

# **Faith, Family, and Fire Place**

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## Regroup

“Okay, kids, let’s go,” Mrs. Thomas opened the front door and waited as all four kids hurried past her into the fresh fallen snow. John and Timmy jumped down the steps and went off running toward the barn both sliding across the ice as if into home plate. Mary plopped down and made a snow angel. Then so did Martha. The boys jumped up and started throwing snowballs at each other. Martha sat up and watched in interest. Mary didn’t just watch. She jumped up, grabbed her little sister’s hand and ran over with her to join the fun.

Mrs. Thomas smiled. Letting out a contented sigh, she dusted off a spot on the wood-board porch steps and sat down. Leaning against the nearby post and setting her feet on the second to the top step, she peacefully thought and prayed as she watched. She was so relieved to see them playing and enjoying themselves, as if the dark cloud of depression and fear had been lifted and they were resting assured that everything would turn out just fine. She hoped and prayed they wouldn’t be disappointed. Their mom had effectively convinced them for now, and Mrs. Thomas couldn’t help but worry what would

happen to the poor little ones if their dad didn't make it, especially John.

Shivering a little, she pulled her coat tighter, keeping the nippy breeze away. Still, she was grateful for the snow and for the lightheartedness it had brought out in the children. She already had the hot chocolate simmering on the stove just waiting for when they came in from the cold.

She wondered how everyone involved would be affected by this incident. Jim with his hurt leg. She hoped it wouldn't affect his job. In the past, she'd say adversity didn't affect him much. Usually, he just kept going and with a smile, but last time when he'd ended up in the hospital it had affected him. He was much quieter now, more thoughtful. She had hoped that experience would have served to ease his fear of hospitals. It hadn't worked out that way.

Then there was Derrick. She had to smile. The reports were that he was hurt, but the details were sketchy. She doubted he considered himself hurt.

Matt. Her face saddened. Just a new Christian and already his faith was being tested and so deeply. She couldn't even imagine what the world would be like silent... not to be able to communicate the simplest things to people, much less the complex, to not be able to work. She feared that that in itself would be more than he could handle. His whole life was work. She hoped that he would find that what he couldn't handle, God can.

Melinda, physically fine, yet undoubted emotionally wounded. Teresa, mistreated for days, surely physically and psychologically drained, and yet, with no time for recovery, thrown into the terrorizing reality of her heroic husband's own horrific struggle with death. Trent, an unmistakable warrior... possibly dying on the battlefield.

Hearing the door squeak open behind her, she looked back to see her husband coming out to join her. He stopped beside her, leaning against the opposite post. "Good morning, dear. Did you sleep well?"

He shrugged. "As well as can be expected under the circumstances. I'd like to drive up there today. I think one of us should be there, but I hate to leave you all alone with all the kids."

"Oh, don't worry about me. We'll be fine. Do whatever the Lord is laying on your heart to do." He nodded in response to her. "Teresa called this morning," she continued.

"Did she? How is..."

"Trent's in a coma. Seems like everyone else is doing fine, except Dr. Fredricks of course. I don't know when the rest of them are planning to come home. Will you look at those little ones," she laughed as Mary and Martha took down Timmy and then started piling snow on him. "Now, girls, be good!" she yelled across the yard as Timmy struggled to get up and then laughing ran away as the girls let him go. "I saved you some breakfast. You had such a late night last night, I didn't want to wake you. I was pretty sure you'd want to make that long drive today. I wish you'd eat something before you go. It's in the stove." She turned toward him as he turned to go inside.

"All right. We'll see." Snow shook off from the autumn wreath as he opened the door.

Mrs. Thomas watched him go in and then turned back to watch kids. "Now, John!" She hopped up and took a couple of steps in that direction. "Your sister is not a sack of potatoes! Put her down!"

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Melinda slowly woke up from the sleep that had overtaken her late-night vigil in the comfortable yet nonreclining chair in Matt's room. She had been debating whether or not it was time to leave him alone, when her eyes had gotten heavy, and... *Yipe!* She woke up the rest of the way suddenly and with a start, shocked at her lack of subconscious moral purity that had allowed her to fall asleep in....

"Good morning." Dr. Fredricks voice broke through her thoughts. She managed to smile back politely, though her mind still racing on how she could explain to the entire third floor staff that she was not....

"Hey! You Melinda?" A young male nurse energetically popped in.

"Um...a..." She instinctively straightened her shirt and pulled her hair back. "Yes?" It was more of a question than a statement.

He looked at her inquisitively, not getting why she was so nervous and then a moment longer as if he thought she was beautiful. "Yeah. Your mother's on the phone."

"My mother?" She reached in her pocket for her cellphone, quickly noticing it was dead.

"Yeah. She sounds pretty upset. There's a phone at the desk right down the hall." With that, he popped out as quickly as he had popped in.

Holding up her dead phone and pointing to the door, she mouthed to Matt, "I'll be back."

Matt nodded an acknowledgement and watched her go. Suddenly, almost desperately, he hoped that she would come back. He didn't want to be all alone in a silent world. After his wife had died, he had successfully convinced himself that he didn't need anyone, but all of a sudden, a strange fear was overtaking him... a fear of being alone and not able to communicate. He reached for his own phone, quickly seeing it was dead, but also realizing that even if it wasn't, he couldn't use it. He couldn't call to make sure Taylor was okay. He couldn't call the hospital to tell them why he couldn't come in for his next shift. He couldn't call anyone. He clutched the phone tighter, wanting to break it in his hand.

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Knock... knock... knock....

"Oh-h-h." Muttering, Jim rolled out of bed and grabbed his shirt off the dresser. Jess was so tired she didn't even stir much less wake up. Groggily, he stumbled to the door and opened it. "Derrick." He rubbed his face sleepily.

"Hey, man. Aren't you awake, yet?"

"Derrick, we only went to sleep..." He looked at his watch, but it took a minute for his eyes to focus.

"Six and a half hours ago." Derrick finished for him.

"Yeah." Jim leaned sideways against the doorpost. "Don't you ever sleep in? I would think after yesterday."

"Yesterday didn't accomplish anything. I mean except for getting Teresa back."

"Minor detail," Jim yawned.

"Those killers are still out there somewhere," Derrick continued passionately.

"So, what do you plan to do about it? The police are working on it." Jim rubbed his face again.

"Yeah, well, I'm going to make sure of that. Besides the better question is, 'what is the gunman going to do about us still being alive?'"

Jim's face grew serious, and his eyes met Derrick's. "He probably thinks we're all dead."

"If he was watching at all, he knows me and Matt aren't."

"Maybe he doesn't watch. He thought Melinda was dead. Besides, the police will get him."

"They haven't yet."

"They just found out who he is!"

"Yeah because of us." Jim rolled his eyes, but Derrick continued. "Yeah, we can hope they get him. I'll stop by the police station right after I check on the others in the hospital." Jim nodded and then turned his head toward the sound of his cellphone ringing on the dresser. "I'll let you get that." Derrick turned to leave.

"Oh, Derrick!" Jim called after him. He stopped and turned back. "Take the truck." Jim tossed him the key.

Derrick caught it and tossed it back. "That's okay. I can walk."

"No." Jim tossed it back. "You've done enough walking."

Derrick caught it again and looked at it a moment, thoughtfully. "If you need it this morning call me. Otherwise, I'll be

back at noon.”

“Just go.” Jim waved him off, yawning as he went back into his room.

“I’ll fill it with gas!”

Jim smiled and shut the door, shaking his head.

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Melinda came back into Matt’s room, sat down, and started to talk. After a moment, she stopped herself, stared into Matt’s blank and pained expression, and mouthed, “Sorry.” Grabbing the notebook and pen, she started to write. ~It was my mother - the phone call. She got worried when she couldn’t get a hold of me.~

“Does she know what going on?” Melinda nodded in response. “Could you...” He paused waiting for her acknowledgement. “Could you call my house? Make sure that everyone’s okay there?” Smiling and nodding, she got up and went back out.

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Trying to prepare himself for anything, Derrick slowly walked into Trent’s room. Teresa, who was holding Trent’s hand tightly and staring down at his motionless body, looked up. Her face looked half grieved, half haunted. Tears stained her face. She didn’t speak. Derrick walked over to the bed. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s in a coma.” Her voice was weak as she returned her gaze to her husband.

“The nurse told me. Still, that doesn’t mean... the worst. Maybe he just needs some time.” Teresa nodded slowly, a steady stream of tears returning to her tear-stained face. “Trent’s tough. I wouldn’t bet against him.” Teresa nodded again. “I’m going to the police station after here. I won’t let them rest until they get this guy. I promise you that.”

She looked back up at him, biting her quivering lip as tears ran into her mouth. “Thank you.” It was all she could manage.

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Closing the door to their hotel room, Jim pressed the dial button on his phone and listened to it ring as he walked down the quiet hotel hallway. He’d decided to go outside to talk so he didn’t wake up Jess and Morgan. “Hey, Pastor, did you call me a little while ago?” He smiled as a couple people passed by, but walked a little faster. “Honestly, I don’t know too much more than last night. Derrick’s at the hospital, now. Then, he’s going to the police station. I guess we’ll know more when he gets back. Jess is still sleeping. Don’t want to leave her, and Derrick’s got the truck.” He paused and listened as he walked outside. “Yeah. Derrick’s got his truck up here, except he can’t get in it, and we left Jess’s car at the hospital. Hey, if you’re coming up here anyway, I bet Derrick’s got a spare key hanging around his place somewhere for his truck.” ... “Uh huh.” ... “Yeah.” ... “Oh, really?” ... “Uh huh.” ... “How are his kids doing?” ... “That’s good.” ... “No, I think we should.” ... “Yeah. I can pray here. Why don’t you start?”

## Captive

“Derrick! Hi.” Melinda stopped abruptly as she almost ran into him at a crossroads in the hospital hallway.

“Sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going.” He backed up and then stared down the hall, his mind on other things.

“How’s the arm?”

“Huh? Oh...” He looked down at it and moved it around as if he had forgotten. “Fine.”

She smiled. “Have you had it looked at today?”

"I'll get around to it." He started walking again.

Turning with him, she realized they were going in the same direction. "Are you going to see Matt?"

"Yeah."

She nodded and then looked up at him. "Any special reason?"

"Just making sure everyone's doing alright." He stopped at Matt's door, opened it for her, and then followed her in. "Hey, man." He went over to him and slapped him on the arm. Matt grabbed Derrick's arm in return, holding it a little longer than he normally would have. He tried to act normal, but his eyes showed hints of fear. Derrick sat down on the edge of the bed. "How's it going?" He talked slowly and articulately. Matt watched him earnestly, trying to read his lips.

"I don't know." He turned suddenly toward Melinda. "Did you get a hold of Mrs. Sanders?" He spoke a little louder than he used to because he couldn't hear his own voice.

Melinda shook her head and picked up the notepad. ~There's no one home.~ She handed it to him.

Matt read it and then slammed it down. "There has to be someone home!" Melinda shook her head. Derrick picked up the notepad and read it. Matt grabbed Derrick's arm to get his attention, nearly panicked, his eyes pleading. He felt so useless and helpless. "She's on bedrest. There has got to be someone home!" He gritted his teeth as he talked.

After holding Matt's stare for a moment, Derrick slowly nodded, his voice low. "I'll find out." He could tell Matt understood, but after a moment, Matt nodded toward the pad, so Derrick wrote it down anyway as Matt slowly released his arm. Matt took the notepad, read it, and looked back at Derrick, firmly nodding his head. "Thank you." Derrick returned the nod, stood up, and headed for the door.

"Good luck," Melinda whispered after him, with complete sincerity. She hoped he found good news. She was afraid he wouldn't.

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Pastor Thomas smiled as a passel of wet and tired kids came piling in the door and collapsed by the fireplace. Mrs. Thomas followed. "Oh, thank you for starting the fire, honey. Looks great!" She smiled at him as she went over to it.

"You're very welcome. It's just the thing for a cold winter day." He followed them over and watched them all dump their coats and snuggle up to the fireplace for a few minutes before putting his hand on his wife's shoulder and softly saying, "I think I'm going to go, then. Are you sure you'll be alright?"

She nodded looking up at him, just then realizing he had his hat in hand and his coat over his arm. "Yes, don't worry about us. The Lord will take care of us... but keep in touch."

"I will." Leaning down, he kissed her and smiled adding, "I love you," before he headed out.

"Love you, too," she called after him, then sent up a prayer as she watched him go."

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Slowly and with an air of sadness, Derrick made his way into Matt's room. "What did you find out?" Melinda's brow furrowed as she asked, not liking Derrick's sullen face.

"You were gone quite a while. Is something wrong?" Matt's face revealed concern and hinted at fear.

Derrick sat on the bed and picked up the notepad, writing slowly, trying to find the right words. ~Mark lured Mrs. Sanders out by poisoning her dog. Then he apparently abducted your daughter. The police are searching.~ He handed it to Matt.

Matt held onto the pad for several moments, reading and rereading it before looking back at Derrick. "Maybe he took her to have an abortion. I found her before by calling around to clinics." His eyes were hopeful.

Derrick gave a half shrug, but he looked skeptical as he took the pad back. ~There are two witnesses that state she was taken against her will, but I can call around if you want.~

Matt read it more quickly this time. "Who?"

*~Neighbors. They are the ones who called the police.~*

Matt read it, and then dropping it in his lap, he rubbed his face. "Oh, God, help me. ... I should have prayed for her." His voice was barely audible. "I should have done something about Mark." After a minute, he looked back up at Derrick, his eyes pleading, tears nearly overcoming his resistance.

Derrick rather forcefully grabbed the notepad and began to write, first in big bold letters... **WE'LL FIND HER!** ...then in smaller letters... *~By God's grace, we'll find her.~* Matt took the pad and read it, nodding in agreement. Gritting his teeth and standing, Derrick returned one firm nod, slapped Matt on the arm, turned and walked out.

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Jim and Jess walked arm and arm down to the hotel dining room for lunch. "I'm almost a little nervous about being seen," she admitted. "Do you think the gunman's still anywhere around here?"

Jim shrugged. "I doubt it. If he is, the police should get him, but Derrick did see him leave in a chopper. He grabbed onto the wall to steady himself, limping some as he walked.

"That could have been just to get him out of the woods."

"He-e... should think..." His voice slowed as his eyes lifted to the entrance seeing Derrick walk in. "He should think everyone's dead, except maybe Matt and Derrick."

"All the more reason not to be seen." Her eyes and voice were urgent as they stopped walking. Morgan looked up at her as her hand tightened around Morgan's little one.

"Hey, Jim... Jess." Derrick walked up to them. "Goin' to lunch?"

"Yeah. Why don't you join us?" Jim resumed walking.

Derrick did. "Well, I'm really not that hungry, but..."

"But you have to fill us in on what you found out," Jim finished for him, "Besides, you'll probably change your mind when you smell that food. Jim used the railing to help him get up the three wooden steps into the dining room. Derrick grabbed his arm to steady him.

"I really didn't find out all that much... as much as I'd like anyway. Matt can't catch a break."

Jim stopped at a table and pulled out a chair for Jess. "How's he doin'?"

"Fine. The doctor will release him anytime, but his daughter's been abducted."

Jess did a double take, her mouth dropping. "Abdu...."

Derrick nodded once as he sat down next to Jim. "By her brother. The police are looking but nothing yet."

"Why?" Jess asked, surprised.

"Trying to get even with his father, I guess."

"Seems like a long way to go." Her voice was thoughtful. "I hope he doesn't hurt her."

"Or the baby," Jim added.

"Yeah." Derrick picked up the menu. "He's just bent on getting even with his father. I wonder if he knew about what happened if it'd make any difference to him at all."

"It might, but how'd anyone tell him?"

"Maybe he'll make contact." Jess suggested, hopefully.

"He'll be found." It was a promise. Derrick looked up from his menu as the waitress walked to the table.

After watching her captor mysteriously walk out of the front door and drive off, Taylor decided to get up and try to find a way out. She didn't expect it to be easy especially if he felt bold enough to leave, but then again.... she didn't need easy, just doable.

Slowly pushing herself up from the old recliner, she was a little weak and unsteady at first, but after a few moments, she got her sea legs and began tentatively exploring the old, dingy farmhouse. First, obviously, she inspected the door. Somehow, it was locked from the outside. Then all the windows in the room – barred up. She made her way into the kitchen, cringing at the stacks of dirty dishes and the food decaying on the floor... windows barred... door locked. She decided to open the fridge out of curiosity but quickly closed it gagging on the smell. After shaking her head and repeatedly taking God's name in vain from shock as she looked around, she hurriedly left and made an inspection of the other two rooms downstairs... nothing.

Almost in a panic, she went up the stairs, desperate for a way out. She slipped on the loose carpet and would have fallen if she hadn't caught herself with the banister. Taking deep breaths as she stood there leaning over and holding onto the railing, she decided she needed to take it a little slower. Desperately, she tried to calm herself down. She was just so scared he was going to return and appear any second. She kept imagining his face like a monster, appearing around each dark corner.

More carefully, she finished her climb up the stairs and went into the bedrooms, hoping beyond hope for just one window that wasn't barred and nailed shut. Even on the second floor if she could just find one way out, she would make it work... somehow. The first two rooms were hopeless. One didn't even have a window. She held her breath as she slowly opened the squeaky door to the last room. Three-quarters of the way open, she started to step in and... "Ahhh!" She screamed as something black jumped at her. She quickly jumped back out and slammed the door.

Curious, after her heart slowed to a more reasonable pace, she cracked the door and peered back in... a cat. Illuminated by a narrow beam of sunlight was a small black cat, backed in a corner, fur standing, tail wagging, teeth bared, hissing. Rolling her eyes, she walked back in and looked around. The small single window was barred. Tears threatened, as she leaned against the dusty, old, worn-out chest of draws and looked out the window through the bars at the unreachable world.

Unruffling its fur, the cat meowed and cautiously approached her. Kneeling down as far as she could in her condition, she reached her hand out. She couldn't reach it, but she offered, and low and behold, she made a friend. The little kitty walked under the touch of her hand, humping its back to reach it. Then rubbing himself against her leg, he began to purr. She smiled as she petted his fluffy humped back. After a few minutes, she even ventured to pick him up and hug him. It felt good to hug something, even if it was a cat.

Hearing a car approach outside, her heart jumped. Gritting her teeth, she struggled to get back to her feet while holding the cat. She wanted to take it back down with her, for company. It probably needed food and water... if there was any food anywhere. Quickly, heart pounding, she made her way back downstairs, getting down seconds before her brother came in the door.

"What are you doing?" he asked angrily as he locked the door behind him. She watched him lock it with a key, figuring out he had it deadbolted from the other side. "I asked you what you're doing." He turned around.

She glanced around, noticing she was standing by the kitchen. "I got hungry. Don't you have any edible food in the house?"

"Where'd you get that?" He looked at the cat in her arms as he approached her.

"Oh, him. Well, I got bored while you were gone, so I decided to go out to the pet store and buy a...."

He slapped her across the face in anger, grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck while it was hissing and went back to the door.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was shrill and tears flooded as she held the side of her face.

Opening the door, he chucked the cat across the yard and then locked it again. Turning back to her, his eyes narrowed. "It's good to see you're not in need of bed rest after all."

"I am!" Her voice was defensive. "I just...."

“Shut up!” He yelled.

She backed up as he walked toward her. He stopped a couple feet from her, stared a moment, and then threw the sub sandwiches he was carrying sideways on top of the coffee table. “When you get done with the dishes then you can eat yours, if not....” He started to turn away.

“No!” She crossed her arms and stated firmly.

Turning back, he advanced toward her, pointing toward the kitchen. “GET MOVING!”

Shocked and afraid, she jumped away. Starting to shake, she headed for the kitchen. Stopping in the doorway, she turned back. “If I lose the baby, then you’ll be sorry!”

He continued to the couch and sat down. “If you lose that baby, you’ll be dead,” he growled, not looking at her. Grabbing his sandwich in one hand and the tv remote in the other, he flipped on the set and lied down.

## Heading Home

“Hello?”

“Hi, Derrick, it’s Pastor. Where’re you at?”

“By the ER entrance.”

“Okay. I came in the main entrance. Be right there. Are Matt and Melinda with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Be right there.”

Derrick closed his phone, looked at the other two who were watching him, and grabbed the new voice to text converter from Matt. “That was Pastor. He’ll be right here.” He handed it back. Matt read it and nodded.

Melinda smiled, stepping back a little and uncrossing her arms. Then after a few moments, she crossing them again, thoughtfully. She was so glad to be going home, and yet was home really home any more. So many things had happened since she had last been there. So many things had happened just in the last couple days. She could hardly force herself to believe that Matt was deaf, that Trent might not live, that Teresa’s life may be changed forever. It was all so overwhelming. It’d been so long since she’d allowed herself to feel safe. She wanted to again. It was a guarded safe. The gunman was still out there... down in Mexico. But the authorities knew where, and they were watching him. She tried desperately to convince herself she was safe. She wanted to be safe... even going back there... back to where it all started... back home... home sweet home.

“Hey, you three!” Pastor greeted them as he walked up. He’d been walking fast and took a moment to catch his breath. “How are you all holding up?”

No one answered for a moment so Melinda did. “Glad to be going home.” She paused. “Glad were no longer in danger.” Her face asked for reassurance.

Pastor nodded. “Praise the Lord for that.” His voice was strong.

“All but Trent,” Derrick reminded them.

Pastor nodded. His face turned quite solemn as did everyone’s. “We need to keep them both urgently in our prayers.”

Melinda nodded. Matt didn’t understand because they weren’t using the device. Pastor smiled toward him. “Hey, Matt.” Stepping closer, he slapped his arm. Matt nodded an acknowledgement. “You know,” Pastor stepped back and looked at Derrick. “He’s going to be all alone, now, at least until they find Taylor. Maybe we should all take turns stopping in and checking on him.”

Derrick looked a little offended as if feeling a need to stand up for masculine independence in general. “He hasn’t

needed anyone in fifty years. Why should he now just because he can't hear?"

Pastor raised his eyebrows. Melinda took a step forward. "Maybe I can find him a app... so he can read his phone calls." Pastor nodded in agreement.

Derrick rubbed his cowboy hat back and forth on his head. "I'll stick around for a while after I drop him off. Make sure he's alright."

Pastor smiled, returning a nod. "Good." Motioning to Matt for his device, he slowly took it. "So, any leads on finding your daughter, yet?" He handed it back.

Matt took it and read it, slowly shaking his head. "They're still looking. They have an APB out on his car."

Pastor nodded and took the device back. "We'll keep praying."

Matt read it. "Thanks."

"Well," Pastor turned back to Derrick and slapped him on the arm. "I'll be praying for all of you. Drive safe." He handed him the spare key he had found for his truck.

"I'll do that." He nodded a thanks and put the key in his pocket. "Gonna pick up Jim and Jess at the hotel before we go get my truck. Then we'll drive back in mine, and they'll drive back in theirs. They're gonna leave Jess's car here for Teresa in case she needs one."

Pastor nodded slowly. "That's very generous of her."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure it's insured." Derrick mumbled.

Pastor shot him a glance. "That's not what I meant." There was silence a moment.

Derrick broke the silence. "Hope you didn't have any trouble finding the key."

"No." Pastor shook his head. "Right where you said it'd be. I never knew you were so health conscious." Pastor glanced at Melinda. "You should see his cupboards. Looks like a dietitian lives there."

Derrick gave him a sideways glance as he walked past. "We'd better get going. They're probably waiting." He nudged Matt's arm to get him to go. "Thanks for the key."

"No problem."

Matt and Melinda followed Derrick. "Tell Teresa we're praying for them!" Melinda called back.

"Will do." Pastor sent them off with a wave and went to go find Trent's room.

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"Wade, you have to eat."

"Then go buy me something edible."

"Carrots are very healthy for you."

"Not when they look like that. Besides the brown sugar isn't."

"They probably put that glaze on it just to make picky eaters like *you* happy."

"Well, they'd better keep trying," Wade muttered, putting down his fork.

Melissa rolled her eyes and sighed in the general direction of the nurse who was just coming in. The nurse smiled back. "Is he giving you a hard time?" She walked over and injected a syringe full of meds into the IV bag. "By the way, somebody called asking about you." The nurse looked toward Wade as she brought the syringe down from the bag.

Still staring disapprovingly at his food, he tentatively picked up his fork again. "Yeah? Who was it?" He didn't look up at her.

"Didn't say. Just asked how you were doing, what room you were in, and what was the best time to call you when you'd be alone." Her face was curious.

Equally perplexed, Wade returned her a "Wha-a-at?" type look.

"Sounded kinda strange to me too." It was obvious that she thought he was hiding something mysterious.

"Anyone we know would have our cellphone number," Mellissa added, thoughtfully. "And why would he want to talk to you alone?" Her voice was about as accusatory as her face. "It was a 'he' wasn't it?"

"Mellissa!" Wade looked shocked.

"Yes, it was." The nurse tried to hold back a chuckle in response to Wade's astonished face.

"Mellissa! I'm surprised at you! You know the only girl I ever talk to is you!" Wade's face reflected his thought, *Wait, let me try that again.* "I mean on the phone. I mean, you're the only girl I want to talk to. I mean if it's not business or something."

"What kind of business?" She stared, accusingly.

"I'm innocent! It was a guy remember! I haven't talked on the phone to a girl since...."

"Well, there was that girl yesterday that asked to be connected to your room." The nurse reminded, enjoying this comical exchange.

Mellissa jumped up, throwing her hands on her hips. "What girl yesterday?"

"I a.... Honey, I swear.... I don't think.... It was.... I don't remember.... Wait! It was Jessica, asking us to pray for... and *you* talked to her!"

"Oh, yeah."

The nurse laughed.

"See." Wade crossed his arms. "I'm innocent."

"Well, I forgot about the cell phone being...."

"Yeah, yeah, so quick to accuse."

"Oh, I didn't really think.... I was just joking."

The nurse gave another little laugh as she headed for the door. "Glad to see you're feeling better."

Wade smiled back, but his smile slowly faded as he turned back to his food and then looked up at Mellissa pleadingly. "I'd feel a *lot* better if somebody would run out and buy me a hamburger."

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"Hey, man, lose your wife?" Derrick got out of his truck at the hotel and went to help Jim carry the overnight bags to the back of the pick-up. Little Morgan, who was holding onto her daddy's pant leg as she walked, smiled up at him. He gave a half smile back.

"She's still pretty tired," Jim answered as he rolled back the cover and hefted the bags into the pickup's bed. "She's going to stay here and take a nap then drive her car over to the hospital for Teresa. I'll pick her up there on my way back through. Derrick nodded an acknowledgement as he tossed the last two bags into the bed. Jim picked up Morgan as they walked back to the cab. "Ready to go home?" Sucking her thumb, Morgan's face brightened into a smile, and she nodded. "Me too."

Opening the door, Jim hefted Morgan into the backseat. Derrick handed him the booster seat that was sitting on the pavement next to the luggage. "Thanks." Jim took it and strapped it in. "There we go." He lifted Morgan into the seat and buckled her up. "All set." With a kiss on her forehead, he glanced back at Derrick, giving him a nod before climbing the rest of the way in, pulling the door shut behind him.

Derrick climbed into the front and reached for his seat belt. "Everyone ready?"

"Ready." Melinda and Jim responded at the same time.

"Alright." Derrick put it in gear, and they took off.

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Slightly dizzy and completely overwhelmed, Taylor made her way back to her chair and hopefully her sandwich. She didn't hold out much hope that he hadn't already eaten it. Pushing down on the arms of the recliner, she eased herself into it with a groan. "Do I get some food, now?" Her voice was bitter.

Without sitting up, Mark grabbed the sub from the table and tossed it toward her. She caught it right before it hit her in the face and gave him a look. He didn't seem to notice or care. Yawning he closed his eyes, putting his hands behind his head. Sighing, she turned to the TV as she heard a scream radiating from the set. *Grea-eat*. She rolled her eyes. *A horror movie... that's all I need right now.*

## Home at Last

"Hey!" Derrick spoke rather loudly to wake Melinda, who was sitting on the other side of Matt, leaning against the passenger's side door, apparently sleeping. It didn't work, so instead he shouldered Matt as he slowed for a stop sign, hard enough to shove him into Melinda. Matt shot him a dirty look, yet with questioning eyes, not knowing what was going on. Derrick didn't bother trying to make him understand. He just glanced past him to Melinda, who was groggily sitting up. "We're here." He pulled in front of her house.

"We're home." She rubbed her face. "I mean my home," she mumbled looking out the window, tentatively, not sure whether this was home sweet home or if there was another murderous monster lurking somewhere in the dark.

"You remember this place?" he smiled as he put the truck in park.

"Barely, but then again, I'm trying to forget about the last time I was here." She was still staring out the window, trying to delay getting out.

"Yeah." Derrick spoke softly. "The new door looks nice, though."

"It ought to. It cost enough. You should see my new insurance rates."

Derrick smiled, knowingly. "Do you want us to go in with you?"

She turned toward him quickly, her eyes pleadingly hopeful. Derrick felt like shaking his head. If she was too scared to even go in, he hoped she'd be okay living here again. Relief swept over her, "Would you?"

"Sure." His voice was slow and weary, but he understood how she felt. Slapping Matt's arm lightly with the back of his hand, he motioned for him to follow as he got out. Matt looked a little lost, but he unbuckled and came. Melinda was just stepping down and groggily closing the door as the two guys joined her on the other side of the truck. She just stared toward the house. So Derrick went back to get her bags. "Come on, let's go." He spoke roughly when he returned, not looking at them just charging by. Surprisingly, Matt followed first. Melinda lagged.

Derrick promptly went in and turned on the lights as soon as Melinda unlocked the door. He hoped they could conquer her fears quickly so he could go home and go to sleep. "Where do you want these?" He held up the bags.

"Just set 'em anywhere." She looked around, rubbing her arms, her former happy home almost giving her chills. Somehow it seemed strange and foreboding. It was the same blue carpet, the same brown, leather couch, the same knotty pine coffee table, but somehow it seemed all different... dusty... musty... abandoned. Derrick set down the bags and waited for her to say something or go somewhere, but she just stood there and stared. After a minute, Matt walked around and began opening windows to air it out. Derrick went to find a thermostat to turn up the heat. Melinda slowly made her way to the kitchen. First, she stopped and stared at the patio door for several moments. As she stared, she tried desperately to convince herself that that

part of her life was over. Tearing her eyes and her imagination away, she went over to the fridge, opened it, and began throwing out the rotten food, all the while, forcing herself not to continually glance over her shoulder.

Derrick walked through the rest of the house going from room to room looking for any signs of forced entry. Matt followed him. After a while, they both ended up in the kitchen where Melinda was rapidly throwing out all the spoiled contents of her refrigerator. She looked up as they entered. Matt made his way to the table and sat down. Derrick stood by the sink and leaned against it with his elbow, looking rather weary. Noticing him rubbing his face to stay awake, Melinda could tell they were ready to leave. However, selfishly, she didn't want to stay alone in this house yet. "Why don't you sit down? I think I have some energy bars." She walked over to the cupboard. "At least they shouldn't be spoiled." Standing on her toes, she reached up and grabbed a box of fruit and grain bars and took it over to the table. "Do you like raspberry?"

"Anything sounds good right now." Derrick made his way over to the table and plopped down. Sitting sprawled out, he opened the box as Melinda went back to her job at the refrigerator. Derrick took one out of the box and slid it across the table to Matt. Matt nodded as he took it and began opening it slowly. Both of them looked very drained almost too tired to eat. Melinda on the other hand, was full of nervous energy. Almost desperate to have them stay. She spoke rapidly for several minutes about nothing of any consequence as she tossed out food. Matt stared at her earnestly as if trying to figure out what she was saying. Derrick, on the other hand, kept letting his eyes close and his head fall.

Annoyed, Melinda charged over to the table and nearly slammed down a carton of moldy cottage cheese in front of him. "Well, it will take a little bit to get this place back shipshape but I'm sure with a little help I can do it."

Derrick's eyes jolted open and he stared disapprovingly at the fermenting container of cottage cheese. "Yeah," he yawned, "it will take a little work." Turning up his nose, pushed the cottage cheese to a safer distance.

Matt's device picked up her statement, and he read it. "I bet you'll have it all put back together and decorated by Thanksgiving." He spoke slowly and tentatively, looking from one to the other for reassurance.

She returned a firm nod feeling a little guilty for not speaking into the device intentionally, "You're exactly right." Marching over to the counter, she grabbed the dish rag, did an about-face, and headed for the sink, just then realizing she hadn't spoken into it again as she ran rag under the water. Rolling her eyes, she looked over her shoulder at Matt who looked understandably lost. Marching back to the table, she picked up Matt's device and spoke into it. "In fact, you are both invited to Thanksgiving dinner... And Taylor too... if she's back."

Derrick looked at Matt, waiting for him to get done reading. Matt looked up at Derrick when he got done, questioningly and pleadingly, as if to say he couldn't do it alone. Derrick nodded and then looked up at Melinda, speaking loudly. "Yeah, we'll come." Matt read the device and returned a firm nod. She smiled and then returned to her rag and still running water at the sink. "Well," Derrick groaned as he pushed himself up to his feet, "it looks like you're going to have a couple guests for Thanksgiving... And it looks like you have a lot of work to do... So, I guess..."

"You aren't leaving already?" Melinda hurried back to the table, leaving her water running again.

"Melinda, it's nearly 3 AM." Derrick's face was tired, his posture drooped, and he was beginning to look uncharacteristically unsteady.

"I know," she murmured, looking down at the floor, thoughtfully. She jerked her eyes back up and stared at him pleadingly. "At least look around again to make sure there's no one here."

"Me-lin-da.... There's no one here."

"Ple-e-ease."

"One more time." His voice was gruff as he snatched Matt's device off the table. "Go out to the car and wait for me. I'll be right out." Rolling his eyes, he stomped out to re-examine every room. Matt gave a polite nod toward Melinda, smiled, and slowly headed for the door. Melinda returned a sheepish grin, looking down and then headed back to retrieve her washcloth from the sink.

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"Wow! It sure seems like we've been gone a lot longer than a couple days!" Jim broke the silence as he turned their

truck into the gravel driveway.

“A lot has happened in that short time, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Jim stopped at the beginning of the circle before turning toward the house. “You want to go eat inside, or you want to take the subs to the barn? Not that I don’t want to be with the others, might just be nice to be alone.”

Jess looked at him. “I like ‘alone’, but if the others notice, they might get offended.”

“Mrs. Thomas won’t care.” He turned the truck toward the barn. “Hopefully, the kids won’t notice.” Jess smiled and grabbed the subs from the backseat as they pulled up. “The horses probably need fed, anyway,” Jim sighed as he turned off the truck, opened the door, and got out, heading briskly toward the barn.

Jess had to jog to catch up. “At least, you’re still around to be doing it,” she reminded him breathlessly, as she caught up.

“Yeah.” He opened the door for her. “There was a time when I was trapped in that cave...” He shook his head.

She went through the door and then spun around to look at him. “There was a time that I thought you may not be doing it again either.” She put her hands on her hips and stared at him disapprovingly as he flipped on the lights.

“Ye-ah,” he mumbled, walking forward, not bothering to go around.

She followed closely. “This may be a good time to discuss your obsession with volunteering.”

He didn’t look back at her, just opened the next door to the main barn. “When somebody needs my help...” He walked toward the viewing room and opened the door for Jess.

“He’s a cop.” She walked past him into the room. “You’re not.”

“He couldn’t do it alone.” He followed her over to the table. “Besides neither is Derrick or...”

“Derrick looks for trouble. You can tell that by the kind of horse he bought.” She took the sandwiches out of the bag.

Jim had to smile as he sat down “I guess. Still, they needed help. You think Matt and Melinda were more capable than me?”

“No, of course not.” She knelt one knee on the chair and began unwrapping the sandwiches. “I’m sure you were a great help, but...”

“Besides, I do kind of owe them.” He grabbed a sandwich and slid it toward him. “They helped me out once, remember?”

“Yeah,” she spoke softly, looking down and remembering the time she was being hunted, and they all came together to help her. Suddenly, she jerked her gaze back to his. “But you paid that back.... That hard drive, remember? You almost lost your life fighting for that worthy cause. Where does it end?”

“Yeaah...” He stared thoughtfully off into the distance then looked back. “There really isn’t supposed to be so much excitement in this little farming community. We went how many years... And then all of a sudden...”

“You start looking for trouble.”

He huffed the laugh. “Trouble began looking for me!”

Jess plopped down in her chair, was silent a moment, and then picked up her sandwich. “You know, you’re right, we ought to just move to Wyoming!”

Jim laughed as he took a bite of his sandwich. “That ought to do it.”

“Besides, did you hear Derrick say this whole thing could be connected to the whole hard drive thing?” she added as soon as she got done chewing.

“Uh uh. Must have missed that. What he...?”

“He said that taking down that whole operation probably stirred Trent’s name up in Mexico. That’s probably how this guy knew where to locate him... You know, after all these years.”

“Huh. Yeah, I wonder.” He took another bite and chewed it, thoughtfully.”

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“Well, Matt...” Derrick brought the truck to a stop in Matt’s driveway and looked over at him. Matt looked back. There was a tinge of fear in his eyes as he opened the door and tentatively got out. Derrick reached in the back, grabbed Matt’s bag, and jumped out, rounding the front of the car before Matt could get his door closed. Matt just stood there staring at the house a moment. It looked so dark and empty. He wasn’t the type to be frightened, but for one terrible moment, he wondered if this was going to be the way the rest of his life would be like... Dark and silent... All alone. Derrick slapped him on the back as he went past and continued toward the house, motioning for him to follow. Matt obeyed. If it had been anyone other than Derrick, just the thought of it would have turned his stomach. He’d always lived such an independent life. He couldn’t change. He wouldn’t change. The only thing that kept him non-suicidal was the faith that this could be fixed, and it would be fixed.

Derrick reached the door first down, set down the bag, and held out his hand. Matt pulled his key out of his pocket and handed it to Derrick... though he didn’t know why. Derrick unlocked the door, opened it, and waited for Matt to go in. That did it. Matt suddenly realized where Mark got his violent tendencies. Stiffening, he crossed his arms and glared at Derrick. No one was going to open the door for him. Derrick just shrugged, picked up the bag, and walked in. Matt’s temper cooled, and he followed. He had to wonder as he walked in how violent Mark’s temper really was. Could he really harm his own sister?

Matt followed Derrick at a distance to the living room and watched as he arranged the pillows on the couch, moved the end table closer, folded the Afghan that was strewn on Taylor’s recliner, turned on the TV, and began setting up subtitles. *Look, nurse Derrick. If you don’t knock it off... Still...* He walked further into the living room. He didn’t really want to be left all alone in this new silent world. It’s not that he was afraid. He would find a way to solve any problems that would arise.... just like he always did. He walked closer to Taylor’s recliner and stared at it, tears threatening his eyes. For years he had pushed everyone away. Now, he had no one... only himself...no work... no daughter... no friends... Well, maybe one. He looked up through moist eyes at Derrick, who had come over and draped his arm over Matt shoulders. Matt had never seen him do that before... maybe once with Jim. “Thanks,” Matt looked down.

Derrick took the device. “You want it?” He held up the remote.

Matt read it and shook his head. Derrick turned it off and set the remote on the table. Derrick’s eyes grimaced as he watched Matt turn back toward the recliner in despair. He grabbed the device again “We’ll find her.” Matt read it but didn’t respond. His eyes did not brighten one bit.

Derrick took the device back. “Look, I’ve been thinking about taking some sick leave for my arm. I will be back tomorrow morning, and we will find her!” His voice was firm and dogmatic.

Matt looked back at him. His eyes were still hopeless. “Thank you. I can’t even use the phone.”

Derrick took the device. “I will find you a phone... one with words.”

Matt forced a smile. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Derrick turned to leave.

“Derrick!” Derrick stopped and turned back. “You don’t need to go. Why drive all the way back to Jim’s just to come back here in a couple hours?” Derrick shrugged. “Besides somebody ought to look at your arm. Knowing you, it’s probably got three different genus of gangrene growing in it right now.”

