someone else is after her and trying to frame me!” He pointed to himself.

“Who?”

“How should I know?!” He threw his hands out in desperation.

“Then you’re in trouble.” Derrick came a little closer and leaned against a top bale of hay, looking down thoughtfully.

“Whyyy?” Carlos backed up till he was stopped by the bed.

Derrick looked up, studying Carlos’s eyes. “Somebody took Trent’s wife.”

“What? Oh, no.” Carlos sat down and put his head in his hands. “Why do they think I did it?”

“I guess they have their reasons.”

“Why would I do that?” He looked back up and held Derrick’s gaze.

“They think the guy’s going to try and trade her for Melinda.” Carlos didn’t answer. Derrick desperately tried to see the truth in Carlos’s eyes, but he honestly couldn’t tell if he was lying or not. He sure was putting on a good act if he was. “So, if you let Trent take you in now, when the guy calls, they will know it’s not you.”

“What if he doesn’t call?” He stared into the distance as he talked.

“Why wouldn’t he call? Why would he want Trent’s wife?”

“Why would he want Melinda?” Carlos’s voice almost sounded haunted.

Derrick looked away a moment and then back toward him. “It does seem like you’re the only one that....”

“Derrick, please,” Carlos fell to one knee and put his hands together, “help me,” he begged. “You gotta help me. You’re the only one who can.”

Derrick stared into his begging, pleading eyes. Had he flipped? Was he lying? Could he be innocent? Was John wrong? Could it be the other guy? “What do you want me to do?”

“Just hide me. Hide me till we can see what’s going on... at your cabin. You know me. We’ve worked together. We’ve been friends. How many nights did we spend bar hopping together before you got religion? You just forget all that? Remember all the times we fought together side by side?”

Derrick’s eyes didn’t relinquish their suspicion. “Yeah. I remember what you’re like when you’ve been

drinking.”

“It wasn’t just me.” Carlos stood up and walked a few steps away, hanging his head.

“I thought you’d already be at my cabin by now.”

“Forgot how to get there.” He raised his head and turned back sharply. “Look, to them I’ve already been condemned. You know what it’s going to be like for me in jail if they think I killed the cop’s wife?” His eyes held Derrick’s gaze. “I won’t make it till they find the other guy!”

“If you’re in jail,” Derrick took a few steps toward him. “they’ll know it’s not you!”

“They’ll say I hired a hitman like they said before!”

“Carlos, I don’t see what running is going to do?” He paused a moment. “Unless you want me to help you escape?” He looked at him questioningly.

Carlos walked away thoughtfully and then turned back. “What if I told you I might know where Teresa is?”

“I’d say, ‘keep talking.’” Derrick’s voice deepened.

“What if I said this man came to me and asked me if I wanted to help him get revenge?”

“On Melinda?”

“Melinda for me. Trent for him.”

“I’d say, ‘Why did you say ‘yes,’?’”

“I didn’t!”

“Then why did he go after Melinda at all? Why didn’t he just go after Trent?”

“I don’t know.” He looked down then his eyes jerked up. “He wanted to frame me.”

“That story doesn’t hold water. If he wants revenge on Trent, he has to make his identity known to Trent, or what good is the revenge?” He finally holstered his gun.

“Maybe he will.”

“Then why frame you?”

“To buy time! To be able to move around freely without the police trailing him!” Carlos seemed desperate for Derrick to believe him.

“Who?”

Carlos broke the gaze, turned, and walked away. “I don’t know.”

“That’s convenient,” Derrick muttered.

“Look!” Carlos spun around and pointed at him.

“No, you look! Here’s the story. You got mad at Melinda for throwing you over. Lost it. Tried to kill her. When Trent intervened so you couldn’t find her, you took his wife for revenge.” Derrick stated the popular theory to see Carlos’s reaction.

Carlos’s reaction was swift and surprising. With absolutely no warning, he struck like a snake with power his

fist into Derrick's face, inches below his right eye. Falling backwards, Derrick caught himself on the stack of hay. Carlos stood like a wolfman over top of him. Anger flared in Derrick's stomach, and he seriously considered charging back and escalating this into a brawl. Instead, he slowly got up, wiped the blood from the side of his mouth where he had bit himself, calmly stood in front of him, and stated. "I'm not going to hide you out, Carlos."

Carlos's eyes narrowed. "Then you'll never find out what I know about Teresa."

Surprised, he knew Trent's wife's name, Carlos asked. "What do you know?"

"Take me to your cabin, and I'll tell you."

Derrick laughed and walked away. "Walking into traps is not my favorite pastime."

"Look, man, if I wanted to hurt you, I could have gotten the drop on you when you walked into the loft." He put his hands up. "I'm not even armed." Derrick turned around and looked at him even more skeptically. "Look, you don't even have to come. Just draw me a map... but if you come, we might stop by and see Teresa on the way."

Derrick stiffened. "Shoot straight with me, Carlos!" His voice was angry. "Do you have Teresa or not?"

"Not... but I might know where she is." He smiled.

Derrick turned and walked away. "This *is* a trap."

Carlos gritted his teeth, but his voice was soft. "This *is not* a trap, Amigo. It is an old friend asking for your help. You can help me and save Teresa." He backed toward the bed.

Derrick stared at Carlos for several moments, unsure what to do. He prayed. He considered. He decided to live dangerously. Walking past Carlos, he ordered, "Let's go." And headed down the ladder. Carlos smiled, dropped a note on Derrick's bed, and followed him down the ladder.

"Oh, no, not again." Matt stopped his car and put his hand to his forehead.

"What's the matter?" Melinda asked wearily from her place on the floor.

"*Someone* is standing in the middle of the driveway."

"No prize for guessing who." Melinda grabbed the blanket and threw it over her head. "Doesn't he ever give up?" Her voice was muffled by the blanket.

"You remember that guy the cops brought to the ER after he rammed a pedestrian in a fit of road rage?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Suddenly, he doesn't seem quite so neurotic."

She pulled the blanket down slightly and glanced in his direction. "I *hope* you're joking."

"You know I am." He sighed. "I guess I'd better..." Mumbling the rest of it, he got out of the car and started heading toward his drive. *Why's this kid always want to fight in the middle of the night? Why can't he pick a more decent hour?*

Trying to look very pleasant and unthreatening, he stopped a few feet in front of Mark and asked in a weary voice, "Why are you standing in the middle of my driveway?"

"What? You're not just going to run me over like the other night?"

"I was just trying to get in my house. You must know that if you start a fight, the other person is likely to fight

back. Mind terribly if I bring my car in?"

"No." Mark tossed his head.

"You want to fight, right?" Mark returned a smirk. Matt ran his hand through his hair, clenched his fist and slapped it down hard against his leg. "Boy, why don't you hire a sparring partner. This is not my area of expertise."

"Oh, I like you better," Mark sneered.

"I can see that."

"Besides, you're wrong. Hurting people is your area of expertise!"

"Look, I'm sorry!"

"No, you're not."

"I'm sorry your mom died! I'm sorry I couldn't save her! I'm sorry you didn't like your life with me! I'm sorry I wasn't a perfect father!"

Pain filled Mark's eyes. "Are you sorry you killed her?!" He took a step forward. "Are you sorry you abandoned us?!"

Matt gritted his teeth. "I didn't kill her!"

"You murdered her!" He stepped forward, thrusting both hands into his father's shoulders, shoving him back.

In more reaction than thought, Matt hauled back and threw the hardest punch he had. It connected squarely with Mark's face, knocking him out immediately. Instantly, Matt reached out and caught his son, inches before his head hit the pavement. Kneeling there a minute, he held him.

Staring into Mark's unconscious face, memories started flowing back, fond memories, painful memories, long gone memories of long-gone family in the long-gone past... when he still held his kids... taught them baseball, basketball, taught Mark how to pitch... read him a bedtime story... tucked him in. They used to laugh and play in those good ole days. Those days when Sandra was still alive. Tears welled in his eyes, and he couldn't hold them back. He loved those days. He'd loved that family. So much, he'd loved that family... the family he'd destroyed... the family he'd lost.

Coming to, Mark blinked open his eyes and looked straight into his father's tearful ones. "I'm sorry, Mark." First it was a whisper and then a hoarse choked tone. "I'm sorry."

Suddenly, Mark rolled off his father's lap and stood up. Dazed, backing up, rubbing his dirty hands on his jeans, mouth open, he stared at his father in disbelief, trying to figure out.... Turning sharply, he ran full speed, not for his car, but down the street and into the darkness.

Carlos stared impatiently at Derrick who was stuffing his duffel bag full of food and ammo from his cupboard. "For a guy who knows how to live off the land, you sure are a freak about coming prepared. How many days do you expect this to take?"

"You tell me." Derrick stuffed two more boxes of energy bars in the bag.

Carlos looked at him cautiously. "I thought you can practically get to your cabin and back in a day."

"You can." Each spoke carefully, keeping one eye on the other at all times.

Carlos cracked his neck. "All the lights have been out in their house for a good five minutes."

“Ok-ay.” Derrick pushed a flashlight into his already stuffed bag and yanked the zipper shut. “Let’s go.” He flung the bag over his shoulder, grabbed his rifle, and headed out the arena room door. Walking through the dark toolroom to the outdoors, Derrick kept one eye on Carlos the entire time, not trusting him around the sharp tools.

“How far is it, exactly?”

“’bout seven hours. Then ya have to hike in.” Derrick glanced back at Carlos. “But don’t forget, you’re going to take me to see Teresa first.”

Carlos nodded. “Don’t you forget, after I show you where she’s at, you’re going to take me to your cabin and leave me out of the rest of it.”

“Sure.” Derrick opened the door and held it for Carlos. Then in silence, they both walked to Derrick’s truck.

Follow that Truck

“Good morning, everyone,” Jim slapped John on the shoulder as he walked in the kitchen and then smiled at Morgan and the other little ones. John didn’t react. He just sat there, staring into space, holding his spoon in his cereal but not stirring it. Morgan hopped up and grabbed his hand. “Daddy, come see what I gave Mary.”

Jim walked over and looked at the little toy Morgan had shared. “That’s very nice, honey.” He rubbed her back and then turned and walked over to Jess at the stove. “How’s it going?” He stood close to her and talked quietly to keep their conversation private.

She sighed lightly and shrugged. “I don’t know how Teresa does it.”

Jim nodded. “We’ll keep praying that he finds her today.”

"Yeah. I hope she's alright." She flipped an egg.

He nodded, munching on a piece of bacon. "Mommy, honey," Morgan turned around in her chair and looked hopefully. Jess took the bottle over and squirted some in her cereal. "ummy, um, um," Morgan stirred carefully.

"Could I try some, Mrs...."

"Sure." Jess squirted some on Mary's cereal.

Jim looked over the group. Everyone except Morgan looked quite melancholy. "How 'bout after breakfast we call your daddy and see if anything's happened yet?"

All their faces brightened as they looked at him in anticipation. "Can we call him, now?" Timmy asked anxiously.

"I suppose we can do that." Jim smiled slightly as he sat down and pulled out his cell phone.

"Hello?" Trent answered right away, but his voice was weary.

"Hey, Trent, it's Jim. I've got a lot of little kiddos that want to talk to you. How are things going?"

"They're not."

"Carlos?"

"Nothing yet."

"Shouldn't be too hard to track down his car, given time, should it?"

"Not hard at all. He didn't take it."

"Oh. Well... he's gotta be driving something."

"Yeah, what? We've been checking agencies all night, even got some folks out of bed. If he rented one, it wasn't within a hundred miles, and if he stole one it wasn't within fifty miles unless he stole it over a month ago."

"Then he's got a partner."

"Uh huh, unless he's hiding somewhere within walking distance. How are the kids doing?"

"Oh, they're fine. Don't worry about them. They're good here for just as long as you need." Jess's eyes widened and she nearly dropped her spatula. She was glad Jim had confidence in her, but... but... She turned toward him. *Don't they have grandparents?* She didn't say it, but her mind was sure screaming it. *I'm only cut out to mother one child at a time!* "Here, I'll let you talk to them." Jim handed the phone to an anxiously waiting John. Smiling outwardly, Jess motioned for Jim to follow her outside, partly to give the kids some privacy and partly to give Jim a piece of her mind. *This indefinite arrangement is not, I repeat not, what I bargained for!*

"Charity," Jim smiled as he closed the door behind him, "Christian charity."

"I... you... how come... I don't know how...." Her hands were gesturing even faster than she was talking. "And then... and I don't... and how could you... and all alone even!" Her hands flew up and then hit down hard at her sides.

"Because you're so good at it." He smiled wide. She gave him a look. "Besides, you're not all alone. I'm here."

"You know nothing about being a mother!"

"You got me there."

"Besides you're just here for today and tomorrow. Then you have to go back to work!"

“Well, that gives Trent two whole days to find his wife. It wouldn’t take me that long to find you.” He stepped forward to kiss her, but she put her hand out to keep him back.

“That’s not going to work.”

“Whaaat?” He laughed backing up, playing innocent to tampering with the affections of the prosecutor.

Jess quickly got back on topic. “They are good here just as long as you need?” She threw her hands on her hips. “That could be weeks... months... years!”

“Oh, it’s not going to be that long. Besides, they’re good kids.”

“There’s four of them!”

“How many kids did we have yesterday, and everything went down perfectly.”

“That’s debatable. Besides there were a lot more adults here yesterday.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a lot less kids here today.” He grinned.

“Ji-im.”

“You’ll do great, honey.” He started backing up.

“Jim?”

“I have every confidence in you.”

“Jim...” She started walking toward him.

He looked at his watch as he backed up. “Will you look at the time. I’ve got to catch Derrick. Make sure he’s still up for fixing that fence with me today.” He stumbled as he backed down the stairs. “Let’s continue this discussion in a little bit.” Turning, he jogged off toward the barn.

“Ji-im!” She yelled after him for effect, even though he was already halfway across the yard. Shaking her head, she turned back toward the house. *Leader, instructor, teacher, protector, entertainer, disciplinarian....* All qualities she didn’t think she possessed... yet she gave herself ten minutes tops to acquire them. *How to keep five kids happy and calm for fourteen hours... fourteen long hours.*

Walking into the living room, Melinda smiled at Taylor who was on her phone in her recliner and then over at Matt who was kneeling on the couch looking out the window. “Has Mark come back, yet?” she asked.

Just noticing her, Matt glanced in her direction. “No.”

“I hope he’s alright.” Taylor glanced up from her phone.

Matt turned around and sat down on the couch. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I wonder if I should go out and look for him.”

“I’m sure he’s alright,” Melinda tried to stay positive. Nobody looked convinced.

“How ‘bout breakfast?” Matt nodded, but his mind wasn’t on food. Melinda headed for the kitchen but then turned back. “Aren’t you going to work today?”

Matt shook his head. “No.” He looked up at her. “They asked me to come fill in, but I told them to find someone else.”

"Wow, getting lazy," Taylor mumbled, still staring at her phone. Matt gave her a look just as the doorbell rang. *Ding... Dong.* They all looked toward the door. Melinda hurried into the kitchen. Matt got up to answer it but looked out the window first. "It's only Trent!" He yelled toward the kitchen as he opened the door. "Hi Trent."

"Hey. Can I come in?"

"Sure." Matt stepped to the side.

"What are you doing still here? I thought your shift started hours ago."

"I get Saturdays and Sundays off."

"Really? You're always there on Saturdays."

Melinda reemerged from the kitchen. "I don't have any idea where Carlos is," she blurted out.

"I hope not." Trent was surprised that she felt the need to proclaim that. "Have you heard the latest?"

Matt glanced from Trent to Melinda and back to Trent, clueless. "What latest?"

Tying her apron behind her, Melinda walked closer, looking at Matt. "Teresa's been kidnapped." Matt cringed. "I got the group text from the prayer chain at church," she explained. She stopped and stood next to him.

"I want to know everything you know about him... habits, friends, somewhere he might go. We need clues... more than we have right now."

She put up her hands up in a shrug. "I don't know where he'd go. The only friends I know of would be drinking buddies or guys at work."

"Guys at work were no help but drinking buddies might be." He got out his pen and paper. "Give me some names."

"I don't know any!" Her voice got more high-pitched than she liked. "That's not what I did with him."

Trent sighed. "What did you do together?"

"Nothing special... a movie, watch TV, went to a couple Cubs games." She shrugged again.

"Did he have any special places, like somewhere no one else knows about? Do you know what particular bars he would hang out at?" She shook her head. "Did he have any special friends that might loan him a car if he got in trouble, or did he have any sleazy or underworld connections?"

"Carlos?!"

"Yes, Carlos!" Trent tried not to sound irritated.

"I just thought he was a regular guy."

Trent sighed again. "Everyone does." He started to stare off thoughtfully just as the phone began to ring. Glancing at the caller ID, he answered it. "Trent."

"Hey, Trent it's Jim. I think I know who's helping Carlos or... trying to find your wife more likely."

"That's the best news I've heard all day. Do you have any idea where Derrick is, and how do you know he's helping Carlos?"

Jim laughed. "How do you know it was Derrick?"

"Is it?"

"Yeah.... I guess.... Both him and his truck were gone this morning. Found this letter on his pillow. Want me to read it?"

"Go ahead."

"~Went with Carlos to my cabin. Tell Trent to meet us there with Melinda. Tell him not to bring any of his police friends, not if he wants to see Teresa alive again.~ It's not his Derrick's handwriting, though."

"Doesn't sound like him either." Trent glanced at Melinda, wondering if she would come or if he should even ask her."

"Do you think he's been abducted?"

"I don't know. Did you hear anything strange last night? Knowing Derrick, there'd be some kind of ruckus before he got taken."

"No, but he *is* all the way out in the barn."

"Yeah. You tried calling him?"

"No answer."

"We-ll," Trent sighed. "Do you know how to get to his cabin?"

"Yep."

"Can you draw me a map?"

"I'm comin'?"

"No, Jim. It's too dangerous. Besides someone's got to watch my kids."

"Jess will watch them. Send your armored guards to watch the house like you first planned. Look, if he's up there waiting to make a trade, he's not going to be worried about finding your kids. He left them alone once, remember. Besides I wouldn't be going if I thought Jess was in any danger."

"I don't want to put you in danger."

"You need backup, a guide, and a good off-road truck. Meet me here in a half hour."

"Okay, but you can still change your mind if you want to."

"I won't. Wouldn't miss it. See you in a bit."

"Yeah. Bye." Shaking his head, Trent hung up and looked at Matt and Melinda who were staring at him intently. "Apparently, Derrick is with Carlos. One of them left a note telling me to meet them up at Derrick's cabin with you." He nodded toward Melinda. "I don't expect you to come," he clarified. "Obviously, I have no intention of trading you Teresa." He looked down thoughtfully. "I'll get her back."

"But it might be helpful." Melinda spoke softly. "You might need me there to even initiate a conversation. If he knows I didn't come...." Her voice trailed off.

"I don't intend to initiate a conversation." Trent's voice was firm. "I'll get her back before he even knows I'm there!"

"What if you can't find her?" She watched the confidence in Trent's eyes deflate a little. "He may not be waiting for you all nice and tidy in the cabin." She paused. "You may have to at least trick him into thinking you are

negotiating.” She paused again then stated confidently. “I want to go.” Trent’s eye’s shrugged.

“I want to go, too,” Matt put his arm around Melinda without touching her. “I can get Mrs. Sanders to stay with Taylor. Mark seems to be gone... for now anyway.” Taylor rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything.

Trent shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You’ll need me if anyone gets hurt.”

Trent gave a half nod. “There could be trouble.” He paused and then asked tentatively. “Can either of you use a gun?”

Melinda shook her head. Matt shrugged. “Haven’t for a while. I shot quite a bit when I was younger. I do have a handgun and a conceal carry permit.”

“You might need me to talk to Carlos,” Melinda added.

“It may not feel very safe up there.” Trent glanced at her.

“I know. I’m not exactly squeamish.” She puffed out her chest. “I can handle high-stake situations.”

“Okay. Well, call your neighbor. See if she can stay here.” He nodded to Matt and then to Melinda. “Pack some food and extra clothes. I’ll meet you at Jim’s in about a half hour. If you change your mind or can’t get ahold of your neighbor, call me.” He turned and headed out the door.

Taylor let herself look very unimpressed, but she was sure nobody noticed. There was no one around who cared how she felt about the subject. She stared toward the ceiling. *Possibly days with Mrs. Sanders... Talk about a fate worse than death.*

Lying on the ground staring up at the trees, Derrick just shook his head as he regained consciousness, wondering how he could be so stupid. He had previously accredited himself with at least a minute degree of intelligence, but not anymore.

Rolling on his stomach he punched the ground. How in the world could he be dumb enough to let himself get drugged? He didn’t understand. Why had Carlos brought him here? He picked up a red maple leaf and crushed it in his hand. He only vaguely remembered getting dumped here as he lapsed in and out of consciousness. Before that, the last thing he remembered was stopping at the gas station, getting a drink of water, going into pay for the gas, and not being able to walk straight when he came back out. He remembered a slight smile on Carlos’s face as his vision blurred, and he fell sideways against the back of the truck. He remembered mentally shaking his head and trying to tighten his weakening grip on the pickup bed as darkness overcame him and he fell to the concrete.

Sitting up, he shook his throbbing head in disbelief. He picked up a handful of leaves and crunched them in his fist. He had no idea how Carlos had managed it. He was sure he had never taken his eyes from Carlos or become unaware of where his things were in relationship to him. He shook his head again. Somehow, he was wrong. Boy, had he fallen for a line when Carlos had said he didn’t remember the way to his cabin. Because here he was dumped in a ditch midway between the road and his cabin. What he couldn’t figure out was why. Had Carlos figured he’d given him enough to kill him? He couldn’t be that stupid... unless this was fleeting lucidity, and the drug would reactivate shortly. His heart rate quickened from fear. Reaching and grabbing hold of a nearby tree, he pulled himself up onto shaky legs. Either way, he was going to fight until he went down for the count.

Right now, thankful that he knew where he was, he was going to hike back to the trail and then decide to either go back to the road and see if his truck was still parked there or head the rest of the way to his cabin to see if

Carlos and possibly Teresa were there. Stumbling as he started off, he caught himself on a tree and waited for his vision to clear. He pushed back against fear that threatened him... fear of the unknown, uncertainty for what to do. Why had Carlos brought him here? Was the plan to kill him? Was the plan to frame him? Was the plan to use him? Was the plan to just momentarily get him out of the way? He desperately wished for answers.

Teresa gasped as she saw her abductor walk back into the grain bin. She'd almost gotten her ropes untied. Her heart sped up sure he'd notice. He'd been gone all night and a good portion of the day. She thought maybe he had left her. She thought maybe she could escape. She thought maybe she could get home. She burst into tears as he walked behind her and saw the ropes. She had been so close to freedom... so close. She cried harder.

The gunman's face spelled rage as he grabbed her arm and yanked her up. The ropes burned through her wrists as he yanked them the rest of the way off and thrust her toward the door. "What are you doing?" she yelled as she fell against the wall next to the door. He didn't answer, just grabbed her arm and thrust her the rest of the way out. "Leave me alone!" Ignoring her, he drug her toward the utility van, dumped her in on her chest, and hog-tied her arms and legs behind her. She protested uselessly. Her entire body shook with fear. She screamed as he closed the back doors and the van got dark, but there was no one to hear. All she could do was cry... cry and pray.

"Okay. Is that everything?" Jim tossed the last pack in the back of the truck.

"Think so." Trent helped him throw up the hatch and pull the cover the rest of the way over. "Okay, kids," Trent turned to his four youngsters who came running and gathered all around him. He knelt down and gathered them into a hug. "You be good, now. You all listen to Mrs. Jessica. I want to hear good reports when I get back." He kissed the little girls. "I'll be back with your Mama real soon."

Half mumbling, half grumbling, Derrick kicked a stone as he trudged back up the path to where he hoped his truck was still parked. Carlos kept his keys which meant one of two things. Either he left with the truck, or he didn't want Derrick to leave. Derrick was sure it was the former, but he made it a practice never to make assumption fact. So first, he would hike all the way back and meet up with an empty parking place, then he would kick himself again for being so stupid, then he would devise the best plan to get back to civilization. Well, he already had a plan - walk. It may not be the most original in the world, but, as far as he could tell, the most practical. It was either that or hollow out a canoe and go white water rafting down the river and hope he ended up in Illinois and not Minnesota or Iowa. *With my luck... What?* He stopped dead in his tracks a moment before continuing the rest of the way to the road.

Coming out of the trees, he walked up the ditch and just stood there staring at his truck... right where Carlos had left it. He ran his hand through his hair and slapped it down against his side. Every time he was sure he had that guy figured out; he would throw him a curve. That had to mean Carlos was still up here somewhere. Tightening his throat and throwing his head back, he mentally screamed toward the sky. *Why did he bring me up here?*

Walking behind the truck, he studied the mud-sunkin' tracks. It was apparent the truck had not been moved. The story seemed clear. Carlos had convinced him to come peacefully up here, then drugged him, then brought him up anyway, then dumped him, then stayed up here himself? He ran his hand through his hair again. It just didn't make sense... and where was Teresa in all this? Stumbling back down the ditch, he fell against a tree and leaned on it, waiting for the world to stop spinning. Turning around and leaning back against it, he looked back and forth from the road to the trail, trying to decide whether to walk back to town or go down to his cabin and try to unravel this mystery on his own.

“No, it couldn’t be that. The t-cell count was too depressed, and the lymphatic swelling in the glandular region was expanding.”

“Was it localized in that region?”

“It was when the patient first stabilized, but after a few hours....”

Jim let the medical mumbo-jumbo being exchanged in the backseat fade into the background. He glanced from the road to Trent on the front passenger’s side. “How do you like the deep, informational medical lectures coming from the back seat?”

Trent turned from staring out the window and gave Jim a tired smile. “I haven’t really been listening.”

“I only get half of what they’re saying. I’m lucky to know what an aorta is, and I have no idea why they were talking about it.”

“They were talking about replacing a heart valve.” Trent returned to staring out the window.

Jim smiled. “I thought you weren’t listening.” He brought the truck into the left lane to pass a semi.

“Bits and pieces.” He kept staring out the window, thoughtfully. “Replacing a heart valve almost seems easy, compared to what we’re up against. At least, you have an instruction manual.... At least, you can see the plans.”

“We’ll figure this out. The answers may not be all cut and dried, laid out in front of us, but they’ll come. Bit by bit the pieces will start falling together.”

“I hope so.”

“It’s just like putting together a giant jigsaw puzzle.” Jim smiled as he went back to the right lane.

“Without half the pieces,” Trent replied dryly.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure nothing has happened to Teresa,” Trent spoke more to himself than to Jim. “I would know. We’re too close for me not to know.”

Leaves crunched under Derrick’s shoes as he walked. He looked up and down back and forth for any sign of Carlos leaving the trail. He’d tracked him about three quarters of the way to the cabin. Then suddenly the trail went cold. He stopped and stared down the trail ahead. It didn’t look disturbed. The crisp, crinkled autumn leaves were perfect, not tromped on by human feet. The lower twigs were unbroken. He looked around again. He had to have left the trail. He had to be somewhere. *He didn’t just vanish.* He turned around and looked back down the way he’d come. *He didn’t just disappear.*

After a few moments of consideration, Derrick decided to continue to the cabin. He needed to know for sure if anyone was there... or had been there. He continued down the trail, looking around continuously. All his senses heightened. Every nerve in his body readied for action, fearing an invisible enemy lurking behind a nearby tree... gun aimed. Swallowing hard, he continued forward.

Tears rolled down Teresa’s face, she repositioned herself. Her shoulder ached from leaning against the hard, uncarpeted utility van floor, and her hand was going to sleep. She was almost too afraid to move, to make any noise at all. She stared at the barrel of the rifle that hung over the edge of the passenger’s side seat, his coat covering most

of it. Suddenly, the van came to an abrupt stop, throwing Teresa forward. She screamed as she went tumbling toward the front. "Shut up!" he yelled and then proceeded to cursing out another driver.

She scooted back to try and get away from him. For a few moments, the van was still, but after a bit, it took off with a screech and a roar, throwing Teresa the other way and finally against the back doors. She yelled when she hit it. "Shut up!"

Shortly after, he turned sharply onto a very bumpy and what she figured was a dirt road. She tried desperately not to yell as her body battered against the bumps.

"Not that I'm trying to slow us down, but aren't we going to stop and eat sometime?" Melinda asked.

"Both you and Jessica packed food," Trent answered.

"That's for while were up there, canned food," Melinda responded.

"You can eat canned food just as easily here as there."

"Jess packed some sandwiches," Jim interjected.

"Then is it permitted to stop and get them out of the back?" she asked.

"You should have put them in here, if you were planning to eat them," Trent's voice was annoyed.

"Sorry about that," Jim took the blame.

"We should eat before we get there, so we're strong for the hike and for whatever else...." Matt's voice trailed off.

"We can eat while we hike." Trent felt stubborn.

"It will slow us down," Matt's voice was tentative yet insistent.

"Fine. Pull over to the shoulder." Trent ordered Jim. "I hope you guys toughen up before we come across any real trouble." Melinda was sorry she said anything. "Hurry up!" Trent demanded before the wheels had even stopped rolling. Jim quickly jumped out to get them. Melinda decided against asking about a bathroom break. She figured she could wait. She just hoped someone else would mention it.

Derrick, hands in his pockets as he trudged along, mentally shook his head as he crunched through the leaves on the way to his cabin. The further he went the more he was sure that Carlos had not come this way. There just weren't any signs. So, for the last half hour, he played and replayed all the possible scenarios in his mind, but he kept coming up empty. He just couldn't follow Carlos's line of thinking. There was something missing... something he would never guess. There just had to be. He knew it.

Looking up, Derrick noticed the cabin beginning to come into view. After getting a little closer, he slowed to a stop and leaned against a tree, staring at it. It would be a good place to keep Trent's wife. Unfortunately, the cabin looked just as he left it... totally undisturbed. Derrick rubbed his hand over his face, feeling quite weary. Still, he had to be sure. So, pushing himself off the tree, he made his way down to check it out, all while trying to figure out his next course of action.

Teresa started shaking again as the van came to a stop. *What's next?* she wondered as she watched her abductor get out. She could tell they weren't in a town. Soon the back doors flung open, and the villain leaned

forward, grabbed the rope that held Teresa's tied hands to her tied feet and yanked her to the back. She yelped. Then taking out his five-inch blade hunting knife, he cut through all the ropes with one violent thrust.

Swallowing hard, Teresa sat up, but she didn't speak. Rubbing her rope burned wrists, she stared up at him through teary eyes. He yanked out a pair of handcuffs from under his coat and cuffed her hands in front of her. Continuing to stare, her eyes pleaded with him, but she didn't speak. She didn't know what to do. She knew she couldn't out fight him. She doubted she could outsmart him. All she knew to do was pray for rescue. Somehow, she felt Trent was coming. She didn't know why, but she felt it. Yanking the chain on the cuffs, the villain pulled her down from the truck, closed the doors, and then headed for the woods, pulling her along behind.

Derrick walked quietly around the cabin, but he heard nothing. The windows were boarded up so he couldn't see inside, but there were no signs of forced entry. He went around front, unlocked the door, and walked in... *nothing... absolutely nothing.* Meandering over to the kitchen, he plopped down on the old, dusty table and put his feet up on one of the chairs. *Well, next course of action, what are you?*

"Taylor!" Mark banged on the door. "Open up! I want to talk to you!"

"Go away! I'm busy!"

"Busy? How can you be busy? You're not supposed to be doing anything!"

"I'm doing my schoolwork! So, go away!"

"No. I'm not going anywhere! I want..." To his amazement and shock, the door flew open. He literally jumped back when he saw who it was. "What are you doing here?"

"Young man! I haven't the faintest idea where you learned to act in such a fashion, but I will tell you one thing clear. If it was my boy acting this way, I would call the cops and let him ponder his actions in a jail cell overnight!"

"What are you *doing* here?" he repeated, concerned that his face betrayed more fear than it did surprise.

Still clutching a kitchen towel, she put her hands on her hips. "And what business is that of yours?"

"I'm her brother!"

"You're acting more like an assassin."

"Lady! Like I said..."

"I heard exactly what you said, and I didn't like it." He returned a blank expression. "Your father asked me to keep an eye on her for a day or two."

"Oh?" Mark grinned, bobbing his head and crossing his arms. "Where'd he go?"

"Wipe that smirk off your face, young man, and don't think for one second I don't know what's behind it! Let me give you a free piece of advice, young one. Don't try anything while I'm here. YOU'LL BE IN **WAY** OVER YOUR HEAD!" She slammed the door in his face.

Mark just stood there and stared at the door. *I think she means that.*

"Stop! Please! I can't go any farther!" Teresa pulled back.

“Shut up!” He yanked her forward, barely missing a tree.

“Where are we going?” He didn’t answer. He just kept up his brisk pace. “Please, stop!” she cried. Then, suddenly, to her surprise, he did. Turning, he shoved her back. She scrambled backwards a ways before falling down next to a tree. Somehow, it just seemed par for the course right now. *Seriously, what more can he do?* Her eyes widened in horror as she watched him answer that question. They had stopped by a pile of brush that he began dismantling and throwing to the side. The more he tossed away the clearer she could see the opening to a deep, dark cave. She didn’t dare imagine what was inside.

“No!” she screamed, scooting back as he came for her. It didn’t do any good. He just reached down, grabbed the chain, pulled her up, and yanked her toward the cave. She pulled back, but it only hurt her wrists.

Taking her to the far wall inside the cave, he stopped her by a metal bar, pushed her to the ground, and connected the handcuff chain to the bar with another chain. She broke out into uncontrollable tears as he walked away. Her heart raced and panic threatened to overtake her. Then suddenly, hearing a sound coming from the tunnel, she gasped and clung closer to the wall. She squinted to see as the dark figure began to emerge. She gasped again as he stepped into the spotlight of sun shining from outside. *Carlos.*

“You took a lot longer than I expected,” Carlos stated as he walked closer toward her abductor.

“Did you accomplish your mission?”

“I did what you said. I still don’t see how that’s going to get Trent up here. What’d the note say?”

“Don’t worry. He’ll come.” His voice had an evil drawl. “Did you eliminate Derrick?”

“I gave him that stuff to drink.” Carlos avoided eye contact.

“Is he dead?!” The man stepped into Carlos’s space.

“I suppose. I mean he should be by now.” He still didn’t make eye contact.

“I can’t believe it!” The man let out a disgusted sigh, turned, walked away, and then turned back. “Nobody crosses me!” He threatened.

“Look, I did what you said!” He forced eye contact. “I gave him plenty of that junk to drink! He should be dead!”

The villain’s eyes narrowed. “He’d better be.”

“Yeah.” Carlos broke eye contact again, wishing he could ask why the guy was so touchy about Derrick. “Where’s the money?”

“You’ll get your money.”

“When?”

The villain returned a threatening glance and started to walk toward him. “There’s a clearing a mile north of here.” He got in Carlos’s space. Carlos forced himself not to back up. “You go there. A helicopter will pick you up. They will give you the money and take you back to Mexico.”

“Yeah.” Carlos looked down. Somehow the prospect of going home didn’t excite him. He had liked his new life. What there was of it.”

“You’d better get to the helicopter on time because you won’t get a second chance to leave,” he threatened. “I’d love to finish framing you. I could do it so beautifully... with no loose ends.” He allowed an evil grin.

“Yeah, but you won’t. My papa’s still got ‘nough pull in your organization.”

The villain’s face changed to anger, and he spat on the ground. “Maybe we should see about that.”

Carlos slowly backed toward the tunnel. “Maybe you shouldn’t.” He soon disappeared into the darkness.

Into the Night

“Wake up,” Matt shook Melinda’s shoulder. “We’re almost there.”

“Oh dear, did I fall asleep?” She yawned as she opened her eyes. “Wow. How’s it dark already?”

“It’s not *already*.” Trent was clearly still in a bad mood.

“The days are getting shorter,” Jim added as he stopped the truck.

“Are we still planning to walk in?” she asked.

“Of course, we’re still planning to walk in!” Trent snapped, shocked that she could already be thinking of spending the night when they hadn’t even started yet.

“I was just asking.... Maaan.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got good flashlights.” Jim tossed her one and then opened his door and got out. Then so did everyone else. Loud crickets night sounds greeted them. The dark, lonely night gave Melinda chills as she got out. She stood there a minute soaking up the eerie feeling and then hurried around the truck to find the others. They were in a group discussing their plan for the hike in. Melinda joined them just as they were disbanding. Looking at her large metal-cased flashlight, she suggested, “Not that I’m being skeptical, but won’t the light be noticeable from a long ways off?”

“Would you rather go without?” Trent returned.

Melinda gave him a look, definitely feeling like she was getting hostile vibes from their resident cop on the journey. *Maybe I should just keep my mouth shut.*

“Take it easy, Trent.” Jim slapped his hand down on Trent’s shoulder. “That’s a valid point. Let’s use them as sparingly as possible... if there’s enough light just using one or if the moon’s shining in a clearing.” Matt nodded.

Trent turned sharply and walked away. “Let’s get the gear.” They followed him to the back of the truck. Melinda zipped her jacket the rest of the way, the cold night air causing her to shiver. Matt cautiously put his arm around her to give her some warmth. First, she was shocked and thought she should pull away, but then she kind of liked it.

Jim pulled everything out of the truck bed. He handed the duffle of clothes, towels, and blankets to Melinda, the duffle of medical supplies to Matt. He slung the mountaineering backpack, filled mainly with food, over his shoulders and left the other backpack, filled with miscellaneous supplies, for Trent. Trent slowly retrieved it as the others headed for the trail. Jim glanced at Derrick’s truck. “At least we know they’re up here.”

Jim decided to point out that bit of good news since no one else was.

No one commented until Matt finally said, “Yeah.”

Melinda couldn’t help feeling a little nervous as they left the safety of the truck and the glowing moon to venture single file down a strange trail into deep, tunneling darkness. Her heart jumped as an owl hooted in a nearby tree. She figured she must have gasped because Matt, walking behind her, asked if she was alright. She turned and nodded, “Yes.” Then she returned to marching on, hoping she had made the right decision in coming up here. She guessed there was no turning back now.

Trent led the way at a brisk and determined pace. Jim followed a few feet behind. Melinda, breathing hard, had to power walk just to keep Jim’s light in sight. Matt followed close behind her. She had a feeling he could go faster and pass her, but she was glad he didn’t.

Derrick plopped down on a damp, mossy log, put his feet up, and leaned back against a tree. He was plum out of options. He felt like all day long he’d been walking everywhere and getting nowhere. He had no idea where to look next. The guy *had* to be up here, but he had no idea where. He banged his head back against the tree and looked up. *God, I don’t know what to do. I’ve looked everywhere. I’m out of options. Is he up here, or am I wrong? Is Carlos up here? Is Teresa up here?* He felt like they were. *Where then?* Nothing. *I’m ready to fight. I came up here to find her. I know you want to her be found... to be taken back to her family... to her young kids, but where, where is she? Where’s Carlos? Please tell me.* He stared into the darkness, repeating his request to God, playing and replaying everything he

knew over and over again in his mind until finally... *the cave!* He remembered the cave. *How could I forget that?* He got up, jumped over the log, and took off running into the darkness.

"Where's the fallen tree?" Jim asked when he caught up with Trent who was stopped at the river's edge.

"I... don't... know," he snapped.

"I hope we're going the right way. We didn't...."

"We are," Trent insisted, staring down into the icy water.

The others caught up. "What's the matter?" Melinda asked. "Oh, dear." she stared down into the frothy water.

"There used to be an old, fallen tree here we used to cross the water... if this is the right place."

"It is!"

"You mean you think we're in the wrong spot?" Melinda asked Jim, ignoring Trent.

"This is **not** the wrong spot!" Trent insisted. Melinda couldn't help smiling in his direction. *Stiff-necked tendencies must run in the family.*

"Then how do you plan to cross it?" Jim was starting to get annoyed.

"Can't hurt to double check," Matt interrupted. "Why don't two of us go upstream and the other two go down. There still may be a way to cross it."

"I'll go along with that," Jim agreed, taking off his pack.

"Fine," Trent relented, dumping his pack and taking off downstream. Jim followed him.

Taking Melinda's hand, Matt said, "Let's go," and headed with her in the other direction.

"Hey wait!" Jim stopped and jogged back, taking his gun from his holster. "Maybe you'd better take my gun, you never know if...."

"I've got one."

Jim's face answered with shock and amazement. "Oh. Alrighty then." He turned back and jogged after Trent. *Huh... a pistol packin' doc... wonders never cease.*

Derrick army-crawled through the pine needles, trying desperately not to crunch on the numerous maple leaves scattered around. He was getting closer and closer to the cave, but to get right up to its mouth, he was going to have to go behind some bushes that covered the front of the rocky hillside. Some were evergreens, but some weren't, which meant there would be a lot of dead leaves behind them. If there was one thing he couldn't do, it was go crunching right up to their front door.... He would have to come up with an alternative.

Coming to the end of his pine needle pathway, he just lay there a few moments staring at the bushes and pondering his options. Staying low, he jogged over behind the bushes, stopping crunch and center behind the first bush. He hoped they hadn't heard. He didn't think they could from this far away. Still, he had to get closer. *Now what, Lord? How do I get there?*

Resting his forearm on his knee, he twirled a leaf with his fingers, staring at it a moment and then looking down the leafy pathway. *Nah-o-o... there's got to be an easier way. Right, God? There's got to be something easier*

than removing each leaf by hand. That'll take forever! He didn't come up with anything. Sighing, he got on his hands and knees and started quietly removing each leaf in front of him, one by one.

"Here you go, honey," Mrs. Sanders handed Taylor a generous slice of her special lemon meringue pie.

"Wow, don't you believe in calorie counting?" Taylor smiled as she took the pie.

"Well, when you're eating for two, dear, it is permissible to have these minor lapses of judgement." She smiled and sat down with her own piece.

"Oh, is it, now?" Taylor picked up her fork. "What's your excuse?"

"Well, I'm working for two, dear. I have to keep my strength up. Mmm...." She enjoyed every second of her first bite.

"Oh, I see," Taylor chuckled. "I sure wish you weren't," she mumbled under her breath.

"What's that, dear?"

"I wish you weren't... working for two. I wish I wasn't eating for two. If my dad wasn't so old fashioned and bent on making me suffer for one little mistake, I wouldn't be."

"Old-fashioned? Yes, dear, but abortion is an old-fashioned idea as well. They just didn't have the technology to do it before the baby was born. People have been killing unwanted babies since the beginning of time. Some civilizations threw them in the river. Some made them pass through the fire. Others simply left them out in the cold. We *used* to think that was barbaric."

"Everyone knows you can't kill a baby after it's been born, but it's not really a person until then."

"I don't know," Mrs. Sanders took another bite. "Sometimes I think my brother would have made a fine person if he had ever been born. My mother aborted him, and that's so old fashioned it was before your father was born. It wasn't legal here in America, yet. She went to another country to have it done. She was going to abort me as well, but she didn't have the funds to make the trip. So, she abandoned me on the steps of the church instead. The pastor's wife, she couldn't have children. She always said I was her special gift from God, dropped down from heaven on her doorstep, all wrapped up in a white package with a little red ribbon on her head." Mrs. Sanders voice broke, and she wiped away stay tear.

"What about the mother, the young mother who can't take care of her baby?" Taylor knew her voice held anger, but she didn't care.

"I feel sorry for her and for all she'll miss. Honey, life isn't about money. Money is empty. It will never make you happy on its own. Only people can do that. You're so young. I know you have dreams of prestige and a career, greatness maybe, but when you grow up, you'll find that any job is mainly a day to day repetitive grind. I'm not downing that, mind you! I always had a job, and I felt useful, like I was contributing to other peoples' lives. Still, what I always enjoyed most was coming home. Honey, there's no reason for a big fancy house if there's no one in it to come home to. It'll only be lonely and sad."

"I'm not saying I don't want that someday. Sure, I want a family, just not now."

"Who's to say, you'll ever get the chance again? You have a little one growing inside you now... a little one that wants your love and wants to love you back. It wants to be read to and sung to and tucked in bed at night. It wants to run and jump on your bed in the middle of a thunderstorm... or on Christmas morning," she smiled in reaction to fond

memories. “Don’t give it up, dear. I’ve seen so many mothers throughout my career give up their first child and then lose their ability to ever have another one. Don’t take this birth for granted. Don’t take this child for granted. Even if you have another child, you’ll never have this one again.”

“Is it wrong to want to live my life before being tied down to a family?”

“No... but it is wrong not to allow the same opportunities for your child. She has a right to live her life, too.”

“He.”

“What’s that dear?”

“He. The ultrasound showed it was a boy.”

“Awww, a rambunctious little boy. You can buy him a dog and teach him to catch a ball and....”