Derrick had to smile at Matt’s bluntness. Actually, the way it felt, he probably wasn’t far off right. Honestly, Derrick knew better than to leave it this long, but so much had been going on, there just wasn’t time... and it would be nice to have someone else clean it for him... not that he couldn’t do it himself... but it did kind of feel like it was on fire already... not that he couldn’t take fire... He eyed Matt approaching him and swallowed hard as Matt took his arm and lifted it. Grimacing, he jerked it away in unintentional response. Matt raised one eyebrow. “Hmmm...” Derrick shot him a look, but Matt just disregarded it, turned, and headed for the stairs. “Come on, I’ll show you your room.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, trying to rub some of the tension away, Derrick followed. Eyeing him coming, Matt smiled.

Now, that was more like it. After all, this was his house... and next time, *he* was going to unlock the door.

Following him, Derrick looked around as he went. He'd never been in Matt's house before. It was fancy. He stared at the heavy wooden banister as he followed him up the wide winding staircase looking for a scratch but not finding one. Staring down at the fairly new, plush, and tan carpet, he almost felt underdressed for the occasion. At least, he could have taken his shoes off. "In here." Matt disappeared inside the bedroom. Derrick followed him, stopping short of the bed and looking around. The idea of a bed looked inviting, but he felt like he should take a shower first before sitting down on this one. "Sorry, it doesn't have its own bathroom, but there's one right next door down the hall.... I suppose you could sleep in Mark's old room if you prefer. It's just still got some of his stuff in it."

Derrick took the device. "No, this is fine." He couldn't believe Matt was apologizing for a bathroom right next door when he was used to going down the loft and into the arena room to find one.

"Well, make yourself at home." Matt started to leave. "Oh, I've got some extra night clothes if you want them. Derrick didn't answer. He looked down at his own clothes and brushed some of the dirt off of them. He didn't do pajamas, but in this case... "Or sleep in your street clothes if you prefer." Derrick just stared. "Well, I'll bring some in, and let you decide." Matt left.

Derrick continued looking around for a few moments, undecided as far as the night clothes, he decided he would just lay down and note Matt's reaction when he came back in. If he looked all too disturbed with Derrick's street clothes dirtying his high-class sheets, then he guessed, he would change. He nearly fell onto the bed from exhaustion, kicking his shoes off at the same time. Closing his eyes, he let his whole body relax, and it felt so good. Hearing Matt come in, he opened his eyes and propped himself up a little, watching him take the PJs over to the chest of drawers and set them down before turning to look at Derrick. They both just stared at each other a moment. Derrick wondered what he was thinking. After a moment, Matt came over, took the chair from the desk, and sat down next to the bed. Derrick looked at him. Matt didn't speak. He just took Derrick's wounded arm and pulled it over to him, pushed the sleeve up, and began unwrapping the bandage. Relaxing a little, Derrick lay back down and closed his eyes, resting his other forearm across his face. He didn't really want to see the wound. From the pain, he could tell it wasn't good. He'd just let Matt handle it. Oddly enough, he trusted him.

Matt grimaced as he saw Derrick's wound. It was festering with puss, fiery red, and hot to the touch. It should have been cleaned much earlier than this. Outwardly, he rolled his eyes but inwardly guilt tugged at him. He was the doctor and should have been the one to suggest it. Derrick was not the type to complain, but he should have been able to tell by his face that there was more wrong than just understandable exhaustion. Gently setting Derrick's arm back down on the sheet, he got up and went to retrieve his doctor's bag. "I'll be right back."

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"Here." Jess threw down a bale of hay from the loft.

"Thanks." Jim caught it. "Probably, four more."

"Okay." Jess yelled down and then turned and went back to the stack.

Jim grabbed the bale by the two strands of twine, tying it, flung it over his shoulder, and headed out to the pasture. He'd already fed the horses that he had brought in. Now, he just needed to take a few bails to the year-round pasture horses. The cold breeze felt good whipping across his sweaty neck as he walked outside. The wind blew snow off the roof and down into his face. "Jo jo, Blacky, Cocoa!" He yelled to the horses as he approached the fence. The herd came running from the far corner, kicking up a cloud of snow as they came. He just stood there and stared a moment. The stirring sight of powerful horses running toward him is something he would never grow used to. He loved it... every time. "Here you go, girls. Eat up." He tossed it over the fence.

When Jim got back, the other four bails were already down at the bottom of the stairs, and Jess was coming down. "I wonder where Derrick is?" She brushed the sweat from her forehead, stopped at the bails that were blocking her way, and sat on the step waiting for Jim to move them.

"Do you good to sweat a little." He grabbed another bail and tossed it over his shoulder.

"I do it!" She put her hands on her hips. "Whenever you don't have time on the days you work."

"Which isn't very often any more between me n Derrick. Grab a bail," He instructed as he headed out.

Muttering, she stepped over the other two, grabbed a bail and lugged it after her husband. "Still, it's getting pretty late. I hope he's alright. Maybe I should call Melinda and Matt to see if they got home alright."

"Derrick can take care of himself."

"Still, with everything going on..." She set down the bail to take a break.

Jim took his out, tossed it over the fence, then came back and took Jess's. "I don't think you should this late. Just wake everyone up."

"You think he's sleeping somewhere else?" She followed him out.

"Knowing Derrick, he could have just decided to sleep in his truck. I'm sure, he's fine."

"I hope so."

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Derrick jerked when Matt sat back down and took his arm. Realizing he had awakened him, Matt wished he had something to knock him out or at least numb his arm. He hated to hurt him, even though he knew Derrick wouldn't show it. "Maybe it would be better if you go to the hospital where you can get some pain medication." Derrick didn't open his eyes or take his other arm from off his face, just shook his head. "It might be better." Derrick shook his head again. Shrugging, Matt took the gauze and saline solution from his bag. "Didn't they give you prescriptions at the hospital last night?" No response. "Derrick!" Derrick took his arm from his face and looked at him. "Did they give you prescriptions... like for an antibiotic? Did you fill it?" Derrick reached in his pocket, pulled out a paper, and put it in Matt's hand. "Of course not." Matt unfolded the prescription to read what they had prescribed.

"I didn't have time." Derrick muttered, returning his arm over his face, even though he knew Matt couldn't hear him.

Shaking his head, Matt unwrapped a sterile pad and began sopping up the puss from Derrick's wound. Sometimes, he just couldn't believe this guy was a paramedic. The deeper Matt went the stiffer Derrick's arm got, until he was clenching his fist. Matt sighed as he opened the bottle of saline solution. He didn't know how bad this was hurting Derrick, but it was starting to get to him.

## Thanksgiving Tomorrow, but We're Out Looking for Clues

"I can't believe we're finally going home." Mellissa spoke cheerfully as she pushed Wade in his wheelchair down the hospital corridor toward the door.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Wade looked back and smiled at her.

"Some," she answered softly, stopping momentarily.

He put his hand on hers. "We were meant to be together."

"Yeah." She resumed walking. "And home just in time for Thanksgiving!" She went through the door and stopped next to their van door.

"Tomorrow, huh? You don't have to do anything special. I know you're probably tired. Maybe we can go out to eat or at least order out in." Wade groaned as he pushed himself out of the chair and pulled himself up into the van. They had him walking around the last few days but it still seems like a long time since he'd been doing it on a regular basis.

"I don't know. We sure have a lot to be thankful for this year." She leaned into the car, draped her arms around his neck, and kissed him. "Just promise me one thing."

“What’s that?” He returned the kiss.

“Promise me there will be no more security jobs?” She kept her arm around his neck and stared into his eyes.

Mesmerized, he stared back into her sparkling blue eyes then jerked his head back in realization. “That’s blackmail! Melissa, I’m surprised at you! Taking advantage of...”

She put her hand over his mouth, her eyes pleading, “Promise me.”

“I’ll think about it. Obviously, it’s not high on my list of...”

“Wade Thundercloud! How could you even consider....”

“I’m not considering....”

“You promise me, or I am not shutting this door!”

“Well,” he shrugged, “you could always drive with it open. As long as you don’t come across a cop, you should be...”

She slammed the door shut. “... Fine!”

He smiled as he watched her charge the wheelchair back into the hospital then sighed to himself. He didn’t really want that job back anyway... The paycheck sure was nice though....

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“We get to see mommy!” Mary cheerfully threw her little clothes into her pink Cinderella suitcase.

“And daddy!” Martha used the stepstool to crawl up onto the bed.

Jess smiled as she folded and rearranged the clothes in Mary’s suitcase. She was so glad for them that they would be spending Thanksgiving as a family with their parents. She hoped the hospital didn’t scare the little ones too much, but she was betting they would be fine... As long as they were together. This had been kind of a rush decision. Trent had just awakened yesterday and, on a whim, Teresa had asked if someone could bring the kids up for Thanksgiving. The Thomases had volunteered and would be here any minute to pick them up. Still, she had to hope and pray nothing happened to dash their hopes. The doctors **had** said Trent was doing better... But just a few days ago, they said he was doing so terrible... She wondered... She hoped... She prayed...

“Jess?” Mary jumped up on the bed.

“Yes, Mary, what can I do for you?”

“Do you think I should take Teddy?”

Jess’s eyes softened as she looked at the cute little girl clutching the furry Teddy bear close to her heart. “I think you should.”

“You think it’d be alright? I’m already taking Sandy and Rex, and Mrs. Thomas did say not **too** many toys.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. We’ve got a little room right here in the corner of your suitcase. Why don’t you give me Teddy?” She took the little bear and fit him in the corner. “And we’ll make him a little stowaway.”

“Oh, goody!” She clapped excitedly. “Teddy’s a stowaway!”

Jess smiled as she snapped the suitcase shut. “And there you go. I think you’re all set. Now we just have to finish Martha’s.”

“Yeah, we can’t forget Martha!” She bounced up on the bed and scooted close to her sister.

“No, we can’t do that,” Jess said, setting the first suitcase by the door.

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“Well, Matt...” Derrick stared at his blank expression a moment then grabbed the device from him.

"That's it. We called every abortion clinic in the state. We called every hotel, apartment building, and shelter in the area. Nothing. What's next?" He handed it to Matt and rubbed his face wearily. "... And neither have the cops."

"It could be that someone is not telling the truth."

Derrick raised his hands in a shrug. "What difference does it make? We still have nothing to go on."

"There has got to be something." Matt gritted his teeth. "Some clue."

"Yeah."

"Maybe we should go over to Chicago and ask around. Maybe somebody knows something. Maybe we could buy some information."

Derrick took the device. "What if they didn't go back to Chicago?"

"That's where they went last time. We have to start somewhere."

"I don't know." Derrick threw the phone book on the table and stood up. "This sure isn't getting us anywhere." Matt handed him the device. "Might as well." He tossed it back. Matt nodded in agreement and stood up. "First," he grabbed the device "I want to get some lunch, at least you take with us." Matt nodded, reluctantly. "Didn't even get any breakfast," Derrick muttered as they walked toward the kitchen.

"Oh here. I almost forgot." Matt grabbed two orange bottles from his pocket. Derrick looked at him, questioningly. "I ran down to the pharmacy and filled your prescription this morning before you woke up."

"I only slept four hours."

"Four and a half."

"How much sleep did you get?"

"Enough."

"Did it go all right?" Derrick turned, looking at him inquisitively, wondering if his deafness had been a problem.

"Went fine. Make sure you take the antibiotic."

"Yeah." Derrick put the bottles in his own pocket as they walked toward the refrigerator together. They each got out their own sandwich fixings and made their own lunch.

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"Well, Jessica," she spoke to herself. Invited your parents for Thanksgiving a month ago, and since you never cancelled, even though you probably should have, you better go to the store and buy a turkey." She spoke out loud just because things seemed so quiet around here lately.

Morgan came into the room and crawled up beside her on the couch. "Whatcha doin,' mommy?"

"Oh, just thinking we should go to town and get some things for tomorrow."

"What kind of things?" She crawled onto her mommy's lap.

"Oh, things for Thanksgiving tomorrow."

"Thanksgiving?"

"Yes. Do you remember Thanksgiving last year? We'll have turkey and stuffing, cranberries and mashed potatoes, green bean casserole and corn on the cob."

"Yummy." Morgan snuggled up closer.

"Yes," Jess sighed, thinking about all the work. "Grandma and grandpa will be here. Do you remember them?"

"Grandma?" Her eyes were big, blue question marks.

"I don't suppose you would. It's been so long." She gazed off thoughtfully and then brought her attention back. "They'll love you... just like mommy does." She gave the little one a big kiss and then set her down on the ground. "Come on. Let's go." She stood and offered Morgan her hand. "We've got some groceries to get." Hand in hand, they walked to the closet to get their coats.

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"Okay, Matt, we're here." Derrick snatched the device from him as he put the truck in park. "We're here. Just watch yourself some folks aren't going to take kindly to a deaf doctor." He tossed it back to him and got out.

Matt read it and got out, following Derrick over to a makeshift homeless encampment. "Don't tell 'em I'm a doctor."

Derrick smiled at him briefly, but quickly snagged the first passer-buyer. "Hi, you mind if I asked you a quick question?" The raggedy old man stopped and looked at him "Could you tell me if you've seen this girl?" Derrick took out the picture. The man looked at it then looked at Derrick skeptically. "Have you seen her? We will make it worth your while if we can find her." The man just stared.

"I am her father. We need to find her! She was taken against her will."

The old man simply shook his head and walked away. Matt tried to follow, but Derrick grabbed his arm and pulled him in the other direction. "Come on. There's plenty more where that came from."

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"Wade, quit protesting! As long as you're all right I want to run to the store and grab a few things for tomorrow. Maybe it won't be fancy, but I don't want this Thanksgiving to pass by without recognizing it."

Wade grimaced as he tried to roll on his side on the couch to face her. "Okay, go, but you'll be sorry if the separation proves to be too much for my fragile health condition."

Melissa rolled her eyes as she searched for her keys in her purse. "Oh, don't be a big baby... fragile health condition. Here." She picked up the TV remote with one hand just as she found the keys with the other and tossed it to him. "See you in a little bit." She turned and headed for the door.

"Bye. Hey, make sure you don't forget the cranberries."

"Wouldn't think of it," she called back, closing the door behind her.

Wade smiled and lifted the remote. He bet there was nothing on. Any time he ever had a chance to watch it, there never was. Of course, in the hospital, there had been some good shows on, but then he was too sick to enjoy it. Before he could find out, his cell phone rang. Groaning, he reached to get it off the coffee table. "He-llo?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, I was just getting ready to watch some TV. I noticed the caller ID, what's up? You want me back?"

"Not hardly. The hospital hopes they're rid of you for good. No, I was calling because a man called here and said it was very urgent that he speak to you. I told him we don't give out our patient's telephone numbers, actually, and he practically begged me to call you with a message."

"Who was it?"

"He says his name was Carlos."

"Carlos? ... What's the message?"

"Do you know him?"

"Maybe. I don't know why he would want talk to me." Wade's voice was suspicious.

“All I know is that he said it was very urgent.”

“What is?”

“He wants you to text him your phone number so he can call you. He says it very important that you don’t call him. Are you ready for his number?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” He grabbed the paper and pen and listened as she relayed the number. “Well, thanks for the message.”

“Not a problem. If I were you, I’d text him.”

“I’ll think about it. Bye.”

Staring at his phone, he prayed about it a moment. His curiosity was killing him, but he wasn’t at all sure he should get involved with this guy. Melissa had updated him on what was going on with the others, including Carlos’s role. After a moment, he texted him his number. He figured there wouldn’t be any harm in just listening. Maybe he could gain information that would help the others. He tried to convince himself there was no way Carlos could get him involved in their mess even if you wanted to. After only a couple minutes, his cell phone began to ring. Looking at the caller ID, he took a deep breath and answered it. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Carlos, man. How’s it going?”

“I’d say I’m doing better than you are right now. Heard you been busy lately... assaulting people... kidnapping them... generally behaving outside the law...”

“Hey, man. That was not my fault. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Sure, you didn’t. Hope you like it down there. Hear you’re going to be there a while... if you don’t get extradited.”

“You’re not making this easy. If fact, you’re about convincing me to change my mind.”

“Making a lot of money? I hear the drug business is quite a ...”

“Look, man, I’m not doing that!”

“Oh?”

“That’s not what this is about.”

“Just what is this about?”

“It’s about your baby, man. I mean, I’ve seen him.”

“What?!” Wade sat up straight. There was a pause. “Carlos, you still there? What about my baby?”

“Look, man, I can’t talk right now, but I’ll call you back as soon as I can. Don’t call me. Understand?”

“Yeah, I understand. Carlos...?” Click. Heart racing, Wade brought down the phone from his ear. Was it true? Had he really seen Davey? Or was this just a sick trick? Was he trying to set him up? Was he trying to get him involved in the vendetta against Trent? He set down the phone. Or could it be true?

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Matt leaned against the light post and watched as Derrick went to ask the next person. He was beginning to get discouraged. They’d been walking for hours. They covered most of the homeless population on this side of town. They’d stopped at the park. They’d asked at the barbershop. They’d talked to the kids leaving school. Nothing. No one seemed to know anything... If they did, they weren’t talking. He could tell by Derrick’s mannerisms that this was another no go. Dejected, he went to catch up with him as he made his way toward another random individual. Part way there, he jumped inside as he felt someone approach him from behind... Two young men... Looking cocky and mad. He bet they were shouting insults, but all he could see was their lips moving. Something about them looked vaguely familiar, though.

“So, you haven’t seen her around?” Eyeing the interaction with Matt, Derrick tried to set his conversation short.

“No, no, if I’d seen her, I’m sure I remember. She’s such a pretty thing. It’s too bad about the pretty ones. My uncle Travon had a daughter once...the prettiest little thing on God’s green earth, but one day, I’ll tell you...shocked her poor mommy and daddy...” Derrick kept nodding politely, but his gaze was fixed on Matt’s predicament, which seemed only to be escalating. “Well, the poor dear wound up...”

Derrick didn’t want to be rude, but he had to go. “Okay, well, thank you anyway.”

“Well, don’t you want to hear...”

Derrick just took off. “Hey, what’s going on over here?” Derrick approached just as one guy started circling Matt, and the other one grabbed his arms, holding them behind his back. Normally, Matt would have reacted, but he was looking to Derrick, hoping for a peaceful resolution... if that was possible. A few more young men were approaching from down the street.

“Hey, out of here, man. It ain’t none of your business.”

“What’s none of my business?” Derrick approached closer, more slowly but not tentatively.

“Get lost \*expletive\* \*expletive\*.”

Derrick stiffened. “If I leave, he’s coming with me.”

“No-o-o.” Three more joined them. “I don’t think so.”

“We have a little score to settle.” The leader rubbed his jaw as if he was remembering a fight. That didn’t make sense to Derrick. He was sure Matt...

Matt, sensing the confusion on Derrick’s face, said, “They were here when I found Taylor last time. They were planning to attack her, when I...” Realization crossed Derrick’s face. He hadn’t realized that Matt had it in him. However, it might stand them in good stead in this current situation because Derrick had a feeling...

“Nobody put me down Isay! You’re gonna find out... what it means... to mess with the destroyer! You hear me!”

Derrick let himself look surprised. The guy seemed a little skinny for such a nickname, but he wouldn’t argue. It probably had some merit. He just hoped that merit wasn’t hidden under his coat or belt with six friends in it.

“That girl was just a...”

Derrick raised his eyebrows in interest. “You haven’t seen her around here anywhere lately, have you?”

They all just stared. Then one of them reached down and picked up a broken half of broom. Another one further away found a child’s baseball bat from outside a nearby house. A third one got a lead pipe from a trashcan. Things were not looking good. The men began closing in. Derrick swallowed hard but kept walking toward Matt. Matt was resigned to throwing the peaceful resolution idea out the window...and for good reason. The men were getting closer. Derrick started to run. The men started to run. Derrick grabbed for Matt. Matt kicked the man that was holding him in the shin, but he didn’t let go.

One of the men whacked Derrick on the back with a broom handle. Derrick was afraid he had been aiming for his head and simply missed... not a bad assumption. Doubled over from the hit, he rammed his elbow sideways into the man’s stomach. The man fell to his knees in pain, holding his stomach.

Matt stopped on his guy’s instep hard until he released his hands. Then quick as a flash, he grabbed the front of his shirt and flipped him, knocking the breath out of him as he hit the pavement. Derrick paused in shock, his mouth open as he stared at Matt. I mean, this guy was supposed to be a distinguished doctor not a street fighter. Derrick’s eyes widened as noticed two formidable foes coming toward him. He, on the other hand, had been a street fighter in his past... many years ago. He had the sudden feeling, he had better bring those skills back to remembrance really quick.

Side-by-side, Matt and Derrick started backing up. The two men they clobbered stood up and began forming a line with the others... a line of destruction coming toward them. They kept backing until it was impractical. Matt stepped to the right. Derrick stepped to the left. The approaching line stopped. Both sides stared a moment until the leader announced, “Let’s go.” The men charged... three toward Matt... two toward Derrick.

Derrick stood his ground until they got close. Then he kicked the one in the knees and grabbed the end of the broken broom handle that was being hurled at him by the other, finally managing to yank it out of his hand.

Matt wasn't faring as well. He had gotten in two good kicks and three solid boxing punches to the one guy, but the other one was able to grab his arm from behind again, rendering him useless. The first guy recovered with a vengeance and began delivering solid blows to his face and midsection. Derrick noticed, but unfortunately he was otherwise occupied at the moment. Just one glance over there nearly earned him a fist in the face. He was keeping the two of them at bay but was making no progress. Matt was about out of wind, and darkness was threatening. He tried to keep his abs as tight as possible, but they weren't strong enough to absorb all the impact. Trying to keep his wits through the pain, suddenly things became very clear as panic set in. Without hardly thinking, he stepped hard on the man's foot to hold it down and thrust his other foot with a snap into his knee cap. He heard a crack. Then the man responded with a yelp, let go, and fell to the ground. Matt also fell to the ground, gasping for air. The doctor in him felt guilty, but the man in him felt relief. That is until the second grabbed him and yanked him back up, murder in his eye. This guy was big, and Matt was sure this was the end as he got his arms pulled back behind him again and the other came charging toward him with a bat. Just as he got close and started pulling the bat back, Matt thrust his shoe into the approaching guy's shin and stomped the instep of the holding guy. The holding guy responded by letting go with his arm and wrapping it around Matt's neck in a choke hold. *Uh oh*. Unable to breathe, he kicked and punched and thrust his elbow repeatedly in the man's midsection, until he finally let go, and not a moment too soon. Stumbling forward, darkness clouding his vision, Matt gasped for air. Before he got enough, he held his breath and swung at the approaching man, connecting dead center with his face and to Matt's surprise not only knocking him down but knocking him out. The other man, surprisingly enough, seeing his friend blacked out on the ground, met Matt's gaze and then began backing up. He backed a few feet and then turned and ran away. Matt finally let himself gasp for air, sucking in a deep breath, then almost fainting from the pain that radiated through his midsection. Doubling over, he shook his head and held his stomach. Taking short rapid breaths, he tried to breathe without getting the same light-headed reaction.

Derrick was also getting the upper hand. He'd knocked one out, and was working on the other, not hitting him hard enough for lights out, but battering him repeatedly, trying to wear him down. He was taking some pretty good hits as well, but nothing he couldn't handle. Finally, he delivered a blow that doubled his opponent over, and he decided to take that opportunity to snap his knee up into the man's conveniently located face... nighty night.

Breathing hard, sweating, and bleeding, Derrick walked toward Matt, seemingly oblivious to the unconscious bodies he was walking between and stepping over. "What happened to the leader?" Derrick's voice was deep and commanding. Matt just stared, trying desperately to read his lips. Derrick grabbed the device. "Where did the leader go?"

"He ran away."

"Where?" Derrick's voice was angry.

Matt pointed in the general direction. Derrick started walking, then seeing movement, started running. The leader emerged from behind a dumpster and started running. Matt tried to follow the two but couldn't run. Derrick caught the leader and held him firmly by the front of his shirt.

"Okay. Okay, man. What do you want?" The leader held up his hands in surrender.

"I want what I said I wanted earlier." He reached in his jacket and grabbed the picture from his pocket, brushing his bloodied knuckles against the inside of his coat. "I want to know where this girl is?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"I'll tell you; I don't believe you. How did you know where we were? How did you know Matt was the same guy you had a run in with earlier?"

"I recognized him." His voice was high-pitched.

"I don't believe you." Derrick nearly picked him up as he swung him around and slammed him into a nearby brick wall.

"Derrick!" Matt shouted.

Derrick didn't relent. Shaking him, he repeatedly slammed him into the wall. "Tell me the truth!"

“Okay! Okay! Will it make you feel better if I tell you! Some guy paid us to come over and rough you up?”

“Rough us up, or rub us out?”

The man shrugged.

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

Derrick slammed him again. “I said, who?”

“I said, I don’t know!”

Derrick stared at him a moment. Then flung him in the other direction toward the road, letting him go. “Get out of here.” The young man ran off. Matt watched Derrick earnestly, waiting for him to explain. Derrick didn’t. He just walked past him and headed back in the direction they had come from.

When they got back, the guy with the broken knee, surprisingly enough, and one of the guys Derrick had knocked out were already gone. Matt hurried over to one of the unconscious men and began looking in his eyes and taking his pulse. Derrick wasn’t that tactful. He walked over to the other, lifted him partway by his shirt and began shaking him. “Hey, wake up.” Matt stood, shooting Derrick dirty looks, threatening to come over. Derrick slapped the guy on the side of the face. “Hey!” The guy woke up, looking a little confused. Derrick was in no mood to explain. He pulled him the rest of the way to his feet, pushed him in the general direction of his leader, and said, “Get lost.” Turning, the guy stumbled off in the wrong direction. Derrick didn’t care... but if looks could kill from Matt... Derrick crossed his arms and sat down on the pavement. He knew better than to go over there and try the same thing on Matt’s ‘patient.’ He would just sit here and wait... and maybe time it. It had taken him all of two minutes to send his guy off. He was betting it would take Matt fifteen.

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“Hmmm...” At the grocery store, Jess searched through the frozen turkeys looking for one with just the right poundage, smiling as she looked. She was sure looking forward to seeing her parents tomorrow. So much had happened since she had seen them last. There was so much she wanted to tell them. She loved her parents’ hearts for service, and their sacrificial willingness to live as missionaries. She just missed seeing them so much. She wished they could watch their grandbaby grow up in person instead of just pictures. The last time they’d seen Morgan was just after she’d been born. Sometimes she felt quite alone with them being so far away, but then she would remind herself that Jim didn’t even have parents that were alive, and that actually, she was quite blessed. “There we go.” Finding the perfect bird, she hefted it into the cart. At least this year, she was going to see them... maybe twice. They were back for six months of furlough, so she had tried to reserve them for Christmas as well.

“That’s a nice size bird.” Melissa remarked as she stopped on her way past.

Jess turned toward the familiar voice and smiled. “Hi-i.” They embraced each other. “How’s Wade on his first day back home?”

“Oh, resting. He’s glad to be back home, though.”

“I’m sure,” Jess agreed.

“You having company tomorrow?” Melissa nodded toward the bird.

“Yeah. My parents are coming over, and besides we like to have leftovers. Sometimes I’ll grind the leftover turkey up for enchiladas or turkey salad sandwiches.”

Melissa nodded, “That’s not a bad idea.” She shrugged. “With my work I don’t usually have a lot of time for home cooking.”

“It looks like you’re going to do some home cooking tomorrow.” Jess peered into Melissa’s cart. “I see cranberries, potatoes, some box dressing... You gonna get a turkey?”

"I think a turkey breast if I can find one. It's just going to be me 'n' Wade. Besides, it fits easier in crockpot."

"No family this year?"

"No. Wade in no shape to travel, and both our families live too far away to come here. Besides Wade needs the quiet and rest."

Jess nodded. "Well, maybe next year."

"Yeah." Melissa moved forward a little to let another shopper through. "Hopefully, Wade will be back to his old self by then."

"I'm sure he will be."

"I'm sure you're happy to be seeing your parents again."

Jess's smile widened. "Yes! It's been a long time."

Melissa nodded and smiled as she started to go again. "Well, I hope it's a really good day for all of you."

"You too!" Jess returned the smile and headed for the butter.

## Thanksgiving

"Good morning!" Jess happily smiled as she turned from the raw turkey she was unwrapping in the sink, toward the sound of her husband coming in the kitchen; but as she observed his dirty, smoky, tired appearance, her face fell. "Tell me you got some sleep last night." He slowly shook his head, no. "But I need your help. My parents are going to be here around noon."

"With what?" he yawned wearily.

She stared at him a long moment before answering. "Never mind. I'll take care of it myself... or let it go." She hurried over to him and pushed him toward the hall. "Just go upstairs, take a shower, and go to sleep. I'd rather have you presentable and in a good mood." Then she hurried back to her bird, paused, picked up the knife, and spun back around, pointing it at him as she spoke, "You owe me that much!"

Jim turned back around, his eyes widening slightly in surprise from her dogmatic commands. "I'll be presentable and in a good mood." His voice was slow and tired, and he refrained from tacking on a 'Yes, sir' to it.

"Good." She lowered her knife a little and turned back toward her turkey.

Jim muttered, "Yes, ma'am," as he turned and walked out of the kitchen.

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"Welp, time to get started!" Melinda charged into the kitchen with excessive determination that today and its meal were going to be a complete success.

Decorating for Thanksgiving had really helped to bring the home sweet home feeling back to her house. She made a mental note to turn on the electric fireplace before her guests arrived. Today was the perfect day for being warm and cozy inside. She looked out the patio door. Most of the snow had melted, but there were still patches around. The bare trees and wilted grass were frosty and frozen with the morning dew. Opening the door, she stepped outside. The blustery wind sent shivers through her body. The entire landscape was a frigid, misty, whiteish blue. The frozen breeze blew her blonde hair behind her. She stepped back in her little, warm and cozy house.... If only she could erase the recent foreboding events associated with her home from her mind.

Going over to the sink, she grabbed the handle of the turkey bag and began flipping it around a little in the sink to see if it was completely thawed. It wasn't. Frozen birds were her nemesis. She was forever trying to yank the neck and frozen innards out of the block of ice inside, and today was going to be no exception. It must be tradition. She went over to the cabinet to get

the turkey roaster. It even happened when she went over to her parents' house. Last year, she had held the bird while her mother yanked and her dad made with comical wisecracks from the sidelines. Her smile faded a little. Someone was definitely going to be missing this year. She set the roaster down slowly on the counter. Last year, would be the last Thanksgiving memory she would ever have of her dad.

Shaking her head and trying to move on to happier thoughts, she grabbed the knife and began cutting away the packaging. She was glad for the company she was going to be having today. Her mom was supposed to be here around nine, and Derrick and Matt had said about ten or eleven. Reaching inside the bird, she grabbed the block of ice and began to yank. She hoped this was one happy, cheery day for all of them. Each one was struggling with something this year. Rolling her eyes, she reached for the faucet and began running hot water inside the bird. It may not be health code, and her mom may not approve, but... She brushed a strand of hair from her face with her forearm. ... what her mom didn't know, wouldn't kill her... that is, unless she got salmonella.

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"What are you doing up already?" Wade slowly made his way into the kitchen, leaning against the wall now and then for support.

"If the turkey breast is going to be ready anywhere near noon, I have to get it cooking now." She cut open the package, dumped the breast into the crockpot, and squeezed the remaining juice and spices from the package. "Besides it's eight o'clock."

"I know." He eased himself into a chair. "We just stayed up so late last night, I thought you'd want to sleep in."

"I want a Thanksgiving, Wade!"

"Good! So do I!" He immediately wished that hadn't sounded so defensive. She didn't answer, but her face was clearly upset as she pulled a square baking dish from the fridge. "Those look good!" He made his voice upbeat and smiled widely at the nicely risen cinnamon rolls in the pan, trying to change the mood.

"There were some cans of them right across from the turkey breast. I figured might as well." She took them over to the stove and turned the oven on.

"I'm glad you did." Grimacing, he grabbed the table and pulled himself up. "That will make a good breakfast." He walked over to her as she reached in the cupboard and pulled out a can of icing. "I wasn't expecting anything so..."

She closed the cupboard and spun around, locking eyes with him. "Special?" He nodded, putting his hand on her waist. "I want this Thanksgiving to be special." Her eyes were pleading.

"It already is." He pulled her toward him. "We're together." Raising his hands to her back, he embraced her, and they kissed... long enough to make a person think it was Valentine's day. When they finally broke off, her serious expression changed to a smile as she backed up. She looked down. "You shouldn't be standing, Wade. You just got out of the hospital yesterday. Go sit down."

"Yes, Ma'am." Grinning, he walked back to the table.

She picked up a can of icing, set it on the stove, then picked it up again and walked over to where Wade was sitting. "I just wanted to say, about the job, I know you were doing it for me too, for us, our family, the life we have together." She took the icing back and set it on the stove.

"I didn't really like it," he muttered, "but I needed a job." He put his hands up in a motion like what do you do. "I don't want to lose what we have."

She turned toward him, leaning back against the stove. "I could tell you didn't like it. Sometimes I wonder why you have to be so stubborn."

He shrugged. "I needed it."

"Apparently not. You don't have it now. You know, the money you made working there wouldn't even begin to cover the hospital bills if the company wasn't paying for them."

He looked down. "Well, they are paying for them." He looked back up. "Let's not argue." His eyes pleaded.

"Well, it's just fair to tell you." She crossed her arms. "I may not have a job either."

His eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"My boss didn't like me taking so much time off to stay with you at the hospital. He said if I wasn't back Monday, he was going to start looking for a replacement. I plan to call him tomorrow."

Wade rubbed his hand over his face. "Well, let's not think about it until then." She nodded, turning and sliding the cinnamon rolls into the oven. "Besides, I'll find job... somewhere. There's got to be something out there I can do." His voice was too thoughtful not to be comical.

Melissa had to laugh as she closed the oven door. "Oh, Wade."

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Waking up with a start, Mark rolled over on the couch with such force he nearly rolled off. "What's going on?"

"I'm just watching the parade." Taylor rolled her eyes but quickly turned the volume down.

"Turn that off!" He growled, plopping on his back and covering his face with his hand.

She muted it. "I'll keep the volume down. Why do you have to be such a grouch?!"

"Let me be perfectly clear." He rolled onto his side, propped himself up on his arm, and stared at her with steely eyes. "You have nothing to be thankful for!"

"I'll be thankful when I see you dead." Her eyes and voice held nearly as much hate as his.

"That won't happen to me, Princess." He laid back down. "But it might happen to you if you don't quit annoying me! So, turn that thing off!"

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Finishing his glass of orange juice, Derrick stared up the stairs. He hadn't seen any sign of life from Matt's room, yet, and if they were going to be at Melinda's around 10, he needed to start getting ready. After limping up the first three steps, he paused. Suddenly feeling lightheaded, he swayed to the side and caught himself on the railing. His whole body ached from the combat last night, and even though he hadn't looked at it, he could tell that his arm was getting infected again. He'd only had a chance to take his antibiotic once yesterday... and the day before for that matter. This morning he had woken up all sweaty, and his arm felt hot even under the bandage. The antibiotic had helped, though. Continuing on, he grimaced as he made his way up the rest of the stairs. A nice relaxing day and a good meal sure sounded good for a change.

Taking a couple deep breaths, he paused a moment at the top of the stairs, trying to get a grip on the pain and light-headedness. Then he headed toward Matt's room. There was no light coming from under the door. Even though he knew Matt was an early riser, Derrick could understand. Matt had gotten beaten up worse than he had, and they had had a late night. Knocking was pointless so when he got there, he just went right in. He flipped on the light hoping that would wake him. When it didn't, Derrick half wondered if he should. *He must be pretty tired.* Walking over to the bed, Derrick wished he could have slept that well. Most of his night had been spent trying to find a comfortable position. Stopping, he stared down into Matt's face. His cheekbone was red and swollen as was his split lip. He laid so still; Derrick wondered if he had taken a sleeping pill. His phone was still next to his pillow but it had long ago quit vibrating it's alarm. "Hey, Matt!" Derrick reached down and shook him. Sleepily, Matt blinked his eyes open and looked at him. Derrick quickly took Matt's device from off the dresser and began speaking into it. "Hey, it's ten o'clock. We are supposed to be at Melinda's at eleven for Thanksgiving dinner."

Groaning, Matt rubbed his face. "I forgot." Grimacing, he sat up. "I'll be ready in a couple of minutes." Derrick nodded and began backing for the door, watching him painfully get out of bed and go to the cabinet to get a towel. Derrick shook his head. As slow as he was moving, he doubted if they would make it there by dinnertime. Derrick went out and closed the door behind him. He just wished Matt had more to be thankful for this year. He shook his head. Days and days searching and they hadn't come up with one tangible lead. He hated lost causes, and for Matt's sake, he sure didn't want this to be one, but they needed something, some kind of sign pointing them in the right direction. Monday, Derrick would have to go back to work. He

determined to still help Matt on his days off... for a while anyway... but... *Lord, please show us where to look.*

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Jess broke the last couple of pieces of bread into the bowl of celery, onions, and spices. She liked stuffing, and they only ever had it on Thanksgiving and maybe Christmas, so she hoped it turned out okay. Humming, she tossed the ingredients together with her hands and then took the mixture over to the bird. Morgan had awakened early this morning and put her behind schedule, but this was pretty much the time she had been planning to put the bird in anyway. Lifting it by its leg, she began stuffing the dressing inside. She couldn't blame Morgan for being excited; she was too. It had been so long since she'd seen her parents. Putting the lid on the turkey roaster, she slid it into the oven. *Done and done. Now, to start on the salads.*

"Ohhh," Jim groaned lightly as he laid down and stretched out across the bed. It had been a long and tiring night. The shower felt good on his aching body, but he was sure ready for a good, deep sleep.

Ding Dong....

Startled, Jim rolled over on to his back. "Oh, no."

Ding Dong....

Pulling himself up with the bedpost, he wearily trudged over to the window, even though he already knew who it had to be. *Jess's parents.* He let the curtain fall back. *Nice and early.* Of course, he had gotten home later than he usually did. *Still,* he plopped down on the bed. *They had said, 'eleven.'* That would have given him a good hour sleep. Between running from killers, nightmares, and midnight fire runs, sleep was getting to be an elusive dream. Lying back down, he debated between going downstairs and being a good host and a good husband or just going to sleep and letting Jess handle it. After all, they were her parents. Closing his eyes momentarily... he was asleep instantly.

"Mom! Dad!" Jess exclaimed joyfully as she opened the door.

"Jessica!" They each embraced her in turn. Doll in tow, Morgan came running up behind Jess then stopped next to her, grabbing onto her skirt. Eyes wide yet sparkling, she stared up at her grandparents.

"Is this adorable child our little Morgan?" Grandma asked, kneeling down to Morgan's level. "Hi, honey."

Morgan hid her face in her mommy's skirt. Jess smiled and picked her little one up. "Say, 'hi,' to your grandparents, sweetie. Looking from one to the other, Morgan gave a shy little wave and then turned away and buried her face in her mom's shoulder.

Both grandparents laughed. "She is a little sweetheart, isn't she?" Grandpa said, rubbing the little girl's back and trying to get her to look at him.

"We're still working on our social skills." Jess kissed the little one and then put her back down. "Well, why don't you come in the kitchen, and we can talk. I just got the turkey in, and I was starting on the grape salad."

"Oh, I haven't had grape salad in so long. Doesn't that sound good, dear?" Grandma asked as she took off her coat.

"Sounds perfect." Grandpa took her coat and held both his and hers.

"Oh, here. You can put those in here." Jess held opened the closet door.

Ed nodded and took the coat in to hang them up. Kathy, Jess's mom, looked around as she waited. "You have such a lovely home, honey. You have truly been blessed."

Jess smiled, but she nearly felt like cringing at the hint of envy, she heard in her Mom's voice. Sometimes she wished her mom had it easier. She wished she *could* have a home like this in the small African town where they lived, but she knew that was impractical. She knew her dad would be happy anywhere as long as he was doing what God had called him to do, but sometimes she wondered about her mom. She hoped she was happy. She prayed she was happy. She found herself praying that more and more.

"Yes, it's very nice, dear." Ed agreed as he emerged from the closet.

"Well, just make yourself at home." Jess headed for the kitchen. "And of course, you're more than welcome to come

visit whenever you're in the neighborhood."

"Well, we've been looking forward to this weekend for a long time." Ed put his arm around his wife, and they followed her to the kitchen.

"It's so good to see you again." Kathy smiled.

"Hey, where's that husband of yours?" Ed asked, as he pulled out a chair for his wife.

"Sleeping, I guess." Jess went over to the counter and continued washing the grapes. "He was up all night at work last night."

"A house fire?" Kathy asked.

"I don't know. We haven't talked.

Ed set down the bakery box he'd been carrying onto the table. "By the way, we brought some breakfast with us."

Jess turned back toward them, drying her hands on her apron. "I saw you had something. What is it?" Jess asked curiously.

Morgan came in, walked under the table, and began pushing on one of the legs of one of the big kitchen chairs to get it pushed back from the table.

"Glazed blueberry muffins, your favorite if my memory serves me correctly." He took one out and held it up.

"Ummm." Jess hurried over. "Some things never change."

"Well, I bought four," Ed smiled at Morgan, who was trying to climb up onto the big kitchen chair. "one for each of us adults, but seeing as how Jim's asleep and he'll probably never miss it..." Ed's smile widened as Morgan finally made it up into the seat and gave a sigh of relief from the effort.

Jess smiled, too as she pushed the chair forward so Morgan could reach the table. "I think you're right," she agreed. "I'll get some plates." She went back to the cupboard. "I've got some extra grapes, too."

"Sounds delicious."

"So, how's it been going? I don't think I've talked to you since you were back in Africa, and that was only for a few minutes that time."

"Oh, yes, that was the time the phone service kept getting interrupted. I guess anywhere you live has its ups and downs, but this is where the Lord has placed us, and He has really been blessing lately. We had four baptized last month."

"That's great." Jess set a plate down in front of everyone and then went back for the grapes. "How long have you been back in the states? About a week?"

"About that. I think we came in Friday, and then we were at a church up in Wisconsin last Sunday through Wednesday for their Missions Conference. That's one thing about Africa. It was a beautiful seventy degrees when we left there, not all this snow like you have around here." Ed smiled.

Jess smiled as she set the grapes down. "Well, we don't have as much as they do up in Wisconsin."

"Yeah. We were having a blizzard up there last Sunday."

"I know." Jess sat down and put a muffin on her plate. "We have some friends that are up in Northern Wisconsin, now. In fact, we were just up there, not too long ago."

"Not being chased by killers again, I hope," Ed laughed. Jess laughed back a rather sarcastic laugh.

"Ed, I don't think there's a thing humorous about recalling that traumatic time in our daughter's life."

"That's okay, mom. Dramatic events kind of go with my life." Jess took a bite of muffin.

“Well, I’m glad to see it didn’t leave any lasting emotional scars, and I’m glad that that time in your life is over.”

“Well, this could be equally....” She watched her parent’s eyes widen. “Well, not for me.” She watched them relax a little. In fact, I wasn’t hardly involved at all, until after the fact. Jim’s the one that got shot at and caught in a cave in after the mine exploded.” She watched their eyes widen again. “It’s really not all that crazy. I mean, compared to all your guy’s adventures over in...a....”

“Haven’t been in any explosions myself lately,” her father added.

“Well, it wasn’t a real big explosion. I mean Jim’s fine. Trent’s in a coma, but....”

“Who’s Trent?”

“Oh, he’s a cop... that goes to our church.”

“So, Jim was with a cop... in a mine... that exploded? I thought he was a fireman.”

“He is! He was just up there because Teresa, Trent’s wife, got kidnapped, but she’s fine, so is Jim. Back to work and everything. He just... limps a little.” Her voice got softer and more tentative the longer she talked and watched her parent’s expressions. “So! What have you guys been up to?”

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“Come on, Matt,” Derrick motioned to him to hurry up as he headed for the door. Talk about slower than molasses. The man was moving like he’d just been battered and bruised in a fight last night. Usually it was Matt who was the stringent perfectionist. Derrick just didn’t want to have to explain why they were almost an hour late. Melinda would be calling them pretty soon. In fact, if Derrick didn’t know better, he would say Matt was completely falling apart since he lost his hearing and his daughter. He didn’t even make his bed or hang up his clothes anymore. Derrick had wound up doing the dishes last couple nights just because a stack of dirty dishes looked so out of place in Matt’s immaculate house. I mean, he’d seen him bawl out nurses for leaving their coffee cups around. He hoped he wasn’t getting depressed or something. Walking through the door, Derrick glanced behind him to make sure Matt was coming. He was, slowly but surely. Derrick decided to go get the car and drive up. *Better be careful. People are going to start treating you like a senior citizen.*

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Lying on his back on the couch, Mark occasionally glanced at the parade on TV that he had been unsuccessful in getting turned off. She had muted it for a while, but over time the volume had crept up again.

Feeling his cellphone vibrate in his pocket, Mark sat up and looked at the number. “Turn that off,” he ordered as he answered it. “Hello?” He lay back down as she muted it. “Yeah, I know.” He paused. “What?” He paused. “That’s impossible.” He sat back up. “He’s dead. You said they were all in the cave when you....” He paused to listen. “You said that no one could have survived.” He paused. “Derrick, too? Anyone else?” He paused. “How accurate is your \*expletive\* information? I mean how much \*expletive\* money did these guys want to....” He paused. “Yeah.” He paused. “Yeah, I know. Have you found a \*expletive\* buyer for the baby, yet?” He paused. “Okay.... Yeah.... Alright.... Sure.... Hey,” He looked over at Taylor, who was staring at him in disbelief. “I think I can find out for sure. Give me some time.” He paused. “Alright.... Okay.... Bye.” He hung up the phone and glared at Taylor, who was already glaring at him.

Crossing her arms, Taylor refused to break eye contact. “You’re seriously going to **sell** my baby?”

“That’s right.” He paused. “What do you care? You can’t take care of it,” he sneered.

“You’re evil.” Her eyes narrowed. “What about me?”

A thin-lipped half-smile crossed his face. “**You** may get a better price than the baby.”

Her mouth dropped. “Your own sister! You’re going to **sell** your own sister as... as a sex slave!”

“Don’t be so mellow dramatic! You’ll probably get a good home.”

“I can’t believe you actually think like that.” She looked away.

“At least, you’re better off than your father.” He stood up and walked away, glancing back at her.

Her brow furrowed. "What about our father?" Her voice turned urgent as her heart began to thump with fear. "Where is he?"

"Probably in hell." His smile widened a little. "I can't see him making it to the other place."

"What are you talking about?" She leaned forward, sitting on the edge of her seat. "What did you do?"

He shrugged. "I didn't do anything. I only hear rumors." He was liking the reaction he was getting. She'd do it.

"What rumors?!"

"Why don't you call him and find out for yourself?" He tossed her the phone.

She looked at the phone. "Why do you want **me** to call him?" her voice was suspicious.

He shrugged. "I want to know, too. He knows your phone number."

"Then you call him." She held the phone out.

"Okay." He stepped forward. "What's his number?"

"Wait a minute." She pulled it back. "I'll call him." She looked down at the phone again. "What if he doesn't answer?"

"Try again later."

"You're just trying to scare me!"

"Why," he cursed, "would I want to do that?"

"I don't know."

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"Don't worry about being a little late. I got started on dinner a little late, so you made it right on time." She spoke as she brought a heaping bowl of potatoes in the dining room. "Go ahead and sit down." She motioned for Matt's benefit.

"The food looks great," Derrick took a stab at a compliment. He wasn't accustomed to making compliments, but then again, he wasn't accustomed to Thanksgiving dinners either. "We haven't had much time for food lately."

"Been too busy um... fighting?" She nodded toward the long, black and blue bruise running diagonal across his neck and then raised her eyebrows, glancing over at Matt's battered face.

"Defending ourselves," Derrick insisted.

"Oh, is that what it was?" She backed toward the kitchen, tugging her mom's sleeve on the way past. "Help me bring the salads." Maggie nodded and followed her in the kitchen.

"Yes it was!" Derrick called after her. Matt's face was question marks, and he cocked his head slightly, wondering what the argument was about. Derrick just shook his head, yanked his chair out, and sat down roughly. Shrugging, Matt pulled his chair out and sat down across from him.

"Here we go." Melinda and Maggie returned with the last two salads and a bowl of cranberries. "I think we are all set." They both sat down, one at either end. "Derrick, do you mind saying the blessing?" She thought about asking Matt, but she didn't want to put him on the spot when he couldn't hear himself speak.

"Why me?" Derrick asked gruffly, obviously still annoyed.

"Why not?" She tried to control the edge on her own voice.

"Well, if you think a sinner that stays out late fighting on a Wednesday night instead of going to church is worthy of..."

"Nobody's perfect."

That brought Derrick to his feet. "I didn't do anything wrong!" Any plans he had for being polite and complementary

went right out the window.

Melinda put her hand up to her forehead. "Mother, would you please pray for the food."

"I don't know." Maggie was grinning, obviously amused. "I would kind of like to hear Mr. Derrick's blessing for the food."

Derrick sat back down, swallowing hard on his pride. "Sorry."

"Just pray for the food then so we can eat."

Gritting his teeth, Derrick tried to quench the fire igniting in his stomach. *Derrick, you need to calm down.* Bowing his head and closing his eyes, Derrick tried to think of what to say. "Lord, thank you for this food. Thank you for those who made it. Thank you that we can enjoy it together. Thank you for the many ways you've blessed all of us this year. Thank you for keeping most of us safe this last week. Heal Trent quick. Help Matt to find his daughter. Help his surgery next month to be a success. Amen... in Jesus' name, I mean," Derrick muttered, looked up, and then looked around. He wasn't accustomed to praying out loud, but everyone looked okay with it... except Matt. He looked clueless. Derrick wondered if he should have prayed into his device so... that he could read the prayer later? *On the other hand, he was probably praying his own prayer in his own mind.*

"That was very nice, Mr. Derrick," Maggie reassured him. "Would you like to carve the turkey?" She handed him the giant fork and carving knife.

*Not really.* But he accepted them. "I'm sure Matt's a lot better at carving than I am, being a doctor and all. Here." Derrick leaned over the table to hand the utensils to Matt. "You do it." Derrick nodded to him. Tentatively, Matt stood up and stepped closer to the turkey. Melinda pushed it a little ways in his direction, trying to encourage him.

"So," Melinda pointed to the device in Matt's pocket, and he took it out for her. "How is your search for Taylor coming?" She spoke into it and then laid it on the table.

Matt read it while he carved. "It's not going very well." Matt tried to talk with confidence, even though he couldn't hear what he was sounding like. "We've covered a lot of ground, asked a lot of people, but we haven't come up with anything, yet." He stared down at the turkey, rather than watching their reactions.

"So, what's your next plan of action?"

He read it then thought a moment as he put turkey on everyone's plate. "Just keep asking. Someone's got to know something." Suddenly, Matt stopped carving and reached in his pocket as his phone started vibrating. He froze when he saw the number. "It's Taylor." He stared at it. Melinda gasped.

Maggie couldn't take the suspense. "Answer it!"

Matt had voice to text on the phone, but instead of answering it, he slid it to Derrick. Derrick didn't even have time to protest. He quickly answered it before it stopped ringing. "Hello." Matt came up behind him to read the text on the screen

"Hi-i, who is this?"

"My name's Derrick. I've been helping your father look for you. Where are you?"

"I'm in a farmhouse in Iowa about four...!" She blurted out. Then suddenly there was a sound of a loud slap, then a scream, then it sounded like the phone dropped to the floor. Derrick grimaced. He didn't like to hear women get hit, especially when there wasn't anything he could do about it. "Taylor?" He heard yelling, cursing, and crying on the other end, but no one seemed in a hurry to pick up the phone. He waited.

Finally, there was a faint "Hello?" accompanied by sniffles on the other end.

"Are you alright?"

"Find me," she whimpered. "Mark's going to sell me... and the baby."

"Oh, give me that!" Mark cursed as he took the phone. "I want to talk to Matt."

"Let Taylor talk to him."

"Then you give him the phone!" He cursed again and handed her the phone.

"Hello?" Taylor's voice was weak and shaky.

"I'm going to give the phone to your father, now."

"Just so you know. It's on speakerphone here."

"Yeah. I figured that out. You are too."

"Okay. Where are you at?"

"Uh... Melinda's house... eating dinner. We've been looking for you, though. Here's your father." He handed the phone over his shoulder to Matt.

"Are, are you okay?" Matt's voice shook.

She started to cry. "Mark said you were dead!"

"What?" *How does he know...*

"He said you were dead. Something about an explosion." Suddenly Matt wished Mark didn't know he was alive, but it was too late, now. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, and we're going to find you!"

"Are you sure you're alright? I mean you sound kind of funny?"

"I'm fine. Let me talk to Mark." Taylor handed him the phone. First Mark shook his head, but then he stepped forward and took it. "Mark?" There was no answer. "Mark?"

"What do you want?" Mark's voice was bitter.

"To know what **you** want. Why are you doing this to your sister?"

He sighed. "Money."

Slight relief swept over Matt. "How much do you want?"

"I don't want a penny from you! I want you out of my life!" Mark yelled into the phone.

"Yeah. Why did Taylor think I was dead?" Matt kept his voice calm.

"You know, she's right. You do sound funny. You did get hurt, didn't you?" Mark's voice was hopeful.

"I've temporarily lost my hearing." He waited to see what the reaction to that would be.

Mark laughed. "Wow! Isn't that ironic! You force me to spend my whole childhood in silence, and now you get to see what it's like! That's even better!"

"Better than if I died." He paused. "You want me dead, son?"

"I am not your son! I will never be your son!"

"You are... my son!"

"I am not!" He yelled it.

"What **do you** want?!"

Mark thought a moment. "To give you everything you gave to me, pop. To make your life as miserable as you made mine."

"I did my best." Matt's voice was soft.

"Then you're a first-class failure!"

"I guess so." He paused. "I don't know how I could have possibly raised a son like you."

Mark ground his teeth and cursed. "I don't know why you're still alive."

"God isn't done with me, yet." Matt felt a little self-conscious saying it in front of everyone, but he meant it.

"Oh, don't give me that! God wasn't strong enough to keep Mom from dying. Even you have to admit, she was a lot better person than you!"

Matt hesitated. "I'll admit that." He paused. "I don't know why God decided to take her, but I do know that he gave her strength, strength to fight, strength to die... gracefully. She was never afraid."

"Were you?" Silence. "Because you came pretty close didn't you? How does silence sound?" His voice was nearly a hiss.

"God's your judge, Mark, but know this. I'm coming after you, and I will find you." His voice was a low growl. Then he changed it to a yell. "Taylor! I'm sorry! I'm sorry I left you alone! But we'll find you! We'll find you!" CALL ENDED flashed across the screen. Putting the phone down on the table, he put his face in his hands and then ran one of them through his hair. When he looked up, everyone was staring at him, but no one knew what to say.

Derrick took Matt's device and finally broke the silence. "At least we know she's alright... and the baby." Matt nodded in response but didn't say anything.

"He..." Noticing her lips move out of the corner of his eye, Matt slid his device across the table to Melinda. "Umm," She cleared her throat and then spoke into it. "He didn't seem surprised that you mentioned God."

Matt read it and shook his head. "His mother was a Christian." He shrugged. "I never said that I wasn't." He looked down. "Always made my kids go to church." He paused. "That's where Taylor met Jack."

Melinda cringed at that. Somehow, going to church hadn't seemed to do a lot for Matt's kids. "I wonder..." Derrick reached across the table for Matt's device again. "I wonder how he knew about the cave collapse."

Matt shrugged. "It almost sounded like he had something to do with it, didn't it?"

Derrick nodded. Maggie tentatively reached for the device and suggested softly. "Maybe he read it in the newspaper."

Matt let himself look skeptical. "It wasn't that big of a news story. The police wanted to keep a lid on it because of an ongoing investigation into Sandervauh and his organization. Maybe one or two newspapers up in Wisconsin carried it, but how would he see that?"

Maggie shrugged, and there was silence a moment. "Maybe," Melinda grabbed the device. "Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he tried his own plan... something that we don't even know about... something that failed."

Matt sat down and leaned back against his chair. "How could we just overlook an attempt on my life? Usually murder's kind of noticeable." Everyone was silent for several moments.

Derrick finally broke the silence. "At least we found out she's at a farmhouse in Iowa about four... four hours away?"

Matt read it and nodded in agreement. "Must be." He didn't look up.

"Come on." Derrick stood up and beckoned to him then took the device as Matt handed it to him. "The police should know about this. Maybe it will help them find her."

Matt nodded and stood up. Melinda tried not to look insulted. "Don't you want to eat first?!" Deep down, she knew her motives were selfish, but she had spent all morning slaving away to get this meal just right.

Derrick smiled at the emotion in her voice. "We'll be back. Keep some warm for us."

She looked down. "Okay," then jerked her attention back to him. "For how long?"

They were already heading out of the room. "Oh, a couple hours at the most," Derrick called back. Melinda frowned. *Knowing those two, that probably means around midnight.*

Maggie smiled sympathetically toward her daughter as she pulled her chair back out and sat down. "Well, I, for one,

can't wait to try your new recipe for oyster stuffing."

Melinda's frown didn't ease as she sat back down. "I hope you like it, mom."

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"Honey, the room looks just beautiful!" Kathy, Jess's mom, acknowledged as they all walked into the cozy, thanksgiving-themed dining room.

Jess smiled with satisfaction, feeling that all the effort had really been worth it. Looking around at the pretty garland of golden leaves mixed with white lights hanging from the ceiling, she was glad that she had kept on Jim to get him to help her hang them. Sometimes getting him to leave that barn in the interests of domestic improvements was harder than riding a brahma bull. "I'm glad you like it.

"So am I," Jim affirmed. "Hanging those leaves was a pain," he mumbled as he pulled his chair out. Jess shot him a look.

"I love your tablecloth." Kathy raised the corner to get a better look at the embroidered leaves.

"I think I got that at a garage sale for a couple of bucks. It was new, though."

Kathy smiled as she touched one of the leaves of garland surrounding the pumpkin centerpiece. "That looks familiar." Her eyes softening even more as she moved the leaf in front of the little porcelain wedding couple figurine.

"Well, it was given to us by a very special person." Jess leaned against her husband as he put his arm around her. "And on a very special occasion." She looked up adoringly into Jim's eyes. He bent down a little and kissed her.

Ed gave a light laugh and put his arm around his own wife. "Where'd you get that one?" He pointed toward the little pilgrim girl, holding a basket of pumpkins and corn and squash.

"Oh, I think at a garage sale."

"Huh?" He looked at his wife. "Probably cost her five bucks." He looked back at Jessica. "You know how much the one we got you cost?"

Kathy whomped her husband in the stomach. "Oh, Ed, stop."

Jess smiled. "I'm sure it was considerable."

"You better believe it."

Kathy gave her husband another reproofing look. Jess tried not to chuckle at it. "Why don't we all sit down. My turkey's gonna get cold."

"Well, we don't want that to happen!" Ed quickly pulled out the chair for his wife.

Jess smiled as she hefted Morgan into a chair and watched them all sit down. Then she crossed her arms and gave Jim a look as she realized he wasn't going to help her with her chair. He cocked his head in reply, obviously not getting the connection. Rolling her eyes, she pulled her own chair out and sat down. Ed chuckled, understanding the interaction.

Jim still looked confused but shrugged. "Ed, why don't you say the blessing?" Jim suggested, trying to change the subject.

"Wait!" Jess stopped them as they all bowed their heads. They looked back up. "First, we all got to say something we're thankful for." She looked at Jim. "It's tradition with my family." Morgan squirmed from hunger, but Jess gave her a look, and she sat still. "Jim, why don't you start. What are you thankful for?"

He looked at her lovingly. "You."

Jess didn't look impressed. "Besides that."

Jim jerked his head back a little in surprise. "Well, okay then... our home, the horses, the cars, my work." He figured that covered just about every....

“Can’t you be more specific?” She glared at him.

“Okay.... I am extremely thankful for our 1995 brick tri-level home with the white trim, the three bedrooms, two bathrooms, one porch, one kitchen, one living room, dining room, and basement.”

“You forgot the fireplace.” She still wasn’t impressed.

“I *am* thankful,” he continued, “For the attached garage, the heating and air-conditioning, the carpeted floors, the attic, a stove, refrigerator, *and* freezer, and that Thomas Edison invented electricity! Did I leave anything out?”

Ed laughed. Jess continued to glare at him. “Now, children,” Ed tried to intermedate, “I have counseled many young couples over the years, and if....”

“Father,” Jess interrupted. “Would you like to go next?”

“I’ve got one, Mommy,” Morgan pipped up.

Jess’s eyes softened. “Okay, sweetheart, go ahead.” She glanced at Jim. “I hope you do better than your father,” she mumbled in his direction.

“I’m thankful for Buttermilk, that she was safe having her baby, and for her baby.”

Jess smiled. “That’s a good one, honey.” She glanced at her parents. “We were all a little bit worried about Buttermilk, one of our mares. She’s getting a little along in years, and she had a breach birth, but she came through it okay.”

“Thanks to me,” Jim added. “Besides I said I was thankful for the horses.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Now, children,” Ed began again.

“What color’s the colt?” Kathy’s eyes were bright with interest.

“It’s a spunky little palomino filly with a star on her face. She is pretty cute. We call her Buttercup.”

“Oh, I would love to see her.” Kathy looked at Morgan. “Maybe you can show her to me sometime.”

“Can I, mommy?” Morgan’s sapphire eyes sparkled.

“Sure. Maybe after dinner we can all go out and introduce Grandma and Grandpa to the ‘extended family.’” Jess smiled.

“That would be lovely,” Kathy agreed.

“If we ever make it to dinner.” Ed stared longingly at the turkey.

“Well, go ahead, Dad.”

“Okay, well,” Ed took his wife’s hand and clasped it in between his, “I thankful for this strong and beautiful woman. The Lord knew exactly what he was doing when he gave her to me. She’s my perfect helpmeet. Your smile, your laugh, your joy....” He stared deep into her eyes. “You lift me up when I’m feeling down. Your sweet spirit makes people comfortable being around you, your love for the Lord and your enjoyment in work gets so much done in the ministry, your contentment to live in the jungle and face the hard-knocks with me, your strong faith and relationship with the Lord, makes me feel like the happiest man alive for having you as mine.” He glanced at Jess. “I’m also thankful for the beautiful daughter you gave me and how you helped raise her to love the Lord.”

Jess stared lovingly at her dad a moment then glared at Jim again. “That’s how you say you’re thankful for your wife!”

“Dad, you’re killing me,” Jim admitted.

“All I got was, ‘oh, yeah, I like my wife, too.’” Jess scowled. “Well, I hope so! At least! If you didn’t you shouldn’t have gotten married!”

“I didn’t say...!”

“Okay. My turn,” Kathy interrupted. “I’m thankful that we get to come here this year, see our precious daughter and her husband, and our darling little Morgan. I’m thankful for safety on the trip back, a good time at our first church, and for the four

new churches who are thinking about taking us on for support. I'm also very thankful for this man." She held his hand and shook it back and forth a little. "He's always there when I need him, his strength and his wisdom, but mostly how he stays walking closely to our Savior. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth as long as we're together." She smiled. "And of course, I'm thankful for my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without him, no matter what I have, or where I'm at, or who I'm with, it would all be empty. He makes life worth living. He fulfills me, no matter where I'm at or what I'm doing."

"I'm thankful for the Lord and that he saved me, too!" Jim quickly added, feeling guilty.

"Well, I'm so glad that my parents could come for Thanksgiving this year," Jess began. "It's been so long since I've seen them, but I'm thankful for all the years I had growing up with them, for their wisdom and what they taught me especially about the Lord. I'm thankful for the Lord and for the joy and purpose he brings to each of our lives wherever we are. I'm thankful for my sweet and smart little girl, for my nice country home, and for the protection the Lord gives us. I'm also thankful for my husband, even though he only *likes* me."

"I never...! I do not!"

"Jess-i-ca," Kathy reproved, trying to hold back her smile.

Crossing her arms and raising her eyebrows, Jess looked over at her husband. "You don't?"

Ed laughed. Jim thought back a moment. "I mean, I do! A lot... a real lot! Jess-ica."

Ed laughed again. "Okay. Who's going to pray for this meal?"

"Go ahead, dad," Jim suggested when no one answered.

"Okay." Ed reached for his wife's hand and then for Jess's hand. Jim followed suit, and they all bowed their heads.

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"It's not quite done." Mellissa came back into the living room and sat down on the edge of the couch where Wade was lying. Sighing, she crossed her arms loosely and leaned against the back of the couch, angling over Wade's legs.

"You've sure been working hard on that meal. Don't wear yourself out." He pushed himself up further, trying to sit up without too much assistance from the pillows behind him that were propping him up. "I don't want you making yourself sick. You've been through a lot, too."

"And there may be more coming for both of us." She spoke softly, staring off into the distance.

"Huh? What do you mean?" His eyes questioned the resignation in her voice.

She waited a moment and then glanced over at him. "A few days ago, maybe a week, my boss told me if I didn't come back into work, he would replace me."

Wade put his hand over his face and groaned. "No-o."

"I told him I wasn't leaving you until you were out of the hospital," she continued. "We argued, and he indicated that if I didn't come in the next day, he would replace me. I hung up on him. I don't know if he was bluffing or not. I haven't had the nerve to call, but I have a feeling...." She stared off again. There was silence a few moments.

"Mellissa?" He wanted her to turn and look at him. "Mellissa?" Finally, she did. "Thank you." His eyes were so soft and caring that tears began forming around Mellissa's eyes. She struggled to hold them back. "Thank you for loving me that much," Wade continued. She leaned toward him, and he pulled her the rest of the way to him until she was leaning on his chest and he was holding her. "Thank you for always sticking with me. I've made some mistakes. I act like a jerk sometimes, but I wouldn't trade you or what we have for anything."

She propped herself up a little to stare deep into his dark eyes. "I love you." She blinked back tears. They kissed and then parted slightly.

"And we'll be alright," he reassured. "I'll find a job," His voice held determination. "... and so will you... if you want to."

She raised her hands in a shrug. "I have nothing better to do... now that...."

“Maybe the Lord will bring Davy back to us.”

“I hope so.” Her voice was deep, and she sniffed back tears. “At least, I’ll be getting unemployment for a while.”

“Well, there’s a silver lining at least. Besides you’re not totally sure you’ve lost the job yet, are you?” He brushed a few tear-dampened hairs from her face.

“No, not for sure.” She sat back up. “However....” She leaned against the back of the couch again, this time angling over his stomach.

“So, until you know, just enjoy your time off.” He put his arms around her waist and clasped his hands on the other side of her.

“You’re right.” She smiled at him. “It’s Thanksgiving, and we have a lot to be thankful for.” They both sat in silence, both absorbed in their own thoughts, yet enjoying the closeness of sitting together.

After a few minutes, Wade’s cellphone began to ring. “I’ll get it.” Mellissa sat up and picked up the phone from off the coffee table. “It says Carlos?” She read the caller ID, questioningly.

Sitting up straight, ignoring the pain, Wade grabbed it from her. She watched him inquisitively as he answered it. “Hey, Carlos, what’s up? Have you found out anything?”

“I think I’ve found your baby, man,” His voice was muffled and broke up a little.

“Where?” Wade sat up even straighter. “Are you sure it’s him.

“If I see him again, man, I’ll text you a photo, but the story... it sounds like yours.”

“What story?”

“Mansenie, the organization you thought kidnapped the kid. They’re down with this human trafficking ring that operates across many countries.”

“And you think they have our baby?” Wade’s voice was urgent and hopeful.

“Davy?!” Mellissa gasped, springing to her feet and covering her mouth with one hand. “He found our baby?”

“No, not them anymore, but that’s good. You don’t mess with them. They’re heavy. I maybe can find who adopted him.”

“Adopted him!”

“Rumor is they aren’t very happy with him.”

“Why not?!” Wade got offended. “I mean, where is he?” He heard some knocking in the background and then Carlos began speaking to someone in Spanish. “Carlos?”

After several moments, Carlos replied. “Hey, man, I’ve got to go.” There was a pause, and his voice changed to a whisper. “Don’t contact me.”

“Carlos! Just the name of the people! Carlos!” Call ended. Wade looked up at Mellissa. Her eyes were wide with hope and fear. “Our baby? He’s found our baby?”

Wade nodded, cautiously. “So he says.”

“Carlos?” Mellissa sat back down on the couch.

“Carlos.” Wade nodded, letting out a sigh. “The man who helped Sandervah kidnap Teresa so he could kill Trent, the man who lured Derrick up there and drugged him, the man who ran out and abandoned all of them instead of trying to get them help.

Tears began to well in her eyes again. “You think he’s lying?”

“I don’t know.” He leaned back against his pillows. “I don’t know which would be worse.... his lying... or those people

having our baby.”

“Why can’t anything ever be good news anymore?” She leaned back against the couch and allowed the tears to flow.

“I just can’t figure out his motive in all this?”

“Maybe,” She wiped her eyes. “Maybe he’s just trying to survive like everyone else. I mean he was supposed to kill Derrick, and instead he just drugged him.”

“You don’t try to survive off the innocent lives of others. I would think Carlos, of all people, would know that.” Wade’s voice held conviction.

“Maybe he thought Derrick could get away. You said that yourself about Derrick, he always finds a way to get away, escape danger.”

“What about Teresa?”

“Maybe he was hoping Derrick would find her, or maybe he didn’t know what was going on.”

“He knew what was going on. He’s as much a killer as Sandervauh.”

“But he didn’t kill anyone! Oh, Wade, maybe he really did see our baby! Maybe he really wants to help!”

Wade looked skeptical. “Maybe, but a man like Carlos, he’s not just doing this out of the goodness of his heart. He’s got to have some reason.”

“He was a fireman. He must have some goodness in him.”

Wade didn’t look convinced, but before he could come up with a reply, the smoke alarm sounded, startling them both.

“Oh, no!” Mellissa jumped up and ran for the kitchen.

Wade allowed himself to laugh. “See, I’m not the only one. I would like this moment documented and remembered for the next time I do the cooking!” He called after her. Wow, he didn’t remember the last time she had burned something. In a way, it made him feel better about his own ability, but on the other hand, he hoped his dinner was okay. He was feeling pretty hungry.

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“Well, Jessica, that was one delicious meal. You did yourself proud.” Ed smiled, groaning and leaning back in his chair, obviously stuffed.

Jess smiled. “Thanks.”

“Yes, Honey, you’ll have to give me your recipe for cornbread. If there’s one thing we have plenty of over there, it’s corn, but I’ve never tasted cornbread this good before.”

“Sure. I got it from a lady at our church. I thought the same thing when I tasted it at a potluck a couple years ago... uh oh.” Feeling her phone vibrate, she took it out of her pocket and looked at the caller ID. “It’s Teresa.” Her face turned solemn. “Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Teresa.”

“Yes, I know! How’s Trent?”

“That’s why I called. I just had to tell somebody! He’s awake, and the doctor says he’s doing much better! They took him off the ventilator, and he ate some!”

“That’s wonderful news!” Jess glanced at Jim’s inquisitive face and covered the mouthpiece. “Trent’s awake.”

Jim looked surprised, but grinned. “Great!”

“We’re so happy for you! It’ll be great to see him again.”

“He’s asleep right now or else I’d let you talk to him.”

“Well, you let him get all the rest he needs. That’s a wonderful Thanksgiving surprise for you and the kids!”

“I know. The kids haven’t seen him yet. My mom’s been watching them since the Thomas’s brought them up. I’m trying not to get my hopes too high. The doctor says it could still go either way. I keep praying nothing happens.”

“We’ll keep praying.” Jess’s voice held concern, determination, and joy all at the same time.

“Thanks. I better go, but I’ll keep you updated.”

“Thanks. We appreciate that!”

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye. We’ll keep praying!”

“Thanks. Bye.

All eyes were on Jess as she hung up the phone. “Well, Trent’s awake. He’s breathing on his own and eating some. The doctor’s still a little concerned, but he says he’s doing better.”

“That’s great!” Jim smiled, relieved at the good news.

“Praise the Lord!” Kathy agreed. She almost felt like she knew Trent and Teresa after hearing their story from Jess.

Morgan squirmed in her chair. She was happy just like everyone else, even though she didn’t understand why. “Horses.” Kneeling on the big dining room chair, Morgan leaned a little too heavily on the back for Jess to resist grabbing her little shirt and pulling her forward. “We going to see the baby?” Morgan asked quietly, yet grinning.

“How does that sound to everyone else?” She looked around at the others. “Want to go out and check on the livestock?”

“I would love to see that new little foal and her mama.” Kathy folded her napkin and set it next to her plate.

“Sounds good to me,” Frank answered, still leaning back in his chair. “I’ve got some turkey and dressing I need to burn off.” He patted his stomach.

“I don’t know.” Jim leaned back and closed his eyes. “I could use a nap.”

“A nap!” Jess exclaimed. Jim opened his eyes with a start. “You just woke up!”

“Then again, maybe not.” Jim tried to hold back a yawn.

“Oh, leave the man alone,” Ed stuck up for him. “He had a rough night last night.”

Kathy smiled as she started collecting the dishes. “We really should get things cleaned up a little first.”

“Oh, we won’t be long,” Jess reassured.

“Yes, but we don’t want any of this good food to go to waste.”

Jess’s smile softened a little. “True.” She got up to help, but it saddened her that her mom lived in a country where wasting food was such a strong concern. “You’re right. We’ll put the food away first, but the dishes can wait until we get back,” she insisted.

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Lying on the bed, sweating, Carlos stared up at the ceiling. He was home, but this didn’t seem like home anymore. What he really wanted to be doing was having Thanksgiving dinner with Melinda like he did last year... eating turkey... staring deep into her lively blue eyes and laughing face. He missed her. He still missed her... even though she dumped him... even though she got him arrested... even though she practically blamed him for the attempts made on her life. He still loved her, but he couldn’t figure out for the life of him why.

Knock, knock.... Knock, knock....

"Come in." His voice was gruff.

"Buenas noches, Senior."

First, he slowly turned to look at her, then when he saw her, he rolled off the bed and stood up. *Wow! Talk about a knockout!* He looked her over head to toe and back up again, whistling when he reached her face. When he spoke, his Spanish was all mixed with English and missing some words.

She giggled and then laughed. "May I come in, Senior?"

"You speak English."

"Ci, Senior." She shut the door and swung her hips as she walked toward the window.

"What's your name?"

"Margarita, Senior. Your parents say you are lonely." Slinking toward him, she unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. "Are you lonely, Senior? She stopped in front of him and stared up into his eyes for several moments, willingly.

He stared back lustfully, before grabbing her and pulling her toward him, kissing her.

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"So, this is Buttercup?" Kathy smiled as she opened the corral gate and slowly approached the little wide-eyed filly, frozen in a wide stance with a little white cap of powdery snow on her head. "Hi, little one," Kathy held out her hand as she slowly approached. "What do you think about you and me being friends?" The filly threw back her little head, spun around, kicked back a cloud of snow, whinnied, and ran off to her mother a few yards away, hiding behind her yet peeking out every so often.

"I'd say that's a, 'no,'" Jim joked.

Jess elbowed him in the ribs, causing him to choke on a laugh. "We've been so busy lately; we haven't had much time to work on her socialization. We need to do that."

"How 'bout right now?" Kathy's eyes brightened as she suggested it.

Jess's own eyes brightened in response to her mom's excitement. "Sure! We can do that. Honey, why don't you get the halters for Buttermilk and Mrs. Trigger." Jess gave her husband a little push in the general direction of the barn.

"Mrs. Trigger?" Ed laughed.

"That was Jess's idea." Jim called over his shoulder as he headed toward the barn.

"Weeell... her husband's name is Trigger, so it stands to reason to me," Jess insisted. Ed laughed again.

"Who's Buttermilk's husband?" Kathy smiled.

"Well, um, Trigger's kind of a polygamist," Jess admitted.

"Well, I'm shocked," Ed joked. "A daughter of mine owning such an animal." Jess smiled in return.

"Mommy?" Morgan climbed on the bottom two rungs of the gate. "What's a poly... polly...."

"Never you mind, Honey." Jess looked around for a subject to change to.

Kathy was already looking at it. "What's that horse's name?" She stared nearly mesmerized across the adjacent pasture at a strong, proud black horse, standing alone on top a hill with such a regal posture, as if he wanted everyone to know that he was the king of this territory. Yellow beams of moonlight illuminated the outline of his shiny form as he whinnied and reared in the darkness. Then, snorting puffs of smoke through his nostrils and pawing the ground in front of him, he threw both hind legs back in a powerful kick, spun around, lowered his head, and charged toward something on the other side of the hill. "He's magnificent."

"I wonder what he's charging at." Jess didn't sound quite as impressed.

"Probably just a coyote." Jim returned with the halters.

"What's his name?" Kathy's eyes were eager, obviously still mesmerized.

"Maverick," Jess informed. "He's a boarder. Only his owner can ride him."

"Only his owner would dare," Jim muttered, handing her one of the halters.

"You tried once," she reminded him.

"Only because Derrick dared me. Besides I wasn't really trying. I had other things to do."

"You're lucky you didn't get killed."

"Look! If I'd had more time...."

"Children, children, just calm down." Ed interrupted.

Jim just gave her a look, swung open the gate, and went in to get one of the horses. Jess returned the same sort of look and moved her daughter a safer distance from the gate closer to her Grandma before going in herself.

"A pink halter, wow!" Kathy smiled as she watched her daughter go in.

"Only the best for Mrs. Trigger!" Jess grinned as she went over to the pregnant mare.

Jim already had Buttermilk and was bringing her toward the gate. "Come 'ere, Morgan," he requested as he opened the gate. Leaving her Grandma, she bounced over to him. Smiling, he bent down and hoisted her up safe in his arm before bringing the mare and her filly out of the pasture.

"You're a pretty thing, too." Kathy rubbed the horse's neck as it went by. "Aren't they beautiful, Ed?"

"I suppose." He buttoned the top of his coat and pushed his hat down further. "Personally, I'm about to become a second cousin to Frosty the snowman.

"A nice, brisk, Christmasy change." Kathy held the gate open for Jess to come through.

"Maybe we'll have a white Christmas this year!" Jess piped up. They all headed for the barn.

Ed groaned. "Personally, I prefer Christmas in Africa."

"Well, I'm looking forward to a nice *traditional* Christmas with our daughter." Kathy caught up with Jess.

"You can be traditional without snow," Ed insisted. "Just because you grew up in northern Minnesota. Personally, I think they handle Christmas in Texas much more...."

"Warmly," Kathy finished.

"Don't worry, Dad," Jim called back. "We have a heated viewing room where you can unthaw."

"You're a lifesaver!" Ed rubbed his hands together and walked faster.

"Remember those beautiful white Christmases the first couple years we were married when we lived with my parents." The fondness of those memory showed through on Kathy's face.

"How can I forget. Those were the most frozen years of my life. If she had her way, we'd be missionaries to Siberia."

Kathy gave him a look as they all entered the barn. "Nooo." She paused. "But maybe just for Christmas."

"Well, I'm ordering a white Christmas for both of us," Jess smiled back at her mom as she took Mrs. Trigger to her stall.

"Me too," Kathy agreed. They both looked accusingly at Ed.

"I will refrain from making my true feelings in this matter known to the Lord, but that's the best I can promise."

“Spoilsport.” Kathy proclaimed as they all followed Jim, Buttermilk, and Buttercup to the arena.

“God did not make people to be penguins!” Ed insisted, ducking into the viewing room.

“Well, he’s got us there.”

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Looking half melancholy, half dazed, Mellissa brought two plates of Thanksgiving dinner into the living room. Sitting down on the coffee table next to Wade, she set one plate in her lap and the other on the table in his reach. “Wade, what if...” Her voice was high-pitched and sorrowful.

“Mellissa,” He shook his head. “this is Thanksgiving. We are supposed to be thanking God for all we *do* have.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I just want my little boy back.” Burying her face in her hands, she began to weep. “Oh, Mellissa.” Wade grimaced as he pushed himself off the couch and sat down on the table next to her. Scooting closer, he put his arm around her. “I think we’ll find our baby... someday. I hope and pray every day that he’s safe and being well taken care of, but we can’t start mourning the loss of him all over again. His life is in the Lord’s hands.”