“Okay, just stop right there. Once this baby is born, I’m out of it. I’m not getting tied down! Maybe I’ll just abandon it at a church like you.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it, honey.” She got up and collected their plates. “They might not care much for babies before they’re born, but they sure do after.” She patted her shoulder on the way to the kitchen. “Mothers don’t have *any rights* after that baby’s a few hours old.”

“Ohhh...” Taylor turned toward her, “shut up!” She was tired of hearing the same old tired argument from everyone. How many people were going to gush about how wonderful it is to be woken up by a kid jumping on their bed? How many people were going to try and convince her she was going to love this baby. She knew the truth. She was going to resent it, resent it for stealing her youth.

Bridge to Disaster

“Find anything?” Jim was the first to ask as the two groups approached each other back at their meeting spot.

“There’s a rope bridge a ways down, but it doesn’t look very safe,” Matt said as he stopped walking.

“What about you?” Melinda added.

“It’s more shallow downstream, but it’s still fast moving. We could probably get across it with the ropes, but getting in that icy water doesn’t sound like a very good idea to me.”

“We’ve got dry clothes to change into.” Trent’s voice was gruff.

Matt shook his head. “The shock of the cold water could make someone freeze up and drown.”

“Maybe the girl.” Trent shot her a dirty luck.

Melinda looked offended. *Some brother.*

“Maybe any of us,” Jim tried to diffuse the situation. “Let’s go check the bridge.” Jim headed off and the

others followed.

When they got there, they all turned on their flashlights and shone them back and forth across the bridge, inspecting it.

“Not very taut, is it?” Jim glanced at Trent.

“It looks like the fastest way.” Trent stared at it, gritting his teeth, and then headed toward the rope ladder.

“Wait!” Matt reached out and grabbed Trent’s arm as he went past. Trent yanked it away. “Look, *bud-dy*, the rope’s cut!” Now, Matt was sounding annoyed.

“What are you talking about?”

“Just hold it a minute, fellas.” Jim shone his light all the way down the right supporting rope.

“It’s the other side.”

Then Jim shone it down the other, stopping at a slight cut going two thirds of the way through the rope. “I can’t believe you noticed that.”

“It’s not all the way through,” Trent insisted.

“Mostly. We’d never all make it.”

“One of us could... and duct tape it,” Matt suggested.

Jim gave a half-hearted laugh. “Did we pack that?”

“Of course, we did!” Melinda sounded almost offended. Matt took a small roll out of one of his leg pockets and held it up.

“Sor-ry.” Jim shone the light again. “I don’t know, it’s all the way on the other side.”

“I think whoever cut that rope doesn’t intend for anyone to get across,” Melinda spoke thoughtfully. “Maybe there are other cuts we don’t see.” Trent took the duct tape and resumed walking toward the bridge.

“Wait!” Jim yelled. Trent stopped momentarily but didn’t look back. “At least, let us get a rope to anchor you!” Trent thought a moment but then resumed walking. “Go!” Jim shoved Melinda in the direction of their packs, and she took off running. Soon as it registered, Matt followed her. “Trent, just wait! If you fall in, there’s no guarantee you can get back out. It’s moving too fast!” Trent didn’t listen. He climbed up the rope ladder to the bridge. Suddenly, it dawned on Jim that at the moment, the guy didn’t care if he died or not. “What good’s it going to do your wife and kids if you get yourself killed?!” Slowly and carefully, Trent started crossing the bridge. Jim retrained his light on the tear, which widened a little bit with each step Trent took.

Melinda and Matt came running back with the packs and dropped them beside Jim. Melinda groaned when she looked up. One month of knowing she had a brother, and she was about to lose him.

Holding tightly to the rail ropes, Trent stepped carefully and lightly from one rope rung to the next. He was more than halfway across. Jim was just beginning to think he might make it when the left rail rope and the left support rope both snapped at the same time, causing Trent to go plunging down to the raging water below. Melinda screamed. Jim instantly grabbed the rope from off the pack. “Run!” he yelled taking off downstream. Matt kept up, but Melinda couldn’t. This time he didn’t stay with her. “The river winds!” Jim yelled. “We can get to the shallow section first and stretch the rope across the water!” Jim ran faster, and to his surprise, Matt kept pace. He was breathing harder than Jim, but he kept up the whole way.

When they got there, Jim quickly unwound the rope, handed one end to Matt, took the other, and splashed into the stream. He went fast, but it took every ounce of strength he had to stand against the current. Near the end, it almost pushed him over, but he made it. He glanced over to see Matt already had his end tied off. *Good*. Stumbling up the bank on numb legs, Jim looked for a likely tree to do the same.

“He’s comin’!” Matt yelled.

Jim yanked the knot tight and stumbled back toward the water. Matt was already wading in. Trent was coming fast midriver. Matt was about halfway to center. Jim couldn’t see Trent struggling. He wondered if was unconscious or just numb. Running down the bank, Jim could tell Trent was keeping his head above water. Matt was nearly there when Trent went rushing by. Keeping hold of the rope, Matt lunged toward him, snatching the back of Trent’s coat just before he went out of range. Matt grimaced, his body stinging from the cold. He had Trent with one hand and the rope with the other, but there was the standoff. He couldn’t pull Trent to shore or even closer to the rope. The current was pushing them too hard. Matt was afraid he was either going to have to let go or go with him.

“HOLD ON!” Jim yelled splashing toward them, forcing his legs not to buckle, especially when he reached chest deep water. The extreme cold threatened to overcome him. Reaching out with one hand, he grabbed Trent. “PULL!” They both tried. “PULL!” It took all their strength, but they got him up to the rope. “Grab the rope!” Trent seemed paralyzed. “Trent! Grab the rope!” He couldn’t do it. Water rushed by them furiously.

“Let’s go!” Matt started to walk, pain shooting through his legs with each step.

“No! Not that way!” Jim pulled them in the other direction.

“Melinda!”

“We’ll get her!” Jim willed himself forward. Matt followed. Almost there, Jim’s legs buckled and he fell down, but he didn’t let go of the rope or Trent.

“You can do it! We’re almost there!” Matt yelled over the rushing water.

Jim willed himself to stand, though he couldn’t feel his legs. *We’re almost there. Help me, God, help me! Two more steps*. He completed them and then collapsed at the river’s edge. Matt pulled Trent up the bank.

Panting, Melinda arrived on the other side. “Are you all okay?!” she yelled.

“Hopefully! Go back and bring the packs here!” She turned to go. “Wait!” She stopped and turned back. “Do you know the way?! You won’t get lost?!”

“I’ll be fine!” She headed back.

Matt went back down to Jim. “Get up,” he ordered, pulling him onto his back.

“I can’t,” Jim mumbled.

“Yes, you can.”

“Just give me a minute.” Jim didn’t open his eyes.

“No now!” He grabbed his shirt and pulled him part way up, his own arm burning. “Let’s go.” He shook him.

“Okay. Okay.” But he didn’t open his eyes.

“Come on!” Matt pulled him up further, until finally Jim got to his feet and opened his eyes. “Come on.” He practically yanked him up the bank then stopped and glared at him. “If you want your friend to make it, you’d better help me find wood for a fire.” Matt turned to go. Jim felt like apologizing for whatever he did to offend him, but Matt was already gone. So, he just did what he said and started looking for firewood. His body started shaking so hard,

everything was blurred with quivering double vision. Twice he reached down for a log and came up with nothing but air.

After removing the last few leaves, Derrick inched himself forward the last foot. He peered around the corner the best he could without being seen from the moonlight. He in return saw nothing. It was too dark inside, but he did hear a slight noise, maybe a sob, he listened carefully until he heard a small voice, praying softly. *She's in there.* He tried to hear more. He wondered about her abductor. *Is he there?*

"Matt? Matt!" Jim who was just returning with a load of sticks dropped them on the pile that Matt had started and looked up toward Melinda's voice calling from across the water. "He thought about returning her call but almost felt too weak to yell.

Matt emerged from behind some bushes. Jim noticed Matt's body was shaking almost as much as his own. "Did," he cleared his throat and strengthened his voice. "Did you get them all?"

"Yes!" She held one of the duffels up. "They're all here."

"Okay! Now, we need to get them across without getting them wet. You need to take the other rope, tie it tightly... very tightly to your end of this rope, after you've untied it from the tree. Then loop the double-long rope around the tree and toss the end to me! Tie it around a rock or log to give it some weight!"

"Okay!"

As she started to do it, Matt turned back to Jim. "Get this arranged into a fire. She'll be sendin' over the matches soon. I'll see to Trent." Kneeling down, Jim started arranging the wood and watched Matt as he went back over to Trent and started rubbing him and shaking him to try to keep his blood moving and warm him up. Jim hoped it was doing some good. Trent hadn't hardly stirred since they got him out of the water. Jim kept praying, but he couldn't help but worry.

"I'm ready!" Melinda yelled from across the river.

Grimacing, Matt got up and headed over but stopped first at Jim, slapping him on the shoulder. "Go, do what I was doing. Keep his blood moving, and keep an eye on his breathing." Without waiting for a response, he continued toward the river and down the bank, stopping at the edge. "Okay throw the..." his voice weakened, but he strengthened it, "throw it!" Melinda pulled her arm back and threw. It landed midstream. "Pull it back and try again!" She did, to no avail. "Okay, let's try something else." He thought a moment. "Let me try it! Tie your end back around the tree!" Soon as she did, he untied his, looped it around the tree, tied a rock to the end, and lifted the rock. Pulling his arm back, he felt his arm go weak. Rather than relying on his own strength, he knelt down and prayed. Then standing up, he pulled back and threw, didn't make it. Sighing, he reeled the rope back and tried again. This time he almost made it... less than a foot from shore.

"I can get it!" Melinda shouted, running down to it. She had to step one foot in the water, but she got it. *Brrrr...* Waving it back and forth, she yelled, "I got it!" and then hopped back up the bank.

"Good! Run it through the handles of the bags, loop it around the tree above a high enough limb!"

"Okay!" she hurried to do it.

"Tie the ends together tight!"

She did. Then slowly and carefully, they conveyed the bags across the stream. Melinda held her breath until they were safe and sound on the other side. It wasn't until she sighed with relief as Matt took them off that she began

to realize she was stranded over here. *How am I gonna get across!*

Searching feverously, Matt found the matches, grabbed the medical bag, and ran up the slope over to Jim and Trent.

“Hey, what about me?” Melinda didn’t know if Matt heard her or not. She knew he needed to take care of more important things first. Crossing her arms, she started walking slowly back and forth along the bank, jumping a few times at unidentified noises from the trees.

Derrick lifted his head in interest. He heard movement, scooting around, walking. He didn’t dare look, but he strained to hear. Hearing a gun cock, he got to his knees. “Hey, man, don’t shoot. It’s Carlos.” There was a silence. Derrick imagined Carlos coming from the tunnel and walking toward them. He must have come in the back way.

“What are you doing here?” the other man growled.

“Your transportation is a little unreliable. It never came.”

Cursing under his breath, the man turned and headed out the cave’s mouth. Derrick stayed very still as the man stomped past, pulled out his phone, and cursed its reception... or lack of it. After a minute, he walked away. Derrick figured to find better reception. He also figured he’d be gone a while. He waited and listened, wondering if this could be his chance. *Carlos... Carlos... what are you involved in?*

“Why are you doing this?” Teresa’s voice was scared and high-pitched.

“I didn’t have a choice. He’s been framing me.”

“Not very well according to Trent. You could have gotten out of it. Why didn’t you tell someone before this happened?”

“I didn’t know this was going to happen! Besides, he’s got me trapped. He’s got ties with my family.”

“You don’t have to play right into his hand!” Her eyes pleaded with him to let her loose.

“You do when he’s holding all the cards!”

“Just get me out of here! If you’re not with him, set me free!” She struggled against the chains.

“I can’t do that. It wouldn’t work.”

“Carlos?” Derrick walked in the cave.

“Derrick! How’d you find this place?”

“I’d like to ask you the same thing. I want to know what’s going on... and I want to know, now!”

Hands in his pockets, head down, shaking it, Carlos backed up. “I don’t even....”

“Why did you drug me?!” Derrick hoped he hadn’t yelled it too loud.

“I had to. I tried not to get involved, but I had to!” He kept backing.

“Wh-yy?” Derrick face and stance were combative.

“He gave me the stuff at the bar. He didn’t tell me hardly anything... just that on a certain night I had to bring you up here!” His eyes held fear. “He said if I let myself get arrested, I’d be killed the same night. Said he had people behind bars that would do it, with their bare hands if necessary!” His voice grew increasingly panicked. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“Okay. Okay.” Derrick walked toward Teresa. “You come in the back way?” Derrick knelt down and began inspecting the bar and the chains.

“Yeah.” Carlos paused. “Derrick,” He widened his stance. “I’m not going along with an escape. This guy’s real heavy. He’ll kill us all.”

“What do you mean?” Derrick ran his hand along the chain, looking for a weak link.

“He’s got connections!”

“How do you know?”

“I just know!”

“Your family back in Mexico?”

“Believe me this guy’s no one to mess around with!”

“That’s what he wants you to think.” Derrick stood up.

“Shhh... listen. He’s coming back!” Carlos’s voice held fear even in a whisper. He ran to Derrick. “Go!” He pushed him toward the tunnel, accidentally ramming him against the wall. Quickly, he yanked him back and then thrust him down the tunnel.

Derrick felt disoriented in the dark, especially after getting slammed against the wall. He couldn’t see his hand in front of his face. Waiting a moment, he listened.

“Well?” Carlos asked gruffly.

“They had some trouble. They’ll be here in the morning.”

“You better not be messin’ with me, man. My family wouldn’t like that.” He tried to sound confident even threatening, but he couldn’t manage it.

“I’ll give you a little warning, mate.” The gunman walked toward him. “No one talks down to me... and lives.” He got right up in Carlos’s face.

Carlos swallowed hard but refused to back up. He ran his hand lightly over his gun, or rather Derrick’s gun he had stolen. “Don’t look like so much from where I stand.” He could hear his voice quiver.

“Keep it up, and you’ll find out. Your dogs can’t shake a stick to my dogs.”

“Maybe someday we’ll find out.” Carlos started to back toward the tunnel. “What time?”

“In the morning,” he growled.

“Whatever, man.” Carlos turned and headed down the cave. Derrick fell in behind him, trying to make his steps sound in sync with Carlos’s. He ran his hand against the wall so he didn’t take the wrong fork when the tunnel split.

“How’s he doin’?” Jim scooted a little closer to the fire, watching Matt as he filled a syringe. “What’s that for?”

“Speed his heart up. Raise his body temperature.”

Jim nodded, rubbing his hands together dangerously close to the jumping flame. He felt a hundred percent better next to the warmth of the fire. “I’ll feel better when he wakes up.”

“Yeah. Me too. Why don’t you go check on Melinda?”

Jim nodded. He wasn’t particularly thrilled about leaving the fire, but he guessed somebody needed to. Slowly, he forced himself to his feet, feeling a little unsteady and lightheaded at first. “Any ideas on how to get her over here?”

“Bring her over the same way we did the packs. Try to keep her out of the water.”

“You think she can get herself attached to the rope that far off the ground?”

“Yep.”

Shrugging and shivering at the same time, Jim trudged toward the river. Putting his hand in the wet mud to steady himself, he half slid down the slope. “Melinda?” He cupped his hands around his mouth, not seeing her at first until she stood up from the log.

“How’s it going?!” She yelled back.

“You alright?!”

“Lonely!”

“We’ll get you over here! Just wait!”

“Have been!”

“Matt’s still working on Trent!”

“How’s he doing?”

“Okay! You just hang on! We’ll come for you!”

Swell. She plopped back down on the log.

Derrick climbed up the jagged wall of the cave after Carlos. Even with the bright moonlight shining down from above, the climb seemed nearly impossible. Derrick was sure he was going to put his foot on a loose rock at any moment and go tumbling down to the hard rock floor. He tried to prevent that with prayer. It sure wasn’t prayer of faith, though. He still felt like he was going to fall. To his amazement, Carlos didn’t. He made it all the way to the top, through the opening, and onto solid ground. Derrick tried to step where Carlos had, though he was almost sure he wasn’t. “Here.” Carlos knelt down and offered him his hand.

Derrick stared at it. He concluded if there was ever a time for being rude this was it. He trusted Carlos to pull him up just about as much as he trusted a rattler not to strike. “That’s okay. I got it.” *I hope.* Grabbing onto a large jagged chunk, he pulled himself the rest of the way and swung his feet up onto grassy land. Breathing hard, he got the rest of himself up, knelt there a moment, his knees sinking into the damp earth, and then stood to his feet.

“Seriously, man, how’d you find this place?” Carlos stood, too.

“I used to live up here. Remember?” Derrick brushed himself off.

“Know it like the back of your hand, huh?”

Derrick shrugged. “You know, the way you were talkin’ to that guy, sounds like....”

Carlos shrugged. “I’ve got extended family, too.”

“Down in Mexico? Something tells me they’re not totally... I don’t know... law abiding.”

Carlos smiled. "They have their own laws. They're not bad folk." Carlos started to walk, so Derrick joined him. "Honestly... I don't know them that well anymore. I haven't been part of the 'clan' since I moved away. I've got their name so I figure I can use it, but honestly if it came down to a fire fight...."

"You don't think they'd stand with you?"

"I don't know." He looked down, thoughtfully.

"You gonna take that chopper tomorrow." Hands in his pockets, Derrick watched the ground as he walked.

"Got to."

"Why?"

"Different reasons." There was silence a few moments while they walked.

"So, you gonna help me get Teresa free tonight?" He flashed a smile way too optimistic for what he knew Carlos's response would be.

"Stay out of it, man. That's Trent's ballgame." Carlos didn't look at him.

"Does he know where she's at?"

"Should." Carlos kicked a stone out of the way. "I left him a note."

Derrick nodded. "Don't you feel a little guilty...?"

"No!" Carlos stopped sharply and looked him in the eye. "I feel alive. That's all I'm trying to do is stay alive." His voice broke. He held the gaze a few minutes longer. Then he turned and resumed walking.

"But you don't allow the same for others?" Derrick stared down at the ground as he resumed walking.

"It's every man for himself in this world." His voice was soft, near mumble.

Derrick raised his eyebrows. In some ways he agreed, and in some ways he didn't. The phrase sounded vaguely familiar, and he knew it was because he said it himself from time to time. "You got the key to my truck or not? I haven't eaten all day 'cause of you."

Carlos smiled, but answered softly. "No. Had to give it to him." Carlos stopped walking and abruptly turned toward Derrick. "Do me a favor."

"What?" Derrick's eyes held suspicion.

"Don't go after Teresa until I'm out of here." His eyes pleaded.

"Why?" Derrick didn't relent the suspicion.

"You're suppose to be dead." Carlos held Derrick's gaze. When he realized he wasn't going to answer, he continued. "Look, he gave me I vial of stuff to drug you with. I don't remember what it's called, but I recognized the smell. If I would have given you all of it like I was supposed to, you'd be dead right now."

Derrick held the gaze a couple more moments, broke it, and resumed walking. "So why didn't you?"

Carlos shrugged. "I couldn't do... maybe for old times sake... maybe cause of the time you saved my life from the fire. I don't know."

Derrick nodded, and they walked in silence a few moments before Derrick abruptly looked up and looked around. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know where you're going, but I'm going to the clearing to wait for my chopper. You'd better not be

there when it arrives, Amigo.”

Derrick stopped and looked back the other way. “Ye-eah.”

Carlos stopped and looked back at him. “Look, man, walk back to the road. Hitch a ride, and go home. Stay out of this, dude.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then at least wait until I’m gone.”

Derrick shrugged. “I’ll do my best, but we differ. To me each life is equally as important.”

“Even Sandervauh’s?” Carlos let the question sink in. “We all have to rank people in importance. I saved your life. You owe me.” He turned back and continued walking.

“But Teresa’s innocent?”

Carlos stopped and looked back. “She married a cop. She knew the risks.” His voice turned angry. “You owe me! I saved your life at risk to mine, and you don’t even care!” He turned and stomped off.

“Carlos!” Carlos stopped a moment but didn’t turn to look back. “Thank you.” Derrick’s voice was genuine.

“Just stay out of sight, okay?” He resumed walking.

Derrick watched him go, then turned and went the other way. *Time to come up with a plan.*

Cold and aching, Matt trudged back down the bank. “Melinda!”

Melinda stood up and walked to the river’s edge. “It’s kind of lonely over here!”

“Let’s see if we can’t get you over here! Do you have a belt?”

“No! Why?”

“You could attach yourself to the rope, and we’d bring you over the same as the packs!”

“Not gonna work! The limb that’s holding the rope up won’t hold my weight! It was bending from the bags!”

“Find a different tree!”

Melinda walked around looking. “I still don’t have a belt!” She weaved in and out of the trees.

“I have one! I’ll send it to you! Find a tree!” He watched her as she walked around and then stopped to inspect a tree.

“I found one!” She ran back and began untying the rope. “I found the perfect branch!”

A night fog started to rise off the river, making it increasingly difficult to see her. He squinted, watching her run back among the trees, climb one, and tie the rope above the branch. “You got it?”

After a few minutes, she ran back. “That looks like a good sturdy one!”

“Okay!” Matt took off his belt, attached it to the line, and pulling the ropes, conveyed it over.

Melinda hurried to retrieve it, almost before it was there, accidently stepping in the water as she reached for it. Quickly, she took it from the rope, looped it through her belt loops, ran back to the tree, carefully climbed it, and got herself all attached to the rope. “All set!” she yelled.

“Okay! Hold on!” Matt reminded himself to breathe after holding his breath the whole time she precariously stood on the branch and got the belt buckled around the rope. Stepping into the divided trunk of his giant oak to boast himself, he grabbed the ropes and began to pull her over. He thought of calling Jim for backup but concluded he could handle it on his own.

She hoped her belt loops didn’t break, but she figured if they did the belt would just slip up around her chest. She felt perfectly safe and prematurely thankful that she didn’t have to get wet. That is until she heard a slight crack. Her initial reaction was to gasp and white-knuckle the rope, but then looking around, she disregarded it. She wouldn’t the next time.

About midstream came another crack, so loud it made Matt’s and Melinda’s heart jump at the same time. Melinda’s heart jumped, but her body was fell, along with the rope and the branch. The rope was still tied around the tree, but because the branch broke it was at ground level, and she was in the water. She screamed... as loud as she could. Shock waves shot through her body as it hit the icy water and the current pushed against her. “Grab the rope!” She heard Matt’s yell as the current bulldozed over her. She was still attached by the belt, but the current was so strong rushing over her head it threatened to drown her. She grabbed the rope, trying to pull her head above the waves. “He-e-elp!” Her hands were freezing up, aching, and going numb at the same time.