She looked up at him through teary eyes. “Why doesn’t the Lord bring him back to us?”

Wade reached in his pocket as his phone began to vibrate. “Maybe he will.” He looked at the caller ID.

Her face was earnest and fearful. “Is it...?”

Wade nodded as he answered it, scooting a little farther away. “Hi, Carlos.”

Mellissa scooted closer trying to hear. “Put it on speakerphone.” He did.

“Hey, man, sorry I had to hang up on you earlier. The old man walked in, and well, you know.”

“No. I take it the rest of your family doesn’t see the moral depravity of stealing another person’s baby?”

“Hey, man, take it easy. Your baby’s got a good home. They’re taking care of him.”

“Would you care if they weren’t?”

“Hey, man, I didn’t take him.”

“Sorry.” Wade tried not to sound too suspicious. “What about Davy? Where is he?”

“I’m not sure it’s him, yet, man. There’s this Christmas party. I think I can get myself invited. They should be there too.”

“The people that have Davy?”

“Yeah. Look, I found a picture of the three of them. I’ll text it to you when we’re done. I might be able to arrange for you to buy him back.”

“Just tell us their name!” He accidentally yelled it.

“Man, use your head. You sic the cops on them; your kid’s gone for good.”

“Why? ... How would they know? I think the police would know how to handle...”

“The police haven’t found him.”

“Look, Carlos!”

“No, you look! You want your baby back, you do it my way! I’m not going to help you get him killed!”

Wade’s stomach turned. “Like you’d care,” he growled.

“Do you want my help or not?”

There was a long pause. Mellissa’s eyes panicked. “We’ll try it your way.” Wade’s voice was deep yet tentative, but his

heart ached as he stared into his wife's pleading eyes. "This had better not be some sorta of sick trick." It was a warning.

"Why would I do that, man?" His voice was soft.

"Why did you help Sandevauh?"

"Man, I don't have time to go into all that with you." His voice was weary. "I didn't have a choice."

"Sure."

"Before I put myself in danger," His voice was cool. "I need a promise that I can have amnesty and get back in the country when I bring the baby back."

The boom lowered. Wade's heart sank. "I can't do that!"

"Fine. Find him yourself. You been doing a great job so far." Carlos sounded as if you might hang up.

"Wait a minute! I can try. I mean... I can see what I can do... but I don't know." Wade's voice trailed off. "I knew there was something behind it."

"Of course, there's something behind it. Nothings for free... but it's a pretty good deal if you ask me. Think about it." Carlos's voice was nearly gloating.

"If you can do it." Wade's voice and face grimaced as he repositioned himself. "You could make a mistake and endanger his life too. Besides, I don't know if I believe you."

"I don't think you have any other choice. Think about it. I'll call you when I have more information." Carlos hung up.

Thoughtfully staring into the distance, Wade closed the phone. Melissa snatched the phone from him. "We need to call Sergeant..."

"No. Don't do that!" He snatched the phone back.

"Why? We need to at least tell him our baby's been sighted!"

"We don't know that," he mumbled, looking down at the phone. "All we know is what Carlos said." He looked back at her. "Besides, we don't know where they're at."

"The police probably do." Her eyes were hopeful.

"I don't think so." He looked away. "Besides what if that's true? What if they do get wind of it and do something drastic."

"You certainly can't be thinking of trusting that murderer!" She jumped up, spun around, and sat down on the couch across from him.

"As you pointed out, he hasn't killed *anyone*... yet."

"That we know of!"

Wade raised his hands in slight exasperation. "So, what do you want to do? Call the police? And tell them what? We don't have any proof. We don't even have a name. Maybe if we play along for a while, we will get one."

Crossing her arms, she leaned back against the couch. "Maybe." She stared off into the distance several moments, her eyes starting to get soggy. "This is the first glimmer of hope we've had in months."

"I know." He glanced at her. "Just don't get your hopes up. This could still be a trick."

"Why?" Her voice squeaked.

"I don't know." He looked far away, thinking.

"Lord, please protect our baby." She squeezed her eyes shut against the tears. "Please, bring him back to us." Her voice was anguished. "We'll raise him for you."

Melinda and Maggie turned their heads from each other to the door as they saw it start to open and then Derrick and Matt come in. Without a word, they wiped their shoes off on the mat and came over to the living room. Matt's face was earnest, but Derrick's looked weary. "How did it go?" Melinda tried to look hopeful.

Derrick threw his hands up as he plopped down on the couch. "They'll keep looking."

"But now they know where." Her voice and eyes were optimistic.

"If he doesn't move her." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"But they will be looking?" She glanced from Derrick to Matt, who was still standing.

"Uh huh." He didn't open his eyes.

"Well, that's good news!" Melinda bounced up cheerfully. "Ready to go finish supper?"

Derrick looked over at Matt who was eyeing the door, impatient to get going. Derrick mentally rolled his eyes. He hoped Matt wasn't thinking of going over to Iowa tonight. "What's the matter?" Melinda looked from Derrick to Matt and back to Derrick.

Derrick rolled his eyes as he stood up. "He wants to go knock on the door of every farmhouse in Iowa until he finds her."

Melinda turned to Matt in shock. "Tonight!" He just returned her a blank stare, so she looked back at Derrick.

"I hope not," he muttered, walking past them both toward the kitchen. They followed him.

Matt's face was looking increasingly annoyed. "We should go." He clenched his jaw as he watched Derrick go to the fridge and get out some food.

Getting a chunk of turkey, Derrick began eating it as he walked toward Matt and held out his hand for Matt's device. Matt handed it to him, his face set. "You want to drive to Iowa tonight?"

"I do."

Derrick nodded. "Okay, but I'm getting some food first. I haven't eaten since breakfast." He considered pointing out that Matt hadn't eaten since last night, but he hoped that he would remember that on his own. Matt relented, sitting down at the table, but his face hardly softened.

Melinda glanced at Matt then put her hand on Derrick's arm on her way past. "Why don't you go sit down. I'll make you both a plate." Derrick nodded, grabbed another piece of turkey, and went to the table. "I'll make you some to take with you, too." She hurried to the fridge to help her mom take out the salads.

Derrick's face didn't conceal surprise. "Thanks." He was just trying to think of a tactful way to ask for that. If there was one thing he'd learned all too well, it was that when Matt got going he would often forget to eat... and would expect him to do the same.

"We'll have it for you in just a jiffy." Putting a generous helping of everything except the salads on a plate, Melinda slid it into the microwave.

Eyes softening, Matt watched Derrick as he sat sprawled out in the kitchen chair staring in the general direction of the two ladies working. Looking uncharacteristically agitated, he ran his hand through his hair a couple of times and then grabbed his other wrist, clenching it and then rubbing it. His eyes betrayed hints that he felt overwhelmed. Understanding why, Matt stood up.

The microwave oven beeped, and Melinda hurried right over, exchanging the plates and bringing the steaming one to the table as the other warmed. She waved it between the two men, not sure who to give it to. Both stared at each other but gave her no answer. So, she just set it between them and hurried back.

Ignoring the food, Matt went over to Derrick and picked up his arm. Reacting to the pain, Derrick yanked it away, but

Matt yanked it back and began rolling up his sleeve. The microwave beeped, and Melinda brought over the second plate of food just as Matt finished unrolling the bandage around Derrick's arm. Seeing the festering wound, she gasped and accidentally took the Lord's name in vain, covering her mouth afterwards with an apologetic look. Matt glanced at her. "Could you go out to the truck and get my bag?" He held out his keys.

"Sure." She took the keys and headed for the door.

Matt glanced at Derrick as he began sopping the pus off the wound with the clean part of the bandage. "I'll drop you off at my house and go alone." It was hard for him to say, but he knew he couldn't keep pushing Derrick. Derrick shook his head in response. "You need to rest." Matt used his doctor tone.

Derrick held out his hand for the device. Matt gave it to him. "So do you. It's only a little more than an hour to the state line. We can start first thing in the morning. You can't go knocking on folks' doors in the dark."

Matt thought a moment and then returned a nod. He knew he needed Derrick to help him. He could only imagine what the response would be to a deaf man going door to door.

"Here." Melinda returned with the bag and handed it to him.

"Thanks." Matt took it from her and began rummaging through it. He couldn't help but own the guilt. Derrick was a strong young man, and normally his arm would be nearly healed by now. It was only because of the stress and lack of sleep that this infection was getting the better of him... and that was his fault. He needed him, but he was asking too much of him.

## Black Friday Can be Exciting

Beep... Beep... Beep...

Groaning in disbelief, Jim thrust his pillow over his head and rolled onto his stomach. "Jim? Jim, wake up." Muttering and shaking his head, Jim adamantly tried to refuse the madness of... "Come on, Jim! Wake up!" Jess grabbed his arm and yanked in a futile attempt to roll him over.

Finally relenting, Jim rolled onto his back. Blinking his eyes clear, he looked at the clock. "Remind me again why we are getting up at three thirty to run out into the cold just so we can stand in a long line and nearly get trampled to death when they open those doors.

"To save money!" Her voice was chipper. "Something that should interest you greatly. Think of all those good deals just waiting to be had!"

Jim shook his head as he slowly sat up. "There's got to be a better way."

Jess pulled the covers off him and then turned back toward the door. "Come on! Breakfast is all ready.

Frowning, Jim reached for the covers and pulled them back up, convinced his wife had serious psychological sales issues. *Black Friday... Bah, humbug.*

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Waking up, Wade could feel Melissa awake beside him. Carefully, he rolled onto his back, gritting his teeth against the pain. "Are you awake?"

"I can't sleep."

Wade yawned. "Why not?"

"Thinking about Davey... the best way to get him back... what he must be like now... what he could be like when he grows up...if we raise him."

“We’ll get him back.” He smiled over at her, though not sure if she could tell in the dark.

She didn’t look at him, but she could feel his smile. “You can’t know that.”

Wade’s smile faded. “No.” He stared up into the dark at the ceiling. “Are you going shopping this morning?” She shook her head, silent tears rolling down her face. He barely made out the gesture, but he didn’t see the tears. “Why not? You always enjoy it.”

“We need to save money. My boss isn’t going to take me back. I’ll call him today, but I know.”

“He might.” He turned his head toward her.

Rolling onto her side, she propped herself up on her elbow and looked into his dimly lit face. “I’ve been texting Cindy... one of the girls that worked with me.” She wiped her teary eyes and sniffed. Wade nodded slowly. “She said they’ve already hired a replacement for me.”

Wade swallowed hard on feelings of anger and fear. “They still might take you back... part time.” She shook her head in response. “A few hours a week maybe, and you can work your way back. You’re a good worker... probably better than that other girl.”

She was still shaking her head, her silent tears bursting into sound. “Doesn’t God love us anymore? Doesn’t he care?”

Wade stared at the ceiling again. “You can’t blame Him for what’s happened. Quitting my job at the fire station was my doing. Not being able to keep my other two jobs was my fault. Even getting shot was probably my fault.”

“He could have stopped it! The gun could have backfired!”

“Ye-ah.” His voice was soft. “I guess He didn’t want to this time, but....”

“He doesn’t love us anymore!” She burst into tears.

Wade groaned, putting his arm over his face. *Why do women have to be so emotional?*

“He could have protected you!”

“He did! I’m not dead, am I?”

Melissa cried harder. “I want my baby back!”

Grabbing the pillow from under his head, Wade smashed it over his face and ears. *Stop crying!*

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“Hey, wake up!” Derrick grabbed Matt’s arm and shook him roughly.

Rolling onto his back, Matt blinked his eyes clear. Staring up into Derrick’s face a moment, he became surprised that Derrick had awoken first. Rolling onto his side, he looked at the clock... *five forty-five!* Shocked he had slept so late and urgent to get going, he thrust the covers back, rolled out of bed, and charged over to the dresser to get his clothes.

Nodding toward him, Derrick left the room and went downstairs, glad he had had time to pack their food. He had a feeling this was going to be one of Matt’s *charge to the finish line* days. If there was one thing he’d learned about working with Matt, it was, pack your food ahead of time or likely go without. Someday he was going to figure out what was so sinful about taking five minutes *to go* through a drive-through.

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“Hurry up!” Jess shoved Jim sideways toward the door before he even had the car all the way in park. “Look at that line!” She snatched her purse and hopped out of the car. He was looking... and it sort of gave him a feeling of dread... or impending doom... or... “Come on, Jim!”

He got out, stretching as he stood. Shaking his head, he went to join her. He couldn’t even see the end of the line. It started at the glass sliding doors in the middle of a huge department store building and kept going all the way down the side, which was easily the length of a city block, and then it turned and looked like it started going down the other side of the

building. She was already charging toward the line and he had to jog to catch up. "When do they open?" He asked when he finally caught up.

"Six o'clock." Her speed-walk was easily as fast as a slow jog.

Jim looked at his watch, trying to read it by the parking lot lights. *Twelve minutes till blastoff.* His breath looked like smoke as they weaved through the cars and approached the lights of the building. Almost every member of the line stared at them as they went past, following it to hopefully an end somewhere. He wondered how long the beginning of the line had been standing there. After all, they sure looked cold and bored. Others looked fiercely protective of their spot in line. He had to wonder what would happen to a poor snook who tried to cut to the front of the line... *mob rule or arrestable offense?* Some shoppers stared down at their phones, while others, flyer in hand, looked primed and ready for action.

About halfway down the building a worker stepped from beside the line and handed them a paper. "Would you like a floor plan to show you where the deals are?"

"Oh! Thanks!" Jess smiled and took it from him without breaking stride. Jim smiled and nodded at the man but kept up his power walk. He had a feeling they were doing all they could to beat the other late arrivals to the end of the line... short of running... but he wasn't dumb enough to entirely count out that option either.

"Floor plan? Let me see that." He grabbed the map and opened it. Sure enough, there was, a blueprint of the building. On one side there was a list of numbered Black Friday deals and then the numbers were placed accurately around the building. *Blueprints.* Refolding it, he shook his head. *Why did he keep underestimating these diehard shoppers?*

Jim squinted to try to see the end of the line. The farther they went down the side of the building the darker it got. He was beginning to feel like he was walking down a dark alley.... a crowded one though. "Come on!" Jess grabbed his arm and yanked him faster.

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"Come on, let's go!" Matt locked the door, pulled Derrick out after them, and charged toward the car. Derrick snatched his knapsack of provisions, closed the door, and hurried after him. "I never knew you were so controlled by food." Matt glanced back at him.

Derrick looked down at his knapsack and then spoke into Matt's device. "Someday you're going to find that it comes in handy." Matt just rolled his eyes and reached for the car door. "Wait a minute!" Derrick grabbed Matt's arm and yanked it back. Matt looked at him questioningly. Derrick waved his hand back and forth pointing at the footprints in the fresh snow powder. "It snowed after we got home. These aren't ours." He tossed the device to Matt and began walking around the car. Matt followed him. Derrick laid on his side and looked under the car. Then he went to the hood. "Key." He held out his hand. Matt read his lips and handed him the key.

Derrick looked at the remote. It had an electronic start. *Good.* Derrick backed up and motioned for Matt to do the same. When they were both far enough back, Derrick slowly pressed the start. That action was met with an explosive response. Both men hit the dirt as the car erupted with a bang into a gigantic fireball sending debris flying.

Shocked, they both looked up from the ground simultaneously, almost mesmerized as they watched the metal melt and the fabric burn. Soon as Derrick regained his senses, he dialed 911. Matt got up and ran for the garden hose. Turning it on, he began wetting down his driveway on the side of his house.

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Rubbing his crossed arms and wishing he'd worn a heavier coat, Jim looked at the clock on his phone... one more minute... *good.* Everyone took a few steps forward bunching closer together. Jim tilted his head back, staring up at the many stars. It sure was a clear night. Suddenly, he felt Jess yanking forward as the line began to move. *Zero hour.* The line stopped. Nope. *False alarm. Must have just been bunching again.* Jim started to get a little claustrophobic, until the guy about four in front of him caught his attention. Standing next to his wife, arms crossed, with an expression even less thrilled than Jim's, and with no assistance from a clock, the man began in a flat voice to count down... ten... nine... eight... seven.... And when he got to zero the line began to move... for real this time. Jim was impressed. *That guy must be a veteran Black Friday victim.* "Let the madness begin," the man mumbled, arms still crossed as he walked forward. Rolling up her ad, his wife whacked him with it. It didn't affect him. Jim figured he must've been used to it.

"Yeah, let the bank accounts drain," a man a few behind Jim replied. Jim heard another newspaper whack and figured *he* must be being a model husband. *Haven't got whacked once*. Jess pulled him forward again as he irresponsibly let a four-inch gap form in the line.

Shivering at the brisk breeze that swept around the corner, Jim thrust his hands deeper into his pockets. "How many stores do you plan to hit before noon?"

"I'd like to make four." She nudged closer to him, wanting him to put his arm around her. He did, though his metaphorical desire to put his hand around her neck was growing stronger than his desire to keep her warm. "But we'll have to hurry." She grabbed his arm and pulled it tighter around her.

"Naturally." At least, they were finally approaching the doors to the building.

When it was finally their turn to enter, Jim relaxed a little as he was met with a nice warm rush of air, which felt so good. "Oh no!" Jess gasped.

Jim jumped. "What's the matter?" He tensed ready for action.

Jess pointed toward the cart corral. "They're all out of carts."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Don't do that to me."

"Well **you** have to find us a cart," she stated rather dogmatically, putting her hands on her hips.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Well, I don't know, but we need one!" She started heading toward the dispersing crowd.

Jim had to jog to catch up. "I've got a better idea. Why don't we just get the top two things on your list. Then you can carry one and I'll carry the other."

"NO!" She spun around toward him in shock.

"Three! I meant three! I'll carry two."

"No!" Grabbing the back of his belt, she turned him around, pointing him toward the door, and then gave him a shove in that direction. "And hurry."

Jim started walking, though he didn't know where. "What am I supposed to do mug someone for their shopping cart?"

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"I should think if you are worried about somebody trying to kill you, you would want to stay close to the police. We can't protect you unless you're with us." The police sergeant insisted his partner finished the report.

Matt took the device and read it. "I'm not worried about being killed! I'm worried about my daughter and grandson being sold as slaves... *if* they even survived the birth!"

The detectives threw up his hands in exasperation. "The men on *that* case are doing everything they can to find her!"

Matt gritted his teeth as he read. "They aren't doing enough! They didn't even know she was in Iowa!" Derrick slowly approached from the side after talking to the other detective.

"That is not my job! My job is to investigate this incident... and Sandervauh."

"This incident seems pretty clear to me," Matt insisted. "Sandervauh, the guy you were supposed to be *sitting on* until you can extradite him, left!"

The detective ground his teeth in anger. "He **did not** leave! We have not lost contact! We know **exactly** where he is!"

"Then why haven't you had him extradited yet?"

"We're working on it!"

Derrick took Matt's device. "He could have hired the hit." He looked at the detective. "Couldn't he?"

The detective nodded. Then he snatched Matt's device from him. "But I'm not taking any more chances! You two are key witnesses, and I want you in protective custody!"

Derrick tensed at the suggestion. He didn't ever like the idea of giving up his freedom. "What if we refuse?" Derrick's voice was stubborn. He was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

"Then you could both get killed." His tone was a warning.

"Apparently," Derrick wagged his head a little as he crossed his arms. "that's not as easy as it sounds." He glanced back at the smoldering car, still sparkling with red glow in the darkness.

"Look," the detective sighed, "we've invested a lot of men, resources, and money in investigating this guy... for years. We **will** take him down! We would like to do that now... if all our witnesses don't end up dead!"

"This one won't." Derrick stated that as fact. The detective didn't look convinced. "Besides even if we do, you still got Jim and Trent, Teresa and Melinda. That's plenty of witnesses."

"I think you need protection," the detective insisted.

"I think you're wrong," Matt growled.

"I think that we can protect ourselves..." Derrick stated forcefully, "with the Lord's help." His voice softened a little and then strengthened. "But we can!"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Where have you been?" Taylor twisted her pregnant body in the chair to look at Mark as he walked in the door.

Mark was grinning like the cat that swallowed the canary as he walked toward her with the sub sandwich. "You take good care that baby. He's going to make your brother lots of money." He dropped the sandwich in her lap and went over to the couch.

"How do you know?" Her eyes were suspicious. "Did you find a buyer?"

"That's right." He sat down on the couch. "We've found a buyer."

"Who's we?"

"Ahh... Uh, uh, uh." He leaned back and began unwrapping his sub.

"Were you meeting him or something?"

"Uh huh." He took a bite.

"He wasn't too happy about your father still being alive... but that should have been taken care of by now." His voice trailed off.

The last part of the sentence didn't sink in. "Why should he care if dad's still alive?"

Matt didn't answer a moment, as if he was thinking. "He's been lookin' hot and heavy for you." He spoke as he chewed. "Been spreading the word all over Chicago."

"So what? He's looking in the wrong place."

"He won't be now." He glared at her then went back to eating. "Besides my boss has a business to protect." He licked his fingers. "Baby retail is not like any other kind of business."

"I suppose not." She raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms.

"You get a bunch of women who have lost their babies together to start comparing notes," he continued, "something's bound to get found out."

“Lost their baby? You mean stolen, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Most of the women we... relieved of the responsibility weren’t any more capable of raising a child than you are.”

“Then they’re pretty capable.” She crossed her arms tighter. Mark choked on a laugh as he took another bite. She wagged her head a moment then stopped, her eyes narrowing. “Besides the baby’s not even born yet. How do you know that they’re going to like him? You have a return policy or something?”

“Talk about a stupid question. You can’t tell anything from a baby. We sent them pictures of the parents.” He grinned at her. “They seemed impressed.”

Her heart sank with fear. “They know who I am?”

He nodded, putting his ankle on his knee and twisting his foot. “You two make a cute couple.”

“Where did you...?”

He glanced at her. “That church picnic. You two were very photogenic.” He raised his eyebrows. “... even if you weren’t getting along too well.”

She thought a moment. “Did **you** slash Melinda’s tires?” He smiled. “But why?” He laughed but didn’t answer. Her eyes narrowed again. “I **will** get away from you, Mark. I **will** see you in jail! I **will** go back home!”

He returned a crooked smile. “You don’t have a home anymore.”

“What you mean?” Worry filled her eyes.

“Your father has been eliminated.” His eyes were cold and narrow, but a smile slowly crept to his face.

Taylor’s mouth dropped. “You’re lying!” She shook her head in disbelief.

He grinned. “He came to quite an explosive end.” He took another bite.

“Why? What’d he ever do to you?” Her voice broke.

Mark choked on a laugh. “That’s a stupid question! You know perfectly well.”

“He wasn’t that bad!” She began to cry.

“Oh, yes, he was.” His voice was calm, and he didn’t look at her.

“So, you had them killed?” Her voice was full of tears.

“Because he was looking for me?” Guilt tugged her heart.

Mark shrugged. He wasn’t going to go into the whole thing about Trent with her.

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“I have been looking everywhere for you.” Jim tried to keep his voice calm as he walked up to Jess, standing toward the back of a forty-foot line for the register. Glancing from her heaping cartful of deals back to the hard fought for empty cart he had in tow, Jim gritted his teeth, crossed his arms, and gave Jess an appropriate stare.

She grinned back, cautiously cheerful. “You found one!” He continued to stare. “So did I.” She pointed toward hers.

“I see that.” He didn’t smile.

“Um, where in the world have you been?” She kept her voice upbeat and innocent.

“A question much better directed toward you.”

She smiled. “Oh, I’ve been all over the place.”

“I can see that.” He looked back at the heaping cart. “Why did you send me on a wild goose chase for a cart, when

you....”

“Now, just wait right there,” she interrupted. “I got this one by pure luck and ingenuity.”

“Yeah. How’s that?” He looked skeptical.

“Uh, well, it just happened to be sitting there all vacant and lonely, not a friend in the world, a cart abandoned when all its friends are coveted commodities. I just couldn’t leave it all alone in the world. It needed someone to help it! So, I took the responsibility.”

“Uh huh. Just how long was the owner’s back turned when you swiped it?”

Jess put her hands on her hips. “Well! I am shocked that you would think such a thing. I’ll have you know there wasn’t anyone around.”

Jim laughed. “On a day like today? You’re losing it! You couldn’t fit a mouse in here much less another person!” His voice grew a little louder than he intended.

Crossing her arms, she turned away. “We are not speaking.”

“Again?” Jim turned around, shaking his head as he scanned his eyes over the crowd. “What do you want me to do with this cart, now?”

She didn’t look at him. “I’m sure there is some desperate soul by the front door looking for one right now.”

Mumbling something about women shoppers, Jim turned to go but first turned back, attempting to keep his voice down. “And answer your phone this time so I can find you.”

“I’ll be right here.” She slapped the handle of her cart. “This line isn’t going anywhere, and there are still ten people in front of me.”

Jim raised his eyebrows as he looked down the line. “That’s a conservative estimate.”

“And you didn’t call me.” She dug through her purse for her phone.

“I called you six times!”

“Eight,” she corrected as she read the missed call message. “Well, I sure didn’t hear it.”

“You couldn’t hear an elephant call in here! Put it on vibrate in your pocket.”

“Yes, sir.” Her tone added sarcasm.

“And I will take the cart back.” He practically charged away as much as one can charge while weaving in and out of people. “Excuse me.”

“You do that,” she muttered. “Men.”

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Reclining in the passenger seat of the truck while Matt drove, arm over his face to block out the sunlight, Derrick was trying to sleep. Although, he wasn’t having much success. His mind wouldn’t shut off. There was just so much to process... Matt’s hearing, their search for Taylor, the car bomb, the recent brush with death at the cave. Was it all connected somehow? Were Mark and Sandervauh connected? Or which one of them was responsible for the car bomb? Derrick had run over so many possibilities and scenarios that he was starting to get a headache. On top of it all, he felt hot and achy like he was getting a fever. He’d had trouble sleeping last night, too. Every nerve in him felt on edge.

Loosening his seatbelt, he rolled onto his side. It had been World War III trying to convince the police to let them go, and by the end of the conversation, he’d been having trouble keeping his clenched fist down by his side. He didn’t know why, but he just felt like punching someone. He rolled roughly back onto his back. Part of him just wanted to run away and make the whole world leave him alone. The other part of him wanted furiously to get this guy and make him pay. He rolled onto his side again.

Matt glanced from the road over to Derrick. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Derrick grumbled, even though he knew Matt couldn't see his lips move since he was facing the door.

"Derrick?" Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Matt reached with the other, putting it on Derrick's ribcage and shaking him gently.

Derrick thrust himself over onto his other side and propped himself up on his elbow. "What?" He hoped Matt read his lips because he was in no mood to....

"Are you okay?"

Derrick snatched the device from the cup holder. "Fine!"

Matt read his lips instead. "Did you take the antibiotic?"

"Yes!" He rolled back to his other side and faced the door, muttering, "If I wanted a big brother...."

"Still, I think we'll stop at the next rest stop, and I'll take a look at it." He didn't look at Derrick but stared at the road.

Anger ignited in Derrick's stomach. Flipping back over, he grabbed the device. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

Matt glanced over and read it. He gritted his teeth, but his face didn't change. "As long as where in this together, that is my business."

Derrick rolled onto his other side. "Leave. Me. Alone."

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Jim turned on the defrosters and squinted to see out the frozen window as he drove up to the store to retrieve Jess and her cargo. At least the sun was up now. Stopping, he got out and went to the back to help Jess load up the loot. "Do we even have any money left to go anywhere else?" He accepted the bags from her and put them in the truck.

"Of course, we do. You wouldn't believe the bargains that I got!"

"I'm sure of that."

"Okay, look!" She handed him the receipt.

He took the top of it and let the rest of it fall to the ground for effect. "I have never seen a receipt that long."

She gave him a look and started putting bags in the back of the truck by herself. "Look at the total."

Skeptically, he threaded the receipt through his hands until he came to the bottom. "Okay. That's not as bad as I thought."

"I'm so glad you approve." She tossed in the last two bags and forced the tailgate up.

"It's not that great either."

"Are you kidding me!" She looked at him in shock, turned back, and finished pulling the cover over the truck bed. "That's fantastic! I'm doing better on my Christmas budget this year than last year."

"Is that how you shop for me too?" He followed her as she took the cart back. "Look for what's on sale and see if anything will apply?"

"No, not for you." She gave the cart a shove when they were still about ten feet from the corral. It sped toward it and went right in. "Don't worry. I'll get you what you asked for." She speed-walked back to the truck. "But for donations, toys for Morgan, gifts for friends...."

They split, each going to their own side of the truck. "I wonder if our friends know they are on the Black Friday list?" Jim asked as he got in.

“Only the bank account knows.” Jess closed her door and reached for her seatbelt. “Oh, by the way, Teresa called while I was waiting for you.”

“How’s Trent doing?” He looked behind him as he backed the truck out.

“A lot better, I guess. They’re going to airlift him to a hospital in Rockford today. Teresa is going to drive back with the kids.”

“That’s good. It’ll be good to see him again.”

Jess nodded. “You have to work tomorrow, maybe we can go out and visit him the day after.”

Jim nodded. “We’ll plan on it.”

Jess grabbed her vibrating phone out of her pocket. Jim glanced at her as he went around the car in the lot. “It’s mom. Probably got a question about Morgan’s breakfast. Why don’t you stop a minute so I can talk to her?” Jim nodded and pulled the truck to the side as she answered the phone.

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Slowly and painfully buttoning a shirt, Wade limped into the living room just as Melissa, who was sitting on the couch, ended her phone call. Her face was pale, and tears trickled down her cheeks.

“Were you calling your boss?” He came over and sat down on the coffee table across from her.

She nodded, sniffing back tears. “He fired me!” Her eyes held disbelief even though she had known it was a possibility.

After a moment, he took her free hand, gently holding it between both of his. “Thank you.” Her eyes held question marks. “Thank you for loving me more.”

She looked down in agreement then back up, her eyes pleading. “What are we going to do?”

“We’ll be all right. You’ll get unemployment for a while.”

She sniffed again then stated rather matter-of-factly. “We’re going to lose the house.”

“No.” Wade’s voice was soft, and he shook his head. “I won’t let that happen.”

“How are you going to stop it? If we can’t pay the mortgage?”

“Well pay it.” His voice was firm. “We’ll find a way.”

“Oh, Wade.” She began sobbing.

He clutched her hand tighter, staring into the distance. “We’ll find a way.”

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“Trent?” Teresa spoke in a whisper and walked quietly over to his bed. She wasn’t sure if she should wake him, but she wanted to say, ‘goodbye,’ before the nurses came in and began prepping him for the flight back home. She was so glad he was finally recovering and was now stable enough to be moved. She wished the doctors wouldn’t always stop short of declaring him out of the woods, but she knew he had a lot to recover from... four broken ribs on one side, two on the other, internal bleeding, surgeries, blood clots, screws in his broken leg, concussion, and minor bleeding on his brain-that she was so thankful didn’t seem to affect him... after the initial comma.

She couldn’t help resenting his job and the danger it seemingly put them in. She wondered just how many enemies Trent had around the country... or even the world. Still, she couldn’t help wondering if Trent had turned to his professional colleagues, instead of coming after her with only a few friends, if he would have ended up like he did. Still, nobody had gotten killed. She guessed, knowing all the choices, her husband had settled on the one he thought best. She just couldn’t help second-guessing his decision. “Good morning.” Trent’s voice broke through her thoughts.

“How are you feeling?” She stepped closer to him, her eyes holding concern.

He blinked his eyes shut again. "Like I was buried in a cave in."

She wished he'd quit responding that way. "Aren't you feeling better by now?"

"The memory lingers on." He kept his eyes closed, and Teresa could tell he was in pain.

"The nurse should be in soon to get you ready for your flight back home."

He nodded, "Good."

"I wanted to see you before you left."

He nodded again. "Where's the kids?"

"In the car, Martha and Timmy were asleep, and I thought it would be easier just to run up here."

"I don't know if I like them being left alone... especially with Sandervauh still loose." Trent still didn't open his eyes. He gritted his teeth against the pain.

"John's watching them." Her eyes teared up as she turned. "I'll go."

"Teresa!" He opened his eyes and held out his hand to her. She turned and came back. "I love you." Tears overflowed from her eyes as she took his hand and bent down to kiss him.

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"Couldn't you hurry up? By the time we get there everything will be all gone."

"I'm going as fast as I can." He slowed down a little behind a semi, though knowing that momentary consideration of whether or not to pass would not be approved by the backseat driver beside him.

"The speed limit is seventy."

"But the truck's only going sixty-five." He pointed out as he pulled into the other lane to go around. "What's so important at this next place anyway?"

"Would you like to hear the entire list?" She pulled the ad out of her purse and began unfolding it.

"No, just give me the highlights."

"Well, this copper griddle for one thing." She pointed to a circled picture on the front page. "You broke ours, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." He looked from the page back to the road as he brought his truck back into the right lane. "That was as much Wade's fault as it was mine."

"Yeah, but you let him in the kitchen," she muttered as she turned the page.

Jim relented. How could he argue with that? Coming up behind another semi, he pressed the brakes to slow behind it. "Oh, no." Jerking the wheel, he squealed around the semi at the last minute.

"Jim!" Jess gasped, grabbing the handle on the door. "What are you doing? I'm not in that big of hurry!"

"The brakes are gone!"

"What? Not again! Don't worry. You've got this!" She clutched the door tighter as he squealed around a tight curve and then passed a car at the bottom.

"I don't understand. They were working just fine! The brake light's not even on. There weren't any puddles under the truck. Were there?"

"Just put it in neutral and get it up the hill!" Jess tried to stay calm.

He thought they'd just gone up a hill, but maybe it was just flat. "There isn't one!" Jim tried not to stiffen and freeze as

the truck gained speed going down a rather steep, long hill.

“Please keep us safe, Lord,” Jess prayed out loud. “Please, keep us safe.” Her voice was turning weak.

Jim swallowed hard and white-knuckled the wheel as the speedometer hit ninety. *Protect us*, Jim prayed as they approached another truck. He tried to relax and not turn the wheel too far.

Jess’s eyes widened and she stiffened as the Semi inched closer and closer. “Easy.” She knew Jim had to edge into the other lane slow or else they would flip. She looked behind them, thankful they had plenty of room. She held her breath as he went around, allowing herself a sigh of relief when they made it. “There’s a hill!” She pointed in front of them.

Still white-knuckling the wheel, Jim nodded, edging closer to the shoulder ready to go off as the truck slowed. *Eighty-five, eighty, seventy-five, seventy, sixty-five, sixty, fifty-five, fifty*. Fuel accelerated the motor. *Fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five...*

Jim it’s speeding up!

“I know.”

“Put it in neutral!” She reached for the shifter at the same time as Jim. They both yanked on it. Nothing. “It won’t move!”

“Get your gun!”

“Huh?!” Her eyes were confused.

“Get your gun!” Jim leaned forward and snatched his from behind his back. Jess grabbed hers from her purse, her eyes question marks as she looked at him. “Now, shoot your front tire at the same time as me!” He aimed his gun.

Jess aimed hers. *You gotta make this shot, or you’re both dead*. She took a deep breath and aimed out the window.

“One... Two...,” Jim tightened his other hand on the steering wheel. “Three!” Jim shot once and hit, swerving them right. Jess shot three times and hit on the third round, swerving the truck back. Jim used all his strength to keep the truck stable and guide it off to the shoulder as rubber flew off, and the rims thudded against the asphalt, jolting them up and down, side to side.

Still breathless from the impact against her seatbelt, Jess let out an involuntary yelp as she was slammed sideways against the door. Jim glanced at her, but that was all he could do as he continued to fight the steering wheel. *Thirty-five miles per hour*. “Why doesn’t it slow down?!” Jess squeaked. Jim yanked hard against the steering, trying to keep it on the road as the rims screeched and sparked.

“The back tires!” Jess gasped.

“What?” Jim yelled over the noise.

Jess sucked in a deep and painful breath. “Four-wheel drives on!”

“No, it’s not!” Jim glanced at the button.

“Yes, it is!” Jess grabbed the dashboard and tried vainly to steady herself.

Jim spared a glance in the mirror. She was right. “They have to rip off sometime.”

“Theoretically, but they aren’t doing it!” Jess contemplated suggesting they jump. Before she could open her mouth, the driver’s side rim came off, sending Jim’s side plummeting until the axel hit the road. Sparks flew up right next to his window. The truck spun multiple counter-clockwise donuts. The back tires peeled off. Two cars raced passed too close for comfort, their drivers laying on their horns. Jim felt their wind as they went passed. Jess screamed. The truck stopped backwards in the middle of the right-hand lane. The engine continued to rev.

“Let’s go!” Jim tried to force open his door, but it was too badly dented. The engine kept revving. Noticing Jess frozen and dazed, he unbuckled her, put his arm around her waist and yanked her over to his side. “Come on! The engine’s going to blow!” He jumped out his open window and then reached to help her, but she was already on her way out.

Clasping hands, they raced down the shoulder together, getting about fifty feet before the truck exploded into a

billowing fireball behind them. The impact pushed them forward, Jim to his stomach, Jess to her knees.

After a moment, Jim rolled onto his back, propping himself up on his forearms and watching it burn. Jess got up and backed up, watching it burn but getting further and further away.

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“I want you to do something for me.” Wade crunched his spoon through his cereal, trying to get the milk to soak in.

“What’s that?” Mellissa replied, carrying the orange juice over to the table.

“I want you to go around town to the gas stations, fast food places, grocery stores, maybe the hardware store and get me some applications to fill out.”

She nodded, taking a sip of juice. “But why don’t you just go online?”

“I’ll do that, too, but I think I’ll have a better chance if I talk to them in person.” He flashed her a grin. “Let them see what a nice guy I am.” She smiled back at him, so he continued, “You know, the strong, reliable, charismatic, intelligent, salt-of-the-earth type.”

Her smile didn’t fade, but she did raise her eyebrows. “I don’t suppose you want me to get one from Aunt Molly’s?”

Wade’s grin faded. “No, that’s okay.”

“You sure? They might have forgotten by now.” She tried to maintain her sweet, loving smile, and ward off the impending ‘gotcha’ grin.

“Yeah, I bet.” Wade stared off thoughtfully. “Last time I talked to them they were still fighting with the insurance company over the smoke damages.”

“Was that before or after they switched churches?” Wade turned and gave her such a look that she couldn’t suppress a laugh. “I think the pastor’s still mad at you for that one. They used to both teach Sunday school, you know.”

He glared at her. “Yeah, well, nobody’s perfect.”

She giggled. “Just a strong, reliable, charismatic... arsonist.”

Wade rolled his eyes and got up to take his bowl to the sink. “Say what you want, but that could have happened to anyone!”

She took another sip to try and hide her grin. “I’ll try not to get any applications from anyone we know.”

“Look!” Spinning back toward her, he put his hands on his hips. “What happened to wives respecting their husbands?”

“As you say, honey,” She got up to take her empty glass to the sink. “Nobody’s perfect.” He gave her a look, and she gave him a kiss on the way by. “I’m just kidding you. I totally respect you,” She set her glass in with the other dishes and then turned back. “As long as, you’re not in the kitchen.”

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Knock... Knock... Knock.... Derrick took Matt’s device from his pocket as they waited. “What if they’re not home?”

Matt read it quickly then turned his attention to the door, gritting his teeth. “Then we’ll come back.”

Derrick rolled his eyes. He wanted to help Matt find his daughter as much as the next guy, but trying repeatedly to get an answer at every farmhouse in Iowa seemed a little like looking for needle in a haystack. Still feeling worn out from his fever, he leaned back against one of the porch’s pillars while they waited.

Finally, an older man with grey and balding hair opened the heavy, wooden door, but he left the screen door closed. He didn’t smile or say anything. Derrick tried to force a smile anyway. “Hi, we’re looking for my friend’s daughter.” He glanced over at Matt. “She’s thought to be with this man.” Derrick held up a picture of Mark. The man glanced at it, but his face didn’t change. “She’s going to be a victim of human trafficking if we don’t find her.” The man’s face still didn’t change. Derrick was starting to get annoyed. “She’s about seven months pregnant and high risk.” He held up her picture. “And they are going to sell

the baby, too.” The more he talked the more his voice got an edge to it. “That is if she doesn’t die in childbirth.” The man’s face still didn’t change. “Have you seen her?” Derrick tried not to growl like Matt.

The man glanced down at the picture, slowly shook his head, backed up, and closed the door. Derrick looked at Matt, hoping that was good enough for him because he sure didn’t want to pursue this further. Matt stared at the door a few minutes, then he backed up and headed toward the car. *Good.* Derrick felt the relief. *One down.*

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“Hello?” Still, standing at the show, watching the police as they conducted their investigation, Jim answered his cell phone. Jess walked up to him, curious about who was calling. “It’s that FBI guy,” he whispered to her. Jess looked impressed and even more curious. “Yes sir.... Good news? Sure, I could use some good news. Really?...” Jim looked over at the charred remains of his car. “Are you sure about that?” Jim sounded perplexed. “Just a second.” Jim lowered the phone and looked at Jess.

“What’s up?” She was dying of curiosity.

Jim’s face looked skeptical. “He says they caught Sandervauh.”

“Wha-a-a-t?”

“He’s been in custody since last night, and they are extraditing him tomorrow.”

In disbelief, they both turned toward the glowing embers of the truck and stared a moment until Jess finally broke the silence. “Then who did that?”

“Good question.” Jim raised the phone back to his ear. “Have you heard what happened to us yet?” Jim paused. “They think someone hacked into the computer in our car and took over the running of it.” He paused again. “Either that, or the accelerator stuck, the gearshift froze, and the brakes failed all at the same time.” He began walking down shoulder. “I’ll let you talk to Sergeant...” His voice trailed off with distance.

Jess turned back and stared at the burning rubble. She had been under the impression that once Sandervauh had been caught their life could return to some semblance of safety.

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“So,” The young flight nurse leaned back in his chair beside Trent. “tell me your story. I keep hearing rumors. I’d sure like to know what happened.”

“It’s kind of a long story.” Trent stared up at the ceiling of the chopper.

“Well, we’ve got a long flight ahead of us. Might just pass the time.”

Trent sighed. “How much do you know?”

“I got the part about your wife being kidnapped and you running up here to play Sir Galahad.” Trent shot him a look. “Tell me about that guy who used to work with you... Sandervol?”

“Sandervauh, and he didn’t work with us. He was an informant.”

“An informant?”

“An eavesdropper... who would sell information to the highest bidder. Turns out he was working for an organization to rat out their competition to the police.”

“So tell me what happened to his wife?”

Trent sent him a questioning glance. “Where do you get your information?”

“Around. I heard you shot her in the head.”

Trent rolled his eyes. “It was when I was working in Texas.” Trent began to flashback. “They’ve been working on busting this cartel for months maybe even years... The FBI, the CIA, the DEA, ICE, and the Texas Rangers. They called some of us from

the PD for extra manpower. I was just a young cop, but I had a good record. When we got there, the compound was like a fortress. There were hundreds of men swarming down below. I was one of them that they dropped from a chopper. They had about five or six choppers, and there were about ten men in mine.

“Why’d they used choppers?”

“The compound was so far from the front gate. They had their own choppers. They had an army fighting at the entrances. By time those men got through, there might’ve been time for the leaders to escape.”

“So, then what happened?”

“They let me and two other guys down on the roof to clear the top floors. The other two went in the attic window. I repelled down to a top floor balcony and went in gun drawn.” He flinched. “There was a young woman... about my age standing by the bed. I locked my sights on her and told her to get down on the ground.” He paused. “She just stood there and stared. I thought maybe she didn’t understand English. I stepped toward her. Then someone emerged from the closet. Just as I began to turn, the girl by the bed pulled a derringer. I shot her, turned, and shot the other girl who was nearly on top of me with a knife. It happened so fast. When it was over.... I mean, those young women had been so beautiful... but that high-powered rifle... at that short range.... Well, you wouldn’t have wanted to see them.” He closed his eyes. “Then there was a third one, too,” he continued, gazing back toward the ceiling. “I was kneeling beside the second girl, trying to determine if I could revive her, when someone hit me over the head with a vase from behind. I started to black out and fall forward. I caught myself on the floor with my hands and came back. Almost in pure reaction, I jumped up and swung the butt of my rifle hard at whoever was behind me. Cracked her skull open.” He squeezed his eyes shut again at the memory. “I’d never seen so much blood.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. It was a day I’d rather forget.” His voice trailed off.

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“Why don’t you go up to this house alone?” Matt asked as he put the truck in park. “Then I can make this last phone call and hopefully get the notice on the local radio station before it airs.”

Derrick nodded and yawned. “Okay.”

“Try to look a little friendlier than you did last time.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the way I look!”

Matt read the device. “Not if you’re auditioning for Al Capone.” Derrick shot him a look. “Maybe you have reason, but to get information, you need to look like one of the good guys.”

“You wanna do it?”

Matt looked back at his phone and began dialing. “Just lighten up, okay?”

## May Day!

Beep! Beep! Beep! The chopper controls began to scream.

“What’s going on?” Trent looked toward the cockpit. The flight nurse stood up and walked in that direction. He looked worried as he stared at the gauges and talked to the pilot through his headset. Trent couldn’t hear what they were saying over the noise. The chopper was dropping and dropping fast. Trent’s heart jumped into turbo drive. *God, don’t let me die! God, protect me! For my wife and kids, God! I’ll try to be a better father! I’ll do whatever you want! Don’t let me die!*

The nurse glanced back at Trent. His face held fear. He came back, sat down, and strapped himself in. He didn’t say anything, but the message was loud and clear. They were going to crash. Trent glanced at the equipment beside him, hoping it was well secured. When out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the heart monitor slide on its stand as the choppers swerved.

He tried to get the nurses attention, but the man seemed frozen staring out the window. He wasn't looking in his direction, and no one could hear him over the noise.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Trent began to loosen his restraints. He knew he had to move that box. If it slid off its stand on top of him, it would only finish what Sandervauh started. He held his breath as the chopper jerked and the box slid toward him, but thankfully, it didn't fall. He worked faster to try and free himself as the box teetered on the edge. Getting himself free, he held his breath as he reached for the box, nearly blacking out from the pain. Breathing hard, which only served to heighten the excruciating pain in his ribs, he collapsed back to the gurney just as the chopper began swerving violently out of control. The box came flying toward him. He didn't have the strength to catch it, but he forced himself to have the strength to thrust it the other way. He forced it just far enough to send it crashing to the ground beside him. He allowed himself one moment of relief before realizing they were nearing the end of their collision course. He tried to reach for the restraints to re-secure himself, but he couldn't do it.

WHAM! The chopper scraped the top of a tree. Trent grabbed the rails of his gurney, but it didn't do any good. The force from hitting the next tree threw him to the ground. He didn't even feel the pain. He felt like he was in a dream. The side of the chopper whammed into another, sending Trent flying toward the door just as it popped open and ripped off. Trent grappled for anything to stop his slide toward the opening. His hand found a metal bar attached to the floor. He grabbed it. It stopped his slide, but his grip was weak. He tried desperately to hang on, but the next tree hit hard against the driver's side, forcing them right, breaking Trent's hold. Trent tried again to grab something, anything as he felt himself flying in slow motion toward the door. His arm scraped on the side as he went through. The IV ripped out of his arm. He began to freefall through the pines.

The rough bark from a branch scraped his arm and the side of his neck as he went past. Twigs and needles brushed against him. His knee knocked into a sturdy limb. His eyes widened as he stared at the ground coming closer and closer. Was it the end? *Lord... help me.* His life began to flash in front of his eyes. He hit. *Ommph.* He sunk deep into a drift of snow.

Eyes closed, he anticipated the sound of harp music. Shivering, he contemplated opening his eyes. He hadn't expected heaven to be this cold and quiet. Still, it was a million times better than the alternative. Opening one eye, he looked around. *Snow and pine trees? What happened to pearl gates and streets of gold?* He opened the other one, finally concluding, he must not have left yet. Staring up at the canopy of pines, he waited for several minutes, expecting the trees to part as he rose back up into the clouds. Nothing happened, though. So, he decided to see if he could sit up. *Nope.* Halfway up, pain shot through his body and darkness threatened around the edges of his eyes. He collapsed back to the snow. *Not good. Well, not as bad as it could be though. ... However... you'd have to go some to get much worse.*

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Arms crossed, trying not to shiver, Jess stared down the road expectantly as Melissa's van came into view. "There she is." Jess glanced at her husband who was staring with a forlorn look in the other direction as the tow truck finished hoisting up the charred remains of Big Red. *That old powerhouse truck had been the envy of man and beast in its day. Now... charcoal.* "It was nice of her to come get us." Jess tried again to get her husband's attention.

"Yeah." Jim finally forced his gaze away from his truck. "I'll go get the bags." Jim walked toward the pile of Black Friday things they had managed to recover from the side of the road. They had fallen out of the back when the hatch came open. Amazingly enough, most of the stuff was undamaged, except the dishes. They didn't make it. And the truck was insured. So, Jim guessed maybe they weren't that bad off... a little banged up. He grimaced as he reached down and grabbed the bags.

"Hey, Jess!" Melissa waved to her from the van. Jess waved back and started walking in that direction. She had been going to help Jim with the bags, but she guessed he could handle it. *After all, he was born a guy for a reason. Might as well let him utilize it.*

"Hi, Melissa." She stopped at the driver side window. Her voice was weary.

"Wow! That truck looks even worse than you said. I can't believe none of you were hurt."

"Yeah. The Lord is good."

"Seriously, what are you going to do now... if this guy can hack into your cars?"

"That guy can't. There's got to be someone else in his organization. Did you know the FBI is involved in this now?"

“No, when did that happen?”

“Actually, they’ve been after him for quite some time. Our friendly neighborhood killer is more high profile than anyone first expected. My car’s probably safe to drive though. It’s so old, they’re not even sure it can be hacked into.”

Melissa laughed. “I’ll have to tell Wade that one. There are benefits to being poor. Come on and get in, honey. It’s cold out there.” She motioned toward the passenger seat. Jess nodded and headed around the other side just as Jim was coming with his hand full of bags. Melissa pressed the button to open the hatch.

“Don’t tell me Wade’s already worried about finding another job.” Jess got in and closed the door behind her.

Melissa nodded, surprised that Jess would think he would be. “He didn’t even work at the other one long enough to qualify for unemployment.”

“Oh.” Jess put her hands up to the furnace vents to try and get them warm.

“Besides,” Melissa’s voice was tentative. “I lost my job today, too.”

Jess turned toward her in surprise. “You’re kidding! I’m sorry. How did that happen?”

“They said I was spending too much time with Wade away from work.”

“Oh, Melissa, I’m sorry.” Reaching, Jess offered a hug, and the two of them embraced.

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A shiver went up Trent’s spine and a sudden surge of panic shot through his veins. His heart began to race, and he realized that no matter how impossible life seemed right now, he didn’t want to die. He also realized if he didn’t find a warm shelter pretty soon, that was exactly what was going to happen. The day was unseasonably mild for this time of year in Wisconsin, probably near forty degrees, which gave him some time. Still, he knew he had to utilize that time. At least, he had been able to convince the staff to let him wear his regular clothes for the flight which were definitely warmer than the hospital gown. Still, he wished he had his coat.

He tried to roll on his side, but a scream of excruciating pain paralyzed him, causing him to fall back onto his back. Trying to slow his rapid breathing that was sending shock waves through his multiple broken ribs, he stared up into the small patches of blue sky peeking through the canopy of trees. He gritted his teeth. *How do I do this, Lord.* Peace spread over him, warming his body and calming his heart. *Try again.* The answer came gentle and caring. *But what am I trying to do? Where am I? Where am I going?* Trent renewed his own sense of panic. *Is there someone out there? Is there some place to go? Or is it just pointless?* The peace remained as if a warm smile of sunlight radiating down on top of him, yet no clear answer came... only the same one... *Try again.* He wanted more of a game plan than that, but he guessed he didn’t have any other choice. At least it was better than just lying here waiting to die in the frost of the night. *If I made it maybe the pilot and flight nurse did, too! Maybe they’re around here somewhere.* The hope gave him the strength to try.

Fingering a nearby root protruding from the ground, he dug out the snow from under it and grasped his hand around it. Taking in a deep breath and holding it, he yanked himself over onto his stomach in one swift movement, letting out a yell of reaction to the pain shooting through his ribs and leg. After taking a minute, he put his hands in a pushup position and slowly raised himself onto his hands and knees. *Ouch.* Make that one knee. The other leg was just going to have to hang. *Ooom.* He pressed his lips together against the pain as he began to crawl. Staring down into the slushy snow, he focused on keeping his breathing slow and steady so as not to increase the stabbing pain radiating through his ribs.

Glancing to the side, he noticed his IV bag laying a few feet away. Turning, he decided to retrieve it in case it was the only source of fluid he could find. *Although...* Looking down at the snow, he concluded he could drink that, too, though it would make him even more cold than he already was. Grimacing, he crawled over to it, dragging his bad leg behind him. Reaching it, his arms began to shake under his weight. Grabbing it, he collapsed to the ground. Rolling onto his back, he breathed heavily as he stared up into the sky, and fear began to creep in again. *I’m not quitting. I’m just resting.* He told himself. Momentarily, he let his heavy eyes close, but then he jerked them back open as panic surged through his veins. Everything in him just wanted to go to sleep and rest, but he knew if he did that, he would never wake up again.

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Nailing a poster to a telephone pole, Matt turned as he saw Derrick approaching him. They had temporarily diverted from asking at farmhouses to asking around in town. The hope was to find someone that had seen him at a gas station or grocery store or fast-food place because trying to happen along on just the right farmhouse was like looking for a needle in a haystack when they didn't even know if they were in the right haystack. If they could at least find the right vicinity first.... "Any luck?"

Derrick took Matt's device. "No." His voice was deep and a little agitated.

Matt didn't bother reading it. He knew Derrick's, "No," from a mile away. Face falling, Matt turned back and finished hammering the nail. Derrick handed Matt the list of houses that didn't answer on that block. Matt took it, glanced at it, and stuffed it in his pocket, sighing inwardly. "Maybe I should start going with you again," he muttered as he turned back around.

Derrick crossed his arms. "Why? Because I look like I'm from skid row, and you look like you're the friendly, neighborhood doctor?"

Matt read it and shot him a look as they walked back to the car. "Nobody'd probably want to talk into the device anyway," he mumbled.

"They might think it's a scam to record their voice," Derrick thought out loud. "They had one where if they could record you saying, 'yes,' they could steal your identity."

Matt shot him another look. *Thanks for the encouragement, friend.* "I have a couple more radio stations I wanted to call anyway."

"How many have you gotten so far... to run the... alert?"

"Five." Matt tossed the hammer in the back seat of the truck.

Derrick nodded. "That should help."

"Hopefully." Matt got in the driver's side. Derrick got in the passenger's side.

Derrick shrugged as he stared out the window. "Maybe you should try a house or two. We'd cover a lot more ground if we were both asking separately."

Matt read the device as he put the truck in drive. "Maybe. Maybe'd we'd just get a repeat of last night."

"Yeah. Maybe. There was something strange about those guys though. It didn't seem like random bullies to me. It felt like they were hired by someone."

Matt let himself look surprised. "Why?" He glanced at Derrick as he slowed the truck to the curb at the next block.

Derrick shook his head as he got out. "I don't know." Running his hand through his sweaty hair, he walked up to the next house. This whole thing was like a puzzle. Every time he tried to figure it out, he only wound up with a headache.

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"Hey! Come on in, guys!" Wade pushed his pillow and sat up on the couch as he welcomed Jim and Jessica in the door.

"Hey, buddy! How's it going?" Jim came over and grabbed Wade's hand as he offered it for a handshake. They held each other's smiling gaze a moment.

"Oh, I don't know." Wade's voice was light, but he grimaced as he turned to look at them. "Maybe better than for you two right now."

"Oh, we're fine." Jess stepped closer to Jim, and he put his arm around her.

"Yeah." Wade paused. "You both look a little banged up." He eyed the bruise on Jess's temple and the cut going down the side of Jim's arm. Glancing at Mellissa coming toward him he moved his feet to give her room as she sat down on the couch. "So, sit down and tell us what's been going on?" He gestured to the chair and the recliner.

"Well..." Jim raised his hands in a bit of a shrug as he sat down. "There isn't a whole lot to tell. We didn't see anyone or anything around. Our car just went berserk. First the brakes wouldn't work and then the accelerator got stuck. The car blew up,

so there's not a whole lot left to inspect. They said it sounded like someone was hacking into the car's computer."

"You think it was that guy that was after Trent?"

"That's the thing." Jess added, sitting on the edge of her chair. "They say the Mexican police have him in custody, and they are working on extraditing him."

"He runs a big operation, doesn't he?" Melissa asked. "Maybe it's someone that works for him. You know, trying to eliminate the witnesses."

"Yeah. Could be," Jim agreed. "At any rate, the police want to put us in protective custody until the hearing."

"What'd you tell 'em?" Wade looked curious.

"We'd think about it. Jess's parents are only going to be here today and part of tomorrow before they have to head to their next church for Sunday, and she really wants to spend some time with them."

"Not too crazy about giving up our freedom and going into hiding either," Jess mumbled.

"Anyway, we asked if they could just station a cop outside the house for now."

"What'd they say?"

"They'd see what they could do," Jim mumbled as he pulled his vibrating phone from his pocket. "Speaking of our friendly neighborhood FBI agent.... Excuse me." Jim got up and went in the other room to talk on the phone.

"FBI?" Wade noted in surprise. "This guy must be really high-profile."

Jess nodded. "I guess they've been after him for quite some time already, but they never had enough hard evidence to actually get him extradited and convicted here. They say he's really good at covering his tracks, and I can see why. I mean, he nearly killed us, and we have nothing to tie it to him."

"That's kinda scary." Melissa paused. "Hey, would you guys like a bite to eat before I take you home?" She started to get up.

"No, that's okay." Jess shook her head. "It's kind of you to offer, but I really want to get back to Morgan. I feel a little guilty leaving her alone this long. I mean, she's not alone. She's with my parents, but you know, with all that's been happening..."

"Yeah, I understand completely. You don't have to tell me what can happen." That statement sent a surge of urgency through Jess's veins causing her to jump up. She hadn't been thinking about what had happened to Davey. Melissa got up, too. "Let me just use the restroom, and I'll drive you two home."

Jess forced a smile toward Jim as he walked back in, trying to cover the panic she knew showed on her face. The effort didn't last long as she picked up on the concern in her husband's face. "What'd he say?" Jim sat down and thought a moment before answering. "What's wrong?" Jess reiterated.

"The helicopter transporting Trent went down. They believe it was intentional."

"Oh no," Jess gasped. "Is he... okay?"

"They don't know." He looked up at her. "They haven't found him yet. They said they think the chopper went off course, but their data says it stayed on course."

Jess's mouth dropped. "Someone hacked the... the..."

"All I know is they haven't found it yet... and, um, you know your freedom spiel earlier?"

"Ye-ah?"

"They are pretty determined that the rest of their witnesses go into protective custody. They already have Teresa and Melinda."

"Teresa... poor Teresa... poor Trent... I hope..." Jess's voice trailed off as she thought about the crash, then suddenly,

her eyes flared. "What if they don't let us go back and get Morgan?"

"I'm sure they...."

"How can you be sure?! What if they think she's safer with my parents?! Or in state custody?!"

"Jess, calm down." He followed her as she charged toward Melissa in the hallway.

"Melissa, I need your keys!"

Eyes widening as she approached, Melissa dropped them in Jess's hand. "What's going on?"

"You'd better come if you want to drive your van back!" Jim called over his shoulder as he hurried after his wife who was already going through the door.

"Well, wait for me!" Melissa grabbed her purse and ran after them.

Wade laid back against his pillow and shook his head. *No one could accuse us of having a dull life. That's for sure.*

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Groaning, Trent continued to crawl. He was beginning to get used to the pain, or at least, he had learned to manage it. However, he was growing increasingly impatient. He wanted the solution now... the way out... the path to rescue... or at least a plan. He felt like he had gone all of half a mile... and that might have been a generous estimate.

Seeing a piece of fiberglass panel in front of him, he stopped, transferred his weight to one arm, and picked up the piece of wreckage. There was little doubt that it came from the chopper. So where was the chopper? He earnestly hoped it hadn't broken up completely. Still on all fours, he strained to look up without twisting. *Oh no.* Catching a glimpse of red, he lowered himself to his back and stared up into the canopy of trees. There it was twisted among the branches of pine..., and the red wasn't from the chopper. His stomach wretched, and he had to look away. He wanted to yell. He wanted to hope that maybe the pilot made it... but the scent of death was too strong. "Hey!" Pain shot through his ribs. He tried again. "Hey! Is anyone alive up there?" No answer.

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"Derrick!" Matt drove up in front of the house where Derrick was conversing with an older lady. Derrick turned to look at him but then finished his conversation. "If you see or hear anything about her, please give us a call. Time is running out on her safety." He pointed to the number at the bottom of the flyer.

"Derrick?" She questioned reading the name beside it.

"Yes, ma'am, but you can call either of us. This is very important to her father."

"Well, if I see anything," She started to close the door. "I'll let you know."

"Thank you," he called after her, then turned and jogged down the sidewalk to the truck. Opening the passenger's side door, Derrick plopped down on the seat and sighed. It sure felt good to sit down. "What's up?" He tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

"The police are looking for us."

His eyes shot back open. "Why?! What'd I do, now?!"

Reading his device, Matt smiled at Derrick's assumption that the reason must be his fault. "They want to put us in protective custody. There has been an attempt on Trent and on Jim. They don't know if Trent survived."

"Survived what? I thought he was in a hospital in Wisconsin."

Matt nodded. "They were transporting him home to Rockford, and the helicopter crashed."

"And they don't know if he survived?"

Matt nodded again. "They haven't found it yet." Derrick exhaled and fell back against the seat. Matt watched him.

“Well? How do you feel about it?”

“Claustrophobic,” Derrick answered, dryly.

Matt thought a moment after he read it. “If I don’t find Taylor soon, I’m probably going to lose her... and the baby.”

Derrick looked at him. “You do know this is like looking for a needle in a haystack?”

“You want to give up?”

Derrick rubbed his face, wearily. “I just want some hope... something that says we’re heading in the right direction.”

“Well, we got that...” Matt replied matter-a-factly. “yesterday... when Taylor said she was in Iowa.”

“Yeah.” Feeling overwhelmed and slightly light-headed, Derrick pulled on the lever, making his seat recline. He rested his forearm over his face. “Yesterday seems like a long time ago, and Iowa is a big state.”

“We’ll find her.”

“Yeah.” Derrick didn’t look at him. “What happened to Jim?” His voice was muffled by his arm.

“I guess someone hacked into the car’s computer and made it.... Well, it wouldn’t stop.”

That made Derrick lower his arm from his face and look questioningly at his own truck’s dashboard. “Great.” He shook his head and put his arm back over his face. “What *do you* want to do?”

Matt hesitated a moment, reading and rereading the question. “I’m more concerned for Taylor and the baby right now than I am for myself.” He paused. “Of course, that’s not your responsibility.”

“Yeah.” Derrick’s voice was drowsy. “But if we split up, whose gonna make sure my arm doesn’t get gangrene?”

Matt smiled at that. “I’m sure they’d have adequate medical staff at the safe....”

“No one’s locking me up,” Derrick interrupted. “Besides, I can take care of myself just as good as any cop can.”

“Then we keep going.” Matt put the truck in drive.

“Might as well,” Derrick mumbled.

“By the way, you’re off duty until after the trial.”

Derrick gritted his teeth. “Per government command?”

Matt glanced at his mounted device and smiled. “Recommendation,” he corrected.

“Yeah, right.”

## Inch by Inch to Safety

Breathless, Trent stopped crawling near the water’s edge of a mostly frozen lake. Thirsty, he looked longingly down the bank at the small wave of water lapping from under the ice against the shore. Getting down to it would be painful. Laying down, he closed his eyes and coughed on what felt like fluid in his lungs. He was so exhausted, all he wanted to do was sleep. Moments before he drifted off, panic surged through his veins, causing him to blink open his eyes. *God, I don’t want to die. I want to go back to my wife and kids. Get me out of this.*

He looked around him. The forest was getting increasingly dim and dusky. The sun shone half-mast through the trees. He was running out of time, and he knew it. He wasn’t out of time. His body was warm nearly sweaty from the effort it had taken to crawl this far, but... he needed the answer now if he was going to make it. A shiver ran up his spine and shook his body. His sweat began to cool. *Lord, help me. I’m at the end of my rope.* His eyes began to close.

*You're almost there.*

Opening his eyes, he looked in front of him. All he saw was part of a frozen lake, trees, and a waning sun. Rolling onto his other side, he yelled from the pain and tried to maintain his senses as his vision went blurry then cleared. He looked around... trees, mist rising off a part-frozen lake, a rabbit, and... a house. He tilted his head back to see it more clearly. There it was, nearly in front of him and to the right. Staring at the ground as he crawled, he hadn't even seen it. *A house!* His heart wanted to leap for joy, but it didn't dare. The pretty log house while kept up was obviously unoccupied and obviously on the other side of the lake. Emotion running high, tears filled his eyes as he stared. It seemed so cruel. That little house could save his life from hypothermia tonight, yet it was just out of his reach. It held shelter, maybe food, maybe blankets, maybe a phone, but he couldn't get to it. It was his lifeline... the only thing that could save his life, and it was too far away. His throat tightened, and he choked on the tears. Either way he looked all he saw was lake. Suddenly, he felt very unloved, rejected, and abandoned. *You just wanted me to see what I can't have?*

*Try.*

*Try what? You just want me to stare at this nice, cozy cabin I can't get to while I take my last breath?* Suddenly, he realized his faith in an abundant heaven wasn't very strong. At that moment, he didn't really care because he didn't want to die. He wanted God to.... His eyes drifted down to the watery ice. *That's not going to hold me.* No answer. *Is it?* No answer. *Why couldn't the copter crash on the other side of the lake?* No answer. *Why did it have to crash at all?* He looked back up at the log house. Anger rose from his stomach through his chest, and he determined he was not going to die staring at that stupid house. If he drowned, he drowned.

Grabbing on an embedded rock with one hand and a hunk of frozen ground with the other, he pulled himself up onto his good knee and started crawling toward the edge. Scrambling down the muddy bank, he let out a yell as he twisted his ribcage. Gritting his teeth, he froze and tried to breathe through the pain. Lifting his head, he squinted to see through the mist as water lapped up on his shaky hand sinking down into the mud. He wanted to see ice, think ice, not mist rising off swampy slush. Sliding down on the ice, he held his breath as water rippled over his hands and soaked through his pant legs. He waited, but the ice didn't give, didn't even crack. Slowly, he slid himself forward into the unknown. If he wasn't so mad, he would pray. His pride wasn't letting him. After all he had been through, he was getting a little tired of thinking that God cared about him. Hitting a soft spot, his hand slid elbow high into the slush. *Although...* He yanked his arm out and returned it to solid ice. His mind went back to when he was a boy and someone had asked his aunt why she prayed when she was in trouble. She had replied, "Because there is nothing else." At the time, he had felt like that was a dumb answer. He was taught you pray because you love the Lord, and you want him to be pleased with you. However, at the moment, he was beginning to feel like the idea did have some merit. *You could be dead right now. ... True.* His good knee began to sink into the slush. Adrenaline shot through his veins, and he lunged forward to solid ice. He felt no pain only numb. *Lord, protect me. Get me there, please God.* He swallowed hard on his pride and prayed as he carefully inched forward, sliding through the water on top the ice... further and further. As he reached center, the water on top began to dissipate, and his wet pant legs began to stick to the ice. He put his hands in his sleeves so they wouldn't stick and continued on. Three-quarters of the way there, he began to shiver violently as wind whipped across the lake. *Help me,* he pleaded, weakly. The wind ceased, but the water returned and the ice turned more slushy. Soon the leg he drug behind him was indenting a trail in the slush, and the ice underneath him was beginning to crack. He tried to move faster, willing it to hold him until he reached the bank. He was almost there when... CRACK! The ice split and he began to fall. He lunged forward and grabbed for the edge. He heard himself scream as he hit. His grasp broke off clumps of dirt but didn't finding anything solid as he sank down and down into the icy water. As the water reached chest level, his feet found solid ground. His knees buckled, and he couldn't feel his feet, but instinct got him back to the edge. Shaking, he grabbed hold of roots on the bank and pushed off with his good leg, trying to jump but quickly splashing back down. His arms were too weak. The roots were too muddy and slippery. Standing on his good leg in the water, he looked around desperately. The whole world seemed to be shaking, not just his body. *God, what do.... God, help...me.* He looked around wildly, and finally his eyes landed on a dock. *Maybe...* Breaking the thin ice in front of him, he half-swam and half-hopped along the shore. Staring intently at the dock, he willed his body to keep moving toward it. *You can do it. You can do it.* He told himself. Pain shot through his muscles. *God, help me! You can do it.*

Approaching the dock, he noticed wooden stairs going up the bank right before it. *Even better. Thank you, Lord!* Desperately, he reached for the wooden railing and clung to it, pulling his good leg up. Gritting his teeth, he willed his good leg to hold him and hop to each next step. One. Two. Three. Yelling, he collapsed to the ground. *Made it.* Breathing hard, he lifted his head and looked toward house, starting to fade into the darkness. *Almost.*

Getting back up on his hands and good knee, he continued toward the house. He wanted to stop. He wanted to rest. But he didn't dare. He had to get there. He hadn't made it yet. As he approached, he wanted to hold out hope that maybe there was someone there, but there wasn't a light in sight. So, instead, he kept the faith that somehow there would be a way in... without breaking a window, though he would if he had to.

Reaching the porch steps, he grabbed the bottom of the railing and pulled himself up onto his good leg. Though it was shaking now, he willed it to hop up the four steps to the porch. He nearly fell once but held himself up with the railing.

Leaving the railing, he fell toward the door, catching himself on the doorknob for support. *Locked. Of course, but where's the key?* He felt around the doorframe. Nothing. He looked at the flowerpots on the table. *Please, let it be in the flowerpots.* He reached for the first one and searched through the topsoil. *Thank you!* He felt metal and clutched the key in his fist. Holding his breath, he tried it in the door then let out a sigh of relief as it worked.

Stumbling inside, he fell against the first table he saw for support, flipped the light switch on, and then slowly lowered himself to his knee as pain shot through his ribs. *Made it.* Crawling to the couch, he pushed himself up and then collapsed on top of it. For several minutes, he just let himself breathe, not feeling like he could move another step. Reaching for the quilt draped over the back of the couch, he pulled it down on top of him. Soon as he recovered some, he determined to get up and find some water, a light switch, and the thermostat, but *not right now... not right now.* Letting his eyes fall shut, he fell fast asleep.

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Derrick glanced at Matt as they walked from the farmhouse back to their car. "It's getting dark. People are going to start calling the cops on us pretty soon," He looked straight ahead. "or at least stop coming to the door."

Matt lowered his device from in front of Derrick and read it. Finally, he nodded reluctantly. "I guess we have covered a lot of ground today."

Derrick's eyes replied, *You can say that again,* but he simple said, "True."

"I guess we should start looking for a hotel." His voice was hesitant. "I'll pay for both of us of course since your helping me. As long as..." He stopped walking

"As long as what?"

"The man that called about protective custody seemed pretty insistent that I tell him where we were. If I use my credit card, he will easily be able to track our location."

"True, but the police have got to know we are around knocking on doors anyway. We are not really incognito."

Matt shrugged. "They may not know exactly where we are at any given time. Beside the FBI may not be in touch with the local police, if they don't know where we are."

Derrick looked unconvinced. "Well, it's up to you. I don't mind sleeping in the truck. I can sleep anywhere."

"How much food do we have?"

"I packed quite a bit." Derrick opened his truck door, but continued talking into the device rather than getting in. "Probably enough for a couple days, and I got a hundred and eighty-seven bucks in cash. Where you are going to buy food that doesn't have a camera, I don't know."

"Those cameras are private, aren't they? I mean, they aren't monitored by police."

Derrick shrugged. "Who knows. I know stores let the police look at them if they ask."

"But why would they ask?" Derrick shrugged and got in on the driver's side. Matt went around to the passenger's side. "Besides, I wouldn't think they could force you into protective custody against your will. That would be infringing on personal freedom."

"So is eminent domain," Derrick yawned. "Personally, I think if they really wanted to arrest you, they could find some law to fit their purpose." He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

Matt's brow furrowed as he read it. "So, you think they'll try to force us into protective custody?"

"I have no idea." He sat forward and turned the key. "If it makes you feel better, let's just sleep in the truck."

Matt read it a couple times then nodded slowly. "Might as well. Besides Sandervauh could be looking for us, too."

Derrick shrugged as he backed the truck onto the road. "Could be."

"You going to find an empty lot or do you think it'd be better to blend in with a lot of cars?"

Derrick gave him a look. "I'm going to find some trees out here. This truck can go off-road."

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"Where we going, Mommy?" Craning to see from her car seat, Morgan looked wide-eyed out the window into the darkness.

"I already told you, sweetie. We are going to live at another house for a few days." Jess glanced at Morgan beside her in the backseat, hand on the window staring out. Then she looked at Jim in the seat in front of her and over at the policeman driving the car.

"What 'bout Butterscotch and 'er baby?" Morgan kept staring out the window.

"Mr. Johnson from church and his son are going to take care of them."

"They'll be okay?"

"They'll be just fine."

"What 'bout Gama and Gampa?"

"They'll be just fine, too. They're going to their next church. We'll see them at Christmas."

"When's Kissmas?" Morgan turned to look at her.

"Not long off."

"I miss Gama."

"Me too, Sweetie." Jess's voice trailed off and she sat up straight to look out the front window as they slowed in front of a house. "Oh, look, we're here." She pointed to the little, white, two-story house as they pulled into the driveway, and suddenly she was more homesick than ever. She wanted her own stained log bi-level with the pretty log railings going around the wooden porch with her own western decor bedroom and her spacious kitchen and her fireplace in the living room. She wanted her home sweet home back, and she wanted it to be safe.

Morgan looked out at the house and hugged her stuffed bunny tighter. "I wanna go home."

*I know how you feel.* "There's nothing to be afraid of." Jess's voice was the perfect 'stoic' blend of uncertainty and fear.

"I wanna go home." Morgan repeated.

"You'll be fine, Morgan." Jim turned back from the passenger's side seat. "We'll go home in just a few days." He glanced at Jess for assistance.

"Your daddy's right." Jess kept her voice upbeat and her emotions cheerful as she unbuckled the little girl. "We're just going on a little adventure. You'll see it will be fun."

"You folks stay out here a minute while I check the house." The plain-clothes officer got out, his gun showing under his shirt as he stood.

One eyebrow furrowing, Jess leaned forward and whispered to Jim. "Check it for *what*?"

"Anything." Jim's voice was an upbeat whisper. "They are just being extra careful, which means we're extra safe."

“Yeah... if we don’t get killed in our sleep?” Hers was a strained whisper.

Jim gave her a look. “Then you won’t have to worry about it anymore.”

She whacked him on the shoulder and shoved him against the door. “You’re a big help, you are!” He just laughed.

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Grimacing as he woke up, Trent opened his eyes and stared up at the piney, wood-paneled ceiling. His head was throbbing so bad he could hardly stand it. His ribs ached just from breathing, and his leg screamed with pain every time he dared to move it. He felt desperate for a pain killer, even ibuprofen, if he could only find some.

Pushing the blanket down, he grimaced at the pain. Trying to get over it, he grabbed the coffee table next to him and pulled himself up onto his good leg. Pain screamed through his bad leg as he tried to put weight in it. Abandoning that idea, he put all his weight back on his good leg and leaned against the head of the couch for support. Pain shot through his ribs as he leaned forward. He gasped a deep breath which made it worse. Feeling light-headed, he tried to breathe deep as his good leg began to shake under his weight. *Help me.* Feeling thirsty, he turned and gazed toward the kitchen. As he turned, his shaking leg gave way and he fell down against the couch. Pain radiated through every nerve, numbing his body and turning his lights out as he tumbled off the couch onto the floor.

\*\*\*\*\*

Wade looked toward the door as Mellissa came in. “Are you finally home? Did Jim and Jess get off alright?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m sure glad we’re not involved in their trouble this time.” She closed the door and set her purse on the little round table by the door.

“Isn’t it a little cold not to have a coat?”

“At least our heater works well in our van. I had to run out of here so fast I forgot it.” She walked over to him and dropped a stack of papers on his lap. “I went around and got your applications while I was out.”

“Oh, good.” Wade pushed himself more upright and began looking through them.

“I was going to bring us home some supper, but then I figured I better not waste the money on eating out. It sure smelled in Macavello’s Diner. I still can hardly believe I got you an application from there.” She headed toward the kitchen. “But maybe as long as they keep you away from the stove!” She called back. Wade wagged his head as he glanced through the first application, but he didn’t answer. “I wonder if they put the others in protective custody?” she continued as she searched through the cupboards. “You know, Matt and Melinda, Teresa and.... How ‘bout some Macaroni and cheese?”

“Again?”

“I wonder if we have any hamburger we can put in it?” She opened the refrigerator. “We do. How ‘bout macaroni and cheese with peas and hamburger in it?”

“Anything’s fine!” He began reading through the second application. “I wonder if they’ve found Trent, yet?”

“I don’t know! I hope so! They hadn’t yet when I left Jim and Jess!” She pulled out her frying pan and put it on the front burner. She filled her three-quart pan with water and a pinch of salt and put it on the back.

“You got me an application for an insurance company!”

“It says they train you. Don’t you think you could sell insurance?”

“No! In fact, I don’t think I could sell life preservers in a shipwreck!”

“Oh, Wade, you give yourself far too little credit!” She cut open the hamburger wrap and dumped it in the frying pan. “You got to find something that you’re good at!”

“Thank you, Mellissa! I’ll try! I mean, there has got to be something even us highly untalented, basic individuals can handle,” he replied sarcastically.

“Oh, Wade, don’t be so sensitive!”

## Recruited for Rescue

Waking as rays of sunshine from the picture window warmed his face, Trent opened his eyes and looked around, reminding himself where he was and of the recent events. Vaguely remembering losing consciousness, he was afraid to move for fear he had broken something else and that pain would cause him to faint again.

Licking his parched lips, he realized that sooner or later, he was going to have to find a way to manage the pain and get to some water no matter how many times he fainted. Pain shot through his skull just from the effort of turning his head toward the kitchen. *This is going to be fun.*

Groaning, he pushed the coffee table a little farther away and then reached up and grabbed the couch cushion, using it to pull himself onto his stomach. Breathing hard, he pushed himself up onto his good knee, trying to manage the pain. Gritting his teeth and dragging his leg, he inched toward the kitchen.

Finally reaching the counter, he glanced up toward the faucet. *So close and yet so far.* Wincing at his throbbing head, he opened the cabinet doors and putting his hands on top of them, used them to pull himself up. The hinges creaked under his weight, but they held and so did his leg this time. It wasn’t even shaking... yet.

Breathing hard, he allowed himself a smile of satisfaction as he turned on the faucet and let the water run into his cupped hand. Leaning against the counter for support, he drank several palmfuls as quickly as he could muster as his leg started to quiver beneath him. Opening the cupboards around the sink, he looked for anything useful. He found a box of crackers and a water bottle. He grabbed the water bottle and placed it under the running water, willing his leg to hold him as it began to shake. Working quickly after it filled, he whacked down the faucet handle, twisted the lid on while leaning against the counter, and snatched the box of crackers as his leg began to give. He grabbed the lower cabinet door on his way down to break his fall. *Ouch.* He landed with a thud but didn’t hurt himself.

Leaning back against the cabinet, he swallowed hard, fending off feelings of nausea. He didn’t want to regurgitate the water after all the work it had taken him to get it. Besides, he knew becoming further dehydrated all alone out here could easily become deadly. He wished he wasn’t alone. He wished there was a telephone somewhere around here, but he sure didn’t see one... not on the walls... not on the counters. He didn’t see any telephone lines around or other cabins either. He looked around at all the pine cabinets going around the upper circumference of the kitchen. He wondered if any of them contained a painkiller... even one pill. Twisting, he tried to get back to his knees but the pain blurred his vision and seared through his side, causing him to fall back against the cabinets. Breathing deeply, he fought the darkness threatening him.