“What happened?” Jim came racing down the bank to Matt, who was struggling to pull. “I can’t.... I can’t pull her. The rope must be caught on the tree... or the current! Help me!” Jim grabbed the rope. They both pulled. They made a little headway, but not much. The rope, no longer taught, formed a half moon under the water as the current pushed it. Melinda kept screaming.

Suddenly, Matt let go, ran down the bank into the frothy water, grabbed the rope again, and resumed pulling. “What are you doing?!” Jim yelled as he pulled.

Holding the rope, Matt ran through the water toward her screams. At first, he could hardly see her through the fog. Fighting the current to stand, he held onto the rope and pulled himself toward her, swimming when the current pushed him off his feet. Their eyes finally connected. “Help!” Her head went under a wave then came back up. “Help me!”

Matt went toward her deeper and deeper, pushing hard against the current. Only expecting it to be chest deep. A surge of fear shot through his veins as the ground dropped off under his feet. Melinda kept screaming. *Strengthen me, Jesus! Strengthen me!* He pulled himself with the rope until he was right next to her, he took a deep breath and let go with one hand, asking for every ounce of strength in his other to hold him. Swinging behind Melinda, he grabbed the rope again from the other side of her. The current slammed her against his chest. He made a mental note that she stopped screaming. At least she must have felt safe with him there. He didn’t, though.

Gazing toward the fog-laden shore, Matt attempted to get them there. Hand over hand, he pulled, inching them forward against the current... inch by inch, tug by tug, hand over hand. Water splashed in their faces. Shore disappeared from sight when the fog thickened. He kept going. It seemed like forever, but he didn’t stop. Battered by the waves, he felt like the current was stronger, but didn’t dwell on it. He just kept laying hand over hand, hand over hand.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, their feet touched solid ground. Melinda took a couple steps, but her knees buckled. Matt grabbed her jacket and pulled her back up before she went under. She clutched the rope weakly. Matt pushed her forward as he walked. Somehow, she managed to stay upright, minus stumbling over a couple of rocks. “You got this.” He helped get her the rest of the way to shore and up the bank before unbuckling her from the rope and letting her collapse to the ground.

Breathing hard and coughing up water, she just stayed there in a crumbled ball for several moments before looking up, breathlessly. “So much... for staying dry,” She tried to give a weak smile.

“So much for finding the perfect branch.”

“Yeah.” She collapsed back down to the ground.

Derrick, who had been on his way back to his cabin to look for some tool that could cut through a chain, stopped abruptly when he heard far away screams echoing off the river. Turning toward the muffled noise, he took off running in that direction. His heart beat like a locomotive, and his breath looked like a plume of smoke in the cold. He felt in perfect rhythm as he ran.

Suddenly, the screaming stopped. Then after a minute, so did he. He wasn't quite sure where to go. Slowly, he kept heading in the same direction, though he didn't like the fact that he was getting further and further away from his cabin. Getting tired, he wanted to be done walking. He almost wondered if his ears could be playing tricks on him. What if the screams had really been coming from the cave? What if Teresa was in trouble?

Coming close to the river, he stared down into the swift, bubbling current, almost mesmerized by the steamy mist floating off into the air. Hearing a soft echo, he knelt and turned his head, listening until he heard another one. He strained to hear the voices carried by the current. To him, they sounded familiar. Maybe that's what he wanted. Turning, he began to follow the river. He had to wonder. Had the gunman's plan of luring Trent up here with the note worked?

“Brrrr...” Rubbing her hands together next to the fire, Melinda shivered against the cold.

“You should change out of those wet clothes,” Matt suggested as he knelt down next to Trent.

“I will. Just give me a moment.” She inched even closer to fire. “What about you?”

“I already did earlier.” Matt paused as he took Trent's pulse then continued, “I can't change again until my first set dries.”

“You should put them over here by the fire.” She paused for a shiver. “We could use the extra rope as a clothesline between those two trees.” She pointed. “Instead... instead of hanging them on branches.”

“It's a thought, anyway.” Matt sat back on his heels, still staring at Trent.

“How's he doin'?” Jim wandered over.

Matt glanced up at him, then back down. “If he doesn't wake up pretty soon, I'm going to give him another stimulant.” Just then Trent started to groan lightly and move his head slightly. “Hey, wake up.” Matt slapped the side of his face. “Wake up!” Trent groaned again. Matt reached down and shook him, aches and pains shooting through his own body. He almost felt like groaning himself. “Hey, wake up!” He slapped him again.

Trent blinked his eyes open, and slowly began looking around. “What happened?”

“Why ask?” Jim knelt down next to him. “You'd never believe it.”

“Where am I?” He sat up too abruptly, reacting in pain. “Ah-rrr.”

Matt grabbed his arm to steady him. “Take it easy. Don't you remember anything?”

Trent stared off into the distance.

Jim stared at Trent earnestly. “Do you remember coming up here? Your wife being kidnapped?”

Trent continued to stare. “No...” His voice sounded haunted. Jerking to the side, he tried to get up but fell back down. “Where am I?”

“Take it easy.” Matt forced him to lie down. “Now, just relax. You got a bump on your head. You probably have a mild concussion.”

“Mild?” Jim repeated under his breath.

“Do you remember me?” Trent stared at the doctor a long while. He didn’t reply, but he looked clueless. “Do you remember Jim?” Trent turned to look at Jim, but only stared.

“Come on, Trent, I’m way more unforgettable than that. You see me in church every Sunday and sometimes even on the job.”

“Do you remember what you do for a living?”

After a moment, Trent answered. “I’m a cop.”

“That’s right! Startin’ to come back now? You remember me? You remember getting clobbered in baseball a few weeks ago.” Jim smiled.

“I remember.” He was still staring earnestly at Jim.

“Do you remember your wife and your family,” Matt’s voice sounded very clinical. Trent nodded. “Do you remember what started happening a couple of weeks ago? Do you remember Melinda?” Matt nodded toward her.

“What happened a few weeks ago?”

“Do you remember your wife getting kidnapped?”

Closing his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose, then covering his face with the back of his hand, Trent shook his head. “I don’t remember.”

“Actually, that’s not that unusual. After a trauma, the brain tends to block out emotionally trying experiences.”

“I want to remember.” He kept his face covered.

“Then you probably will,” Matt reassured.

Jim rubbed Trent’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Buddy. You’ll be fine.” Startled by an owl hooting, Jim’s heart jumped, and he glanced around. *That is, if we don’t all get killed first.*

Noticing Jim’s reaction, Matt slowly shook his head. Jim was supposed to be the fearless cowboy. He looked down at Trent. Trent was supposed to be the superhero cop. Why did he feel like their little group was on a death mission? “Why don’t you go open us some cans of food. We should eat something and then try to get some sleep. So at least, we’re in some shape for whatever tomorrow brings.” Jim nodded and got up. “Melinda, go change.”

“I beg your pardon?” She wondered if her voice sounded as shocked as she felt. *What right did he think he had to...*

“Hurry up!”

One hundred and one cutting replies raced through her mind, but to her own surprise, she just got up to do it. Frankly, she was too tired for a battle.

Hey, Friends, What's Up?

Derrick slowed, walking even quieter as he began to see the dancing flames from the fire flickering between the branches. He tried to find a better angle to see if these people were his people or the enemy before he got too close. He couldn't tell. All he could see were shadows and silhouettes. *Have to get closer.*

Derrick looked at the ground. Again, he didn't want to go crunching all the way to their camp. Those stupid leaves were fast becoming his worst enemy. Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back. *Lord, I do NOT want to remove every single leaf in my way again! There's got to be a better way.* He opened his eyes and stared up at the branches

above him... specifically one excessively long, sturdy branch that could get him a good ten feet closer... if he could get up there and stay on. *Thank you.*

Not debating a moment longer, he grabbed the branch above his head and pulled himself up onto it. Giving himself a nod of satisfaction, he stood up and looked down. *Yipe!* Losing his balance, he swayed back and forth, refusing to fall. Heart speeding up, he reached for the trunk. Managing to fall into it, he hung on. *Whew.*

After giving himself a minute, he continued. Letting go of the trunk, he grabbed the branch above him and pulled himself up onto it. Then he repeated the process with the branch one higher. Finally, on the long, sturdy branch, he quickly decided to sit instead of stand and scoot his way across to the edge, where he could spy on the people below. He still had to squint to see in the darkness. He managed to make out one girl, two guys, and one person sick or injured. His eyes widened as he watched one guy take open cans of food to the others. Regardless of friend or foe, that food sure looked inviting... and he fully intended to get his hands on some. In fact, suddenly, food felt like the most pressing matter of all. He felt an urgency to rush and get some before it was all eaten.

"Hey, could you bring the bag over here?" Derrick cocked his head. The voice sounded familiar.

"After I get done eating this, okay?" That voice was Jim's. He knew it. Derrick grabbed the branch and swung down, not caring to be quiet anymore. Matt and Jim both stood up like a wolfman in reaction to someone coming. Jim pulled his gun.

"Take it easy. It's only me." Derrick came into view. "Don't shoot." He smiled as he came closer.

"Derrick?" Jim took a step toward him. "What's going on?"

"That'll be a long story. Who's hurt?" He kept walking toward Trent.

"Trent. He's got partial amnesia," Jim explained.

Derrick stopped abruptly and turned back. "You're kidding."

"I wish I was."

"You mean he doesn't remember anything about the guy?"

"What guy are we talking about?" Jim went to open another can, but he kept his eyes on Derrick.

Derrick shrugged. "Both, I guess. Carlos and the other guy. Carlos will play either side, whichever gives him the best chance of survival. It's the other guy that's behind it." Derrick stared longingly at Jim's food.

"The guy in Trent's picture?" Jim drained the can of chicken.

"I don't know. I didn't ever get a real good look at him. Could be, except he doesn't look as tall, but maybe it was just a trick of the photo that made him look tall."

"Why? What's his motive?" Jim handed the open can of chicken to Derrick.

"Haven't figured that out, yet." Derrick dumped half the can in his mouth and chewed it. "Saw Teresa, though." He finished chewing. "Seems to be okay. Won't be easy to get her free."

Matt came over. "You know where she is?"

Derrick nodded. "She's in that cave." He looked at Jim.

"Do you think we can get her tonight?" Jim asked.

Derrick shook his head and dumped some more chicken in his mouth. "It's not going to be that easy."

“Why?” Trent, who was apparently listening, called in their direction.

Derrick and Jim walked closer to Trent. “Do you remember?” Jim asked.

“No, but you’re telling me my wife’s being held against her will.”

“He’s got her chained to a bar,” Derrick continued. “We’ll have to cut it.”

“How are you planning to do that?” Matt inquired, getting another can.

“I thought there might be something back at my cabin. I’ll go over there first thing, but first,” He sat down on the ground. “I got to get some sleep.” Putting his hands behind his head, he lay down on his back and closed his eyes.

“Is my wife okay?” Trent gritted his teeth as he talked.

“Seems to be. I’m sure she’d rather be somewhere else, but she didn’t seem to be hurt too bad.” He didn’t open his eyes.

“Too bad?” Trent tried to sit up.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” He rolled onto his forearm to prop himself up.

“You tell us. Who’s the guy in the picture?” Derrick’s voice grew drowsier.

“What picture?”

Derrick raised his eyebrows but didn’t open his eyes. “Did you talk to them?” Jim asked, sitting down.

“Talked to Carlos. He didn’t seem to know what was going on. Just did what the guy told him.” His voice got weaker.

“Like what?”

“Like bringing me up here,” he yawned, “to lure Trent to....” His voice trailed off.

“So, what’s the best plan to.... Derrick?” Jim scooted a few feet closer. “Derrick!” Derrick didn’t stir. “I guess he’s asleep.”

Matt nodded in agreement as he came back over and sat down on the log with his can of pineapple. Chewing, he put the fork back in the can. “I wonder if this guy’s got anyone else with him other than Carlos.”

“I don’t know.” Jim scooted toward Matt and leaned back against the log. “I guess he’ll tell us more in the morning.”

“What about this cave?” Matt nodded toward the fire. “Any chance they see the....”

Jim shook his head. “Too far away.” Glancing down at Trent, Jim studied his face. He looked upset... half confused and half like he was trying desperately to remember. “We’d all better try and get some sleep. Dawn’s going to come pretty early.” He glanced toward a sleeping Melinda and then Derrick.

“Somebody...” Jim leaned his head back against the log. “Somebody, should stay up and keep watch.” He yawned.

Matt gave him a sideways glance. “I’m waking you up three hours before dawn... because that’s how much sleep I require.”

Jim nodded without opening his eyes. “Deal, Doc, deal....”

Feeling at peace, Jess looked up from her mattress. She'd been kneeling beside her bed and praying for over an hour, ever since she got the kids to go to sleep. Walking out of their room, she had gotten this terrible feeling as if something was wrong... terribly wrong. She almost felt panicked. She'd gotten on her knees and prayed, mostly for her husband and his safety, but then also for Trent and Teresa, Matt and Melinda, Derrick... Carlos.... She just couldn't hardly figure how to pray for Carlos. She sure never felt like he was a killer. She's always just felt like he was one of Jim's friends. She hoped he wasn't a killer. She prayed her husband was safe.

"Mommy?" Jess jumped up as her bedroom door began to open, revealing the outline of an adorable little girl standing in the doorway... her little girl. "Mommy, I can't sleep."

Jess smiled, sitting down on the bed. "Do you think you'd have a little easier time in here?"

Nodding adamantly, Morgan ran to the bed and jumped up on the mattress. Jess grabbed her to keep her from falling back off and hoisted her over to the other side, pulling the covers up around her. The little girl grinned as she grabbed the covers and pulled them closer. "Night, Mommy."

Jess leaned over and gave her baby a kiss. "Night, little one."

"No... no don't...." Jim rolled over hard, tossing violently. "Stop! Don't go.... Don't leave me.... No!" He rolled over again.

"Jim." Matt stood over him.

"No... no!"

"Jim!" Matt knelt down and began to shake him, but quickly retreated, dodging a flying fist. "Jim, you're dreaming!" Matt ducked again. "Will you wake up?" Matt fell back on his heels as Jim sat up, grabbed his shirt, and threw him to the ground, straddling him. Keeping one hand on Matt's collarbone, he made a fist with the other and pulled his arm back... way back. "Jim?" Matt's voice nearly squeaked. Mind clearing, Jim blinked. Matt could tell from the puzzled expression on his face, he was waking up. "Jim?"

"Yeah?" He looked at his raised fist and began to lower it.

"Would you mind getting off of me? I wasn't even practicing medicine yet when your mother was... died."

Jim shook his head, "Yeah, sure." He leaned off to the side, sitting down next to him.

Slightly annoyed, Matt sat up and brushed himself off. "You know, I could recommend several good psychiatrists with special expertise in the area of...."

"Matt," Jim stopped him short. "what did you want?"

"Nothing." He stood up. "Absolutely nothing." He brushed himself off. "It's just a little hard to keep watch when you're making so much noise."

"What time is it?"

"I was going to wake you in a half an hour. However, since you are already awake, and I dare say that real life, no matter how dramatic it may get, is certainly less violent than your dreams," He kept brushing himself. "why don't you start your watch now?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

"Good. ... Goo-ood night." Matt stomped to the far opposite side of the camp and plopped down to sleep.

What will a New Dawn Bring?

Slowly waking, Matt opened his eyes and stared up at the wisps of pink clouds slowly floating in the eastern sky. The morning was cold and clear. The sky was dim, but the sun brightened the distant horizon. He pulled his blanket a little higher. "No... no..." He turned his head to look at Jim, sitting up against a rock, rifle in his lap, head hanging, clearly dreaming again.

Shaking his head, Matt thrust his blanket down, got up, and walked over. "Jim." He kicked Jim's shoe. "Jim! Wake up!" Jim startled awake, jumping to his knees. Matt gave him a disapproving look. "Don't ever enlist in the army. You'd never make it through guard duty."

Rubbing his face, Jim sat back down, falling back against the rock. "I must have fallen asleep."

"Must have. Do you know where Derrick went?" Bringing his hands down, Jim drowsily looked around the camp, as if searching for Derrick. "No? He's not here. You didn't see him go then?" Jim shook his head.

"Where'd he go?" Trent stumbled to his feet and limped over. Both Matt and Jim looked at Trent.

Jim put his hand up in a blocking motion. "Don't get all upset. I'm sure he's just...."

"Just what... playing both sides? I bet he's helping them!"

"Helping who?" Matt made eye contact with Trent. "Do you remember?"

"I... a..." Trent's face went blank as he thought.

"Do you remember...." Jim began.

"Good. You're awake." Derrick called from the edge of the clearing as he walked in.

They all turned toward him. "Where have you been?" Jim called to him just as his eyes fell to the small hacksaw in his hand. Jim suddenly remembered what Derrick had said about finding a tool that could cut through a metal chain... but not before Trent had gotten to him.

"You're in it with this madman... this killer!"

"What?" Derrick tossed the saw aside as Trent came closer.

"You're down for part of the cut! How much does he want? What's your share?"

"I don't know.... I mean, I'm not! What are you talkin'...."

Before he could finish, Trent pulled out a surprise right, smashing his fist into Derrick's cheekbone. Shocked, Derrick fell back a few steps but stayed on his feet. "What's the matter with...." Before he could finish, Trent tackled him. Jim started running toward them. Matt went too but slower. He was pretty sure Derrick wasn't the type to need assistance. On top of him, Trent threw punch after punch in Derrick's face at blazing speed, not giving Derrick a moment to recover.

"Trent, stop!" Jim grabbed the back of his belt and tried to pull him off but couldn't.

Finally, Derrick reacted, thrusting his right fist into Trent's chin and then striking across his face with his left, stunning him just enough to flip him over. Now on top, Derrick pulled his arm back with all the force of his anger, but before he could thrust it forward, Jim grabbed his wrist. "He's already got one head injury. Maybe that's why he's acting strangely."

Mumbling something inaudible, Derrick stood up and walked back over to retrieve his hacksaw. Jim grabbed Trent as he jumped up, holding him back. "Just calm down, will ya."

"Where have you been?" Trent was still irate.

Derrick held up the saw. "Getting the tools we need to free your wife." He walked over to the provisions duffle and grabbed a bag of nuts. "Are you guys about ready to go?"

Jim let go of Trent. "This is *my* wife! We are going to do it *my* way!"

Derrick opened the bag of nuts and sat down on the log. "I'm doing it the safest way."

Trent's face grew red with anger. "You are NOT going to jeopardize my wife."

Derrick didn't look at him. He just kept eating. "Say the word, and I'll go home. Really this is none of my concern anyway. Just happened to get dragged into it."

Jim's heart froze at that thought and then started to race. "Don't do that!" He stepped closer.

"We don't need him," Trent growled.

"I think we do." Matt came closer. "We need every man we can get. Unless you want to go back and turn this

matter over to the authorities.”

Trent looked away. “No.” Then he jerked his gaze back to Matt. “This matter? This is my wife’s life we’re talking about!”

Before Matt could answer. Derrick interrupted, staring into the distance as he ate, as if engulfed in his own thoughts and not listening. “Could be a suicide mission for the killer.”

“What?” Jim looked from Matt and Trent to Derrick.

Derrick shrugged. “He’s never asked for a ransom. All he seems to want is to get Trent. Maybe he’s planning to kill everyone... including himself.”

“What difference does that make!” Trent was still angry. “We still have to get her out of there!”

“It could make a lot of difference if you’re going to try and negotiate with him.” Derrick finally looked at him. “Maybe soon as he sees you, everything’s going to explode.”

Trent’s face softened from rage to contemplation. “Why?” He spoke, thoughtfully as he sat down on the other side of the log.

“Yeah, Trent why?” Jim knelt in front of him, trying to read his face.

Trent stared at the ground in a trance, trying to remember. “I don’t know.”

“Who’s the guy in the picture?”

“What picture?” Trent asked, still in a daze.

Jim’s face fell. “I bet he still has it on him,” Derrick suggested.

Jim knelt closer. Seeing the edge of it sticking out of Trent’s shirt pocket, he pulled it out. “This picture.” Jim held it in front of Trent.

Trent stared at it for several moments. “He was an informer. He worked both sides... taking out the competition by snitching to the police. There were rumors that he died.”

“Why would he want your wife dead?” Matt asked.

“I...” He spoke slowly. “I killed his wife ... and his sister.”

Melinda, who had just woken up, gasped loudly and then quickly covered her mouth. Jim and Matt turned to look at her. Derrick tried again to get the whole story. “Why’d you kill them?”

Trent shook his head as if he didn’t want to remember. “Lots of people got killed. There was a big fire at the compound.”

“But *you* shot them?” Derrick tried to clarify.

“Yes. I shot them!” Trent snapped. “They were armed.”

“Just calm down.” Jim slapped his hand down on Trent’s shoulder. “At least now we know a little about what’s going on?”

Matt was still trying to figure out Melinda’s gasp. He kept looking back and forth between Melinda and Trent wondering. *They do kind of look alike at that. Nah... well, maybe.*

“While we’re sitting here talking, anything could be happening to Teresa. It’s time to quit talking and go get her!” Trent started to get agitated again.

“Go right ahead.” Derrick got up and grabbed a plastic fork and a can of pineapple from the bag.

“Derrick, you can’t seriously mean you’re not going to help us. You’re the only one that’s been there... the only one that knows what’s going on up there!” Now, Jim was starting to get irritated with Derrick and his casual, ‘don’t care’ attitude.

“It’s his ballgame.” He thumbed over his shoulder at Trent as he sat back down. “I’m not going to follow him off the side of a cliff, which is probably what you guys are going to end up doing.” He popped the can and tossed the lid back toward the bag.

“Sure. You can walk away.” Matt let his voice turn skeptical. “Tell me, if people die, will you have a clear conscience?”

“Won’t be my fault.” Derrick took a bite and chewed slowly, staring straight ahead and trying not to let Matt’s steely stare shake him. “I’ll be around,” He looked down into his fruit as he talked, “but I work alone. I’m not taking orders from anyone.”

“At least tell us where we stand with Sandervaugh.” Jim sat back on his heels. “What are we up against?”

Derrick put the fork in the can of half-eaten fruit and turned around. First he looked at Trent, who’s face had softened again, then at Matt and Jim, who both looked eager to hear, and quickly at Melinda, who was just coming over. “Like I said, they’re hold up in the cave. Your wife’s chained to a bar and padlocked. That’s why I got the saw. Didn’t see anyone else but Carlos. I don’t think Carlos is in on it. He just got caught in the middle, and he’s doin’ what he has to, as he sees it, to stay alive. He’s got family in Mexico, and it appeared that he made a deal with the killer for a helicopter ride out of the country.”