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The smell of oil and old wood greeted Derrick as he walked from the snow into the barn where the farmer was working on his combine. “Hi, your wife said I’d find you here,” he greeted the man as he turned to look at him. Squatting next to the combine with a wrench in his hands, the man just looked at him. “I’m helping my friend look for his daughter. She’s been abducted. Here’s a picture of her and the man who took her.” Stepping over some equipment, he handed the flyer to the man, who glanced at it first and then stared at it intently.

“Do you think you’ve seen her?” Derrick studied the man’s face as he stared at the flyer.

“Not her.” He pointed to Mark’s picture. “Him, maybe.” He wiped his dirty forearm across sweaty face.

“Where’d you see him?”

“I can’t be sure.” He continued to stare at the photo and then pointed to Mark’s neck. “It’s just that tattoo. I guess it’s probably not that uncommon for a young man to have a cannabis leaf tattooed on the side of his neck. It just stood out to me, I guess. I have a brother-in-law....”

“But you think it was him?” Derrick interrupted.

“Could be.” The man continued to study it.

“Where’d you see him?”

“At this gas station near where I work, about forty-five miles from here. I went in to get some lunch, and he was in front of me in line to get a sandwich. I guess I took notice of him because of the way he was acting, sort of nervous like, lookin’ around, didn’t want to stand still, kind of short with the lady making the subs, acted like he needed some pot to calm him down.”

“Could you give me the name of the station and what town it’s in?” Derrick already had a pen and paper out to write it down.

“Sure.” He rattled it off so quick that Derrick had to repeat it back to make sure he got it right. “That’s right,” the man confirmed.

“No girl with him, though?” The man shook his head. “Did you see his car?”

“Yeah. I went out right after him.”

“Was there anyone else in the car?” The man shook his head. Derrick was afraid this might just be another false alarm... until he asked the man to describe the car. He described Mark’s car to the ‘t’. Derrick was surprised Mark would still be driving his own car. He bet he exchanged license plates with someone, though. *Of course, if that was him and Taylor wasn’t in the car. That must mean he has her stashed close by.* “Thanks. Hopefully, this is what we’ve been looking for.” Derrick started backing up. “If you find out anything else, or if you see him again, would you please give us a call?”

“Sure. Good luck.” The man turned back to his tractor as Derrick left.

Matt stood by the truck, waiting impatiently for Derrick. “What’d he say?” Matt asked as soon as Derrick got in range of his device.

“He thinks he saw Mark. He described his car.” Derrick shrugged.

“Where?” Matt’s face turned urgent.

“Town about forty-five minutes from here.” Derrick went toward the driver’s side door. Matt got in on the passenger’s side. As he got in his phone started to vibrate. He got it out but just stared at the caller ID.

“Who is it?” Derrick looked over at him, curiously, as he grabbed his seatbelt.

Matt glanced up at him and read his lips. “Melinda.” It stopped ringing and *missed call* flashed across the screen.

“You gonna call her back?” Derrick spoke into his device and then turned the key as Matt read it.

“I wonder if anyone would track our location if I did?”

“The good guys or the bad guys?” Derrick smiled.

Matt’s face didn’t lighten. “Either one.”

“Could be she thinks we should be in protective custody.” Derrick put the truck in drive and started off.

Matt read it a few times before responding. “If something else has happened,” He stared at his device and then looked at Derrick. “I’d like to know about it.”

Derrick wagged his head in an unsure nod. “Wouldn’t change anything. Still, I wouldn’t mind knowing if they found Trent.”

“Could be she found out something about Taylor, too.”

Derrick looked both ways then pulled the truck out onto the road. “There’s a town up here. We’ll stop and buy a disposable phone and some minutes.”

“That’ll take about all your cash.”

"That it will." He guided his truck around a curve, skidding the tires a bit in the gravel. "You can go in. Wear the hat and the sunglasses."

Matt read it, looked at him, and gave a crooked smile. "Want them to think I'm blind, too?"

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Finishing his coffee, Jim approached Jess, who was sitting on the couch, trying to get interested in the morning news on TV. Smiling at Morgan coloring on the floor, he stepped over her and her mess of crayons before sitting down next to Jess on the couch.

She muted the TV as he sat down. "There is absolutely nothing on. We should have at least brought a DVD player and some DVDs."

"Yeah. You're probably right." He put his arm around her as he sipped his coffee.

She crossed her arms, impatiently. "There are a million and one things I could be doing at home right now."

Jim gave a reluctant nod as he took another sip. "And maybe if we are all still around when this is over, you can do them."

She nudged him in the ribs. "Morgan."

He glanced down at her, intent on her picture. "Oh, she's in her own world."

Crossing her arms impatiently, she flopped back hard against his arm and the back of the couch. "It's just so..."

"Boring?" Jim finished for her. She nodded, not looking at him. "I know where you can find a partner for a mean game of checkers."

She gave him a look. "That sounds sooo... fascinating." Her voice went deep at the end, and her enthusiasm was about equal to someone taking their last walk to the gallows.

"Good!" His voice was upbeat as he got up to go find the checkerboard. He heard her mumble something after him, but only smiled, concluding to try and figure out what it was would be far from edifying.

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Bringing her laptop into the living room after finishing the breakfast dishes, Mellissa smiled at Wade who was surrounded by several half-finished applications on the floor, on the table, and on the couch. "How's it coming?" She asked, sitting down and opening her laptop.

"Uh." He looked up toward her. "I think I've gotten two done... one for the distribution center and the one for the cheese factory. A lot of the others are almost done. "This one wants to know how much professional driving experience I have. I don't guess I can count the first year I was a paramedic, cause I was just the passenger."

"I wouldn't call it, 'just a passenger.' You were still saving lives." She pressed the internet button and watched it come up.

"I mean I wasn't driving." He looked back down at the paper and continued his calculations on the corner of the page. "Although I should finish this one." He picked up the one beside him. "All I needed for it was my social security number and my..." His voice trailed off as he wrote on it.

"What's that one?" She stared at her screen as she typed in the web address.

"The one for Macavello's." He didn't look at her.

"Do you really think it's wise to fill that one out?" She glanced at him over her computer.

"You got it for me!"

"In a fit of insanity." She continued typing. "The only reason I did was because you said to get one from everyone that was hiring."

He rolled his eyes. "If I get the job, it must be the Lord's will."

"You got the security job!" She looked at him.

"Yeah, well, I prayed about this one."

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Waking, Trent looked around the kitchen, amazed he could sleep still sitting up against the cabinet. Trying to move, nausea and dizziness hit him, but he forced himself to his knees despite it. Almost wondering if it was worth it, he willed himself to crawl to the refrigerator. He had to know if someone'd been there recently. Opening the doors, he got the message loud and clear. It was totally wiped clean, not a remnant of food anywhere.

Seeing a pantry broom closet next to it, he shifted his weight to one hand and opened the doors with his other. Finding it hard to see what was on the shelf when he was down so low, he backed up, raised himself as much as he could manage, and squinted to see the labels... some cans of fruit and vegetables and some boxes of cereal. At least he wouldn't starve, but what he really needed was some way to contact someone, some way out of here. He squinted against the pain in his head... and some ibuprofen.

Grabbing the handles on the front of the pantry, he used them to lift himself up onto his good leg. He snatched the two boxes of cereal and flipped them over by his box of crackers and water bottle. Then, using the counter for support, he quickly hopped his way from cupboard to cupboard, looking for anything useful... cups... plates... bowls... mixing bowls... napkins... pans... tablecloths and dishrags... matches... citronella candles... placemats... food processor... mixer... blender... nothing that he wanted or needed. He lowered himself to his knees before his leg gave way.

Seeing a door off the kitchen, he decided to go toward it. He didn't remember seeing a garage. Reaching up for the handle, he pushed the door open.... *Bathroom.... Good... and maybe.* He pulled himself over to the sink and used it to pull himself up so he could look through the medicine cabinet. *Painkiller! Oh, blessed painkiller!* He grabbed the box and stuffed it in his pocket, making a mental note to make a list of everything he borrowed so he could replace it. After using the restroom, he crawled his way back to his pile of food and water, slowly but surely managing to get it all back to the couch with him, snatching the TV remote from the lampstand on his way by.

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Matt took his regular phone out to find Melinda's number and then dialed it on the disposable phone, hoping she would answer when she didn't recognize the number. Derrick took his sandwich out of its bag and began eating it. Melinda answered her phone on the second ring, "Hello?"

"Hi, Melinda. It's Matt." He put it on speaker phone and held his device close to it.

"Matt! I've been so worried! Why haven't you been answering your phone? Did you know the police are looking for you? Matt?"

Matt took a moment to read it before answering. "We're fine. I know. They want us to come in to protective custody."

"I heard they were considering some charges like child endangerment or neglect or something. They said they'd still protect you if you cooperated."

"What?!" Matt looked at Derrick.

Derrick didn't look surprised. "I told you they could find a way."

Matt just gave him a look. "Where are you getting your information?"

"From the police."

"I figured that. I mean...."

"Look, is Derrick still with you?"

Matt glanced at Derrick, who was shaking his head, adamantly. "Why?"

"Why? Because I need to talk with him. I don't have much time. The police are outside waiting for me. I guess I'm going into protective custody like everyone else. Is he there?"

Derrick was still shaking his head. "Why don't you give me the message. I'll see if I can locate him."

"He's probably sitting right there," she mumbled.

"What's the message?"

"Actually, it's from Teresa... and me too. She doesn't believe Trent is dead." Matt and Derrick exchanged concerned glances. "She thinks Derrick could find him, and so do I. The authorities have located the helicopter. The pilot and the flight nurse are both dead. They couldn't locate Trent's body, but they believe it must have been thrown from the helicopter and drug off by an animal. They said there was no way he could have survived the fall or the cold temperatures last night. They said he probably died on impact like the others. Teresa doesn't believe it. She says if he was dead, she would know it. They've called off the search partially because of the bad weather coming and also because they think they've covered pretty much the whole area. It's been snowing up there, and there's been no sign of tracks. I don't want to believe he's dead either. I mean, I just found out he's my brother."

Matt glanced at Derrick, who looked skeptical. "Why Derrick?" Matt asked.

"He could find him. He's rugged enough to survive the climate, and he's smart enough to figure out what happened to him. Think of Teresa, Derrick! Think of his kids! They'll all grow up fatherless if you don't find him... and time's running out. It's only been one day so far, and Trent's smart enough to survive that! I know he is!"

Matt glanced at Derrick. Derrick glanced back, but then just stared out the window, his face unemotional. "I'll give him the message."

Derrick glanced back at Matt and mouthed, "Where."

"Tell Derrick we need him!"

"Where do I tell him to go?"

"It's somewhere between Superior and Cable."

Derrick rolled his eyes and gave Matt an unimpressed look as he wrote on a piece of paper. *Wow, that's specific!*

"Melinda, if I know Derrick, I doubt he's going to go without the exact location."

"I'll find out and text you! Just give me a couple minutes."

Derrick tensed, and Matt read what he was thinking. "Uh, Melinda, if the police know that Derrick's going up there...."

"Oh! No, no, no. They don't know that I'm connected with either one of you. Just trust me! Assure him this is not a trap! I've got to hurry. I'll call Teresa. Just give me a few minutes, okay?"

Matt glanced at Derrick again but couldn't read him. "I'll give him the message."

"It's Trent's life, Matt!"

"I'll give him the message."

"Okay." She paused. "Goodbye."

"Bye." Matt hung up the phone and looked at Derrick, who was staring in the rearview mirror. "Well, you heard."

"Yeah." Derrick put the truck in drive but kept his eyes on the mirror.

"What's the matter?" Matt turned to look out the back window. "A police car."

"He's running license plates." Derrick slowly back out of his parking space and slowly began weaving in and out of the parked cars, trying not to look conspicuous yet also trying not to put his license plate in plain view. He drove through the alley between two buildings and to the backside of the mall. The police car had seemed to be heading in their direction for a while

but then seemed to lose track of them. Soon as they were on the highway, Derrick increased the gas and got them out of there.

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Stretching as much as wasn't painful, Wade set the last application on the table and stood up from the couch. "How's your job search coming?" He walked over and stood behind her chair, looking over her shoulder at the laptop. "A law office, huh?"

"This one's over an hour away." She tilted her head back and looked up at him. "I've applied for two law offices, a dental office, and an eyeglass place in Rockford, a doctor's office and an insurance office here in town, and a nursing home in Lena." He nodded slowly. She turned back to her computer. "There just aren't that many secretarial openings around."

"It sounds like you're doing alright. Besides, if you really can't find anything," He walked over to the closet and got his coat. "they're looking for a waitress at Macavello's."

"Ha. Ha." She looked up at him. "Where are you going?" She watched him put on his coat.

"Gonna drop off some of these applications."

A shadow of worry crossed her face. "Do you think you should already? This will be the first time you're out of the house. Maybe I should drive you." She set her laptop on the table and stood up.

"Mellissa, I am not an invalid. I can drive myself."

"But can you work for eight hours a day at a factory?"

"I guess we'll find out." He grimaced as he bent down and picked up the stack of applications.

"Wade, be careful." She put her hand on his arm. "Don't overdo it."

"I won't." He put his arm around her waist and kissed her. "Don't worry." Releasing her, he headed for the door.

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Matt glanced over at Derrick, who'd seemed consumed in his own thoughts ever since Melinda called, then back at the road as they turned off the county road onto the highway. "Have you decided what you are going to do?" He held his device next to Derrick so he wouldn't have to pick it up while he drove.

"No." He continued to stare at the road.

As Matt considered how to ask Derrick where they were going in way that might generate a civil response, his disposable phone vibrated so he took it out and read his text. "It's from Melinda, telling you how to get there. It looks like you'll have to walk in quite a ways, not really next to any road. She says one of us can use her car since she won't be needed it. She says she'll leave the key in the flowerpot." He looked questioningly for several moments at Derrick before concluding he wasn't going to get any response. "Do you want to read it?" Derrick held out his hand for the phone. Matt considered asking him to pull over first, but quickly abandoned that idea and just let him read it while he was driving.

After a couple of minutes, Derrick handed the phone back to him and spoke. "If I don't at least try, and we find out later that he did survive the crash and died from exposure later, it will be my fault."

"It won't be your fault."

"On the other hand, we just got a lead that could bring us to your daughter, and if she dies..."

"It won't be your fault," Matt interrupted. Taylor's not in immediate risk of death. Trent is. Taylor still has me looking for her. Trent has no one right now. I think you should go try to find him... if you safely can."

"He may be already dead."

Matt nodded. "And if the other rescuers have stopped looking for him, there must be a reason."

Derrick stared out the front window for several minutes in silence as he drove. "I feel like I should go look for him."

"Then go." He paused. "The Lord will help me find Taylor." His voice held more doubt than he liked.

Derrick nodded. "We'll have to drive back to Illinois and get Melinda's car."

"Yeah." Matt's stomach twisted at the thought of abandoning their search for a whole day, especially when they felt so close, yet he also felt like it was the right thing to do.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" Derrick glanced over at Matt, feeling increased tension next to him.

Matt swallowed back a lump in his throat as he read the text. "Sure." His voice was quiet.

"I don't want you getting hurt again." Derrick was beginning to feel unsure.

Matt tried unsuccessfully to laugh that statement off. "There aren't many street gangs in this neck of the woods." His voice cracked. "I'll be fine." He forced a smile. "I can take care of myself."

Derrick grimaced at Matt's tone. "Maybe we should check out this lead on Taylor today and then tomorrow..."

Matt was already shaking his head, reading while Derrick talked. "If Trent is still alive, he doesn't have that much time. I have to live with what happens to him, too."

Derrick grunted as he turned on the blinkers and went around a slow-moving tractor. "If the search and rescue can't find him, I don't know why she thinks I can," he mumbled.

Matt raised his eyebrows as he read it. "Probably for the same reason I do. Eighty is coming up in one mile. Take it east."

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Wade glanced at the application on the seat beside him as he drove into the massive factory parking. *Big place*. He drove slowly down one of the rows of hundreds of parked cars. This job might not exactly be at the top of his list, but he figured at least he would qualify. After all, who wouldn't qualify to work in a factory. Of course, he had thought that about the grocery store too. After all, who would think you would need experience to run a cash register.... And how was a person supposed to get experience if they wouldn't hire him.

Turning, Wade drove slowly next to the massive sprawling building, staying a semi-length out because of all the semis stopped on the side. He had to squint to see if any of the doors were labeled *office*. Some of the places he had visited today wouldn't even let him talk to a manager. They just insisted that he drop off the application and that they would be in touch with him. *Yeah right*. Everyone wanted experience, and all he was experienced in was being a fireman paramedic. He had been a cadet in high school, took classes in the summer, and was hired like a year after he graduated from high school. He figured he might be able to get some kind of job in a hospital setting, but the thought of being forced back into the medical profession turned his stomach, especially if he couldn't be what he'd always dreamed of.

The line of semis ended and was replaced by mostly empty parking places. He drove a little closer to the building, searching until the word OFFICE glared at him from above a door. He quickly parked, grabbed the app, and swallowed down the lump in his throat as he got out of the car.

Pulling himself to his full height, he walked confidently into the building, flashing a smile at the girl behind the desk as he walked up. She didn't return it. "May I help you?"

"I would like to speak to a manager." His voice was chipper.

She raised one eyebrow. "In regard to..."

"Hiring the perfect employee... me!" He flashed another grin.

This time she couldn't help but smile back. "And you are a qualified machinist?"

His smile faded a little. "What kind of machine?"

She tried to suppress her smile from widening further. "Are you qualified to run any machines?"

"We-ell." He wondered if the toaster oven counted. "Sure." After all, a car was a machine. A washer machine was a

machine. A vacuum was technically a...”

“Sir, we are looking for qualified CNC operators.”

“Oh.” He knew his face looked blank. “How ‘bout a good old fashioned, hardworking, totally responsible...”

“Sir, we have all the general laborers we need at this time. However, I will take your application, in case something becomes available.” She stood from her desk and held out her hand over the counter. He wasted another resume by handing it to her, but he guessed she might as well throw it out as him. Smile fading, he turned and walked out the door. He was beginning to feel totally unnecessary to the entire function of the whole worldwide economy.

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Derrick turned his truck onto Melinda’s street. The day was just starting to darken into dusk, though it was barely four o’ clock, yet. He hoped any nosey neighbors around would be too busy deciding what to prepare for supper to notice him hijack Melinda’s car. Derrick took Matt’s device as he pulled up to the curb. “Well, I guess this is it. I’ll be back to help you as soon as I can.”

Matt returned a single nod, his face resigned. “Just find Trent. Here.” He handed him the disposable phone. “You take it.”

Derrick hesitated. “You might need it.”

“You *will* need it to call for help when you find Trent because you won’t have a car. I’ll have my car right there. Besides I’ve got my other phone if I absolutely need it.”

Derrick took the phone. “Thanks.”

Matt nodded once, firmly. “I’ll be praying for you.”

Derrick nodded back a couple of times. “I’ll be praying for you, too.” They both stared melancholily out the window for a moment, simultaneously praying for each other and then for themselves. “Come on,” Derrick snapped out of his daze and slapped Matt on the arm as he got out and started walking toward the house. Matt got out more slowly and then stood by the truck as he waited for Derrick to return with the key. Watching Derrick return with it, he turned back to the truck and pulled his medical bag up on the seat. Taking out everything Derrick would need to tend to his arm and anything he thought he might need for Trent, he put the supplies in the glove compartment but left it open so that Derrick could see them. Then as Derrick approached, he pointed to them and instructed. “Clean it three times a day and *take* the antibiotic.”

Derrick nodded. He felt like replying sarcastically, “Yes, Pappy,” but he didn’t. “You should take part of the sandwiches.”

Matt shook his head. “You won’t have time to stop. I still got some cash. I can go to the store if I need to.”

Derrick took out his billfold. “Here.” He offered him the rest of his cash.

Matt shook his head. “You might need it for gas.” Derrick relented and closed his wallet. “Good luck.” Matt nodded to him as he took the key and turned toward Melinda’s car. Derrick nodded back and headed back into his truck.

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Yawning, Trent paused the DVD he was watching and stared out the massive floor to ceiling windows on the front of the house. If he didn’t think about his current uncertain circumstances or the hazardous condition his body was in, he could convince himself to be pretty content here with his comfortable couch and blanket, his water bottle and box of crackers, his TV, and his spectacular view, even if this was his fourth go round with Cinderella. He appreciated the noise from the TV, but he was sure that one more round of bibbity bobbity boo was going to drive him to risk his safety and crawl over to change the disc rather than keep watching what was already in there.

Hearing a familiar chatter, he turned his head a little to see a fluffy, little brown squirrel peeking in the bottom corner of the window. He tried to climb the window, but after a few failed attempts, turned around and scampered off into the fluffy, accumulating snow. Snow had been falling all day, but it was starting to get a little heavier. He stared toward the setting sun gleaming through the trees and wondered how much snow they would have by morning. He hoped rescuers were still looking for him. There were several inches on the ground but not so much that he would think they couldn’t get through. He hoped.

Looking at the fluffy, green pine limb weighted down with snow in front of the far window, he forced himself to focus on the snow's beauty rather than its danger. He smiled as he watched a bright red cardinal swoop down from the vivid green pine and land on a broken limb of a log barely peeking out of a mound of snow. Twittering, he fluffed his feathers out as giant snowflakes rained down all around him. He squinted to see the indentation of the lake, which was now barely discernable from the rest of the landscape. Snow peppered down in front of the window as the squirrel leaped from one snow covered branch to another, catching the branch in midair and flipping upside down as it clung to it. He smiled at a distant deer, bounding through the snow, jumping over logs and weaving through trees,

Grimacing, Trent reached for another cracker and slowly munched on it as he watched the show outside. He pushed away all thoughts of the pilot and the flight nurse, of his worried wife and kids, and of the danger he was in from Sandervauh and his henchmen. He prayed about it occasionally, but in the final analysis, all he could do was lie still, let himself heal, and let the Lord take care of all the problems.

## Heading Up North

Squinting to see out the back window through the dim evening light, Derrick put his truck in reverse and steered it perfectly to connect with Jim's trailer hitch. After hearing the metal clang, he got out, went around to the trailer, and connected the chains to his pickup. He was glad for Jim's blanket statement a few months back that offered he could use the trailer if they weren't using it. He didn't guess Jim would be needing it in protective custody, and taking Maverick up to help him look for Trent would make his life a whole lot easier.

Going to the back of the trailer, he released the double doors on the top and let the ramp on the bottom fall down to the ground. Turning, he headed through the barn, grabbing Maverick's halter and lead rope on his way past the tack room. He'd already thrown a few of bales of hay and a couple ten-gallon jugs of water in the back of his pickup. He'd put the saddle, blanket, and bridle in the front of the trailer. Now, all that remained was to get one lunkhead in the back of the trailer... that would be the most fun he'd had all day. It wouldn't help that it was getting dark.

Going out the back of the barn, he walked down the path to the pasture gate and whistled. He didn't see Maverick, but that didn't mean anything. It was a large pasture, and Maverick was largely antisocial. Sometimes Derrick knew exactly how he felt.

After a few moments, a large, black stallion came galloping over the hill into view. A few seconds later, he was barreling toward the gate, mane and tail flying. Kicking up a cloud of dust, he skidded to a stop less than a yard from the metal barrier. Whinnying, he enthusiastically nodded his head and trotted around in a circle. "You're feeling good today." Derrick opened the gate and approached the stallion. "Stir crazy?" He put the halter on and clipped it shut. "How 'bout an adventure?" The stallion nickered and pranced beside him as he led him through the barn.

All was fine until Maverick saw the trailer, at which time, he tossed his head, yanked backward pulling Derrick with him, reared up, spun around, and bolted back toward the barn. The only way Derrick could get him stopped was to body slam himself against a passing wall and grab onto a wooden beam. Round one unsuccessful.

Three ropes, one metal post, 15 minutes of lunging, and 10 minutes of riding around the arena at a full gallop later, Derrick was finally able to yank one sweaty, half-exhausted stallion into the now pitch-dark trailer. It was touch and go there for a while, and nothing surprised Derrick more than the fact that he came out on top.

After latching the trailer doors closed, he turned around, wiped his sweaty face with his damp sleeve, and fell back against it, praying for the strength to drive the thing all the way to northern Wisconsin without wrecking it.

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Wade glanced up at a flickering street light as he pulled their van into his last parking lot of the night. He was way past tired, but he wanted to get this last application dropped off before he headed home. *Macavello's*. Part of him wondered why he even tried this place, but it was in his nature to go for broke. So, he figured he might as well try. After his past experiences from today, he didn't expect anything more than a person accepting the paper at the door with a trite reply that they would get back

to him if they were interested. The only place of the day that had even sounded remotely interested was a factory needing hardware assemblers for the third shift. That sounded like tons of fun. Nothin' he'd like more than screwing together hinges at three 'o'clock in the morning... but he guessed he'd do it, if he had to.

Grimacing, he used the car door to help pull himself out. Yawning, he walked toward the bustling door. *Last stop.* He was definitely ready to go back to his nice warm house, eat a good supper, watch some tv under a blanket, and go to sleep. He put his hands in his pocket and kicked a chunk of ice out of his way as he approached the door. A rush of cold wind refreshed him as he reached for the door handle. A group of people were coming out just as he was going in, so he held the door open for them. Laughing among themselves, they thanked him and continued on.

He stopped inside the door and looked around, the warm atmosphere bringing a smile to his face. Many of the booths were full with chatty, cheerful customers. Soft music played in the background. Red checkered tablecloths and drippy candles gave the whole place an ambiance he'd forgotten in the era of fast food. Waitresses and busboys hurried about in a pleasant yet rushed manner, and he could see how they might need one more exceedingly responsible, highly efficient....

"Table for one?" A young hostess asked as she grabbed a menu from behind the wooden cashier counter, which was scalloped with entwined white lights and grapevines.

"No, um, I mean, I'm not here to eat. I just wanted to drop off this application." He held it out for her.

"Oh, a...." She glanced over her shoulder toward the kitchen. "The boss really likes to see the applicants when they drop off their.... Let me go see if he's available. Just a minute." Her voice was upbeat and fast paced as she turned and headed toward the kitchen.

Still holding out the paper, his mind didn't move fast enough to answer her before she was gone. Slowly lowering the application to his side, he backed up to the nearest wall and leaned back against it, letting his head hang and intermittently letting his eyes fall shut.

He waited for several minutes, watching busboys hurry back with stacks of dishes and waitresses rush out with platters of food. In fact, the whole place seemed like a giant revolving door. As soon as one group finished, another one came in. *Popular place.* In fact, his hostess returned from the kitchen and escorted three sets of people to their place without acknowledging him. At one point, he took a step toward her, but she only smiled at him and headed back toward the kitchen, returning a few minutes later without explanation. At least he got a good rest standing there indefinitely.

Four couples later, he attempted again to speak to her, walking next to her after seating her last couple. "Uh, Miss?" He began but was promptly interrupted.

"I know. It's just so busy tonight... the weekend, you know. Maybe you can come back another day. I can ask the boss...." He followed her right into the kitchen, since they were going that way. "Hey, Mac!" She yelled as they entered. "This is the guy I was telling you about!"

Wade stopped short and looked around for who she was talking to as she went and filled the drink order for her customers. "Well, as long as you've already barged in, come over here, young man!" A balding, older gentleman in a white chef coat called from his stainless-steel counter where he was chopping vegetables and motioned with his knife. Weaving in and out of traffic, application in hand, he hurried over there. Forcing his best movie star grin, Wade stopped in front of the man and held out his application. The man just stared at him, tomato in one hand, long chopping knife in the other. "You know, you're not supposed to be back here in your street clothes." He pointed his knife accusingly. "Could contaminate the product."

"Oh." Wade debated back and forth whether or not to offer to leave. "I'd just like to say.... I'm a good worker, reliable, always on time, efficient, very efficient, responsible, highly conscientious." Wade leaned against the table for support. "You'll never...."

WHACK! Wade jumped back as the man slammed the blade of his knife against the counter. "Young man! Our equipment is highly cleaned and sanitized. Placing one's filthy hand...."

Wade's eyes widened and he glanced at his hand. "I'll wash it off," he interrupted.

Trying to suppress a smile at Wade's expressive response, the man pointed with his knife to a bottle labeled sanitizer sitting on a nearby counter and then resumed chopping. Cautiously, Wade went over and picked up the spray bottle. Then glancing at the chef, he tentatively got some paper towel from the dispenser, hoping that the use of paper towels was

acceptable.

Returning to the counter, he started to spray, but was cut short as they chef yelled, "Ah!" and defensively covered his vegetables. Backing up, Wade sprayed the sanitizer on the paper towel and then used that to wipe off the counter. The chef nodded and returned a slight smile. "So! How much experience do you have working in a restaurant setting?"

Wade groaned. *Here we go again.* "I've worked all my life as a fireman paramedic, and everyone knows what good cooks firemen are." His self-assured smile widened.

The chef didn't look all that impressed. "Why did you quit... or were you fired?"

"Oh, no, no. I quit." His voice softened. "Got burned out, actually." He gave a sheepish grin. "Too much blood."

"Hmm." The man continued chopping. "And why do you want to work here?"

Pausing to think, Wade took a chance by slowly putting on a pair of food service gloves, picking up the extra knife, and beginning to chop a carrot. He thought of all the eloquent and honest answers he could give, from how he always dreamed of working in a restaurant to a blood oath that he wouldn't burn the place down. He decided to go with the honest approach. "Sooo my wife can eat?" He flashed a tentative smile.

"Thinner."

"Huh?"

"You're slices need to be much thinner. Here." He took the carrot and showed him. "As so." He scooted the carrot back. "You try." Wade duplicated it, and the man nodded in approval.

They both chopped in silence for several minutes. Wade didn't know if that was a sign that the man was considering hiring him or if he was just extorting free labor on a busy night. "She called you Mac. Are you by any chance the owner?" Wade ventured to ask.

"I am."

"You have a nice place here."

Mac nodded. "You been out of work long?"

"I've had a couple different jobs since then. Haven't found my calling, yet." He smiled. Mac looked at him questioningly. "My last job, I was a security guard up at the mall in Rockford, but, uh," He glanced up at him. "Lying in a hospital bed with a bullet in my chest, I decided to reconsider that calling, too." He grinned.

Mac's eyebrows jumped in surprise, but his voice was monotone. "When'd you get out?"

"Uh." Wade had to think a minute. "Last Wednesday."

Mac mentally counted back from Saturday. "Three days ago?"

"Three and a half," Wade grinned.

Mac pushed a pile of whole tomatoes in his direction and showed him how to dice them. "Like so." Wade tried to duplicate him. Mac just stared at him disapprovingly until on the third tomato, he finally got it right. Mac gave a smile of satisfaction and went back to his own chopping, but Wade could tell he was mentally shaking his head. There was a few more moments of silence until Mac looked up at him and noted. "You don't look mean enough to be a security guard."

"Yeah." Wade relented. "I think the guy that shot me felt the same way. I know my wife did. Maybe you're all right."

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Going off the road into the gravel a little, Derrick yawned and shook his head, trying to keep himself awake. He turned off the heater, opened the window, and pushed off the power button to the CD player. He'd turned on the Christian music hours ago to keep him awake, but it was starting to have the opposite effect on him, especially the slow songs.

Rolling his head and stretching his neck, he tried to think of something that would keep him engaged. He wondered how

Matt was doing. He rehashed his strategy to find Trent over and over in his mind. He prayed for both of them. He prayed for Jim and Jess, Melinda and Teresa, and the kids. He reminded himself to pray for Wade and Mellissa to find their baby, even though he hadn't thought about that for a long time. He prayed for missionaries and for the church services tomorrow. He prayed that Sandervaugh would be caught, tried, and convicted and that his regime would be shut down. He prayed for strength and that he could stay awake.

Yawning again, he hit the brakes a little harder than he should have as he slowed for a stop sign. He heard a slight thump in the back and felt a sudden surge of concern for Maverick, but he was sure he hadn't slammed on the brakes hard enough to make the horse lose his balance, so he just kept going. If he wasn't so tired, he would have gotten out to check on him. He figured he should find a spot pretty soon to stop and let Maverick out to stretch and cough. He doubted the horse would drink, but he guessed he should at least offer him some water. Yawning, Derrick took his orange juice from the cupholder and drank the rest of it. He had found a little country gas station without cameras where he filled up and bought five bottles of orange juice and a can of cashews. They had helped him stay awake for a while, but they weren't anymore.

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"Wade Thundercloud! Where have you been?" Mellissa met him at the door as he stomped the snow off his shoes and trudged in.

"I told you I had one more to drop off," he yawned as he walked past her and made a beeline for the couch.

"That was five hours ago!" She shut the door and hurried over as he eased himself down on the couch. "I've been calling and calling!"

"Sorry." He leaned back and closed his eyes, putting his feet up on the table. "I turned my phone off before going in the last place and I guess I forgot to turn it on." He opened his eyes and forced a grin. "I got the job, though."

Her concerned face lightened to a smile to match his. "You got a job? Where at?"

"Macavello's."

"Oh, Wade!" Mellissa put her face in her hands and then took it out and looked up at him. "Somehow I think you are destined to kitchens and grease fires! I mean there is just something in you that has a need for flames! That's probably why you became a fireman, an inner rebellion against...."

"Mellissa." He grimaced slightly as he leaned forward to take her hands. She stared at him questioningly, waiting, expecting something profound... but he was just too tired to think of anything profound. "Just pray that I don't start any fires."

"Oh, Wade!"

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Taylor stared at Mark for several minutes on the couch just watching his steady breathing and trying to determine if he was really asleep. It was hard to see him in the dim light that flooded from the kitchen, and she wanted to be sure. She had planned this escape for a long time, and she didn't want any mistakes.

She had been proud of herself for getting Mark to play right into her hand when he had come back with supper tonight. Standing a few feet from the kitchen, she had gotten on him before he was even in the door. She had hit him with every mean, nasty, demeaning comment she could think of. It had been a chore to keep from smiling as she watched the anger rise in his face and turn it beet red. Her plan worked perfectly. He slammed the door, threw the food on the coffee table, and came after her. He had caught her by the hair and slapped her, but it had been totally worth it because he had forgotten to bolt the door. All night long, she'd been on pins and needles afraid that he'd notice, but he didn't. Now, she just had to wait for the right opportunity and take it.

Putting her hands on the arms of her recliner, she willed it not to creak as she pushed herself up. Eyeing Mark the whole time, she walked lightly across the floor to get her coat. She put it on, tiptoed to the door, and placed her hand on the cold, metal knob. Her eyes darted in fear as she turned it. Pulling the door tight against the hinges, she held her breath as she slowly opened it, willing it not to squeak. It didn't share her concern. About a third of the way open it let out what seemed to her to be a deafening creak. She jerked her gaze back to the couch. Mark didn't stir. She looked back at the heavy, wooden door. Fearful to open it any wider, she turned sideways, sucked Junior in as far as she could, and squeezed herself through the opening.

Afraid the rush of cold air might wake him, she quickly grabbed the frosty, outside doorknob and carefully pulled the door closed. She wanted to let out a sigh of relief that she was free, but she didn't dare.

Every nerve in her body jumped as she ran through the long grass, past the decaying, old barns, and into a clumpy, frozen, plowed-under cornfield. She slowed down, partially to catch her breath and partially to keep from tripping on the uneven clods of dirt and cornstalk stumps. She gazed up at the bright full moon, wishing some clouds would pass over and dim it. Her mind thought of nothing but Mark waking up and chasing her. The nearest farm lights seemed hopelessly far away. She didn't entertain any other thought than that they would help her if she could get there. Pushing forward into the biting cold, she tried to believe in herself, but she couldn't help the fear that her body might let her down.

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Stumbling from fatigue as he got down from his truck, Derrick paused to get his bearings before slamming the door behind him. Staring down at the snow as he walked, he tried to determine where there were branches to limit tripping over them. It was a dark, cold, quiet night. Though the moon was bright, its light barely shone in between the thick canopy of pine on either side of the lonely, dirt road. He almost couldn't believe he had made it all the way up here. He was about ready to fall asleep on his feet, but he knew if he wanted Maverick to be well rested in the morning that he needed to get him out and cross-tie him more loosely to a couple trees.

Reaching the back of the trailer, Derrick yanked the latch up to open the top doors and waited for the ramp to fall. Maverick grunted several times and impatiently stomped his foot. "Hold your horses," Derrick muttered, going around to the front of the trailer and hopping in to untie him. Maverick was more than ready to back out once Derrick unhooked him. In fact, Derrick had to give him the whole length of lead to keep from getting yanked out with him, he backed up so fast. "Someday you're gonna get used to that thing." Maverick shook his head and grunted before thrusting this nose to the ground and ravenously eating the grass to calm his nerves.

Derrick shook his head. He was waiting for the day when feed would serve to entice him *into* the trailer, rather than just being a nerve tonic for when he got out. Maybe nothing could do that. "Come on." He led him to the side of the trailer and tied him to one of the rings on the outside. Then he went back to get the ropes to set up a cross-tie. He hoped he could see well enough to do it.

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Nearly getting bounced out of bed, Jess woke up and put her hands out against the nightstand to stop herself. She turned and gave him a dirty look even though she knew he was asleep. She would think all his muttering and thrashing around would wake him up. No such luck. "Jim?" She reached out and tugged on the back of his shirt, but it didn't wake him. He only flopped over onto his back. She had to swipe her hand away quick before it got smashed. "Jim, wake up!" She got up and knelt next to him, trying to shake him the best she could, though his body felt as heavy as a rock, especially at this time of night. "Come on, Jim." She straddled him and tried to pin his arms down when.... "Ahhh!" That attempt sent her sailing through the air and down for a thud landing. "Ouch."

"Jess?"

"Now you wake up." Crossing her arms and her legs, she just sat there on the floor and waited for him to turn on the lamp, ready with her best dirty look.

He rolled on his side, flipped on the lamp, and looked down at her. "Are you alright?"

"I pre-fer being thrown from a horse. At least then, you have time to prepare." She got up, dusted herself off, and crawled over top of him back to her side of the bed.

Still waking up, he tried to recall what just happened. "I take it. I just a...."

"You did." She pulled the covers back up.

He glanced at her apologetically. "I'm sorry." He'd searched his mind for a more in depth apology, but that is all he could come up with. "Maybe we shouldn't sleep together any...."

"You're not going to get rid of me that easily!"

"Jess." He had to smile at her. At least, she wasn't afraid of him. "You know I don't want that."

"Good. Then let's not suggest it again." She flopped down, pulled the covers to her neck, and turned her back on him. "Maybe if you didn't think about it during the day, you wouldn't dream about it at night."

"I... What makes you... I don't think... I mean, why do..."

"You do." She didn't look at him.

There was silence for several moments. "Well, I can't help that."

"You could."

"How?"

"Every time you start to think about it, pray for help to stop. Force yourself to think about something else."

Moments passed as he stared off into the distance. "I haven't got it worked out, yet."

She flipped back over, propped herself up on her elbow, and looked at him. "Got what worked out?"

"Life."

"Hats off to you for trying. I don't think you'll make it, though. Life's a pretty complicated..."

"That's not what I meant."

"I'd sure like to know what you did mean. I mean I have no secrets from you. In fact, I found it kind of difficult to marry a man with no past, not because you don't have one or because it might not be up to our current standards, but because you won't trust me with it."

"It's not that." He looked away. "I just don't like reliving it."

"Ha!" Jess wanted to be more openly sympathetic, but it wasn't working. "You relive it every day!"

"Not every day." He gave her a look. "I was starting to get over it... before..."

"Well, if you're going to let fear rule your life, maybe you should go back to school and become an accountant."

He shot her a glare. "Why don't you go back to sleep."

She smiled at him. "I don't like to go to sleep ignorant."

Her smile was contagious. "What do you want to know?"

She paused a moment, her face growing a little more serious. "How did your mom die?"

Trying to conceal a grimace, he looked away. "How do you know she did?"

"You talk in your sleep. Did your father, too?"

"No. He's around somewhere.... I guess..." His voice trailed off.

"Well, when's the last time you saw him?" It was hard for her to believe that he could be alive, yet totally absent from his fine son's life... at least ever since she'd known him.