“And you don’t think he’s in on it.” Trent sneered.

“He was supposed to kill me, and he didn’t.” Derrick sighed. “He just drugged me.”

“Well, that was noble of him.” Trent’s voice was pure sarcasm.

“Maybe he just didn’t use enough drug,” Matt was skeptical. “Could have been a mistake.”

“He had opportunity to try again.” Derrick paused to take a bite. “Just know, if Sandervauh ordered to kill me. That probably means he doesn’t intend to leave any witnesses.”

“He’s just one man.” Trent took his gun out and pulled it apart to clean it.

Derrick shrugged. “Ye-eah... we think.”

Trent cleaned his gun with a vengeance. “Get some food. Make sure your guns work, and then let’s go.” He gritted his teeth, not looking up as he talked.

“What’s the plan when we get there?” Matt’s face spelled concern. Melinda came and stood next to him. Trent didn’t answer.

Jim stood back up. “How’d you get in the cave? You go in the back?” He looked earnestly at Derrick.

“I went out the back. Goin’ in I crawled behind the brush in the front up to the entrance.”

“There was enough cover with no leaves?”

Derrick nodded as he chewed. “There were dead leaves in the back that had to be removed ‘cause of the sound.”

“I would think you’d make more noise moving them than just avoiding them.” Trent dried the parts of his

weapon that were still wet.

“No-o.”

Trent put the gun back together and stood up. “We’ll decide what we’re going to do when we get there, which I intend to be very soon.” He turned and went toward the food. Melinda had already gotten some and was sitting down on the fallen tree eating. Matt took out his revolver and emptied it as he went over. He figured he’d dry it and then put fresh ammo in it, just in case. “You going to be able to use that thing if you have to?” She asked as he sat down next to her.

He nodded. “If I have to.”

“I don’t think I’d be able to kill another person even if my life was in danger.”

“Even if you knew you were going to die?”

“I don’t know.” She stared off thoughtfully. “I doubt it... too many years dedicated to saving lives, I guess.” She smiled.

He took out his handkerchief and started pulling it through the barrels. “Sometimes to save lives you have to be willing to kill.”

“Are you?”

It was Matt’s turn to stare off thoughtfully. “I’d have to be very sure that inaction would cost somebody their life. Maybe I’d end up waiting too long. I don’t know.” He went back to drying. There were a few moments of silence before Matt interrupted it. “Tell me something. Why’d you gasp when Trent was telling about what happened to the snitch?”

Melinda swallowed hard, thinking a moment how to answer. “It was just such a shock.” Her eyes darted back and forth. “First, everyone’s convinced it’s Carlos and then this other guy comes into the picture and it turns out he has the perfect motive. It’s weird.”

“Interesting though.” Matt stared deep into her eyes even as they darted trying to avoid his penetrating stare. “Trent killed his wife and sister and now this guy is trying to kill you and Teresa.” He didn’t relinquish the stare, but Melinda still refused to meet it.

“Yeah, funny, isn’t it?”

Matt gave a half smile at her increasing nervousness. “You do kind of look alike at that.” His smile widened as she turned and looked at him in near horror. “Does Trent know?”

She looked away, starting to rub the top of her legs nervously. “Only if he figured it out like you did.”

“How did you find out, and why didn’t you tell him?”

She shrugged. “There was no reason to. I had no idea about this guy. Everyone kept saying it was Carlos. My mom told me right after my dad’s funeral.”

“Don’t you think Trent has a right to know?”

She shrugged again. “He has a family, a good family that raised him.”

“Yeah, still I’d think he’d want to know.” Holstering his gun, he stood up.

“He may, if he is as perceptive as you are.” She looked up at him.

“I don’t know. I think if he knew, we’d know it.” He turned to go toward the food. “Oh, grab me an energy bar,

will ya?"

"Sure."

Hearing the sound of chopper blades spinning above him, Carlos slowly woke up and then quickly sat up as he remembered where he was and realized what was happening. Standing, he watched as the chopper slowly came in for a landing. Swallowing down a large lump in his throat, Carlos ran into the wind of the chopper just hoping he remembered how to act with these people.

Running to the door, he was stunned at who opened it. "Hey, Juan!"

Carlos jumped into the chopper, grabbing his arm just as the man pulled him forward into an embrace, slapping his back and saying. "Me amigo, it's been years. I never thought to see you again, my friend."

"No, me either," he stepped back grinning from ear to ear, "not unless I got back down to Mexico."

"You should have made an effort, my friend."

Carlos nodded enthusiastically. "You're right I should have tried harder, but hey, it's happening now, right? Hey, man, how's life been treating you? You working for the Mendozas now?"

"Si." He nodded. "The Mendozas very good family to work for, very prosperous in their business."

"They must be," Carlos pulled lightly on his friend's shirt. "Not doing bad yourself I see. Really moving up in the world, huh?"

"Oh, Si. There is much opportunity when you know the right people. Come, sit down. I will tell you all the news."

"All right." Carlos followed him to the back as the chopper started to take off again.

Showdown

“Over here you can see the cave,” Derrick turned as he left the trail. The others followed. Trent felt angry, but he had swallowed his pride and let Derrick lead because everyone had agreed that no one else was one-hundred percent sure about the way. Beginning to crawl, Derrick made his way behind a large fallen oak. The others followed all trying to remain hidden. “There it is.” Derrick looked over the log with the other men. Melinda didn’t risk it.

“Look at that!” Jim whispered loudly.

“What?” Trent and Matt turned toward him. Derrick tried to follow his gaze. “That thing circling.” Jim pointed. “It’s no bird. I bet it’s a drone.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Trent sounded frustrated.

“It’s just another hurdle to climb.” Jim spoke calmly.

“I bet there’s one guarding the back as well,” Matt suggested.

“Probably,” Derrick agreed.

“Before we start,” Jim turned around and leaned back against the log. “I think we should pray. I know the Lord is in charge of this day and its outcome, but I’m not sure that he’ll give us the victory if we don’t ask Him. We need to ask him.” Derrick nodded, turning around. Then so did Trent and Matt. Jim knelt down on one knee and bowed his head, then so did Derrick. Trent stayed seated but bowed his head. Matt stayed seated, brought one knee up to his chest and rested his arm and head on top of it. Melinda knelt on both knees, folded her hands and tilted her head back, facing up toward the sky. They all closed their eyes as Jim began. “Lord, keep us safe, all of us including Teresa... and the ones we left home. We’re going now to try and free Teresa. Please, go with us. Help us to be strong in the Lord and in the power of your might. You know what we’re going into a whole lot better than we do. Please, show us the way. Make the crooked paths straight. Please, protect us. You said that the angels of the Lord camp round about them that fear you and delivereth them. Please deliver us. Give us wisdom. Wisdom comes from You who made heaven and earth. I know this could go really bad for us if we make a mistake. Please, don’t let us. Please, show us the way, and keep us safe. In Jesus name, I pray, Amen.

Derrick prayed next. “Jesus, you said, We have not because we ask not, so we’re asking. We’re asking that you keep us all safe and that you make us successful. That we will all go home today, unharmed. That we will all be able to celebrate your birth next month with joy because none of us is lost. Please bring this young mother home to her husband and children. Make right win and evil fail... always Lord. In Your name, I pray.

There was silence a moment then Trent went. “Lord, you see my wife, Lord. She’s held down there in chains, Lord. Please, free her, and bring her home to us, Lord. ... Lord, don’t let my children have to grow up without their mother, Lord. Even if I don’t make it back, Lord. Just protect her life, Lord, and bring her home.

Melinda continued. “Our gracious heavenly Father, please be with us today. Please, have your will in all that happens. Please, do what’s best for everyone that’s involved. Please, don’t let anyone get hurt or killed. Please, help us. Give us all your courage and strength. Please protect Teresa’s life and all of us. Don’t let this evil man kill any of us. Help this to be settled quickly, even so that this troubled man is not killed. Please make him to get the help that he

needs, and Father, please help Carlos. I don't know what's going on with him, but You do. Just please help him, and help us.

Matt finished. "Lord, we're going to go, now, and we're going to do our best, but the results are up to you. We know that whatever happens will be best, if we can respond to it, rightly. Help us to live according to your will, whatever the outcome is. We pray that we will all go home safely and be able to continue our lives as before... or even better. Help us to take what we learn up here to be better people and better Christians. Please go with us now as we go and prosper us. Most of all, let your will be done, and help us to accept it. In Jesus name.

They all looked up. "Okay, well, what's the plan?"

Trent turned back to look over the log, thinking a moment as he assessed the situation. "I want a man posted in front and one in the back. I'll go down behind the brush on one side. I want Jim to go behind on the other. Then we'll see what we should do from there. We'll keep in contact through texting, if the signals hold."

Matt checked his phone. "Got a signal."

Jim checked his. "Very weak for me."

Derrick shook his head. "No signal."

"I've got a signal. If something goes wrong, the person in front and in back will shoot down the drones and close in."

"Don't have a gun. Carlos took it."

Trent rolled his eyes. "Well, wait," Jim put up his hand. "It'd be better if Derrick came with you anyway, since he's already been down there."

"I'm not taking orders from him!" Derrick progressively lowered his voice, realizing it was too loud.

Jim shot him a look. "I'll stay here and shoot," he finished.

"I'd rather have you with me," Trent demanded.

Jim slowly shook his head, looking down. "I'm not giving up my gun."

Trent turned to Matt, who turned to look at Melinda, thinking as how somebody needed to make a special effort to protect her. "I don't want to either." Trent turned back to Derrick, but his pride didn't allow him to beg. "Do what you want. I sure don't need you. Jim, you stay in the front. Matt, you come with me. I'll show you how to get to the back when we get to the place where we split." Without waiting for a reply, Trent started to crawl away.

Matt followed, snagging Melinda's arm on the way by. "You come with me." She did.

For a minute, Jim just watched them leave. Then, he turned to Derrick. "You gonna let him go it alone?"

"That's what he wants. I may go down there just to see what happens, but that's all."

Jim tried not to smile as he watched Derrick start to leave. "Sure."

Derrick turned back. "If it was me, I'd have two people crawl behind the bushes in front, two people go down the tunnel from the back, and Trent announce his presence and walk in the front door to speak to the guy. This way we're too spread apart." He turned back to go.

"How would you get someone down the back way with a drone there?"

"I'd find a way... that is, if there is one there." He headed out, not waiting for further comment. Jim watched him a ways and then turned his attention back to the drone, making sure he had it in his sights in case it started to

bare down on either Trent or Derrick.

“Good morning, kids!” Jess greeted enthusiastically as Trent’s kids came lethargically walking into the kitchen.

“Morning.” John forced a smile as he helped his little sister into a chair.

“How are you all this fine morning?” They all looked up at her like she was crazy. “Um, did you sleep well?”

“No,” Mary stated flatly.

Strike Two.

“Sit by me.” Morgan scrambled down from her chair, hurried over and grabbed Mary’s hand. Mary followed reluctantly.

“Not because of you,” John clarified politely. “It’s just all that’s been going on.”

Jess nodded, forcing a smile and turning back toward the griddle. “You all like pancakes?” She flipped one on the outside edge.

“Yes ma’am.” Mary was still melancholy.

“I love pancakes... so does Martha.” John smiled at his little sister.

“Pancakes!” Martha grinned, grabbing the sugar bowl as she talked. John hurriedly reached and took it away.

Jess started flipping the rest on the griddle. “We’ve got peanut butter, maple syrup, strawberry jam, orange marmalade, and chocolate chips. Oh, and there should be a spray can of whipping cream in the fridge, too.”

Silence. “Sounds good, Ma’am.”

“That’s good.” Her voice was nearly a whisper.

“I want my mommy!” Mary broke into tears.

Momentarily, Jess clenched her fist and closed her eyes, *help*, before going to “try” and help with the meltdown. *Jim, come home, now, so I can strangle you!*

After making a wide loop and successfully avoiding all drones, Trent reached his side of the cliff and made his way behind the bushes. He froze, his heart nearly stopping when he saw the drone spin around and start heading in his direction. He didn’t move a muscle and after a while it stopped right across from him, turned back, and returned to its circuit. For a moment, his heart sank wondering if it saw him, but when it turned back, he dismissed it. He moved carefully but quickly.

“Look, mommy!” Morgan stopped eating, jumped down from her chair, and ran over to the door, looking out the large circular window. “It’s snowing, mommy! It’s snowing!” Jess stood up and went over to the door, opening it. The other kids followed, lethargically.

Larger, fluffy flakes swirled down in a blizzardous fashion. “Can we go out, mommy, please?” Morgan stared up at her with sparkling blue eyes.

“Sure. Let’s get our coats and go out.” Jess took Mary’s hand in one hand and Martha’s in the other.

“Yeah!” Morgan went running ahead. John, hands in his pockets, ambled slowly behind.

Jim ran through the trees and then crawled the rest of the way to a good vantage point, where he could get a good shot at the drone if need be, yet he was very careful not to move when the drone was close in its circuit so it wouldn't pick him up. Getting down, he hid behind a relatively small log and watched. He could see just the faintest rustle of the brush where Trent was, but not enough that anyone would notice. He just hoped the drone didn't. He saw nothing at all on Derrick's side, which made him wonder if he had gotten there yet.

Derrick moved slowly and cautiously, a little more quickly than last night because his path was nearly clear. A few leaves had blown back and needed to be recleared. He figured he had plenty of time since it would take Trent a while to clear his side. The further he went, the more he wished he'd been more emphatic about this suggestion to clear the leaves as he heard a faint, *crunch, crunch* coming from the other side. He didn't like giving advice to Trent mainly because he didn't like getting his head bit off, but this way he was sure he was going to get it shot off. Derrick gritted his teeth as he neared the cave's mouth and Trent came *crunch, crunching* into view. If looks could kill, Trent would have been a goner. Derrick only hoped the gunman hadn't heard inside.

Matt was breathing hard as he climbed the hill. He kept one eye on the drone circling around the back entrance the entire time. Halfway up the hill, he stopped for a breather just as snowflakes began to lightly fall. “It's snowing.” Melinda's voice was soft beside him.

“Yeah.” Tilting his head back, he let the melting snow refresh his face, quickly thanking God for its cool goodness as the flakes melted on his sweaty arms and neck. As they resumed trudging uphill through the trees, he began praying for everyone's safety in the ensuing battle and continued praying until he reached the top.

“Trent! Trent Henry!” Derrick's heart froze at the gunman's voice. He inched backwards into the brush, making sure he was well concealed. “I know you're out there! You've got two minutes to come in unarmed or I'll blow your wife's brains out,” he laughed. “then you can have her back... if you still want her.”

Fire rose in Trent's stomach. Standing, he broke out of the bushes, giving a strong glare of hatred toward the gunman. Slowly reaching for his gun, he tossed it into the brush on the other side. Derrick jerked his head back as he saw it coming, but it still slammed into his arm when it landed. *Ummm*. His mind yelled, but he refused to make a sound. “What do you want from me, you murderous son of satan?” Trent nearly spit on the words.

“I want to see you die, and I will. First, you will see your wife die just as you saw your sister.”

Derrick's ears perked up. He thought Melinda was dead? Well, that was something at least. As long as, he didn't figure out the truth, at least she was safe.

“Which sister?” Trent was feeling confused.

“What's the matter with you cop? You only have one sister!” Trent stared at him blankly. “Melinda, you *****!”

“Melinda?” He stared down, thoughtfully, and jerked his face back up in anger and vengeance. “It didn't work! You're a no good failure! You couldn't kill her, and you won't kill us!”

Rolling his eyes exaggeratedly, Derrick shook his head. *Now, that we're all on the same page, and he knows she's still alive....* Suddenly, Derrick wondered if Trent would try trading Melinda for Teresa. He was sure not.... He

hoped not.... It wasn't happening while he was here!

"What are you talking about, Fuzz?"

"She's not dead!"

"She is dead!" He raised his gun higher!

Grasping the gun, Derrick inched closer, wondering if he should close in. There'd be shooting if he did. He was sure of that... and Trent would be right in the crossfire... yet still.

Bang! ... Bang, Bang, Bang! Derrick squinted to see through the brush. He could see just enough to see the front drone falling to the ground. The first shot must have been Jim's. The other three must have been Matt's. He wondered if Matt finally hit it... or gave up.

Cursing, the gunman looked at his phone and then threw it sending it crashing and shattering into the wall right next to Teresa. Teresa screamed. Trent stepped in her direction. The gunman fired in front of him. Trent stopped and turned back. "You'll pay, Cop! So, will your friend. So will Carlos. Bring him in here!"

"Who?"

"NOW!!!" His face was purple with anger.

Trent turned toward the cave's mouth, his mind racing at who to call. Derrick was the closest, but he was so careful the gunman probably hadn't seen him. Matt was the least experienced and probably the most likely to be seen, especially with Melinda tagging along. Jim was the one he would want by his side in here. Still, he was the one he least wanted to get killed. The gunman had to of known there were two... unless he figured both drones could be shot down from the front. "Now!" He saw the gunman raise his gun again. He was sure he was angry enough to shoot him down right now. The hair on the back of his neck bristled, but he didn't turn around. "Jim! Jim, he knows you're out there! You have to come in!" Momentarily, Trent waited to die or for the gunman to kill his wife, but nothing happened. He watched as Jim came toward them. Everything was silent.

Derrick waited impatiently in the bushes. When Jim got close, he wanted to jump out. He was sure, between both of them, they could get the gunman before he got Trent. He needed Trent to move in order to get a clear shot of Sandervauh

"Tell him to put down his gun."

So much for that idea.

"Jim! Jim, he wants you to throw down your gun! You'd better do it, Jim!" He did, and then continued to walk in.

Derrick began backing up. He could only hope that Matt had gotten his drone and that they could sneak in the back way. *Seriously, what has this world come to when your only ally is a pistol packin' ER doc?* He backed up a little faster yet remained totally silent.

As Jim came, Trent turned back toward the gunman. "Who are you? You're not Julian. You would have aged." Trent was remarkably surprised at how much he did resemble the picture, a little older but not enough, a little shorter and stockier.

"I'm his son. I will avenge my father since he's grown too weak and cowardly."

"All by yourself?" Trent tried to determine if he had any help.

"You will watch your wife and your sister die just as my father did," he hissed.

“How are you going to manage that? You don’t have Melinda.”

“You will bring her to me!” Jim was just getting to the opening of the cave. “Get in here!” The gunman waved his automatic rifle in Jim’s direction.

Jim walked in calmly. “What’s going on?”

“Over there!” The gunman waved his rifle in Teresa’s direction. Jim shrugged and ambled over there.

“I was just doing my job.” Trent insisted, referring to the incident that killed his mother and aunt.

“You are a killer!” The gunman growled.

“So are you,” Jim interrupted, leaning back against the wall next to Teresa. The gunman swung violently in Jim’s direction, aiming his gun. Jim didn’t react. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes!” he hissed, straightening his back and turning back toward Trent. “And I will kill anyone who hurts me or mine,” he growled. His eyes were as steel glaring into Trent.

“I was just doing my job.” Trent’s voice was quieter, and at one point nearly shook.

“So. Am. I.” He aimed his gun.

Jim was afraid he was going to squeeze the trigger. “You kill him, now, and he won’t see anyone die.”

“You will bring me Melinda.” He waved his rifle. “Over there with the others.”

Backing out of the brush, Derrick jumped to his feet and ran toward the top of the cliff. He couldn’t make out what they were saying inside, but he could tell by the tones that the situation was desperate. He asked for every ounce of speed as he barreled around the cliff and up the hill to the top, keeping an eye out for any drones just in case Matt missed.

Trent knelt down next to his wife so grateful to be able to see her, to be near her. “Trent.” She bit her trembling lip and reached her free hand around his neck. Trent bent forward to gather her in an embrace, but as soon as he did the gunman jabbed him in the shoulder with the barrel of his rifle. “Get up.”

“You just said....”

“I said get up!” He kicked him in the shoulder, throwing him against the wall.

Jim seized the opportunity and lunged forward, but the gunman swung around jabbing his rifle barrel right into Jim’s stomach. Jim quickly stopped and backed up. Trent jumped to his feet but stopped as the barrel turned back toward him. “Now, go call your other friend.”

“Who?”

The gunman’s glare was so fierce his face began turning purple.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t take me for a fool, you ****. You had to have two **** men to shoot down the **** drones!”

“Jim shot them down.” Trent lied. “He could see them both from his vantage point.” The gunman glared at Jim. Jim didn’t react one way or the other.

“Bring him here, NOW!” The gunman stubbornly demanded.

“Who are you...?”

“DERRICK!”

“You brought Derrick up here.” Jim tried to confuse the gunman.

“He’s not dead! I saw him!”

“Was he supposed to be dead? The police think he came up here to help Carlos... and well, that would be you too.” It wasn’t a lie. Jim was careful about that.

“He’s not helping me!” The gunman yelled, running his one hand roughly through his hair and slamming the rifle down against the side of his own leg with the other. Walking around aimlessly, he did seem to be confused. Jim tried not to smile, but he was grateful.

Matt and Melinda went over to Derrick as he came to the top of the hill. “What’s happening?” Matt asked quickly.

Derrick took a moment to catch his breath but only a moment. “Did you get the drone? I didn’t see it, but...”

“Yeah. I got it. Took a couple tries.”

“As long as you got it. You okay?” He looked toward Melinda. She nodded. Derrick huffed a laugh. “The killer thought you were dead.”

Melinda’s eyes brightened. “Great!” Her voice was hopeful.

“Don’t get excited. Trent corrected that impression.”

“Grea-at.” Her voice changed to gloomy sarcasm.

“Why’d he do that?” Matt’s voice was angry.

“I don’t know.” Derrick shrugged. “I was thinking about that. Maybe he was trying to buy time. The gunman really wants to kill both Melinda and Teresa before he kills Trent. Right now, he doesn’t have Melinda.”

“Let’s keep it that way.” Matt’s voice was deep and commanding.

“Of course.” Derrick began walking toward the hole to the tunnel. “I’m going to need your help to get them out of there. Jim’s in there with them.”

Melinda and Matt followed. “What is he planning to do to them?” Melinda’s voice was high pitch.

“Nothing good.” Derrick stared down into the tunnel, thoughtfully.

“Do you have a plan?” Matt came to a stop on the other side of the hole.