"He left when I was a kid, shortly after my mom died." He looked over at her. "My uncle raised me. I told you that."

"Yeah, you told me that. You're changing the subject. So, how did your mom die?"

Sighing, he roughly raked his hand through his hair and then slapped it back down against the bed. "You want to hear the whole story, I'll tell you the whole story." He began rattling it off without emotion. "I grew up in a nice, happy middleclass family until I was eight years old. My dad was an insurance salesman. My mom worked at a bank. My mom had chronic tonsillitis for years... nothing too serious. It would come, and it would go. Until one day when her new doctor suggested they be removed. Nothing to worry about." His voice broke. "After all people get their tonsils removed every day." He turned and

looked at her. "Right?" She slowly and tentatively nodded. "Well, the surgery was lethal for my mom. They made a mistake, gave her an overdose of a bad combination of drugs and then couldn't reverse it."

Jess cringed. "Sorry."

"She hemorrhaged to death. I was with her. Dad couldn't take it. He left the hospital and didn't come back until late that night after it was over. After that he just went off the deep end... drinking... drugs... lost his job... lost his house... dropped me off at my uncle's about a year later and took off. Never saw him again."

Jess looked at him. "Sorry." She had wanted him to tell her, but now she didn't know how to respond.

"You said that."

She gave him a look. "Well, what'd your uncle do, for a living I mean?"

Jim smiled at the memory. "He was a firefighter, still is out in Wyoming, I think. I should try to get a hold of him sometime again. When he moved so far away, we just grew apart, I guess. Then I met you." He gave her a tentative smile. "And we started our own family."

She returned the tentative smile. "And the past is in the past."

He broke the gaze and stared off into the distance. "Yeah. If only, it would stay there."

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Panting, Taylor stopped to catch her breath at the edge of the field and the edge of the grass that started the farmer's yard. Outside lights illuminated many different outbuildings and barns. Her eyes scanned the area for the house. Her eyes lightened with hope as they landed on a giant, boxy, white-washed, two-story house. In desperation, she headed in that direction as fast as her pregnant body would allow, imagining the moment when help would arrive and rescue her.

Eyes trained on the house, she stumbled past the barns with the fastest walk she could muster, across the gravel driveway, and up the steps to the porch. Gasping, she turned to look at headlights turning down the gravel lane and coming toward her. Fear knotted her stomach as she realized it could only be Mark. "Help." The call wasn't loud enough. "Oh, help!" She nearly tripped while turning and fell against the door, catching herself with her forearms. "HELP ME!" She pounded with both fists on the door. "HELP!" She kicked a metal watering can against the house for noise.

Mark was coming fast. Headlights now out. He stopped the car in front of the porch and ran toward her. Abandoning her effort, she turned toward the stairs and started to run. She was halfway down the stairs when Mark got in front of her, jumped over the railing, and blocked her way. "DON'T!" She let out a blood-curdling scream as he grabbed her arm. She tried to pull away, but he only tightened his grasp and yanked her harder toward the car. "NO! MARK!" She screeched.

He thrust her in the backseat with no regard for how she'd land. Falling forward, she broke her fall with her hands and worked to push herself up as the car started to take off. Tears rolling down her face, she contemplated throwing the door open and jumping out, but it took her too long to get her nerve up. By that time, he was going too fast. Besides she knew he would only catch her again... since no one would help her. Letting the tears fall, she allowed herself to cry freely.

\*\*\*\*\*

Waking up with a start and a sense of panic, Matt sat up from the reclining passenger's side front seat and rubbed the back of his sweaty neck. He looked around. All he saw was the normal surroundings: a sagging, old, wire fence, a couple trees, a muddy gully leading to a nearly dried-up creek bed. All he heard was the normal high-pitched ringing in his ears. No help there. He looked around again, wondering why he felt this way.

Getting out of the car, he closed his eyes as a rush of cold air refreshed his sweaty face. Pacing back and forth next to the car, he prayed, but he couldn't get a sense of peace only urgency. He felt like something was happening... something bad... something he couldn't control.

Falling to his knees in the grass, he prayed harder, specifically for Taylor's safety. He prayed that she wouldn't be killed... her or the baby. He prayed that he'd find her and that Mark and whoever he was working with would be brought to justice.

He prayed for a long time before he finally felt at peace. Still kneeling, he looked up at the dark yet starry sky for several

minutes, letting his mind drift to several different subjects. Finally, getting up, he went around to the driver's side instead of back to where he'd been sleeping. Four hours was enough. He felt a need to get to that gas station and start investigating come daybreak.

Putting the car in reverse, he backed out of the grass onto the road. Flipping on his headlights and taking off, he began again to pray, this time for success, that someone would know something, and that he would be able to track down their hideout.

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Sniffing back tears, Taylor held a hand to her bruised face as she limped into the kitchen. For a minute while Mark was battering her in rage, she thought for sure he was going to kill her. She limped to the cupboard and got out the oblong butter dish. It was the best thing she could find to freeze ice in. She couldn't sleep. Every time she moved, she hurt. Longing for something to relieve the pain, all she could come up with was ice and even that would take hours to freeze.

She grabbed the large plastic cup, too and then took them both over to the sink and fill them with water. Every few seconds she glanced over her shoulder, not daring to ponder what would happen if Mark woke up again. Grimacing, she carried the filled containers over to the freezer and nudged the door open with her bruised shoulder. The cold air made her shiver as she set the water inside. The heat in the house was nothing to brag about, and her escape attempt outside had chilled her to the bone. She didn't anticipate ever warming up.

Closing the freezer door, she turned and limped back toward the living room. She kept expecting contractions to start any minute. After all she'd been through, she totally expected to miscarry the baby. No such luck so far.

## Riding to Rescue

Standing next to Maverick, Derrick squinted to see where he had laid the saddle on the ground. The day was just beginning to break into dawn, but he figured by time he got Maverick saddled it should at least be light enough to see the trail. Bending down, he grabbed the saddle and flung it up on top the blanket he'd already placed on Maverick's back. Maverick bobbed his head and pulled back against the rope in protest, but Derrick had the cinch tied and tightened before the horse could make any meaningful objections.

Derrick rubbed his hands together and blew in them, trying to generate heat. Soon as he was done saddling, he intended to put his gloves on, but he was a little afraid they weren't going to be thick enough to provide the level of protection he desired. Bending again, he picked up his loaded saddlebags, flung them up behind the saddle, and tied them together. "Ready?" He asked Maverick, untying his lead rope and looping it over the saddle horn. Maverick nickered. Taking the reins in one hand and grabbing the saddle horn with the other, Derrick swung up into the saddle. "Then let's go." He turned Maverick and guided him up on the road and then back down to the trail, putting on his gloves at the same time. It was still pretty dark, but he could see well enough to make out the trail.

Holding the reins in one hand, he put the other in his coat pocket for warmth. Sitting back in the saddle, he let himself relax. They had a good three-hour ride ahead of them at least, and he was hoping for it to be rather uneventful.

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Pulling into a far parking place at the busy, small-town gas station, Matt rubbed his face vigorously and tried to regain his alertness before getting out of the car. He stretched and shut the door and then sent up another quick prayer as he walked toward the building. Swallowing hard, he gazed through the window on his way by at the two long lines waiting at the register. He pleaded with the Lord for one of them to know something.

He walked in tentatively but gained boldness as he walked toward them. "Excuse me!" He wondered how loud he was talking, but he could tell he got their attention. "I'm looking for my daughter!" He walked in between the two lines and held up the flyer. "I need to find her! She was taken by this man!" He pointed to the picture of Mark. "Please has anyone seen them?"

He handed a flyer to the first person in each line. They each studied the picture then shook their heads and handed it to the next one in line.

“Hey, let me see that.” A lady took the flyer from the man two in front of her. Matt took a step toward her in interest as she stared intently at the pictures.

“Have you seen them?” he asked hopefully, taking his device out.

“Yeah, I think....” She stopped when she saw the device.

Matt looked down at the device and then back up at her. “I’m sorry. I’m deaf. I can’t hear you. Look.” He turned the device toward her, he let her watch the words come up.

Noting his volume and tone, she believed him. “I see. Well,” She looked down at the picture again. “I work over at a sub shop in the next town. There’s this new guy that started coming a couple weeks ago, I guess. He comes every day or every other day. If he buys four subs, he’s generally back the next day. If he buys eight, then he’s not... till you know, the day after.”

“And you think it looks like him?” Matt’s voice held hope.

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“How does he pay?” Matt talked fast.

“Sorry?” She cocked her head.

“Do you know if he pays with a credit card or cash?”

“I’ve only ever seen him use cash. Why?”

Matt’s heartrate increased with anxious hope. *Let it be him.* “Can you tell me how to get there?” His eyes and voice were urgent.

“I can do better than that.” She stepped up to the counter to pay. “I’m heading to work right now.” She inserted her credit card into the chip reader. “You can follow me if you want to.”

“Yes, thank you!” He accepted his other flyer back from the last person in the other line, waited for her to get her receipt, and then walked out with her, holding the door open for her when they went through.

\*\*\*\*\*

Repositioning himself in the saddle, Derrick stared at the bright beams of sunlight radiating through the thinning trees. He could tell they were coming to a clearing, which he figured put him right about at the halfway point.

After his short night last night, he was doing everything he could to keep himself awake and upright in the saddle. His sense of urgency told him to keep going, but his weary body was going to force him to rest when he got to the clearing. Nodding off and falling forward, he caught himself on Maverick’s neck. Shaking his head and rolling his shoulders, he tried to awaken himself as he sat back up. He hoped he could make this work. Stiffening, he forced his eyes open wider. Everyone that knew him expected so much of him. Sometimes he just wanted to scream at someone that he wasn’t Superman. Other times, it knotted his stomach to hear someone acknowledge that he had short comings. Sometimes he felt like pushing everyone in his life away and running to the wilderness. Other times he felt so lonely he was sure he would do almost anything for someone who recognized he was alive. He hadn’t felt that way so much anymore ever since he started living in the apartment over Jim’s barn. Still, the feeling was there somewhere, embedded deep. Otherwise, he wasn’t exactly sure he would be up there. Sure, there was the duty to preserve life, duty to himself, duty to humanity, duty to the Lord, but there was also something more, something so strong that he wasn’t sure if he could go back and face his friends if he failed.

Shivering against the breeze as he entered the clearing, he zipped his coat the rest of the way up. He wasn’t sure if it was wise to get down and rest or not. The motion of riding had kept him warm, and he knew lying in the wet snow would certainly do more harm than good. Still, that didn’t mean there wasn’t a way.

“Ho.” He pulled back on the reins and brought Maverick to a stop near a newly fallen tree. He took Maverick’s lead rope and tied him to a sturdy branch. Then he began brushing and shaking off the snow from the logs and branches of a certain section. Then he broke off a few branches and added them to his section until he had a strong tangle of dry branches to support

his weight. After untying his blanket from behind the saddle, he laid down the tangle of branches for a short rest, but quickly fell asleep.

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Waking up coughing, Trent rolled onto his side. He felt no pain. He felt like he was floating. He wasn't sure if he was really coughing or just dreaming.

As the coughing subsided, slowly weight and feeling came back to his body. He looked around the room, reminding himself where he was. Catching a glimpse of something shiny, he looked down. His eyes widened at the bright red blood covering his hand and on the couch.

Fear tightened his chest as coppery blood taste presented in his mouth, and he felt liquid draining from his nose. His hand shook as he lifted it to his mouth and wiped the blood from his chin. Clenching his other hand against the couch cushion, he tried to fight the panic welling inside of him. *I need help, God! Please, send me help.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, Matt watched impatiently as car after car stopped, ran in, came out with a sub, and drove off. None of them were Mark. He'd been here for hours, and part of him felt like he was wasting his time. Still, he had gone in and asked the guy that was working with Lindsay if he recognized the picture, and he didn't say, "No." Although, he was about as sure as Lindsay was, and that wasn't very sure. However, this was the only tangible lead he had. So, he figured he had to run with it. If only he could run.

He repositioned himself in his seat and tried to relax. Waiting was not his strong suit. He needed something he could do. He'd already prayed so much last night and this morning, he felt like he was out of things to say. Glancing at Melinda's glove compartment, he decided maybe it was time for something else. Leaning to the side, he opened the compartment and took out the pocket Bible. Maybe it was time to listen.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lying quietly, Derrick stared up at the fluffy clouds slowly wafting across the blue sky. He'd been sleeping for a couple hours until Maverick whinnied in his ear and nudged him with his muzzle. Though his horse was getting impatient to go, Derrick was having a hard time convincing himself to get up. The day was warming into the mid-thirties, and just lying there under his blanket in the sunshine felt so good. He hadn't been derelict while he was lying there. He'd spent the last half an hour praying... praying for strength... praying for wisdom... praying for guidance in which way to go. Now, it was time to get up and do it.

Grabbing a branch, he pulled himself to his feet. Maverick gave him a look like it was about time. "I know." He rolled up his blanket and tied it back behind the saddlebags. After taking his gloves off, he unbuckled one of the saddlebags, grabbed a bag of jerky, took out two pieces, latched the saddlebags, untied Maverick, and swung up into the saddle. Maverick took off walking before Derrick had his far leg in the stirrup. Together, they headed the rest of the way across the clearing and to the trail.

\*\*\*\*\*

Staring up at the ceiling, hands clenched, Trent focused on his breathing. Every breath in and out felt like an effort. Congestion was filling his lungs and trying to push air in was becoming a struggle, not impossible but not easy either. The blood had stopped draining from his nose, and he hadn't coughed any up in quite a while. Still, he couldn't push back his fears, not with the fluid he felt filling his lungs.

He felt so helpless. There was absolutely nothing he could do but pray. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to drown. *God, don't let me die. Please, God, don't let me die.* He kept repeating it over and over. He felt his blood pressure go up. Realization calmed him as he felt his blood pulsating hard through his neck and pounding in his chest. He knew if he was bleeding to death, his pulse would be weak and rapid. The realization gave him some comfort. Maybe there was time. *Lord, make them find me! Please, Lord, don't let me die.*

\*\*\*\*\*

"Good morning, Mellissa!" Wade turned toward her and smiled as she came in the kitchen.

She glanced at him and pulled her bath robe tighter around her as she walked to the table and sat down. "You sure are in a good mood this morning." She frowned at the fact that he was already dressed and ready to go for the day while she was still a mess.

"I am in a good mode. I'm feeling good. It was a beautiful morning for a run... well, mostly walk. I'm ready for a good breakfast and to take my beautiful wife to church. Then after church, I get to go train for my new job." He opened the cupboard and took out a box of cereal. "Did I tell you how much he is paying me?" He took the cereal and milk over to the table.

"About five times." She picked up the cereal and began shaking it into her bowl. "That seems like an awful lot to pay an average, run-of-the-mill..." Her voice trailed off.

"He wants an assistant... someone he can depend on... someone he can train to help them create in the kitchen." His voice was chipper as he took the cereal from her.

"Then why in the world hire you?" She let her face looked shocked.

"That hurt, Mellissa. Not at all nice." He poured milk over his cereal.

"Why? You know it's true." She ate a spoonful.

"Anyone can change."

"We will see." She still appeared skeptical. "Of course, I guess I have no room to talk. I was up past one o'clock last night and still haven't found the right job for me. At least, you have one."

"A good one." He smiled and nodded his head.

She had to smile back. "What time do you go in?"

He swallowed before answering. "One o'clock. One to nine tonight."

She smiled again. "I'll miss you. Just don't do too much. Remember, you haven't even been out of the hospital for a full week yet."

"Yes ma'am." He shot her a sarcastic grin as he got up and took his bowl to the sink. She handed hers to him on his way.

"I guess I should finish getting ready. We should leave in a half an hour."

"Or fifteen minutes," he suggested. She smiled back at him. They had a mutual understanding that they would never reconcile her fashionably late mentality to his let's be early one.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ducking under some branches, Derrick guided Maverick around a fallen tree. He figured they must be getting close. He hoped so. Trying to navigate through the low and tangled branches off trail was about as annoying as trying to find a person in a smoke-filled room.

"Ho." Seeing piece of plastic on the ground, he dismounted and walked over to pick it up. Examining it, he quickly concluded that it had come from the chopper. Looking up, he walked slowly around the spot until he came to the place. Broken branches told the tale of where the chopper had once sat. Rope burns on the trees and a couple wrappers caught on twigs blowing in the wind were the only signs that remained of the excavation. Still, there was plenty of evidence for the recent event that convinced him this was the spot. *Now what?*

Meandering around, he looked down for any signs of someone crawling through the brush. Then he remembered that they had thought he might have gotten thrown out of the chopper before it hit. Walking in a circle around the spot, he looked up at the branches for a sign that someone had fallen through them. Not seeing one, he widened his circle. He kept circling again and again, wider and wider until finally....

Stopping so suddenly that Maverick nearly ran into him, he stared up into the broken branches all the way to the top of the tree. *This is where he fell.* He walked around, kicking through the snow, looking for some sort of clue. Kicking against the box, he knelt and brushed away the snow... *a heart monitor.* He kept searching until a little way away he found an empty IV bag, ripped open as if someone had used it as a water source. *So, he was here. Now what? Which way?* Kneeling, he prayed for

several minutes for wisdom which way to go. Looking up from prayer, he glanced several times from the place where he'd fallen through the trees to the spot where the ripped open IV was several yards away.

Standing up, he formed a line in his mind from the heart monitor to the IV bag, he determined the direction he figured Trent to be traveling... if indeed he was alive. Mounting Maverick, he rode slowly in that direction, praying as he rode.

Gazing at the bright rays of sunshine coming through the distant trees. He could tell there must be a clearing just beyond them. He felt drawn to those rays of sunlight as if they were a beacon guiding him.

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"Good, afternoon, Mr. Macavello." Wade's voice was chipper as he buttoned his chef coat and walked over to the man.

"Good afternoon, good afternoon. On what facts do you base your ignorant, premature assumption? I assure you Mr. Thundercloud! If this morning was even in the slightest an indicator, this will by no means even vaguely resemble a good afternoon!" Thrusting off his dirty chef coat, the man threw it into the laundry bin with a vengeance before stomping off to get a clean one.

Wade swallowed hard, determining to be perfect because today was definitely not the day to accidentally start a grease fire.

"So, young man," Mr. Macavello came back in, buttoning his fresh chef coat. "just why you expect this to be a good afternoon?"

"Well, a...." Wade confidently pulled himself to his full height. "because you hired me, sir, and I'm just the one you need to make the day better!" He flashed his best movie star grin.

Mr. Macavello looked less than impressed. "We'll see. In that case, I expect you to be smart, to be efficient, to work fast, to work hard, to stay out of the way, to do your best, to make a superb product." He talked fast.

Wade swallowed hard. *Talk about a tall order.* "Yes, Sir. You got it!" His light-hearted voice did not reflect his true emotions.

"My boy, I want you to understand that one bad meal can affect a business for a lifetime. One dissatisfied customer may not only never return, but also may tell their friends, who will tell their friends, who will tell their friends!" His voice progressively increased in volume and emotion.

Nervous fear tugged Wade's heart. *Maybe you should check anything I make before we let a customer try it.* "Yes sir, got it! No bad meals. No under par products. Of course not, sir. Yes sir! Top of the line all the way!"

Mr. Macavello still didn't look convinced. "Go see if you can boil a pot of potatoes."

"Yes sir! Right away." Wade spun around to the stove. Devoid of the courage to ask where the pans were, he decided just to look for them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Coming to the edge of the clearing, Derrick weaved Maverick through the last few remaining trees. Stopping him on the other side, he looked over his surroundings. The clearing wasn't the empty meadow he had expected. It was a lake with a handsome log house on the other side. He dared to wonder if somehow Trent had been able to make it there, but if so, why had the people who lived there not called for help? He determined to find out.

*Then again,* He walked Maverick toward the bank. *How could he have gotten across.* He watched the water lap under the thin ice against the edge. He doubted it had been cold enough lately to freeze the ice thick enough to walk on. He looked back up at the house. Even if Trent wasn't there, maybe the people that lived there could give him some sort of information.

Looking in both directions, he tried to determine which way was shorter around the lake. He couldn't see the end on either side. He decided to go left just because the lake seemed to narrow some in that direction. Turning Maverick, he walked him through the snow above the bank around the perimeter, hoping for the end soon.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Stupido, what do you think you are doing?”

Wade turned, lid in hand, as the chef charged over. *Stupido could only be him.* “What’s the matter?” He spared a glance at the chef who was yanking his pan of potatoes off the burner.

“From where do you get your sense, you blunderhead!”

“My father?” Wade’s voice was tentative.

Macavello shot him a look. “How many people do you think we serve here in a night, you featherbrain, five?”

Wade stared at the pan. “The pan’s too small.” He paused. “Well, that’s the kind of pan my wife uses. I mean, when she makes them.”

First, Macavello just stared at him like he had completely lost his mind. Then, he whacked him on the back of the head and ordered, “Use your brain, lad! That’s why the good Lord gave it to you. Come.” He led him to pantry and got out the biggest aluminum cooking kettle Wade had ever seen.”

“Wow.” Wade watched him lug the giant pot over to the stove.

Macavello swung it up on the burner. Giving Wade another look, he picked up one of the whole potatoes in Wade’s pot and tossed it to him. Wade caught it, though looking clueless. “Your wife boils her potatoes whole without peeling them?”

“Yeah.” His voice was tentative. “They don’t usually look like these though.” He held up the potato. “They’re smaller and more of a reddish color.” He paused. “Maybe she did cut them.”

Macavello put his hand to his forehead. Some days it just didn’t pay to get up in the morning. “Come.” Wade followed Macavello over to the walk-in cooler. “Get two of those big bags of potatoes,” he ordered holding open the door and grabbing the potato peeler from the drawer behind him. “Put them here on the counter.” Wade lugged the twenty-pound bags over and hefted them onto the counter. “Now, you peel each potato like so.” Macavello peeled one with the speed and accuracy of a professional. “Then you cut it as such.” He cubed it. “Rinse it, and put it in the pan.” He tossed it in. “Got it?”

“Oh, yes sir. No problem!”

“Good.” He looked a little unsure that he should leave, but he slowly started to go before stopping short and turning back. “Don’t overfill the pan.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Leave an inch at the top.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And fill it with water before you start to cook them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And don’t start them cooking until you have all the potatoes in the pot.”

“Yes, sir.”

Macavello slowly turned back to go just hoping he hadn’t forgotten anything.

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Derrick was relieved when he finally came to the end of the lake and started rounding it. He looked back to see if he could see the house. He couldn’t. He hadn’t timed it, but he felt like he’d been following the shoreline for forever. He hoped beyond hope that this wasn’t a dead end. He hoped there would be someone there to give him some insight. He had a sickening feeling it might just be a summer vacation home... but if Trent had made it that far, which he thought he had, he would have seen the home, too. Still, he hadn’t seen any signs since coming to the lake, and the vague signs he saw before could by all rights have been contributed by some animal. He clung to hope he’d get some clue from coming here, but if not, he would simply go back and start again tomorrow.

Getting hungry again, he turned and unlatched his saddlebags. Reaching in, he pulled out a sandwich. No need for refrigeration out here. Maverick knickered at him. "What? You had a big breakfast." Maverick stopped walking and started digging through the snow with one of his front hooves. "Uh uh." Derrick kept his head up so he couldn't reach down to eat the frosty grass and nudged him to get going. "You can eat when we get there."

\*\*\*\*\*

Matt repositioned himself impatiently as he glanced from mirror to mirror for the millionth time. This time his attention jerked to a car turning into the parking lot... a car that looked a lot like Mark. Holding his breath, he scrunched down farther in his seat even though he was parked way out of the way by the dumpster. He watched intently as the driver got out his car... Mark. It was him! Matt could hardly believe it. His heart rate quickened as he watched him walk to the building. He prayed in turbo speed that the people inside wouldn't accidentally give him away and that he would be able to follow Mark to the hideout.

He waited for several minutes which felt like hours until Mark finally reemerged from the building carrying a couple bags of subs. When he came out, he was glancing around some, but he didn't look all that suspicious.

Matt put his sweaty hand on the shifter as he watched Mark slowly drive out of the parking lot. He swallowed hard. He had never followed anyone before, and he wasn't sure he could do it without making Mark suspicious.

Backing up, Matt went the opposite way of Mark at first before looping around and coming up behind them as he waited for a break in traffic at the exit. Seeing Mark glance in the mirror, Matt quickly slammed down the visor and sat tall trying to keep his face hidden behind it.

Mark took off normally. Matt waited a few moments and then followed. He tried to stay as far behind him as possible. At one point, he thought he had lost him in traffic, but after speeding up, he was able to find him again.

They made it through town okay, but when they both turned onto a back, country road, Matt became aware that Mark was becoming suspicious... and for good reason. He resisted the urge to slow down when Mark did and let himself catch up to him. Now, he had to find a way to get out of here without arousing suspicion and without losing Mark. Seeing a side road coming, he turned on his blinkers and made the turn. He went slowly at first until Mark was out of sight then he stepped on it and tried to get around the country block without losing Mark. He only hoped Mark wouldn't notice it was the same car that was turning behind him again. 60... 70... 80mph. Gravel scattered and flew in all directions. His tires skidded through every curve as he barely slowed. A cloud of dust caused a thick haze from ditch to ditch behind him. His car hydroplaned in loose gravel a couple of times, sending him toward the ditch, but as soon as his tires hit the grass, they found traction, and spitting up dirt, got him back on the road.

He slowed to thirty to make the turn onto the road parallel to Mark, sweating every moment until he was back up to seventy. Coming to the top of the hill, he could see Mark on the other road way far ahead of him. Afraid he might lose him, he floored it to ninety. The car slid back and forth in the gravel from one side of the road the other, but he kept it on the road... barely.

Coming to the first intersection, he was afraid he was too far behind, that if he turned toward Mark's road he would lose him for sure. He concluded he needed to catch up first. So, being able to see forever in each direction because of the empty fields, he blew through the stop sign without slowing. At the top of each hill, he could see Mark on the parallel road and see he was catching up.

At the top of the last hill before the next intersection, Matt saw Mark's car begin to slow and turn on its blinkers. He stomped on the brakes as much as he could without sliding off into the ditch. Mark was turning onto the road right in front of him. Tires skidding, gravel flying, dust billowing, brakes locking, Matt got his car stopped right at the intersection as Mark was passing right in front of him. Their eyes locked.

Mark stomped the gas and took off. Matt turned and followed in hot pursuit. 30... 40... 50... 60... 70... 80mph. Heart pounding, and sweating, Matt gripped the steering wheel with white knuckle force, trying to keep the sliding car on the road. Seeing Mark's car weaving in front of him, Matt got the sinking feeling this was not going to end well. He slowed a little to give Mark space to do the same, but he didn't.

Matt's gut twisted as he watched his son skid his car into a turn way too fast and then spit up dirt as his tires went off

the road. Somehow watching his son do it scared him more than duplicating it himself.

Coming to the top of the hill, Matt gazed at the mile of road below. It twisted and turned better than any storybook maze. He only hoped they could both get through it before one of their cars flipped. He had a feeling that wasn't going to happen.

Knowing Matt would slow down for the stretch of twists and curves, Mark floored it, seeing his chance to lose him. If he could make it through the gauntlet fast, there was a road at the end lined with trees. His father would have no idea which way he turned. He slowed to sixty in the first type curve and then sped up 70... 80... 90mph.

Matt slowed down to forty in the first tight curve. He soon lost sight of Mark and then even his cloud of dust. His heart thudded with fear he was going to lose him. *Please, don't let me lose him. Please, don't let me have come all this way for nothing. Please, spare my daughter's life and the baby's.*

"Nooo." Matt slammed on the brakes as the smoking wreckage of a crumbled vehicle came into view. Pulling over and thrusting his shifter into Park, he jumped from his car ran down the ditch and into the clumpy, plowed-under cornfield.

"Mark!" Smoke began to seep from under the hood. The car lay on the passenger's side. Running toward it, Matt eyed the smoke nervously but did not break stride until he reached it. Grabbing the side, he hoisted himself to the top.

"Mark!" He crawled to the driver's side door and peered in the window. Mark lay unconscious, suspended in the air, still strapped into the driver's seat by his safety belt. Blood dripped from his forehead and stained the inflated airbag.

"Mark?" Matt ran his hand along the badly dented car door up to the handle. He yanked... nothing. Standing up on the back door to get better leverage, he yanked again... nothing. He kneeled again, this time in prayer. *God, what do I do? Help me!*

His eyes went to a small crack in the window at the same time as he caught a glimmer from a small flame dancing out from under the hood. After running his fingers along the small crack, he stood to his feet and began thrusting his heel at the crack. Again and again, he stomped until finally his heel went through. He stomped again and again around the edge of the hole, widening the opening. Glass rained down on Mark, and Matt prayed that he didn't wake up and open his eyes. Eyeing the flame periodically, Matt noted its increasing size. Once he had enough of the window stomped in, he was able to pull the rest of the glass out and toss it to the ground, though he cut himself in the process. His heart froze as he noticed multiple flames now jumping from under the hood.

Grabbing Mark with his bleeding hand, he yanked to see how wedged in he was. Taking a chance on the power to see, he pressed the button. To his surprise, it moved back, and his heart filled with gratitude. Wrapping one arm around his son, he held him up as he used his other hand to unbuckle him. Then arm straining, he grabbed him with both hands and yanked him through the window. The flames shot up higher and began to billow. Without pause for breath, Matt jumped down from the car and slid Mark down after him. He froze for a moment, staring at the mesmerizing flames, but quickly recovering his senses, he put his arms around Mark, clasped his hands together in front of his chest, and began running backwards, dragging Mark with him. He was barely in the clear when the car exploded, erupting into a gigantic fireball before his eyes.

Breathing hard, Matt collapsed to his knees beside Mark. Staring down into his son's unconscious face, his mind went back to the days when that face was happy and innocent. Back to the time when those eyes danced with anticipation and excitement before they had permanently cooled to callous and vindictive hatred. It was how he wished things to be again. Maybe the change had been partly his fault. Pulling his folded handkerchief from his pocket, he pressed it against his son's bleeding forehead.

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Pulling Maverick to a stop, Derrick stared at the cozy log house at the top of the hill. He wanted to hope, but he didn't dare. He expected this to be the next stop in an incredibly long and impossible journey. His highest hope was that they might spare him and Maverick a place of shelter for the night in their shed.

Dismounting Maverick, he took the lead rope from the saddle horn and began tying it to the railing of the wooden dock. Pulling away, Maverick approached the lake, pawing at the ice on the river's edge, crushing it with his strong hoof. Derrick waited for him to take a long drink. Then when he was through, he resumed tying him up.

Stretching, Derrick started up the hill. Staring tentatively at the house, he rehearsed his speech in his mind. Soon as the day started darkening to evening, he had been able to see there were lights on in the house which gave him both hope and

apprehension.

Lying on the couch, Trent stared up at the ceiling. The congestion in his lungs had started noticeably subsiding around noon. Now hours later, his breathing seemed nearly back to normal, but he didn't dare move for fear it would start up again.

Reaching the top of the hill, Derrick merged onto the stone walkway and headed for the door. Gritting his teeth, he reached up and knocked on the door.

Trent nearly jumped at the sound of knocking. He turned and looked at the door but had to wonder if he was hallucinating. Shaking his head, he returned his gaze to the ceiling. *Couldn't be.*

Knock. Knock. Knock. "Hello? Is anyone home?"

Trent looked back to the door, afraid he recognized the voice. He couldn't believe that out of all the things he could be hallucinating, he was actually hallucinating Derrick. "Hello?" Trent risked talking back. After all, there wasn't anyone around to see him delirious.

Derrick was taken back with surprise. *Trent? ... No.* "Can I talk to you a moment? It's very important! I'm looking for a friend of mine who may have survived a helicopter crash around here!"

*Friend? When did we become friends?* Trent was almost positive he wouldn't have hallucinated that phrase. "Derrick?"

"Trent?" His voice was tentative. "Is that you?"

"I think so. The door should be open!" He stared intently at the door as it slowly opened. His eyes widened and his heart leapt for joy as Derrick walked in. *Rescue.* "Derrick! How did you find me?"

"Trent!" Derrick ran over and sat on the table next to him. "Are you okay?"

Trent gave a *stupid question* type laugh. "No." He glanced away but then turned back. "How did you find me?"

Derrick smiled and looked up. "We have a mutual friend."

## Captured

Waking up in his father's arms, Mark stared up into Matt's face for several seconds as his vision cleared and he regained his senses. "What are you doing?" Mark quickly rolled away onto his knees resisting the urge to put his face in his hands as a sudden wave of dizziness washed over him.

Matt shrugged. "Are you okay?" He scooted a little closer and held out his device.

"I... Why...? What does it matter?" His voice was angry but shaky.

"I care."

"Don't give me that!" He snapped. "Besides, it's years too late... even if I did believe that!" His eyes were wild and fiery.

Matt's eyes were weary. "You're bleeding." He held out his handkerchief. Mark snatched it and held it against his forehead, but his face didn't soften, even as he glanced at Matt's bloody hand as he took it. "Your shoulder was out of place." Matt nodded toward Mark's limp left arm. "I put it back in for you."

"I suppose you *expect me* to thank you for that," Mark's voice held disgust.

"No, Mark." Matt's voice was as weary as his eyes. "Actually, all I want is my daughter and my grandchild back."

Holding a deep, penetrating stare into his father's weary eyes, Mark cursed him in a low, gravelly voice before turning and trying to stand up. His leg gave out from under him, and he fell. Pushing off the ground with his hands, he tried again. This time he made it, but he walked with a distinct limp as he made his way back to the charred remains of his car. Matt followed him. "I see *your car's* okay." Mark's voice was bitter as he glanced at Matt. Being out of range for his device to pick that up,

Matt just stared back. Rolling his eyes and snapping his fingers, Mark motioned for the device. Not trusting him, Matt didn't hand it to him but rather stepped closer and held it out. Mark grabbed for it, but Matt swiped it away. Mark's face was full of fury. "I said, 'I see your car doesn't have a scratch!'"

"Yeah." Matt eyed him suspiciously. "I'd be more than happy to give you a ride back to where you're keeping Taylor."

"I'm sure you would." His face was evil anticipation. It sent chills up Matt's spine and made him wonder if he was walking into a trap. Still, no one could know that he was coming... and since he had confiscated Mark's cell phone no one would.

Matt glanced at a car going by on the road, and his mind raced for a plan if they should stop. Thankfully, they didn't. He knew if the police got involved right now, Mark would just deny taking his sister and would find some way to switch the suspicion around to him. After all, there was no evidence that Mark had taken Taylor, just Matt's word, and he didn't even have Derrick to back him up anymore.

As they got to the car, they both headed for the driver side door. "You're not driving my car, Mark. Just tell me where to go."

"No. Way." Mark's voice was deep and his eyes were threatening as he turned towards Matt. "Give me the keys, old man, or I'll take them."

Matt put his device in his pocket after reading that and widened his stance. "You can try."

Anger reddened Mark's face as he charged toward him. Matt just waited calmly way until Mark got in range. Then, ducking Mark's swing, he grabbed Mark's bad arm and yanked it back out of joint. Mark yelled and fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Matt watched for a few moments before kneeling beside him, grabbing his arm, and whacking it back into joint. Mark yelled again. Matt got up, walked to the driver's side, got in, locked his door, and waited for Matt to come to the other side.

Soon as Mark got his pain under control, he got up, slowly walked over to the passenger side door, got in, and looked at Matt. Matt turned the key. "Where do I go?" He held out his device. Mark didn't answer. After staring for several moments, he came at Matt and grabbed the cell phone attached to his belt. Matt struggled with him to get it back, but Mark ripped it off, pulled away from Matt's grasp, and fell out the door. Matt lunged over the front seats and out the door after him, but Mark had already rolled under the car. Matt wasn't small enough to follow him or brave enough to move the car with his son under it. So, he only watched helplessly as Mark texted for backup.

After Mark was done, Matt used every argument in the book to get him to come out, but he wasn't moving. So, Matt gave him an ultimatum. "You've got two choices. Come out of there and come with me, or stay here and wait for the cops because I'm leaving. Taylor has got to be in a house somewhere on this road. Matt got up and went back to the driver's side door. As he got in, Mark rolled out from under the car and got in.

"You want me to tell you which way to go?" Mark asked as Matt started to drive.

Matt glanced over to the device to read it as he drove, but he didn't answer. He had no reason to believe Mark, so why listen to his directions. Matt looked intently at each house that he passed until he came to an old, rundown, white, paint-peeling, two-story farmhouse. He glanced at Mark as he slowed, and Mark's face told the story. This was it.

Driving down the lane, Matt scanned the property over and over again, looking for signs of anyone else there. He didn't see anyone, and he had a feeling it would take a while for Mark's reinforcements to get there. If he hurried, maybe he had a chance.

Mark tried unsuccessfully to look disinterested as Matt pulled up to the house and got out. Slowly, Matt walked up to the house halfway expecting to get a bullet through his head any minute. All the windows were barred. The front door was locked, and he didn't have any doubt that any other door was locked too. "Taylor?" He knocked on the door "Taylor!"

"Dad?!" Shocked, Taylor put her book down and went to the door. She unlocked her side and then jiggled it fiercely to try to tell him he had to unlock his. After a few moments, she heard the deadbolts unlock and saw the door start to open. Stepping out of the way, she waited until Matt came into view. "Dad?" She took a tentative step forward. "Dad!" She fell into his arms and gave him big hug. It may have been out of character for both of them, but she was just too happy to do anything

else. "How did you find me?" she asked pulling away.

Not understanding, Matt got his device and held it out. "Say it again." She looked a little confused, but she repeated. Matt read it quickly as he glanced at Mark getting out and walking toward them. "I'll tell you later. Right now, we have to get out of here." She nodded and followed him as he turned to go.

Taylor's eyes widened when she saw Mark coming toward them. He had a metal bar in his hands as he stopped in front of Matt and blocked their way. Taylor backed up. "You're not going anywhere," he warned.

Matt stepped to the side and tried to go around. Mark swung hard at his head with the metal bar. Matt ducked it just in time, feeling the wind from it rush past the top of his head. Without missing a beat, Matt kicked hard into the side of Mark's knee on his bad leg, forcing him to fall on his bad arm. Mark called out in pain and rolled on the ground, holding his arm. Matt resumed walking. Taylor hurried to catch up. They both got into the car, and Matt took off.

Skidding the tires, he accelerated down the lane, eyeing an SUV coming down the road in their direction. Having an uneasy feeling about that SUV, he tried to beat it. He didn't. The SUV turned down their lane, blocking them. "Oh, no!" Taylor screamed. "Who are they?" Matt didn't have time to read the words popping up on its device. He threw the shifter into reverse and skidded the tires as he accelerated backwards. There were ditches on both sides of the lane, so he had to back up all the way to the house. "Do we have a phone to call the police?!" She looked at his belt where he normally wore his phone. There wasn't one there.

He swung the car around and drove toward the barn. The SUV didn't follow but rather turned sideways to block the drive. He eyed Mark coming back out of the house with a gun. He glanced in the rearview mirror at three men getting out of the SUV all armed. "Get my gun out of the compartment under your seat!" Matt instructed. "Take out the box of shells and load it!"

Taylor leaned to the side and tried to maneuver her pregnant body so that she could get to the compartment under the seat. She managed to get the handgun and box of shells just as a gunshot rang out. She gasped and ducked as she loaded the magazine.

Matt gunned it toward the empty field. He didn't know if this little car could make it off-road or not, but he guessed they were going to have to try. Inches from the field, the car spun forty-five degrees and stopped as tire blew out from a bullet. Taylor screamed. "Come on." Matt got out on the driver side and hid behind the car, motioning for Taylor to follow him. She crawled over the seats and handed him his semi-automatic with the box of shells.

Hiding behind the hood, Matt returned fire at the three men that were approaching them. They all immediately scattered and took cover. Matt and the gunmen fired back and forth. Taylor counted the shots from her dad and had the correct number of relief bullets ready to load. Every time he paused to load, the three men came out and rushed closer. By the fourth time, they were close enough to rush him should he have to pause to load again. So, Matt didn't return fire. One of the gunmen stepped out, apparently concluding he was out of ammunition. Matt aimed carefully and fired but missed by inches as the man ducked back behind the barn.