“Nothing elaborate. Just go in by the tunnel. It will come out at the back of the cave where they’re at, but the tunnel’s so dark they won’t be able to see us. Then just wait for the right moment to overpower him. If all else fails, one of us could jump out and yell to get him to turn around and the other one could shoot him.”

“Why not just shoot him in the back?” Melinda inquired.

“If you don’t kill him on impact, he could still shoot whoever he’s aiming at.”

“Ready?” Derrick nodded toward Matt. “Got your gun reloaded?”

“Oh... no.” Matt grabbed three bullets from his pocket.

“Hey, you found a gun.” Melinda noticed.

“Uh, yeah.” Derrick rubbed his bruised arm. “Present from Trent.” Matt returned his gun to his holster. “Ready?” Matt nodded.

Melinda peered down into the darkness. “Long ways, isn’t it?”

“You’re not coming.” Derrick demanded, almost surprised she was considering it.

“I’m certainly not staying here alone.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I don’t want to leave her here either.” Matt put his arm securely around her.

“What do you want to do, deliver her express shipping to that guy? Something could go wrong. He could get us. If he gets her, it’s all over. This is the safest place for her.”

“I don’t want to stay here alone.” Her voice was weak, and her body started to quiver. Derrick couldn’t see it, but Matt could feel it.

“Then you shouldn’t have come.” Derrick demanded.

“I won’t get in the way.” She looked pleadingly up at Matt.

“This isn’t going to be something you want to see!”

Matt held her even tighter. “It’s up to you Derrick. I’m not going without her. You take us both, or you go alone.”

“I don’t know if I can do it alone.” Derrick hated to admit. “That’s why I came to find you. But taking her, it could get her killed. It could get us all killed.”

“It won’t.” Her voice was high-pitched.

“You’d have to handle yourself a lot better than you’re doing right now.”

“I will. I promise.” She tried to calm her voice.

“Give me your word.” He stared deep into her eyes. “Give me your word that if we get taken, you will stay behind. I’ll go before Matt, but if we both get taken, you have to remain hidden because if he has you, he has all the cards.”

She nodded slowly.

“Give me your word.”

“You have my word.” Her voice was soft, but she sounded as if she meant it.

“A-ll right.” He sounded unsure as he crunched down to go in the hole. “I’ll go first. This climb is tricky. She’s probably going to need a lot of help.” He looked at Matt. Matt nodded.

“Here we go, bacon, eggs, and a cup of fruit, a good hearty breakfast for our skinny little mama.” Mrs. Sanders

set the tray down on the end table next to Taylor.

“I am not an old, worn-out mother.” Taylor’s voice broke as she blinked back tears and looked in the other direction.

“No. You are a young, charming, very beautiful, mother.”

Taylor put her hand to her mouth, choking back a sob. “I am not a mother!”

“Yes, you are, dear, and it’s not a dirty word.”

“Just go away. Go away and leave me alone.”

Mrs. Sander’s nodded, turning to go. “You know, dear.” She turned back. “While being a mother doesn’t have to be your only job, it can easily be your most rewarding. There is only so much one person can do in this world, no matter how dedicated, but by investing in your children, you will have a part in everything they do as well. You know, I have a friend. She’s quite a bit older than me. But in her lifetime, she had five kids, just five people in this whole vast world, but she invested in them and taught them and loved them. And when they grew up, they all had an impact in the world. One was a doctor. One was a police officer. One was a missionary. Still more than that. They all had children... between two and five each, and they loved and invested and raised them right.” She stepped closer. “They all contributed greatly to the world, no more so than having children of their own. My friend, she has over a hundred descendants living right now, including great great great grandchildren. They are all profitable members of society... all striving to make this world a better place. She brags that not one of them has ever been in trouble with the law, and knowing her, I’m sure it’s true. My friend... well maybe she never had a *real* job, but maybe... just maybe she had the best job of all.” Taylor didn’t respond, so Mrs. Sanders turned to go, but she stopped one more time in the doorway. “Darlin’, just answer me this. What if Thomas Edison’s, Albert Einstein’s, George Washington’s, or Bill Gates’ moms had decided to abort them? Just think what our world would be missing today. You’ve got no idea what that baby could grow up to be or do.”

Knock, knock, knock.

Mrs. Sanders turned and went to the door. “Mark, is that you again?”

“This time it’s serious.”

“Mark, I told you....”

“Your dog’s sick. I found it outside. I think it’s dying.”

“Toto?” She opened the door to see her beloved dog, lying limp in Mark’s arms.

“I saw it come out the doggy door this morning. It was staggering around, walking in circles. Finally, it just fell down.”

“Toto?” She cupped the little dog’s head in her hands. The doggy’s eyes were open and it weakly licked its mouth, but it couldn’t hold its head up.

“Maybe you can do something if you get it to the vet. I’ll carry him out to the car for you.” He turned and left.

“I’ll get my keys.” Mrs. Sanders hurried over to the desk and grabbed her purse. “You’ll be alright for an hour, won’t you, honey? I won’t be long. I’ll call you if I’m any later than an hour.” She hurried out the door and down the sidewalk.

“Mrs. ... Mrs. Sanders?” Taylor called, alarmed that she had forgotten to lock the door. “Mrs. ...” She heard the car start up, and knew she was leaving. Flipping the blanket off her, and putting the footrest down on the recliner, she pushed herself up with the armrests and slowly got to her feet.

Holding her tummy and breathing a little harder from the strain, she made her way to the door, but by time she got there, it was too late. Mark was already coming in. "Good morning, sis." His grin was conceited, self-satisfied, and evil.

"You did it, didn't you?" She sat down on a nearby lampstand table. "What did you do to her dog?"

He grinned again. "Just never you mind about the dog. You and me are going on a little trip."

"I'm not going with you anywhere."

"Oh, yes, you are." He walked toward her. She tried to back up. "You've got ten minutes to pack anything you want to take. Then we are leaving."

"Where?"

"Hurry up." He advanced closer.

She started backing toward the living room. "I can't go up the stairs."

"Yes you can, and you will."

"Mark, get out of here!" She grabbed for her phone on the end table, but he snatched it first and put it in his pocket.

She started to scream, but he slapped her hard across the face. "Don't do that! Now, move!" He chased her up the stairs.

Derrick watched worriedly as they made their way down the wall. He figured he had every right to worry. Matt didn't look all that confident himself, and Melinda was visibly shaking. Reaching for a good hand hold, Derrick just used his arms to swing over above a ledge and then dropped down on it. This part was a tricky level and he figured here on the ledge; he could instruct the other two through it. "Put your foot here," Matt instructed Melinda in a normal voice.

"Whisper!" Derrick reminded them in a loud whisper.

"Right here," Matt whispered. "There you go. Now, put your hand on that rock there. Right. Now, don't let go, yet. Melinda! No! Get the...!" She started to fall. *At least, she didn't scream.* Matt grabbed for her, but couldn't hold on, not to her and the wall both. Derrick grabbed her arm as she went past. She grabbed him with her other hand. Her body slammed against the wall beneath the ledge. Derrick's arm slammed into the ledge, right on top of the bruise. The sharp rock sliced through his skin. It was Derrick that yelped, purely out of reaction. He hoped beyond hope the gunman didn't hear him. He hoped beyond hope, he didn't let go of Melinda. His arm was going weak, and to his surprise, he couldn't pull her up. "Hold on." Matt climbed toward them, slowly because that was the only way he could make it. Derrick tried to make his mind a blank, refusing to let the pain get to him, refusing to let go. Finally, Matt made it to the edge. "Hold on," he spoke softly but not a whisper. Kneeling down, he reached for Melinda's arms and helped pull her up. Getting Derrick's blood on him, he glanced at Derrick as they got her up on the ledge. "You okay?" He asked Melinda first. Breathing hard, she nodded, too drained to talk. "Okay. Then we'd better get this bleeding stopped." He pushed Derrick to sit down and pulled his clean handkerchief out of his pocket, applying pressure to the wound. "You know if you weren't so accident prone...."

"Accident prone!" It was a whisper, just a rather emphatic one.

"Accident prone. How many times have you gotten shot, burned, drug - by a horse or a car, kicked your foot through a window, or otherwise inflicted some sort of bodily harm and then expected me to fix it."

“No one asked you to....” He jerked his arm away, but Matt jerked it back.

“And motorcycles, we won’t even go into that.”

“I can ride a motorcycle.”

“You mean on those rare occasions when you’re actually on top of it instead of underneath it.”

Derrick yanked his arm back and started wrapping the handkerchief tight. “Have you ever stopped to think that all my ‘accidents’ are always brought on by outside influences?” He stared at Melinda, who looked sheepishly in the other direction. “In fact, if it wasn’t for people and animals, I could get totally through my life completely unharmed.”

Matt choked on a sarcastic laugh. “You couldn’t get through life totally unharmed if you lived in a padded room.” He grabbed Derrick’s arm again and tied the handkerchief for him. “You’d probably find some way to blow it up,” he mumbled under his breath.

Derrick just glared at him a few seconds then returned to the matter at hand. “How about we try this again.” Derrick was the first one to resume climbing down. This time he coached the other two until all three finally made it safely to the ground. Both Derrick and Matt helped Melinda down off the last rock, and they all headed toward the tunnel. “Don’t whisper when we get to the tunnel. The sound carries a lot. Keep your hand along the left side of the wall. It’s dark and the tunnel splits toward the end. You won’t go down it, going in this direction, but you’ll lose the wall at the split.”

Matt and Melinda nodded. Derrick took out his gun and went first, running his hand against the wall. Matt nudged Melinda second. She started, but the first place she put her hand was in a cobweb. A spider scampered across her hand, causing her to gasp. Derrick turned around... if looks could kill. She backed up sheepishly. Derrick came back from the tunnel. “You should stay here.”

Grabbing Matt’s hand, Melinda shook her head, stepping closer to him. Derrick rolled his eyes. What happened to the strong, intelligent career woman that saw death every few days? “You can’t do that again.”

“I won’t. I was just surprised.”

“That could happen again.” Derrick looked disapprovingly. Matt looked questioningly.

“It won’t.”

Derrick shrugged and started out again, venturing into the deep darkness. “Just hold my hand,” Matt suggested. “I’ll take care of the wall.” Melinda nodded, holding his hand tighter. “Don’t make any noise.” He reminded right before heading down the dark corridor. Carefully and quietly they made their way to the end, or almost the end. They stopped behind a formation where the wall jutted out and peered around the corner. Derrick went to the other side. Matt and Melinda stayed. Looking into the dimly lit cave, they could see Jim, Trent, and Teresa all sitting together chained to the same metal bar. Derrick wondered how they let that happen. There were cans of food and jugs of water stacked around. There were a few automatic rifles leaning against the wall in different locations, some blankets, a few twelve packs of beer, and some battery powered lanterns about. The one thing none of them saw was the gunman. He didn’t seem to be in there. Derrick sprinted back over to Matt’s side and risked whispering since the gunman wasn’t around. “I left the hacksaw in the brush right next to the ‘door’. I’m going to get it and try to saw them free before he gets back. I need you to cover me. If you see him coming back, start shooting at the door... before he can come in or aim his gun. Don’t take time to aim. You probably won’t hit what your aiming at anyway and by then it’ll be too late. Just keep him out.

Matt nodded and reached for his gun. “Okay.”

Derrick peered around the corner one more time and then headed in. “Derrick,” Teresa whispered as he came

into view.

“Shhh.” He didn’t go over to them, but rather made his way toward the door, staying to the side so as not to be seen. Stopping to the side of the opening, he reached his arm around and grabbed the saw just as the gunman stepped up to the door. Matt fired, barely missing Derrick, but missing the gunman by a mile. The bullet ricocheted off the wall and bounced off three more rocks before finally falling to the ground. Matt didn’t fire again, not after seeing the path of that bullet.

Putting his rifle to Derrick’s head and pulling him up by his shirt, the gunman shouted toward the tunnel. “Come out, now, or your friend’s done for.” All of a sudden Derrick didn’t know who he wanted to come out. If Melinda came out, they were out of a bargaining chip. If Matt came out, they were out of fire power. He walked toward the tunnel with Derrick.

Melinda pulled Matt back as he started to go. “I’ll get Derrick away. You shoot him.” She whispered as soft as she could.

“What?” the gunman bellowed.

“I’m coming!” Melinda ran out. “Don’t shoot him! Oh, Derrick!” She ran and fell into his arms as if there was something between them. No one was more surprised than Derrick, but he caught her anyway. She transferred her weight, causing him to fall to the side. Soon as they were clear, Matt jumped out, aimed for the heart, and fired, hitting the gunman squarely in the leg. The gunman reacted in pain, dropping his rifle. Steadying the gun, Matt aimed again right for the heart, and fired, nicking the gunman in the right arm. Yelling and grabbing his arm, the gunman backed up. Matt fired again. The bullet this time, spiriting up dirt and embedding in the ground right between the killer’s legs. The killer turned and ran. Derrick ran for the saw and grabbed it. Matt sprinted forward and kept firing out the opening. Derrick ran and slid next to Jim, starting to saw before he had stopped sliding. Soon, Jim was free! Then so was Trent. The saw blade broke. With all the might of his adrenalin, Derrick grabbed the chain, then so did Jim. They yanked in unison. The bar bent and the chain snapped. Teresa was free! ... or almost. Matt ran out of ammo and started to reload. “Let’s go!” Jim yelled. They jumped up. Trent pulled Teresa up. They all raced for the tunnel. Melinda sprinted to the front, sprinting down it. Trent, Teresa, and Jim followed hot on her heels.

Matt was still reloading. “Go!” Derrick yelled as he went past Matt, heading the other direction himself and out the front door. He wasn’t giving up on getting this killer! Soon as he was through the door....

KA-BANGGG!!!

Explosive Circumstances

Derrick hit the dirt! Matt was thrown by the concussion out the front of the cave. Melinda, who was already through the tunnel, hit the dirt and covered her head. Trent was thrown hard against the wall and knocked unconscious! Jim, being forced to the ground right next to Teresa, covered her with his body for a shield as beams, rock, and debris fell from the ceiling. Jim grimaced as a beam pinned his legs and something sharp pierced into his shoulder. He heard Teresa scream, but couldn't tell if she was hurt. He couldn't tell anything in the darkness. More beams fell. One landed inches from crushing his back, but remained propped up by the wall. Once the rumbling and crashing stopped, for a moment there was nothing but a deafening silence, one that caused Jim to wonder if they were all dead.

"Matt? Matt?" Derrick got to his knees and tried to wake his unconscious friend. He didn't move him, in case his back was broken, but he wasn't getting any response. He checked his pulse - good and strong, and he was breathing. He rubbed his arm gently, "Matt?"

"Teresa? Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Not being pinned, she rolled out from underneath him, but quickly grabbed his shirt again for reassurance. "It's so dark!" Her voice squeaked. "I can't see a thing!"

"I know."

"Jim? Trent?" They could hear Melinda calling from the other side of the tunnel.

"Melinda?" Jim yelled as loud as he could. "We're trapped! At least, I am! I'm pinned! Can you find some light somehow and bring it to us?"

"All the lanterns are on the other side!" She started to venture down the tunnel. "Maybe I can help get you free!" She stumbled over a rock and fell into the darkness, slamming her forearm on a board when she landed. "Oww!"

"You need light, Melinda! We don't even know where everyone is!"

That sent Teresa in a panic. "Trent!" She began searching wildly with her hands. "Trent!"

"I can't climb all the way up by myself!"

"I bet you can if you try!"

Melinda stood up and tried advancing further down the tunnel. "I'll kill myself!"

"Well, don't do that, but I bet you can do more than you think!"

Melinda stopped when she ran into some boards. She tried to find a way under or over it, but the nest of boards were so entwined, she couldn't. "The tunnel's blocked!"

"You're gonna need light."

"Oh, okay. I'll try." She started to turn around, but then turned abruptly back. "What if I run into the killer?"

"Do you have a gun?"

"No."

"Don't run! Go very very carefully, and don't be seen!"

Melinda shook her head in disbelief that she was really in this situation. She felt like she was in a dream. Her heart sped up, and her breathing quickened. She needed someone to help her, anyone, even if it was someone just to remind her that she was in reality. Reaching the rock wall, her body began to shake. She tried to slow her breathing. She tried to keep from hyperventilating. Placing her shaking hand up on a good hold, she managed to pull herself up onto the first rock. "I can't do this. God, help me! I can't do this!"

"Matt?" Finally, Matt began to raise his head, but he didn't look at Derrick. First, he stared straight ahead. Then he looked to the right, back ahead, and finally, over at Derrick. "Matt?" Matt's face spelled confusion.

Matt stared at Derrick for a long time, initially just trying to remember what happened, which he did, but then.... He could see Derrick's lips moving, but he couldn't hear him. In fact, he couldn't hear anything... birds, leaves, the wind. All he could hear was a very loud ringing. Jumping to his feet, he started to panic. His heart jumped into turbo speed. Rubbing his head, he started pacing back at a lively pace. He could see Derrick get up and come over. He felt him touch his arm. He could see his lips moving, but he couldn't understand what he was trying to say. He forced his breathing steady, but his pace quickened faster and faster until he started to run. He wanted to run away, run away from this day, run back in time. He wanted his hearing back, now! Before he could run far, Derrick tackled him to the ground and held him steady. First, he struggled to get away, but then he just grabbed ahold of Derrick and let his body go into uncontrolled shaking. *No, God, no!*

"Trent?" Teresa continued to search with her hands. "Trent!"

"Teresa, please try and calm down." Jim almost begged as he yanked and pulled, struggling to try and get himself free.

"He's got to be here. He was right behind me in the tunnel. Trent?"

Jim could tell by her voice she was getting further away. "Don't get yourself...."

"Nooooo!" She screamed it at the top of her lungs.

"What?" Jim yanked as hard as he possibly could, but it was no use. "You found him? Check his pulse? Maybe he's just unconscious." He yanked harder, feeling so helpless.

“He’s dead! No! He’s dead!” Teresa got up and ran toward Jim, tripping over him, yet crawling struggling to get past. Jim grabbed her and twisted her off of him, trying to hold her down when he couldn’t even sit up. She almost made the beam that was over top of him fall.

“Did you check his pulse?”

“He’s dead! I know he’s dead!”

“You don’t know that! You just felt his body, and you think that! Even if his heart’s stopped, there may be time for CPR! Go check! You could save his life, now, by doing it!”

Melinda’s heart froze when she heard the blood-curdling scream, so did her body momentarily, but then she felt a great surge of urgency and adrenalin that made her climb faster and more efficiently. Rock to rock, cliff to cliff, hold to hold... and soon she was up... up and out. *Thank you, Lord.* She didn’t pause for long. She jumped up and started running down the hill, through the trees, over logs, around bushes.

Derrick held Matt tighter, almost trying to force his body to stop shaking, but mostly to try and convey reassurance. He thought of a million things to say, but he couldn’t say them. It was plain to see that Matt’s closeness to the epic blast had rendered him deaf... at least for now. He hoped beyond hope that it wasn’t permanent. He hoped beyond hope that his other friends weren’t dead. He had to find that out, and he had to find out now. Standing up, he lifted Matt with him, let go, stared him in the eye, and mouthed very slowly, “You... will... be ... fine.” Then, grabbing his belt, he led him toward the cave. Normally, he would have just told him to wait there, but in his present condition, he was afraid he would run off... maybe end up killing himself. He wasn’t even sure that Matt’s hearing was the only part of his brain affected by the blast.

Walking into the cave, Derrick looked around. Dust and rock were everywhere. Most of the lanterns were dumped over or thrown. The glass around all of them were broke, but there were two that still had some light bulbs intact. One still shone, and the other one he turned on. “Come on.” He let go of Matt’s belt and motioned for him to follow. Reaching the tunnel, he gave Matt a lamp, but they didn’t go far before being met with a giant wall of rock and dirt... a thick impenetrable wall. Derrick started to dig, but soon abandoned the project. “Let’s try the other way.” He grabbed Matt’s belt again, and they headed out. They walked over to the woods, but just as they were about to enter, they were almost run over by one charging nurse.

“Derrick? Matt!” She quickly fell into Matt’s arms and began jabbering. “It blew up! The cave blew up!” She slowly stepped out of Matt’s embrace.

“We know.” Derrick answered.

“Jim’s trapped! Teresa’s with him. I tried to get to them, but I couldn’t without light. There’s some beams that fell in the way. Maybe with all of us and the lights.” She grabbed them both by the hand and started charging back up the hill.

“What about Trent?”

“I don’t know.” Melinda stopped walking and looked Derrick in the eye. “I heard Teresa scream when I was just getting out of the shaft.” She glanced at Matt, interested in his reaction, but then concerned when she just got a blank stare. She turned back to Derrick, question marks for eyes.

“His hearing got hurt in the blast?”

“He’s deaf?” she gasped. “Nooo!” Her face spelled horror.

“He doesn’t need any more fear.” He shot her a disapproving glance.

“No... of course not.” She tried to force a smile in Matt’s general direction.

Jess climbed the porch steps and fell to her knees beside the patio chair. At this point, she didn’t even care what the kids thought of her. She just had to pray. She had been playing with all the kids in the fluffy, falling snow, but then all of a sudden, a deep, dark foreboding feeling had swept over her, even worse than last night. She didn’t just feel Jim was in danger, she knew it! Burying her face in the chair’s cushion, she began earnestly to pray.

“If he’s not dead, why won’t he wake up?” Teresa’s voice remained high-pitched.

“Just keep checking his pulse... as long as it’s beating... as long as he’s breathing...”

“I’m so afraid it will stop. I’ve never done CPR.”

“But you know how?” Jim wished he could move. He tried to yank his legs free again. He felt so helpless.

“Teresa, I don’t suppose you could move this beam. I mean, if you could just lift it a little, even an inch maybe, I think I could get free.” He heard her scoot over in his direction.

“I doubt it.” She started feeling around in the darkness until she felt his leg and then the beam on top of it. Standing, she tried with all her might to lift it. ... It didn’t budge an inch.

“Here we go again.” Melinda rolled her eyes as they all stood at the top of the shaft, staring down.

“You know, you don’t need to come,” Derrick reminded her. “Why don’t you stay up here and rest?”

“You might need me to help lift.”

Derrick couldn’t help but look insulted, his ego, clearly taking a hit. “I think we can manage it.”

Melinda didn’t care much about his ego. She was more concerned about practicality. I wouldn’t mind staying up here if I knew your inflated sense of masculinity wasn’t going to prevent you from asking for help if you need a third person to lift.” She started to step back, not particularly wanted to go down again.

“Melinda, don’t worry. If us two *men* fail, it’s all you.” He pointed at her enthusiastically and a little bit sarcastically.

She wagged her head at his egotistical sarcasm, turned around, walked over to a tree and sat down.

Trying to suppress a smile, Derrick slapped Matt on the arm and nodded toward the shaft, beginning to head down himself. Matt followed. This time Derrick stuck close by, a little worried about him.

“Jim, I’m scared. I’m just so scared.” Teresa started to cry.

“You have a right to be.” Jim mumbled. “It will be okay, though. I’m sure Derrick was heading in the other direction toward the gunman. I’m sure he made it out and is getting help... Melinda, too.”

“If he was in the cave, he’s probably buried, too. That must have been the killer’s plan all the time... get us all

together and then blow us to the hereafter.”

“I doubt it. I think he wanted to kill everyone one by one. I bet it was just a backup ‘safety’ feature he had rigged.”

“Does it matter? It worked! We’re all going to die in here!” Her voice screeched.

“Teresa, calm,” He tried to yank himself free again, to no avail. “down.”

“Jim! ... Jim!”

Jim pushed himself up higher on his forearms and turned in the other direction. “Derrick!”

“Derrick! Help us!” Teresa’s panic turned to mild relief.

“Derrick, are you okay?”

“Yeah! The way’s blocked by some beams. I think if we move this one, we can crawl through. We’re tryin’.” His voice was strained as they struggled to move it.

“Who’s we? Did you catch up with Melinda?”

“Yeah. There we go.” They yanked the beam the rest of the way out and let it fall to the ground. “She’s up top! I’ve got Matt with me!” Derrick climbed through then waited for Matt to come.

“Good!” Teresa squeaked. “Trent’s hurt!”

“Well... so is Matt!” They headed down the tunnel. “But I’m sure he’ll try!”

“How’s he hurt?” Jim’s voice held concern.

“Lost his hearing from the blast!” Derrick pulled down a couple loose hanging boards.

“No.” It was more of a groan.

“He’ll get it back. I’ve known other guys it’s happened to. There’s an operation, I’m sure.” Derrick quit yelling as he approached closer.

“Trent’s dying!” Teresa squealed impatiently, not exactly knowing since she hadn’t taken his pulse for a while.

“We’re almost there.” Derrick spoke calmly.

Teresa struggled to see around the debris. “I can see your light!”

“We’re comin’.” Derrick held up the light, studying the debris as they drew near. Matt walked a little faster, assessing the situation more quickly, glancing at Jim, but then stepping over him to the other side, making a bee line for Trent when he saw him.

“Please, help him.” Teresa scooted closer to Matt as he knelt down and began examining Trent.

Derrick knelt next to Jim. “You okay, buddy?” He rested his hand on Jim’s back.

“Yeah.” Jim tried to look back at him. “Just a little stuck.”

“Pretty good stuck, I’d say.” Derrick studied the mess of boards and beams on top of him.

“Did you get the gun man?” Jim’s face was hopeful.

Derrick shook his head. “No.” Standing up, he began removing some loose boards.

"My left leg hurts." Jim grimaced as if just realizing the extent of the pain.

Derrick nodded. "Yeah. You've got a shard of wood stuck in it. First, we've got to get you out of here." He lifted the top beam, taking some of the pressure off, but then returned it slowly. For a moment, he just stood there watching Matt and Trent until he was sure Matt was convinced that Trent was stable anyway. Then he went over and took Matt's arm, pulling him up. Matt looked at him questioningly. Derrick pulled him over until he was standing above the top beam and pulled Matt's hands down to the beam. Then Derrick took a few steps toward the bottom beam, wrapped his own hands around it and nodded at Matt. Matt took a deep breath and pulled lifting his beam a good foot. Derrick lifted his up right under Matt's. "Okay, Jim, go!" Jim struggled and pulled his body toward Trent until he was clear, yelling a few times from the pain, but he made it. Derrick and Matt dropped the beams. Jim breathed heavy, groaning some as he rolled onto his back. Matt came over and inspected the shard that was embedded in Jim's calf.

"What about Trent?" Teresa insisted. Matt didn't hear her. Derrick wasn't sure how to go about this. First, he slapped Matt on the shoulder to get his attention. Then he pointed at Jim, then at Trent, put his hands up, and shrugged. Matt looked worried.

"I need..." Matt swallowed hard and stopped. Derrick realized he couldn't hear his own voice. Rubbing Matt's shoulder, Derrick nodded enthusiastically and motioned for him to go on. "Go..." He stopped, but Derrick kept nodding and motioning. "Go back up with Melinda." Matt talked slowly, keeping his eyes glued to Derrick's for reassurance. "Go back to the stream and get the medical bags. Take Melinda with you. Take... take care of her."

Derrick nodded and mouthed, "Okay." Getting up, he grabbed a lantern, climbed through the debris, and took off down the tunnel.

Matt scooted back over to Trent and resumed his examination, trying to determine if his back could be injured and what would be the safest means of extricating him.

"Why are you doing this?" Taylor couldn't hold back the fear she felt as she rode opposite her brother in his car.

"Somebody needs to teach him a lesson. You won't even stand up to him. You just let him run rough-shod all over you. Anything he asks you to do, 'Yes, sir.' Why don't you try licking his boots clean sometime?"

"That's not true."

He raised his eyebrow and glanced over at her. "The sound of it make you sick? It makes me a little sick, too."

"He's changed a lot the past few months. He's not too bad, now. He seems to really seems to be trying, lately. I really don't mind him so much lately." She stared thoughtfully out the window.

"You should. I can't believe you can get used to the way that man treats you!"

"I'd say it's superior to the way you are treating me. I'd rather be left all alone than kidnapped!"

"I'm not kidnapping you. I'm your brother!" His voice was angry.

"Then take me home. I'm supposed to be on bedrest."

"I'll find you a **** bed! Just shut up! I'm sick of your whining!"

Derrick climbed up the rocks and pulled himself through the shaft onto the grass, lying there a moment to catch his breath. Melinda hurried over to him. "Did you get to them?"

Derrick rolled onto his side and looked up at her. "We got to them. Trent's unresponsive. Jim's got a shard of wood in his leg, probably pretty bruised as well. Teresa's okay... a little cut up. Matt stayed with them." Derrick got up. "He wants us to go get the bags." He started to head off. "Come on." He motioned to her. She jogged to catch up.

Jess looked up to see all three girls sitting around her and John on his knees praying a few feet beside her. "I thought you guys were playing." Jess scooted back a little on her knees and then pulled herself to her feet. John stopped praying and looked up. "What's wrong?" Morgan asked, looking worriedly into her mother's eyes.

"I'm sure everything's okay... now."

"You've been praying a long time." Mary's big teal eyes looked worried as well.

"Well, I believe the Lord answers prayer." She offered a hand to Morgan and the other to Mary. "Let's go see the horses. I bet they're getting hungry for their breakfast." Stepping off the porch, the three girls walked beneath the shower of fluffy snowflakes toward the barn. Gathering Martha in his arms, John followed a few paces behind.

"Derrick, slow down!" Breathing hard, Melinda's lungs burned as she tried to keep up. Every time she felt that they were headed for a breather, they weren't. For instance, if the ground finally leveled out, he would run faster. If he slowed down, it would be because the terrain was getting rough. Her heart felt like it was about to explode, and he still didn't even look winded. Hands on her hips, bending forward, she gasped for air. Derrick stopped and turned around, not breathing very hard, just looking annoyed. "I'm doing my best!"

"I know." He walked back and forth as he waited, trying to soften his persona. "We're almost there."

Nearly exhausted, she leaned against a tree. "Why don't you run ahead and bring the bags back."

Derrick shook his head but kept pacing. "Matt doesn't want me to leave you."

"Matt..." She stood away from the tree. "We need to get him to a hospital, too." She resumed walking. "I hope..."

"Yeah." He began blazing the trail again.

"Don't go so fast!"

He stopped. "It's right up here. I can see it."

Breathing heavy, struggling through the brush, she caught up. "Yeah there it is!" Momentary excitement turned to faintness and her body began to fall. "Then we have to walk all the way back."

Derrick caught her. "Mel-in-da." Her body grew increasingly limp, so he had to hold her up. Pulling her out of the brush, he spotted the tree with the rope tied to it and took her over, setting her down beneath. She looked up at him, but still looked dazed. He returned her an unimpressed look. "I'll get you some food." Going over to get the bag and all the way back with it, he kept staring at the rope, looped around one tree on this side and one on the other. The knot where it was tied together was nowhere in sight. The middle of the rope lay under the current. He dropped the bag of food next to her.

"Thanks." Melinda weakly unzipped it and began rummaging threw the cans. Derrick just grabbed one on top, which happened to be a fruit cocktail and popped the lid, drinking the juice as he stared at the ropes.

“What’s the matter?” Melinda finally decided on a can and pulled it out.

“We need that rope to get the others up.”

She popped her lid. “Go get it.”

He shrugged, put the can on the ground, and headed toward the bank. “Okay.”

Melinda watched him a moment and then suddenly scrambled to her knees. “Don’t go in that water! You’ll get killed by that current!”

He turned around. “I won’t get killed.”

“You will if you untie that rope and try to swim back without it!”

“I think I can handle it.”

“It’s too cold! It’s been snowing!”

“It’s not now.”

Derrick’s voice was so calm it was about to throw Melinda into a rage. “Just cut the rope and pull it around!”

Though he already knew, Derrick tugged on the rope to show her. “It’s caught. It won’t pull around.”

“Maybe it won’t be when you cut it!”

“What it will be is too short.” He continued on.

“Derrick!” She got up and started running toward him, but he was already in the water. Shaking her head and throwing her hands up, she yelled after him. “If anything happens, I can’t help you!”

“No one asked you to!” Pulling the rope tight, he held onto it and ran across, surprised when the ground dropped off, but changing instantly from feet to all arms, he kept pulling himself across until his feet hit solid ground again. Without missing a beat, he kept going. Almost to the other side, he found the knot, stopped momentarily and quickly untied it. Holding onto both ends, he quickly climbed up on shore.

Melinda let out a huge sigh of relief as he made it up the other side, but then quickly held her breath again as he got the rope unstuck and jumped back in. Holding both ropes in his grip, he pulled himself forward, a little more awkwardly this time with a few glitches, but he made it across. Breathing heavy, he climbed up on shore, dropped the ropes, sat down on the ground and grabbed his half eaten can of fruit. Melinda smiled, glad to see there was something that could wear him out. Turning around, she went back to finish her can of chicken. “There should be some dry clothes in one of those bags,” she suggested, although, he didn’t look the least bit cold. His breath was steaming.

Jess and the kids stood lined up looking over the pasture fence at the horses eating their hay in the snow. The ground was white. Flakes continued to float down. Each horse had a white snow covered back and mane and a small mound of snow on top their head, except Danny who had shook himself off before coming to the ‘dinner table’. “Well, Thanksgiving’s only four days away. What does your family usually? What do you think they’ll be doing when they get back?” She wasn’t sure if this was a good topic or not, but everyone was so sad and quiet, she thought maybe remembering the good times....

“If they come back,” John mumbled, not looking at her.

“Oh, I’m sure they will be. Probably be back a few days before. Your dad knows what he’s doing. I’m sure of

that." She tried to give them hope.

"Yeah," John mumbled again.

"This is Sunday, isn't it?" Mary questioned.

"Yes, it is. I wish we could have gone to church, but until your daddy gets back, we'd better stick around here."

"They're having their Thanksgiving potluck today, aren't they?" Jim continued his sister's thought.

"I suppose." Jess stared at the horses.

"We've never missed one before."

"On Thanksgiving, we always go to Grandma's. We have turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes!" Mary started to cry. John moved over and put his arm around his sister. She turned and hugged him crying into his shirt. Then Martha ran over to him, beginning to cry and joining the hug. Wide-eyed Morgan came over to her mommy and took her hand, gazing up at her. Jess wildly searched her mind for solutions to this newly established crying jag, all while mentally kicking herself and telling herself not to mention Thanksgiving again!

"You know," Teresa sniffed back tears as she rubbed her unconscious husband's arm. "Thanksgiving's this week. Thanksgiving's always been a special time for my kids. How are they always going to remember Thanksgiving? The week their mother got abducted? The week their father got killed?"

"No!" Jim sat up and spoke emphatically. "They'll remember it as the week both their parents came home safe and sound."

"Safe and sound!"

"We'll get Trent to a hospital. He'll be okay."

"How do you know? You're just a fireman. Will he?" She turned to Matt. His expression was blank. "Will he be okay?"

"If you want an answer, you can't talk like that. Put the light near your face. Speak slowly, simply, and deliberately, like if you were trying to read someone's lips."

She tried it. Holding the light up to her face, she mouthed, "What... is... wrong... with... him." Matt stared back blankly. "This isn't going to work."

"Try it again."

She did, and the third time, he got it. "He's...." She motioned for him to go on. "I can't be sure."

She let her face fall and then grabbed his arm and mouthed. "Tell me!"

"He's..." She motioned and let her face show eagerness to hear. "I'm fairly certain he has a broken arm." She nodded that she understood and motioned for him to continue. "It... is likely a head injury that is preventing him from coming to." She nodded again. "He may have a fractured skull. We'll have to immobilize his head and arm for sure. I don't think his back is broken, but we should improvise a back board anyway. His... his pulse is steady, but weak. It could be simply because he's unconscious or there could be internal bleeding."

Teresa jerked her head back toward Jim in sudden realization. "When they get back, he won't even be able to use a stethoscope!"

"No, but Derrick can."

Out of breath and feeling tired enough to sleep on her feet, Melinda downgraded from a jog to a walk. "Derrick, don't you know a reasonable pace?"

"Come on, we're almost there." He paused, but he looked like he was getting tired, too. It was impossible to distinguish between the water and the sweat drenching his clothes.

"I have to rest a minute." She sat down on an old stump. Derrick set down the medical bag, took off his pack, and leaned against a tree. "What's that?"

"Hmm?" Derrick looked at her.

"Listen."

He did, and the sound grew louder as if it was coming closer... the whirling sound of helicopter blades. Derrick stood away from the tree and listened until he was sure the chopper was landing. Then, he took off running in that direction.

"Where are you going?"

He didn't pause to answer. He just kept booking it in that direction, slowing slightly as he approached. Reaching the edge of the trees, he arrived just in time to see the gunman swinging up into the chopper. Quickly, he pulled out his handgun and aimed just as the chopper was taking off. He was sure if he pulled the trigger, he could bring the chopper down, but he didn't instead he slowly lowered his gun, not sure if that was the right decision or not. If he missed, they would know people were still alive down here. If he brought the chopper down at this range, there would likely be few injuries which would mean he would have to fight, who knows how many, and furthermore they would likely call for back up before he could get to the radio. So, he let them go. At least they were leaving... at least... he hoped. Turning around, he jogged back to Melinda.

"Okay everyone. Go to your rooms, dry off, and change into some dry clothes. I'll start a fire in the fireplace, so you have a nice place to warm up. Then I'll make a nice fresh pot of hot chocolate. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good, ma'am," John finally responded in a rather melancholy voice as all the children, except Morgan trudged their way up the stairs.

"That's good," Jess whispered, watching them go. Morgan stood beside her, holding her hand. "You'd better go change, too." She smiled and swung the little girl's arm.

"Okay, mommy." Morgan grinned and ran off.

Her own little girl brought a brief smile to Jess's own face, but soon she sighed and turned toward the pile of wood and the box of paper. She just hoped this fire was at least a little appreciated.

"When is he going to be back? We've been waiting for ages!" Teresa complained.

"Right now!" Derrick yelled from the end of the tunnel.

"Derrick!" Jim sat up. "Did you get the bag?"

"Yep."

"Everything go okay?"

“Yeah.” Derrick began climbing over the debris. “Saw the gunman leave in a chopper.”

“Do you think, he thinks were all dead?”

“I don’t know.” Derrick set the medical bag beside Matt. “He thought Melinda was dead once. Maybe he doesn’t stick around after... afterwards.”

Matt began rummaging through the bag then stopped and looked at Derrick. “I need....” Derrick looked back and encouraged him to continue. “I need you to help me immobilize him and Jim’s leg. Then...” Derrick motioned for him to go on. “Then I think you should go for help. I don’t think we should try moving them.” Derrick nodded.

“I can make it,” Jim said, pulling himself up on one leg.

“Why?” Derrick pulled a couple things out of the bag. “I can make better time on my own.”

“You need to rest,” Jim continued. “You haven’t been able to catch a break all day.”

“Neither has he,” Derrick nodded toward Trent. “I’ll make it.” He began unwrapping a package.

“Don’t get yourself hurt,” Jim insisted.

“I never do.”

There was silence a moment as they worked until Derrick’s statement registered more fully with Jim. “That’s debatable!”

“You could at least tell me where we’re going. We’ve been driving for hours.”

“Iowa. A friend of mine has a house there were we can stay.”

“Oh, he won’t think it’s odd... you showing up with your pregnant sister?”

“No. He knows about the situation.” Mark took his car into the left lane to pass.

“Why Iowa? Don’t you know it’s harder to get an abortion in Iowa than Illinois?”

“You really think I’d take you to an abortion clinic now?” He took his car back into the right lane without blinking.

“What do you mean?” She looked at him. “I thought that is what you wanted.”

“You really think I’m that stupid?” His voice grew with anger. “You really think I’d let you go to a nurse and spill your guts so I’d get put in jail....”

“Mark, you’re scaring me. What are you going to do?”

“No, what are you going to do. I’ve had a change of heart. I think you *should* have that baby.”

“Why?” Taylor’s eyes held deep suspicion.

“Don’t worry. You won’t have to raise the brat. I know where we can turn a nice profit with an adoption.”

“What if I want to?”

“Want to, what?”

“Raise the brat!”

“I’m not going to let you ruin your life.”

“My life,” she huffed a laugh, “all you’re concerned about is ruining our father’s life.”

“Pretty sure that’s already taken care of!” He turned and smiled at her, causing his car to go slightly off the road.

Runnin’ for Rescue

“A-n-ything else?” Derrick mouthed to Matt. Matt shook his head. “Okay then.” Derrick turned back to Jim “Then I guess, I’ll go. Oh, hey, I brought you some food.” He pulled a can of chicken out of each of his front pockets and one out of his leg pocket. “It was all I could pack for now with the climb down. I could get Melinda to toss a few more down before I go.”

“Why don’t you take Matt with you so you don’t have to come all the way back.”

Derrick nodded. "Okay." He stretched as he got up. "I'll go as fast as I can."

"Just be careful."

Derrick nodded and grabbed Matt's arm, pointing toward the end of the tunnel. Matt looked confused. "I'll stay."

Derrick nodded. "You'll come back." Matt's expression was blank. Derrick tried again. After three unsuccessful tries, Derrick just shook his head and pulled Matt after him. Matt went, but he was obviously clueless as to why.

When they reached the shaft, Derrick stopped and looked up. "Melinda! Hey, Melinda!" Soon he saw her head emerge at the top, looking down.

"How is everybody?"

"Okay. Take a couple cans of food out of the pack for us and then throw the rest of it down, will ya!"

"Okay." She was gone for a couple of minutes. Then, she returned. "Watch out." Derrick stepped back, pulling Matt with him as Melinda dropped the pack.

"Thanks!" Grabbing the pack, he put it on Matt's shoulders, slapped him on the arm, and went to climb the wall, with a final wave before he began.

Matt nodded and headed back down the tunnel. "So, what's going on?" Melinda yelled down to Derrick as he climbed.

"I'm going to hike out and get help for the others." Reaching the top, he grimaced as he pulled himself out. "It's up to you whether you go with me or stay here."

"I don't know. I'd like to go with you and get out of here... but I don't want to cross that river again. Maybe you can handle it, but that water's just too cold for me." She watched him collapse to the ground and roll onto his back exhausted.

"There's a fallen tree downstream." He closed his eyes. "That's how I got across the first time."

"We sure didn't see one." Her eyes lifted to his newly blood-soaked shirt sleeve.

"It's quite a ways down from where you crossed."

"What'd you do to your arm?" She knelt down next to him and started rolling up his sleeve which revealed a pussy blood-soaked handkerchief.

"Just cut it earlier."

"It's infected." She cringed at the wound. "Why didn't you clean it when you had the medical supplies?"

He shook his head but didn't open his eyes. "There wasn't enough to go around."

"Something tells me you put yourself further down on the triage list than your condition warranted." Pushing him on his side, she snatched his handkerchief from his back pocket. It was wet with the dirty river water. "Oh, this isn't going to help. I've got to get you...." She started to stand up, intending to go back down for the supplies, but Derrick caught her by the arm and pulled her back down.

"The antiseptic's all gone." He sat up.

"Well, that was pretty stupid!" She put her hands on her hips. "What do you think's going to happen to those guys if you can't make it."

"I'll make it." He stood up. He wanted to ask her to go with him, but his pride prevented it.

"I'll go with you." She picked up his dirty handkerchief, not sure what to do with it. She squeezed the water out of it and put it in her pocket for now, wrinkling her nose and shaking her head as she glanced back at Derrick's oozing forearm.

"Then let's go." He headed off into the woods. She followed starting to pray as they went. She figured if there was ever a time a group of people needed it, this was it.

"So, what would you all like for lunch?" Jess paused the cartoon she had put on. Trent's kids, who were all laying on their stomachs on the floor, turned back and looked at her with sorrowful faces.

"I don't think we're very hungry," John finally replied.

"I know." Jess spoke softly. "But it's after two 'o clock. You really should eat something." Tears began streaming down Mary's face again.

Morgan got up and came over to Jess. "How 'bout peanut butter and jelly?"

"How does that sound to everyone?" Jess looked hopefully at the other kids. Mary's silent tears turned into quiet sobs. No answer. They just stared back. "Ham and cheese? Turkey? Chicken nuggets?"

"Whatever you want, ma'am." Tears threatened John's eyes. Mary started crying louder. Martha began to sob. Timmy joined in. Jess let herself fall back and bang her head against the top of the chair. *Jim, come home, please!* Morgan crawled up in Jess's lap and wrapped her arms around her mama's neck.

Ding dong! The doorbell rang. Surprised, Jess held securely to Morgan and jumped up. Trent's kids jumped up and screamed. The younger ones all gathering around John. Talking and crying and gasps increased. "Just take it easy. Don't be so loud." Jess put down Morgan and reached inside the cabinet for her handgun. The kid's eyes widened. Loud cries turned to soft whimpers. Morgan grabbed Jess's skirt and went with her. "Go with the other kids," she ordered. Morgan reluctantly obeyed. Carefully, Jess peered around the curtain to the window by the door. "Pastor and Mrs. Thomas?"

"Why would they be here?" John backed with his brother and sisters toward the dining room.

"I don't know." Hiding her gun by her side under a fold in her skirt, she cautiously opened the door with her other hand. She was sure her face was suspicious. Still, it couldn't match the pastor's shocked expression.

"Is everything alright in there?" Mrs. Thomas asked in worried surprise.

"Everything's fine." Jess kept the entrance blocked with her body even as Mrs. Thomas tried to peer in.

"We heard some screams." Mrs. Thomas remained worried.

"We... we just weren't expecting company."

It was Pastor's turn to look skeptical. "You always scream when someone rings your doorbell?"

"Sometimes!" Jess remained indignant. "Was there something you needed?"

Pastor raised one eyebrow. "We were just a little worried about you."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well, none of you were at church, your family, Trent's family, Derrick, Melinda. I was just going to call, but none of you answer your phones either."

“Well, the others are likely out of range. I just haven’t felt much like answering my phone today.”

“Oh,” Pastor nodded. “They all just decided to go fishing today?” He wasn’t done trying to pry for the truth.

“Camping more likely.” Her voice had an annoyed edge to it.

“Mrs. Thomas!” Mary broke free from her brother and came running into the pastor’s wife’s arms, then so did Timmy. Jess rubbed her face, mentally shaking her head.

“Starting a daycare, honey?” Pastor grinned.

“Oh, come in.” Jess grabbed Mrs. Thomas’s arm and pulled her and the kids in. “It’s probably not safe to spend all day talking on the porch anyway,” she mumbled to herself.

Pastor cocked his head. “Since when isn’t it safe to stand on your front porch anymore?”

Jess just gave him a look as Morgan ran over yelling, “Mommy,” and collided with her leg, putting her arms around her mommy and hanging on.

“One thing about your life, Jessica,” Pastor glanced around the messy, kid-filled room, “It can’t ever be classified as boring, can it?”

“Derrick! That tree isn’t any bigger than a balance beam!”

“It’s all we got. Don’t worry. The car’s just a half of mile on the other side.” Derrick was looking increasingly tired.

“That’s a long way if you’re getting swept down by a current.”

“You don’t need to talk like that. We’ll make it.” Suddenly, he stopped abruptly in his tracks.

“What?” Melinda looked at him, scared at whatever he saw or remembered.

“Do you have a key?”

“Derrick! I can’t believe you could come this far and just now realize you don’t have a key!”

Derrick’s face changed to anger. “Do you have a key!”

“Yes, I have a key. Jim gave one to each of us before we left.”

Mild relief showed on his face, but it didn’t mask his grit-teeth determination that showed stronger. “Do you want to go first or me?”

“I’ll go first.” Melinda climbed up on the tree. Secretly, she hoped if she stayed close enough to Derrick that he would catch her if she started to fall. Personally, she was afraid she was putting superman expectations on the man. Still, she was sure he was used to it... after all, everyone did.

Thankfully and due in part to much prayer, they both made it safely across. Melinda checked her phone reception as they walked the rest of the way. “Should have brought Matt’s phone. His gets reception anywhere.”

“Oh, yeah, the phone. See we don’t even need a key.”

“We need a key.” She didn’t look up from her phone. “So, we can drive you to a hospital instead of waiting for an ambulance.”

“Yeah. I could clean it out myself and be fine.”

“Yeah.” Melinda put her phone back in her pocket. “I don’t see your nurse letting that happen.” A few yards after her phone vibrated in her pocket. “Here we go.” She looked at the screen. “Twelve missed calls.” She began scrolling through the numbers.

“And there’s the cars.” Derrick stepped to the side to keep them in view. “Besides we have to wait for the ambulance to guide them in.”

“Guide them in nothing! You’re wounded. Just tell ‘em how to get there.”

“You think you could get back there if I just told you?” He looked skeptical.

“Yeah, well, these guys are professionals. I’ll ask for search and rescue.” She dialed 911 as they stepped onto the road.

“After that, call Jessica. I bet she’s worried.”

Sitting next to Mrs. Thomas, who was holding Mary, Jess held Morgan in her own lap as the two-hour cartoon was just coming to a close. Pastor was in the kitchen making sandwiches, and John and Timmy had even promised to eat one if the pastor made it. Jury was still out on the girls.

Jess’s cellphone started playing a tune. Jess picked it up and checked the number. “Melinda!” Scooting to the edge of the couch, she lowered Morgan to the ground and answered the phone. “Hello? Melinda? How’s it.... Is everyone.... Is Jim....”

“Jim’s okay. He hurt his leg, but he’s going to be fine. We’re waiting for an ambulance, now. Once we all get out, I’ll have him call you.”

“Ambulance? Is he hurt that bad?”

“Trent’s hurt worse. There was an explosion. They’re still back at the cave.”

“The same cave?”

“I don’t know. ... Derrick says, ‘yes.’”

“Is he okay?”

“Seems to be. His arm’s cut up and infected.”

Mrs. Thomas inched closer, trying to hear, but Jess wasn’t about to put it on speaker phone, with the kids in here. They too were beginning to gather around. “Melinda, what about Teresa?”

“She’s with us. She made it out so far with just a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Well, that’s wonderful!”

“Yeah,” Melinda’s voice saddened. “Pray for Matt. He’s lost his hearing for now.”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah. Trent, too. He’s pretty bad, I guess.”

“So, who’s with you, now.”

“Just me and Derrick, here. We’re not sure if we’ll have to lead the search and rescue back in or not. Derrick thinks we will.”

Jess nodded. "Well, we'll be praying for all of you. Have Jim call me as soon as he can!"

"Thanks, and will do. I hear sirens coming I better let you go."

"Okay. Be careful. Bye." All little eyes and Mrs. Thomas's were fixed upon her, as she hung up.

Pastor was just coming in from the kitchen. "I heard the phone ring."

"What'd they say?" Little Timmy couldn't bear not asking another second.

Jess smiled. "They got your mother back and she's gonna be fine."

"Oh, good." There was a collective sigh of relief.

"When are they going to be back?" John's face was eager.

"Didn't say. I haven't talked to your folks, yet. That was just Melinda calling so we wouldn't keep worrying." *or we would start.* "I'm sure your mom will call as soon as she gets a chance. They aren't even all out of the forest, yet. Give 'em some time."

"Well, isn't that good news." Mrs. Thomas set Mary down and stood up. "We can all start thanking the Lord that your mommy's going to be okay." She glanced over at Jess, who was trying desperately to smile through her worried expression. "That ought to increase all of our appetites. Here," she grabbed the remote. "Why don't I turn another movie on, and I'll go see what's keeping Pastor with those sandwiches." She smiled toward her husband as she grabbed Jess's arm and pulled her up. "Come on, honey. Why don't you come help us?" Jess went with her.

"Why don't I help, too." John started to come.

"No. That's okay dear. You just stay and watch your brother and sisters. You know what they say about too many cooks in the kitchen."

"No. What do they say?"

"Oh, it's not good, honey. Why don't you go back and man the remote? Fast forward any bad spots that come on."

"Okay." He shrugged and went back to find the remote.

Jess gave her a look. "Bad spots on Snow White?"

"Well, I'd sometimes FF the evil witch." She pushed her the rest of the way into the kitchen. "Now, tell us what they said on the phone."

"For one thing, they said Jim was hurt."

"Jim?"

"Yeah. I'd like to go up there. Be there when they bring him out if I could. He's been so terrified of hospitals lately."

"It's seven or eight hours up there, isn't it?"

"'bout that."

"So, you won't get there till at least around 10 tonight."

"I'd still like to go, but I can't take all the kids."

"Well, we'd be happy to stay with the kids, honey, if you really think you should go."

"I do. There is a police.... Wait how'd you guys get in here?"

"You have a very nice police team guarding your house."

"Too nice, apparently."

"Are you insinuating that me and the pastor could resemble anything like a hit squad?" She stepped close to her husband and put her arm around him.

"No, but I'd think.... I mean really... you can't just take people by face value. After all...!"

"Ye-es?"

"Now, just calm down, Jessica. Don't get all in a tizzy. They know me from the jail ministry."

"Oh. Oh, yeah."

"Now, tell us what they said about the others."

Mark pulled into an old, bumpy driveway up to a rundown, seemingly abandoned farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere. "Mark," Taylor's voice was growing increasingly high pitch. "You're scaring me! I want to go home!"

"Shut up!" He turned toward her and raised his hand but didn't hit her. She quickly jerked her face toward the window and cowered, expecting him to slap her. He laughed lightly. "Welcome to your new home," he got out of the car, but leaned back in, "at least until you have the brat." Smiling, he closed the door, went around to her side, and opened her door.

"Please, Matt, I won't press charges. I won't even tell on you, if you just...."

"You better believe you won't. Let's go."

She glanced toward the house. "I don't want to." She inched further into the car.

"It wasn't a question!" He grabbed her and yanked her out. She screamed and yanked back, but he didn't seem to care. There was no one around to hear her scream. There was nothing but miles of cornfields in every direction. He yanked and pulled her all the way into the dark, dirty farmhouse. Sobbing and out of breath, she looked around at the old, torn, decaying furniture and then back up at Mark through tear-filled eyes. "What are you going to do with me?"

"That depends on you... if you're smart enough to stay alive, or if you're dumb enough to get yourself killed!" Turning toward the door, he locked it from the inside with a key. Watching him, she got the message loud and clear. There would be no way out of this house without a key. She didn't even have to see if the windows would open. Somehow, she already knew... they wouldn't. Crying softly, she watched him stomp off toward the small, dingy kitchen. Sitting down on the raggedy, stained couch, she tried to calm her shaking body. She tried to tell herself her dad was okay. She tried to tell herself he'd find her. She tried to convince herself that he wouldn't hurt her for sure until she had the baby because he wanted to sell it. The thought of what would happen after that threatened to send her into a panic attack, but she tried to tell herself she'd be found before then. She tried to stay positive, think good thoughts, find a way to cope... but it felt nearly impossible.

Time Will Tell

"Jim, stop shaking." Derrick demanded as he helped Jim out of the back of the ambulance into the dimly lit

bay.

“I’m not shaking.”

“Okay.” Derrick put his shoulder under Jim’s arm to steady him as he started to fall. “You lucked out that they didn’t have enough ambulance attendants to man this one or else they would have forced you to act like a regular patient.”

“Yeah, with the way my life is, it’s a good thing I have a portable paramedic to bring with me on these... outings.”

“Jim,” Derrick caught himself on the door frame as Jim put too much of his weight on his friend. “You’ve got one good leg use it.”

Jim tried to shift his weight just as the ambulance driver came back, supported Jim on the other side and helped them the rest of the way inside. “Hey, you’re shakin’ man,” the driver noted as he helped him onto a gurney in the hall. “You scared or something?”

“Of course not.” Jim craned his neck and tried to calm his shaking body.

“Man, you’d better get that looked at.” The driver took Derrick’s arm.

“I know.” Derrick yanked it back.

“Don’t get all up tight, man.” The driver turned and walked away.

“I think that’s a very good idea.” Jim sat up on the gurney. “Why don’t you and I split?”

Derrick gave him a look. “Just lie back down. I’ll find a doctor.”

“Hey, what time is it?”

“About 9:30.” Derrick left.

“But he has to be here. This is the only hospital within fifty miles.” Jim looked toward the familiar voice coming from down the hall. He sat up and strained to see. “If Trent is here....”

“Jessica!” He got up, stood on one foot, and hopped down the hall, leaning on the wall for support.

“Jim!” Jess came bursting through the double doors and ran down the hall toward him. “Jim!” She fell into his arms, pushing him back against the wall. He didn’t care as he clutched his arms around his wife and smothered her with kisses.

Feeling the familiar touch of his junior Jess, he looked down to see Morgan holding onto him with one hand and Jess with the other. Bending down, he picked her up and brought her into the hug.

“Mrs. Thomas?”

Mrs. Thomas looked up from her task of cleaning up the living room to see John standing in the door. “Yes, dear? Aren’t you asleep, yet? You know what your mother said about....”

“I’m worried about dad.” He walked into the room and sat down.

Mrs. Thomas set the magazines in her hand down on the table and sat down. “He’s in the Lord’s hands. Whether the Lord decides to leave him here for you and your brother and sisters and mother or whether he decides to take him home to heaven... just remember going to heaven would be wonderful for him.”

“We need him.” John leaned forward on his knees and looked down at his hands, tears threatening his eyes.

“I know, dear. Would you like to pray for him again?”

“I’m not very good at praying, just basically repeat what I hear others say.” He didn’t look up at her.

“What do you mean, dear?” She knew, but she needed to hear him say it.

“I’m not saved, you probably didn’t know that.” He looked up at her. She shook her head. His voice broke. “I just figured I had plenty of time.” He paused. “I didn’t want to have to be ‘good’ now. I wanted to wait and get saved when I was older.”

“But what about now? What about knowing Jesus, now and being able to really pray to Him for your mom and dad?”

“Yeah, but I just guess I just didn’t think it would make any difference. Besides Mom is praying.”

“She needs someone to pray for her to.”

“I know,” he mumbled, looking down.

“Dear, I’ll tell you this because I think you are old enough to understand. You have a wrong idea of ‘fun’. Right now, you think ‘fun’ is sin. That’s wrong, and if you give your life to Jesus that mindset will change, and changing that mindset will keep you safe because sin has consequences. Just like if someone steals something. It might be fun at the time, until they lose what they stole and get put in jail, so for that few minutes of fun and excitement of getting away with something they end up paying with sometimes years of their lives and a prison record. It’s the same thing with smaller sins. Lying might seem right at the time... until someone finds out and then they don’t ever trust you again. Getting drunk might seem fun at the time until you do something out of your head and end up ruining your life or someone else’s. Same with drugs. When you get older you might think it’s fun to conquered the hearts of many girls, but if you go too far you may never know the faithful, loyal, and enduring love your parents have found in sticking with only each other.”

John watched her as she explained, but then looked down again, rubbing his hands together. “I know. I should be satisfied with a safe, dull life.”

“I don’t remember saying, ‘dull’, dear. Life is only as dull as you let it. There are many warriors for evil, we need more warriors for right... like your dad. He doesn’t have to drink and curse to show that he’s tough, neither does Jim or Derrick. Theirs isn’t an act, it’s real. They don’t act tough, they are tough.”

John smiled up at her. “I was thinking... before I came down here. Maybe I would like to get saved.”

Mrs. Thomas smiled back. “Would you like to pray, now? Remember the Bible says, if we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in our heart God has raised him from the dead we will be saved, and if we call upon the Lord we will be saved. But you have to mean it in your heart. Repent and be converted for the remission of sins. We can’t be perfect, but like you said we need to be willing to change from following after sin to following Jesus, and repent, ask him to forgive you of your sins.”

John nodded. “I’d like to pray.” Mrs. Thomas nodded back, and they both bowed their heads and closed their eyes. All the while John was praying, Mrs. Thomas was praying for John that the Lord would teach him and use him and make him a strong Christian and warrior for right. “Dear Father in heaven. Thank you, Lord, for sending your son, Jesus to die for my sins. I believe that he died on the cross and rose again the third day, Lord. I believe, Lord, that he has the power to forgive sins. Please, forgive my sins, Lord. Please help me to live for you, Lord. Please, take me to heaven some day when I die. Thank you, Lord, for saving me. In Jesus name, I pray, amen.”

“He’ll heal alright.” The doctor finished typing on his computer as he talked to Melinda. Matt simply lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. “But he’ll be deaf until he has the surgery. Even then, I wouldn’t get his hopes too high. The surgery only has a sixty percent success rate in the best of circumstances. I’ll refer you to Dr. Hajeed in Rockford. He’s the best I know in your area to do the surgery. If you’re not satisfied, I can refer to a doctor at the Mayo Clinic as well, but I’ve heard Dr. Hajeed has had great success, and he’s much closer.”

“Okay.” Melinda nodded her head. “How can I tell him? How can he decide?”

“I’ll right you a prescription for a hearing assistant.”

“A hearing aid?”

“No. It’s a small handheld device. You will talk into it, and it will write the words on the screen for him to read.”

She nodded. “I can’t believe all the years I worked as a nurse and I can’t remember one case of someone losing their hearing from an explosion.”

“Thankfully, explosions aren’t all that common.”

“Will he be alright?” Teresa looked up at the doctor with pleading eyes from the chair next to Trent’s bed.

“As I said, ‘he’s critical.’ We’ll know better in twenty-four hours. If he makes it that far, he’ll have a very good chance. Don’t look so worried. He’s made it this far. I don’t think he’s going to give up, now.”

“You make him sound so broken up.” She gazed toward her husband as she talked. “Multiple bones in his arms... a compound fracture in his leg... his collar bone... multiple ribs.”

“All things that are quite manageable. Be grateful his neck and back are fine.”

“Why doesn’t he wake up?” She stared deep into his face.

“Honestly, you don’t want him to. He’ll be in too much pain.”

“Can’t you give him stronger pain medication?” Her eyes pleaded again.

“Not with that degree of head injury.” The doctor began backing toward the door. “We will as soon as it’s possible.”

She returned her gaze to Trent’s face. “He’s like this because of me, you know.”

“Don’t blame yourself. You certainly didn’t ask to be abducted, and he knew the risks when he came after you.”

She nodded reluctantly as tears began streaming down her face.

Stepping out of Matt’s room, Melinda glanced down the hall to see Derrick conversing with a doctor. She wondered who he was inquiring about. Not himself, she was sure. She smiled and shook her head as she saw his sleeve had been rolled down again. Actually, the dried blood blended rather nicely with his rust colored shirt. She bet no one’d even noticed it, yet. *Maybe somebody ought to point it out to someone.* Slowly, she began walking toward them, but before she got there, they had already concluded their conversation and parted ways. “Who were you asking about?” Melinda inquired as she caught up to him.

“Jim.”

"How's he doing?" She matched his stride and walked next to him down the hall. "Fine. They don't even think he'll have to stay overnight."

"That's good news. I'm sure that will make him feel better."

"Yeah. He probably weaseled them into it." He didn't look at her as he walked. "Be better if he gets a couple rounds of IV antibiotics. That wound was pretty deep, and the wood was in there quite a while."

"Maybe they will give him a round before they leave."

"Didn't sound like it."

"I know someone else who could use some." She grabbed his bad arm, but he yanked it away.

"That's just a scratch."

"Yeah. Pretty... big... scratch."

"I'll take care of it." He started walking faster.

"When? When are you going to have a doctor look at it?" She started growing out of breath again as she tried to keep up. *My whole day's been like this!* But she refused to ask him to slow down... again. "Where are we going?" She followed him into the stairwell and began quick-stepping down the stairs next to him.

"Jim's room."

"Why? When are you going to see a doctor?" She stopped in front of him on the landing between the first and second floor, blocking him against the wall.

"That's my business." He stepped to the side, but then so did she. He had had this thing about shoving girls which gave her just enough time to get her hand up to his forehead. "You have a fever."

"Do you mind?" He jerked away and dodged her in the other direction, getting around without plowing her over and heading down the next flight of stairs.

She chased after him. "I'd just go get a doctor and bring him to you except by time I got back, you'd be gone."

"Probably." He stepped onto the first-floor landing and went out the door.

"What are you gonna do?" She meant it as a rhetorical question, like obviously there's only one thing you can do.

"Maybe I'll clean it myself and save myself a premium rate hike on my insurance."

"If you were going to do that you would have done it already."

"I did clean it." He rolled up his sleeve to prove it.

"With plain water that's not good enough."

"I know." He pushed open Jim's door. "Hey, man, how ya doing?" He smiled toward Jess.

"Oh, pretty good. They think I can leave pretty soon."

"Yeah. I heard. They think it's going to be about a half an hour till they get those final test results, though. I was wondering if I could use the car right quick. I just have to run and grab something from the store."

"Oh, sure." Jim took out his key.

"Thanks." Derrick took it and headed out.

"What are you gonna get?" Jim called after him out of curiosity, but he was already gone.

"I could tell him. I could tell him exactly what you're going to get. You're going to try cleaning your arm out yourself instead of leaving it to the experts." She was hot on his heels again.

"I know what I'm doing."

"If you have a fever, you need antibiotics."

"Not necessarily."

"Yes, necessarily, and why didn't you tell Jim what you thought about him needing IV antibiotics while you were in there?"

"It's his life," he mumbled, then stopped and looked her squarely in the eye. "Because he is in no more need of a mother than I am!" She stepped back a few steps. Derrick spun around and whammed through the nonautomatic door just for effect.

Shaking her head, Melinda made her way back to Jim's room. After all, she wasn't afraid to give a suggestion. "Hey, Melinda," Jess greeted her as she reentered the room.

"Hey, you know what Derrick's doing that's so important?" Jim looked at her questioningly.

"I don't know if he considers it important or not, but my guess would be gauze, peroxide, maybe alcohol, bandages...."

"Why?"

"He has a thing about saving insurance companies money."

"Huh?" Jim looked confused. "Come again."

"Insecurity complex. He thinks he knows better than anyone else."

"Ohhh. He wants to take care of his own arm. Well, he is kind of a health nut."

"Yeah."

Uncertain

Finally contented, Jess walked out of her hotel bathroom after changing for bed and made her way in the near dark to check on Morgan who was sleeping on an added roll away cot. She sighed, crossed her arms, and for a few moments just watched her little one sleep. She was just so glad everything was back to normal for her little family. Everyone was safe, and they were back together again. Her heart broke for those that were not okay tonight. Wade and Mellissa. Trent's kids at home. She was sure they must have felt a few hours of relief that everything was okay until the crushing news came that their daddy wasn't... at least their mommy was... to some extent. Jess couldn't help but wonder how this traumatic experience would affect Teresa. She'd been through so much... the car crash... the abduction... the explosion... being trapped... nearly losing her husband... and now just waiting to see if he'll live. Melinda... just lost her father... lost Carlos... just found out she had a brother and now losing him. Matt... didn't have to come... lost his hearing because he did... saved Trent's life according to the ER doctor... yet paid a great price. Derrick... she smiled to herself. He'd be alright. That guy was just too stubborn to be hurt. He'd doctored his own self and then came with them to the hotel, taking a room down the hall.

Sighing lightly, Jess pulled the covers up around Morgan and then turned to go to her own bed. Jim was still awake, smiling at her as she climbed in. Smiling back, she reached for the light string and pulled it, transforming the room into total darkness. Snuggling close to Jim, she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder, not planning to ever let go... or at least not in the foreseeable future... and that was just fine with him.