They were at the standoff for several minutes until Mark snuck around the other side of the barn and came up behind them. "Get up!" he ordered gun trained on Matt. Just noticing him, Taylor nudged her father's arm as she turned around. He glanced at her and then back at.... His face fell when he saw Mark. *Lost that battle, hopefully not the war.*

"Now go to the car!" He motioned toward the SUV with his weapon. The other three joined them on the way. "You got directions to the other hideout?" He asked one of the gunmen as they got the SUV.

"Yeah. They are right here on my phone," he answered.

"You three get in the house and get it cleared of any evidence, it won't be long before someone calls the cops about this gun battle. "Hurry! You *\*expletives\**! Hurry!"

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"What in this universe do you think you are doing?" Macavello charged over.

Wade froze and glanced from the plate he was prepping to the chef and back to the plate. "You said to..."

"I said to *arrange* a plate of meatloaf, not to slop it together like blobs of paint oozing together on a lopsided easel. He

tipped the plate to make the food lump together even more. "Would you eat this?"

Wade stared at it, his face clueless. "Why not?"

Macavello let out an exaggerated sigh, muttered something in Italian, turned and headed for the trash, whacking Wade on the back of the head on his way past. Wade couldn't understand all he was saying, but he did make out the words, "blunderhead" and "inedible." Giving Wade a look, Macavello tilted the plate sideways and let the food slowly slide off into the trash. Then he tossed the plate into the soapy water, causing bubbles to fly as it plopped in.

"Now," He walked briskly over to get a clean dish. "Observe how one arranges a plate. Like so." He carefully removed two slices of meatloaf from the pan and transferred them to the plate without breaking off a crumb much less reverting the whole piece to crumbs like Wade had done. He decoratively placed the top slice kitty-corner on the bottom one. "Then potatoes." He piled them in a hearty yet well-structured pyramid, drizzled the gravy in an elegant design, and placed a tiny sprig of parsley on the top. "Green beans." He put them neatly in a separate bowl with a perfect square of butter on top. "The dinner roll... again, with just a little butter on top. And the salad." He placed a scoop of premade salad perfectly in the center of another separate plate without spilling a drop on the edge. "Now," Puffing his chest out, he spun the plate around, proudly. "that is how you prepare a feast. Now, take that to the tray to go out." He commanded, proudly.

Wade picked up the plate with both hands and carefully carried it over to the tray, drawing an analogy between dropping that plate and his entire future crashing to the ground right in front of him. Swallowing hard, he placed the plate down on the tray and just stared at it a moment.

"Now, you try!" Macavello called after him.

Wade swallowed hard as he turned but then forced himself more upbeat as he returned. "Yes, sir!" Wade rubbed his hands together enthusiastically as he reached for the ladle to the mashed potatoes.

"No, no, no!" Macavello whacked him on the back of the hand with wooden spoon.

"Ouch!" Wade jerked his hand back and scowled at the chef as he rubbed it. "Now, what?!"

"Use your head, boy! That's why God gave you one!" Macavello crossed his arms and waited. Wade just stared at all the different items blankly then looked questioningly at Mac. Mac rolled his eyes and pointed toward the meatloaf with his wooden spoon.

"Oh, yeah!" Wade grabbed for the utensil.

"Careful, boy, carefully!" He swung his spoon toward him again.

"O-kay. Okay." Holding his breath, he tried to keep his hands from shaking as he tentatively scooped out two pieces and started to transfer them toward the plate that he had sitting too far away. Halfway there, the pieces started to slide off the metal pancake turner. "No, no, no!" He tilted the pancake turner back and forth one way and then the other trying to keep the meatloaf from sliding off. Not succeeding, he gave it one last ditch effort and flung the meatloaf for the plate, saving one piece, landing it dead center on the dish, though it did break into three pieces. The other piece landed somewhere around the sink. Wade sent Mac a tentative yet apologetic forced grin.

Macavello just shook his head for several moments before leaning against the counter, putting his face in his hands, and started muttering to himself in Italian. Wade wished he knew the words for, "You're fired." Then at least he would know where he stood.

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"What's this place?" Mark asked as Big Dog turned the car down a short lane to an equally if not more run-down farmhouse.

"This is where the boss wants you to stay," the brawny driver growled, not looking at him.

"How long has this one been abandoned?" Mark's voice indicated how unimpressed he was with the accommodations.

"You'd better be grateful for what you've got, leech! The boss wouldn't be happy to hear you whining," Big Dog warned.

Taylor tried to squirm, or adjust, or move even just a little bit. She was so sandwiched in, she felt like she was

suffocating. This backseat wasn't made for four kids much less four adults, specifically two that could rival Goliath. She glanced at her dad beside her. Fear encompassed her own heart from his worried expression.

"Alright, everybody! Get out!" Big Dog bellowed as he put the SUV in park.

*Finally!* Taylor waited for Mark to open the child-proofed door from the outside but then sprung out as soon as she was released. Matt got out after her. The other two, Bruno and Max got out on the other side.

"Bruno, take him upstairs!" Big Dog ordered about Matt.

Bruno came over and reached for Matt's arm. Matt pulled away and kicked him hard in the side of the knee. Yelling in pain, Bruno fell. Taylor started to run, but Big Dog grabbed her from behind by both arms, preventing her from moving. As Bruno was getting up, Matt kicked him in the chin, pushing him backwards. Turning to run, he stopped short, nearly running into Taylor. Big Dog stared him down. "You know, it wouldn't take much to break her scrawny neck." Still holding her tight, he slid his hands up closer to her shoulders.

Swallowing hard, Matt backed up, turned, and headed for the house. Rubbing his jaw, Bruno got up and followed.

"What are you going to do to him?!" Taylor ran over to Mark as soon as Big Dog released her.

"Why do you still care about him?" Mark's voice held disgust as he locked the SUV and closed the door.

"Mark, tell me!" She demanded, grabbing his coat as he started to walk.

Mark turned back toward her, his face so set in anger that she let go of his coat. "No!" Her face filled with fear, and his relented a little. "We're not going to kill him." He grinned in his father's direction. "He's got a job to do for us first," he mumbled.

Taylor's eyes narrowed and her voice lowered. "He won't do anything for you... slimeballs." Her voice was quiet and nearly shaking on the last word.

"Oh, he'll do it, angel." He brought his hand up close to her neck. Her eyes widened, and she backed up. "Don't worry. He'll do it." He turned and headed for the house.

Fear shot up Taylor's spine. She got the message loud and clear. He would do it... if he loved her. For a brief moment of terror, she had to wonder. Did he love her or his principles more?

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Tired and achy from all the recent activities, Wade slowly got out of his van and headed for the house. He hoped Mellissa wasn't right about him overdoing it. The only thoughts he would entertain were those that told him, with a good night's rest, he would be good as knew.

Stopping dead in his tracks, Wade stared at the house. *It shouldn't be all dark already.* He took out his phone and looked at the clock. *Nine-fifteen. Mellissa hasn't gone to bed this early since... ever.* Taking out his pocket knife, he opened the blade as he walked toward the house.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled as he quietly unlocked the door and slowly pulled it open. Tightening his hand around the knife, he stepped in, squinting to see in the darkness as he closed the door behind him. "Wade, is that you?" Nearly jumping ten feet, Wade turned toward the voice coming from the kitchen. Seeing the light from her lantern, he rounded the corner. Wade's racing heart settled as realization hit that it was only Mellissa.

"Don't do that to me!" Wade reminded himself to resume breathing. "What are you doing sneaking around in the dark? Why are all the lights out?"

"Well, I'm sorry," She approached him and handed him a flashlight. "but you're going to have to get used to 'sneaking around in the dark' because they turned the electric off." Mellissa went over to the couch and got under her stack of blankets.

"They can't do that in the dead of winter!"

"Make sure you tell them that when you call." She pulled the blankets up around her neck.

“No. I mean, it’s illegal... I think.”

“It did get up past forty degrees today.”

“Still!”

“By all means, Wade, call them and give them a piece of your mind, anything to get us some heat in here.”

“Whatever happened to that payment plan?” He came over and got under the blankets with her.

“It came down to the phones or the electric.” She scooted closer to Wade. “I was under the same impression as you were, so I paid the phones.” Shivering, she curled up closer. “...last month.”

“Last month!” He pulled away and looked at her. “You mean we haven’t paid anything on it in two months?”

“That’s happened before... a couple of times.” She wrapped her arm around his. “I’ve always got us out of it in the past.” Her voice trailed off.

He gave her a look. “Just what are your plans this time? How much do we owe anyway?” He pulled his arm out of her grip and put it behind her.

“You mean, how much do we have to pay before they turn it back on?”

“Ye-es.” His voice was accusatory.

“Twelve hundred forty-eight dollars and fifty-four cents.” She blurted it quickly and braced for the reaction.

Wade just stared a moment before groaning loudly and falling to his side on the couch, not even caring it was his bad side.

“But you can talk them out of it!” she stated cheerfully. “I have every confidence in your power of persuasion!”

“Me!” That got him to sit up. “You’ve been handling it all this time. Go ahead and finish!”

“I think they’re a little tired of hearing from me,” she mumbled. “Besides you’re *so good* at... diction!”

Wade groaned again and shook his head. “I hate money!”

Arms crossed, she stared straight ahead. “Join the club.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Pacing back and forth in the dim light inside the four, cold, brick walls of the old upstairs bedroom, Matt felt like a caged animal. There was so much he wanted to be doing right now and instead he was trapped. He had a million plans for escape and none of them seemed the least bit feasible.

He looked around in disdain at his surroundings. He’d never even seen a house in this condition much less stayed in one. The creaky, old, wood boards creaked under his feet as he walked. Cobwebs tangled in front of antique paintings on the walls. The striped wallpaper was faded and peeling. Dusty, antique knick-knacks ‘decorated’ a cracking, cherry-wood dresser... knick-knacks from long gone days past that gave the room an eerie haunted house feeling. The bed with its paint-chipped, white metal frame and it’s well worn, hand quilted bedspread was an obvious haven for bugs and vermin. Mouse turds scattered across the ripped quilt, and fluff protruded from the side of the mattress. Eerie shadows danced around the room from the lone flickering lamp on the nightstand, whose meager light was not nearly strong enough to dispel the darkness. He turned full circle, taking account again of every wall, not one window. He felt encased in tons of heavy brick entrapment. The only thing that could keep him calm was prayer. If he stopped for too long, he started to panic.

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“Derrick?” Trent whispered loudly, trying to wake him. “Derrick?”

“What?” Derrick rolled onto his side in the comforter on the glossy, knotty-pine floor, where he slept a few feet from Trent on the couch. He’d volunteered to stay down here with Trent so that the doctor could sleep upstairs in the bedroom. After it was determined Trent was stable enough to remain here with certain medical treatments, the crew had left them with a

doctor, supplies, and two police for protection. Derrick couldn't argue that this seemed like a good location for a safe house, since the owners had volunteered it. However, the whole North Woods scenario put him in mind of past events that hadn't turned out to be safe at all.

"How'd you find out about the helicopter crash? Not from the police, did you? I mean, you're not family."

"Melinda called Matt. Matt told me." Derrick yawned.

"Melinda?" Trent's voice held question marks.

"Melinda, your sister, remember?"

"Yeah." Trent stared up at the ceiling. "I still have a hard time wrapping my mind around that one." He paused and glanced at Derrick. "The police told her?"

Derrick yawned again. "She didn't say."

Trent looked back at the ceiling. "I just can't get used to the idea of her being family."

"Why? You do look kind of alike?" Derrick rolled onto his stomach, pulling the comforter over himself.

"It's not that. I mean I knew I was adopted. They just said it was a single mom that couldn't take care of me. I guess, I just never thought she might get her life together and start a functional family with another kid. I mean, why was she willing to raise Melinda but not me?"

"Ask her." Derrick buried his face in his forearm, trying to block out the kitchen light.

"It's not that simple. I don't know if I want to meet her. I haven't even gotten a chance to ask Melinda about her yet."

"That's fair." Derrick rolled back onto his side and propped himself up on his forearm. "Where do your parents live, I mean, your adopted parents? I mean, I've never seen them at church. Are they Christians?"

"They are Christians. They live in Missouri, now. They're planning to come up for John's baptism. So, you'll probably see them then. Sometimes we go down for Christmas, but I think Teresa had them roped into coming up here this year."

"Oh," Derrick mumbled. "That's good." His voice trailed off.

There were a few minutes of silence as Trent engulfed himself in his own thoughts. "Derrick?" Not getting reply, Trent glanced down at him. "Derrick?" He stared at him a moment longer then looked back at the ceiling and mumbled. "Fine. Just go to sleep."

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Getting tired after pacing for a couple of hours, Matt sat down on the gritty, loose-paneled, wood floor, refusing to touch the mouse-eaten bed. Leaning against the wall, he stared at the shadows. He felt better when he was pacing, but he just didn't have any energy left.

It felt natural at this moment to notice every sound, to listen for any clue of what was going on around him, yet all he could hear was the same old high-pitched ringing. He felt so helpless and uniformed. He couldn't see what was going on. He couldn't smell anything other than the musty room. He couldn't even tell if the other men were still here or if he was all alone.

Getting up, he walked to the door. Grabbing the doorknob, he jiggled and yanked on it. He felt the door vibrate from the other side as if someone had banged on it, but he didn't stop. He could see the door giving a little as he yanked back with all his weight on the knob. Walking back, he ran forward and kicked the door. It shook and bowed with his weight. He walked back to do it again when the door opened and driver from earlier came in.

Matt backed up as the giant man walked toward him, threateningly. A few feet from him, the man stopped. His lips moved, but Matt couldn't decipher his words. Matt took his device out, trying to stop his hands from shaking as he held it out. "I said, 'Knock it off, or I will tie you to the bed frame.'" Matt swallowed hard and nodded. The man backed up and turned to go.

Matt went after him. "Is Taylor alright?"

The man turned back to him in anger, but his face softened some when it connected with Matt's worried expression.

“She’s just the same as she’s always been.” Matt read it and nodded, though he wasn’t quite sure if that was good or not. The man turned and walked out.

Matt meandered back to the middle of the floor, sat down, and then laid down, resting his hand on his stomach as hunger pains shot through his midsection. Up until this moment, he had refused to admit Derrick had been right with his constant nagging about remembering food. Now, he felt that he should have paid more attention to eating earlier because that little bag of nuts he’d been munching on all day as he waited for Mark to show up wasn’t going to last him long if they decided against feeding him. He guessed they’d been feeding Taylor because she’d looked alright, not that he could do anything about it anyway, though he might be more willing to go for broke if he knew they were in immediate danger. How was he supposed to know that? How was he supposed to know about anything going on right now? He turned his head and stared at the light seeping under the door. Part of him wanted to panic at the thought of starving to death in here, the other part of him didn’t care.

## Attacked

Three days past. Matt couldn’t decide if he’d been held captive for three days or four. It felt like an eternity, and the dark little room didn’t give away the secret of night or day very easily. In fact, he wasn’t quite sure if it was night or day right now. Lying on his side on the floor, he stared at the bricks in the wall. All he could do was think, think of ways to escape, replay the events of the day he’d been captured and think of all the things he could have done differently, pray for a way out. One of the times he’d been praying as he lay here, he’d seen a loose brick in the wall that looked as if it could be taken out with a little effort. Little effort... that was an understatement. He’d been scraping at the mortar for days, and it was just as stuck now as it had always been. He just felt too weak to keep doing it now. They gave him water but no food. He’d tried to escape once when they let him out to use the restroom, but all he got was a lump on the head for his trouble. He was getting discouraged.

Noticing movement out of the corner of his eye, he turned onto his other side and watched as the door slowly opened. He watched more in fear than in anticipation. There was absolutely no one in that house other than Taylor that he wanted to see. He watched as Mark walked in with another man, not one of the three, yet he looked vaguely familiar. Matt wasn’t sure why. Mark walked over with his daily gallon of water. His lips moved as he set it next to him. The other man closed the door and leaned back against the wall, watching. “Hungry?” Matt read Mark’s lips as he held up a wrapped sub. Matt looked away. “Get up!” Matt read his lips again out of the corner of his eye as Mark kicked him in the legs. He didn’t react, only rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

Frustrated, Mark knelt down and went through his pockets until he found his device. “I asked if you’re hungry!” He spoke into the device. “You can have this sandwich!” He held it in front of Matt’s face. “Do you want to know how?” He held the device in front for Matt and waited. Matt refused to look at it. “Read it!” Mark grabbed the front of his shirt and shook him, yelling and cursing at him. Matt didn’t respond.

The other man walked over and stood over top of them. “He’s a stubborn one, isn’t he? I guess it takes more dynamite than I first thought to get rid of some people.” Mark looked up at him, dropped the device on Matt’s stomach, and stood next to him. “Go get Taylor.” Mark nodded and headed for the door.

Reading, “Taylor,” on the man’s lips, Matt sat up, grabbed the device and read it. “Dynamite?” He looked at the man. “You’re the guy at the cave.” A slight smug smile crossed the man’s lips. “You’re Sandervauh.” The man gave one nod. “Then who’s in jail?”

“Ahh the love loss between fathers and sons.” Sandervauh glanced back toward the door. “I’m sure you can understand that.” He walked over to the old, wooden chair under the old, wooden desk, grabbed it, and set it down next to Matt. Sitting down, he stared firmly into Matt’s eyes. “Now, I’ll tell you what you’re going to do.” Matt’s eyes widened as they held the gaze of the evil man. “In five days, next Monday, they are going to have a hearing to see if there is enough evidence to bring Richard Sandervauh to trial. Much of the prosecution rests on the testimony of four men and two women who are to testify that he tried to kill them in a mine explosion after a kidnapping.” Matt nodded cautiously, hardly willing to tear his eyes from the man’s face in order to read the screen. “Now, some of the people there won’t realize the difference between my father and I as we look fairly similar in tactical gear. Trent will. Teresa might. Derrick and Jim might. We are working on illuminating those

witnesses. Your job is to convince whoever shows up that Richard Sandervauh is their man.”

“You want your father to take the fall for attempted murder?” Sandervauh nodded his head, slightly smiling. Matt’s eyes narrowed and his voice deepened. “Why-y?”

Sandervauh shifted, glancing away. “The old man’s grown into a nervous coward.... No longer fit to run an organization as... complex as ours.”

“So, it’s a power grab.”

Sandervauh braced with anger as he stood up and shoved the chair back to the desk so hard that it fell. “All you need to know is that if you fail, your daughter will die a slow and violent death.” His eyes narrowed with evil. “We’ll send you the link to watch on your phone.” He turned.

Matt swallowed hard. “Was this your plan all the time?” Sandervauh turned back. His eyes questioned. “To frame your father for Melinda’s death... our death?” His voice softened.

Sandervauh shrugged and looked away. “Plans change... evolve.” He looked back with a vengeance. “But *this* is the plan, now... and you had better not fail!” There was a knock at the door that Matt didn’t hear. “Bring her in!” Sandervauh instructed, stepping to the side.

Mark walked in with Taylor, holding tightly to her arm. “Dad!” Taylor tried to pull away, but Mark wouldn’t let her. “Are you okay?”

Matt stood to his feet. He was too far away for his device to pick up the words. “I’m fine. Are you?” She nodded tears coming to her eyes. Matt cringed at the bruises on her face. Sandervauh motioned for them to go, and Mark yanked her out of the room.

Sandervauh looked sharply at Matt. “That will be the last time you ever see her before her death if you don’t decide to cooperate.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” Matt stopped him. “What if I do?”

He glanced back but didn’t turn around. “If you succeed, plans will return to normal for her and the baby.” He walked out and shut the door.

Head spinning, Matt fell back against the brick wall and slid down to the floor. Sitting there, he stared at the door. His brain that was usually whirling with different thoughts and possibilities was blank. He had no idea what to do. His whole body felt numb... weak... helpless. He laid back down and stared up at the ceiling. *God, what do I do?* He could think of nothing more to pray.

The brick he’d been trying to pry loose for days fell out and landed on his stomach. Putting the brick down next to him, he peered out the tiny hole to the miles of farmland stretching forth outside. *Freedom... so close and yet so far.*

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“How’s he doing, Doc?” Derrick asked, coming from the kitchen eating a bowl of bananas and milk for breakfast.

The doctor looked from Trent to Derrick as he took the stethoscope from his ears and draped it around his neck. “He’s coming along, much better than yesterday.”

“You think he’ll be able to testify in a few days?”

The doctor shrugged as he stood up. “We’ll see.”

Derrick nodded, tipped his bowl, and drank the last bit of milk in the bottom. “I guess I’ll go check on Maverick and feed him.”

The doc smiled as he walked to his bag. “I must say that was a first for me, being transported to the scene of an accident with six bales of hay in tow.”

“And a mini supermarket,” Trent added.

"Yeah." He put his stethoscope in his bag. "I have gone with the supplies to check on people in protective custody before, but the horse is a new one."

"We got to keep your life interesting, Doc." Derrick went out the door. Tilting his head back, he let the warmish cool breeze refresh him. He hadn't been expecting such mild weather, but he'd take it. It'd been in the mid-forties yesterday and today was shaping up to be another beautiful day. The snow had melted, the lake had unfrozen, and Derrick was feeling more like he was on vacation than in protective custody. They didn't even care if he rode Maverick around the woods for exercise. It had been a pretty nice last couple of days for him.

Maverick's ears perked, and he knickered in anticipation as he watched Derrick heading toward the hay. Derrick pulled two slabs off the bale, took them over, tossed them in front of Maverick, and untied his rope so he could reach. Holding the rope in one hand, he leaned against Maverick's back with his other arm and watched him eat. He wished the stallion could have more freedom while they were up there, but at least they both got to enjoy a nice ride every morning and every evening.

After a few minutes, he looked up as his attention focused on the distant sound of a helicopter approaching. As far as he knew, no one on their side was supposed to be coming today. He slowly retied Maverick as possibilities arose in his mind. When his mind settled on the possibility of Sandervauh, he spun full-circle, bounded up the hill and ran into the house. "Hey! There's a chopper coming! It's flying low!" Trent and Doc turned to look at him, eyes filling with fear. Drake was already looking out the window, gun drawn. Henry came running from upstairs. "Everyone out the back! Hurry!"

Derrick put his arm around Trent and pulled him up. Trent groaned from the pain. Henry came on the other side of Trent and put his arm around him. Doc grabbed his bag and ran for the back door first. Then the three went as fast as they could after them. Gun drawn, Drake brought up the rear. "Hurry!"

Trent lost his footing going down the back steps, but Derrick and Henry held him up. Halfway to the trees in the back, Drake split from them and hid in the trees to the side of the house, readying his gun to train on the approaching chopper. The deafening, whirling sound was getting closer and closer. They were almost to the trees when....

KABOOM!

It took all Derrick's might to stand against the concussion. Henry let go of Trent and fell forward to his knees. Derrick kept running and got Trent to the trees just as the helicopter blades started to come in view, rising above the house just its frame began to crumble. Henry jumped up and ran faster than he ever had, desperate for the men inside the chopper not to see him as he drove for cover beside the others.

They all watched in shock as a giant cloud of smoke plumed from the crumbled rubble of the once lovely home. Then their attention simultaneously turned to the chopper circling above. The same question haunted everyone's mind. Had they been seen escaping?

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the chopper started to head away. Derrick and Doc relaxed a little. Trent reminded himself to start breathing again. Henry still stood staring toward the chopper gun drawn. "I wonder if Maverick's okay." Derrick broke the silence.

Henry shot him a dirty look as he holstered his gun. "I hope *Drake's* okay."

Derrick gave a subtle nod. "Yeah. Me too."

Derrick took a step forward and then stopped. "You hear that?"

They all listened. "No," Henry reported.

"They landed." Derrick's voice was soft as he listened.

"What are you talking about?" Henry's voice was demeaning.

"They landed somewhere. I bet at that clearing I ride by all the time."

"I think you're hearing things. Stay here and guard them while I go look for Drake." Henry started to go.

"Wait a minute." Derrick grabbed his arm. "Call for help first or give me the phone so I can."

Henry yanked his arm away. "I can't call for help until I find Drake!" He paused to study their faces. His voice softened.

"I was just getting done with my shower when this happened. I didn't have time to get my phone."

Derrick rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "That's just great! Because you had to play dictator and confiscate all our phones, we now have no way to contact help!"

"Drake has a phone!" Henry yelled back, staring into Derrick's eyes. He held the stare a few seconds and then turned to go.

Derrick grabbed his arm again and yanked him back. "You guard them! That's what you get paid for." Without waiting for response, Derrick headed off through the trees toward the woods across from the side of the house where he saw Drake had headed. Every so often he glanced toward the smoking heap of rubble, the nice little vacation home total strangers had been willing to let them use. His gut twisted with anger. He wanted every last one of those helicopter assassins busted, if for no other reason than their viscous disregard for other people's property.

Passing through the woods on the side of the property, he didn't see Drake anywhere, but he was able to pick up his trail and follow it. Coming toward the front of the property, he craned his neck to see the dock. He smiled as his eyes landed on one wet, distraught mustang half in the water and half out, pawing the ground and bobbing his head. *He's alright*. He was still tied to the dock rail so far, though one side of rail was snapped in half.

"Hey... Psst..."

Derrick turned toward the whisper. "Drake?" Drake stepped out from behind a tree, gun drawn but pointed up in the air. "You okay?" Derrick nodded toward his bleeding upper arm.

"Yeah." Drake lifted his arm some, trying to see the wound. "Got nicked by something, nail, piece of wood maybe. Whatever it was, it went on through."

"Got a handkerchief?"

"Yeah." Drake grimaced as he held the weight of his pistol with his bad arm and reached in his back pocket for his handkerchief. Derrick took the cloth from him, ripped his sleeve open further, and tied the handkerchief around the wound under his sleeve. "What about Henry, Doc, and Trent? Are they okay?" He stared into Derrick's face even though he wasn't looking at him.

"They're fine." He yanked the knot tight. "You got your cellphone?"

"Yeah." He pulled it out of his pocket, looked at the screen, and shook his head. "The only thing is it hasn't gotten reception since it's been up here."

Derrick rolled his eyes and leaned back against the tree. "But you felt that that was unimportant."

Drake shrugged and put the phone back in his pocket. "We had three phones that got reception."

"And now we have none," Derrick finished.

"We'll just have to do without them. Do you hear that sound?"

"It's the chopper."

"Yeah. That means they landed, and they'll be coming after us. I'm going to go see if I can stop them. I think you should go back and tell the others to start heading for the road."

"The others won't listen to me." Derrick pushed himself off the tree and started walking. "They'd never make it anyway."

"Where are you going?" Drake called after him with an authoritarian tone.

"Does it matter?"

"I want to know. The choppers that way." He pointed. "The others are back that way." He thumbed over his shoulder.

"The chopper isn't that way."

“Listen to it.”

“You go that way, you’ll run into a shale cliff and the chopper will be eighty feet above you.”

“Oh.” Drake glanced in that direction and then walked toward Derrick. “Well, if you’re going toward the chopper, I’ll just go with you.”

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Doc took off his coat and covered Trent, who was laying on the ground groaning. Henry who had been pacing back and forth came over and stood next to them. “We need to get out of here.” He kept looking all around as he talked.

“Where?” Still kneeling next to Trent, Doc looked up at him.

“Toward the road, I guess. Somewhere other than here. If they’re coming, we don’t need to be waiting for them. Even if help is coming, it will take them a while to get a helicopter and come all the way out here.”

Doc nodded as he stood. “What about Drake and Derrick?”

“Drake will figure we headed for the road. That other guy won’t have any trouble tracking us, not in this mud.” He looked down annoyedly at their footprints.

“Neither will the men from the chopper.”

“Hopefully, it won’t be so muddy further in. Here. Help me with him.” He reached down and put his arm around Trent, trying to pull him up. Doc put his coat back on and got on the other side. Between them both, they got him up. Trent gave every effort to walk with their assistance, and together, they headed for the road.

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“Shhh...” Derrick put his arm out to stop Drake.

“What?” Drake whispered, nearly running into his arm.

“They’re coming!” Derrick whispered, grabbing and pulling him behind a tree then ducking behind his own tree a few feet away.

The faint sound of voices increased as the gunmen approached. Drake’s eyes widened as the men came into view. They looked like seasoned soldiers... armed for war. His eyes went from their assault rifles to the grenades on their belt to their knives with a six-inch blade. He swallowed hard on the lump in his throat. So, much for trying to make war with them here. The only battle plan now was to retreat.

After the men were a ways past them, Derrick ducked back over to Drake. “We can’t fight them,” Drake whispered when he got there.

“No,” Derrick agreed.

“We just have to go back, find the others, and run for it.”

“That’s going to be hard to do with Trent.”

Drake nodded in agreement. “But it’s all we can do until we get somewhere where I’ve got reception.”

“Even then, it will take them a while to get here,” Derrick whispered back, looking over his shoulder.

“What?”

He looked back at Drake. “You go get the others out of here. I’m going to check the chopper.”

“Why?” Derrick stared back in that direction and didn’t answer. “They didn’t just leave it unguarded.”

“They might have.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed!” It was an emphatic whisper, but Derrick wasn’t listening. He just started walking in

that direction. Shaking his head, Drake headed back the other way.

Derrick jogged up the muddy hill, using rocks and roots for traction. Nearing the top and the clearing, he slowed. Walking quietly and glancing all around, the hair on the back of his neck stiffened as he sensed everything around him.

Coming to the edge of the trees, Derrick stood statue still, looking at everything, listening for anything. Taking a deep breath and reaching behind him to make sure he could get his handgun easily from its holster, he ventured out from the trees. His eyes scanned the chopper for a rental name but came up empty.

Hearing a rustle of leaves, Derrick immediately grabbed his revolver and dove under the chopper. He waited for several minutes, studying the area where the sound had come from before concluding that maybe it was just a deer. Still, he wasn't sure. He had an eerie feeling that he was being watched.

Crawling out from under the chopper, he went out on the opposite side from where he'd heard the rustle and quickly ducked into the front of the chopper, closing the door behind him. Glancing in the back tied his stomach in a knot. It looked like an arsenal back there. In the front, he eyed a clipboard and the radio. Unable to resist, he reached for the clipboard first just as a rush of air and a projectile whizzed past his face. He fell to the floor as the gunshot rang out. He reached for the radio just as a barrage of bullets whizzed above his hand into the radio and the instrument panel. His heart jumped into turbo-speed and his body started to shake. He was trapped.

Trapped or not, he had no intention of dying while hiding on the floor. Scooting back to the door on the opposite side to the gunfire, he opened it, slid out, and ran... with all his might... faster than he had even run before. Though he could hear himself breathing and see his legs pumping, he felt weightless. He hoped that was from the adrenaline and not his spirit leaving his body, assuming he'd been shot without noticing it. He didn't pause to check. He booked it for the trees faster and faster as bullets whizzed past all around him, spurting up the earth around his feet, tearing through the branches a few feet ahead of him.

Reaching the trees, he slowed a little, but the bullets didn't. Splintering bark barely missed his eyes as bullets embedded in the trees around him. The sound from the gunshots nearly split the atmosphere. He contemplated ducking behind a fallen oak and returning fire, but quickly abandoned the meritless idea. He was way too outgunned to stand and fight... especially with a phantom he couldn't see.

Weaving through trees and jumping over logs, Derrick tried to get out of range, but it wasn't working. The gunman had to be pursuing him. Soon, he would have a choice to make. He would be at the cliff any second. If he went over, maybe the gunman wouldn't follow him.... Maybe he wouldn't need to because he would already be dead at the bottom.

Reaching the cliff, his decision was clear. If he stayed here, he was dead for sure. *Might as well go for broke.* Just before he knelt down, a bullet ripped through his thigh. Reacting with only a grimace, he got down and swung over the side. Starting his climb down, he saw a flash of someone running through the woods toward him. He climbed faster, as fast as he could without falling. He depended on his upper body strength and he willed his bad leg to hold him as he transferred himself from rock to rock.

About halfway down, his attention went upward as he caught a glimpse of the gunman above him. He had visions of a second gunman below blowing him off the side of the cliff because if there was someone down there, they could do it very easily, but he didn't let the fear paralyze him. He kept climbing down. The gunman up above aimed his rifle downward and started firing, but he couldn't find a position that would aim the bullets toward the cliff. His best shot was a good four feet out.

Nearing the bottom, he jumped the last couple of feet. Pain and numbness shot through his bad leg, but it did hold him. Staying close to the cliff, he followed it until he was out of range, then he ran deeper into the woods.

When he felt safe, he stopped and looked down at his blood-streaked pant leg, determining maybe it was time he start carrying a handkerchief. Instead, he took off his belt and wrapped it tightly around the wound. At least the bullet had just grazed him. Both he and Drake had been lucky today... so far.

Soon as he had the bleeding controlled, he resumed walking, then feeling a renewed sense of urgency, kicked it up a notch to jogging. One thing about coming down the cliff, it put him far ahead of the others. He figured to be back at the demolished house a good ten minutes before the gunmen, even with his detour.

Coming to the edge of the woods near the front of the house, he slowed to a walk. His knee buckled, but he caught

himself on a tree. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head and tried to see if he could see Maverick. Still standing next to the broken dock, Maverick noticed him and knickered. Trying not to limp, Derrick made his way over to him. Glancing back and forth, he was alert to any movement, not feeling comfortable coming out into the open.

Still obviously rattled, Maverick repeatedly bobbed his head and then nudged Derrick's arm as he approached and began untying the rope. "Tell me about it," Derrick replied to Maverick's obvious disapproval to the current events.

After leading Maverick up the hill a ways toward the smoking rubble, Derrick stopped, tossed the lead rope over the stallion's brawny neck, and tied the other end to his halter, forming reins. Walking back to Maverick's shoulder, he grabbed a hunk of mane and jumped. Not able to get his bad leg to swing over, he went back to the ground. He felt like yelling from the pain that shot through his bad leg as he landed, but he didn't. Limping around to the other side, he choked up on Maverick's reins to keep him still.

Gripping the reins tight with one hand, he put that hand on Maverick's shoulder, the other on his back, and used his arms to push himself up rather than trying to jump off his bad leg. Soon as he was high enough, he swung his good leg over.

Soon as his leg was over, Maverick gave a slight jump against the rope and tried to trot. Derrick loosened the rope and let him go into a canter up the hill, taking a wide berth around the smoking rubble. Shying at the smoke, Maverick went into a gallop around the house. Derrick let him go, though hanging on and keeping balance with his bad leg was difficult.

Coming to the trees, Derrick pulled hard to get Maverick down to a walk. Maverick fought him at a trot all the way to the trees and then skidded to a stop when he reached them. Falling forward and catching himself on Maverick's neck, Derrick muttered something inaudible as he guided Maverick into the woods. Looking down at the tracks in the mud and around at the broken twigs, he weaved Maverick through the trees to follow their trail.

## Walking Wounded but Walking Out

About five minutes later, Derrick could see flashes of people moving in front of him, and a couple minutes later he caught up to them. Doc and Henry were on either side of Trent helping him walk. Doc turned to look at him, Henry didn't. "Don't you guys hide when you hear someone coming?" Derrick had to pull Maverick to a very slow walk to stay behind them.

"*Only you* would be approaching on a horse." Henry answered without looking at him. "Not even the gunmen are that... different."

Derrick felt like wagging his head in response, but no one was looking so he skipped it. He glanced from Doc with his mild-manner and sweaty neck and hair above his coat to Henry's earnest, agitated face and sweat-drenched shirt but kept silence for a few minutes as he followed. "You know you guys aren't making very good time." Doc smiled back at him but no one answered. "You wanna see if Maverick will give Trent a lift."

"No." Henry answered abruptly. "I want you to know if he will be okay with it."

Derrick thought a minute how to answer. He wasn't at all sure Maverick would go for another rider. No one else had ever tried. "I think you'd better give it a go or find a place to hide while I go for help because at this rate the gunmen will be on you in no time."

"How many?" Henry didn't look at him just kept going. Doc repositioned his arm supporting Trent's weight.

"I saw five coming toward the house, but there's at least one more somewhere."

"Where's Drake?" Henry's voice was bristly.

"I don't know." Derrick's voice was soft. "He followed the men toward the house. I went to check out the chopper."

"We heard gunshots." His voice was still gruff.

“They were after me not him. He did get nicked in the arm by debris from the house, but he looked alright.” There were a couple moments of silence.

“How’d you get here before them?” Doc turned his head to look back at him.

“Shortcut, but they will be here soon.” Derrick was getting a little impatient with this delay. They needed to be moving a lot faster than they were.

Henry finally stopped walking. The others followed. “Try it if you want, but you are responsible to see he doesn’t get killed on that animal.

Derrick nodded slowly and dismounted. He wasn’t sure he liked that responsibility. Walking around in front, he held hard onto Maverick’s halter and lead him close to a fallen tree. Henry and Doc helped Trent over to the tree and straining, managed to get him up on the log. Breathing hard and grimacing, Trent leaned one hand on Maverick’s back while the other two supported him. Maverick stepped away. Derrick brought him back and held his halter down even tighter. Trent leaned again a little harder. Maverick gave a buck and stepped away. Henry had to catch Trent to keep him from falling. “This isn’t going to work.” Henry’s voice held anger.

“Try it with me on him.” Derrick went back on the other side of Maverick and swung himself up.

Doc touched Derrick’s leg just noticing the blood-stained pant leg when he swung it over. “What happened to you?”

“It’s just a graze.” He scooted forward to make plenty of room for Trent and choked up on the lead rope to prevent Maverick from going forward. Then he reached down for Trent’s arm to help bring him up there. Maverick started to step his back end to the side, but Derrick slammed his heel in his flank immediately forcing him to step back. “Come on.” He helped pull Trent up behind him. Maverick gave a little buck but quickly stopped when Derrick told him, “Knock it off!”

Climbing down from the log, Doc let out a sigh of relief when he was satisfied that it was going to work. Then hanging his head, he followed behind. Derrick noted how tired they both looked. He wasn’t at all sure running was a good idea. Their only chance to stay in front of the gunmen was if they happened to have a really good head start, which would mean the gunmen having a really hard time picking up their trail... or maybe if they thought, even for a while, that they had been in the house when it exploded. If he had one illogical hope, that would be it.

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Drake peered out from behind his tree and watched the five men disperse around the smoldering house. One of the men kicked at some of the ashes. Another dared to step on a smoldering beam. “Do you see anything?” One of the men called to him.

“No!” He shook his head and climbed down from the beam.

“I know I saw one of them running into the woods!” Another called from the other end of the house.

“We know... but how many were with him?”

“What does it matter?” The fourth man kicked at a pile of blackened bricks, scattering them. “However many there are, we have them out-gunned.”

The first man scowled at him. “Two of them are cops. They could be laying an ambush for us.”

“If they both got out.” The second man argued. “That one guy could be laying around here wounded somewhere. He wasn’t very far when it exploded.”

“Let’s find out.” The first guy raised his gun and swept it in a half circle motion in front of him. “Fan out. Look for tracks. Hunt those expletive expletives down!” He kicked a charred beam, smashing through it and sending ashes flying.

Swallowing hard, Drake took off running through the trees. He stayed far enough away that they couldn’t hear him or see flashes of movement, yet close enough to remember the way to where Henry and the others had run. He didn’t know if they’d still be there or if they’d left, but he did know for sure he had to find them and fast!

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“Just how far is this road?” Doc asked breathlessly as he power-walked to catch up.

Derrick pulled Maverick to a stop to give Doc and Henry a short break. Henry was still sweating, but he didn't look near as exhausted as Doc. “I figure we've got about four miles left.” Doc swayed backwards, obviously feeling faint from that bit of news.

“Aren't there any houses closer?”

Derrick shook his head and answered softly. “They are all near the road.”

“Are there quite a few?” Henry asked in interest.

Derrick stared off toward a distant elk. “From what I noticed when I was riding. It seemed like they were spaced about a mile or so apart.”

“So, even getting to the road, we may not wind up near a house,” Henry's voice was agitated.

Derrick started to shake his head, but then forced a smile. “We'll be within a half mile of one.”

Henry frowned back.

“We'll make it.” Trent's voice was weak and strained.

“Four miles.” Doc swayed sideways and caught himself on a tree.

Derrick frowned. “If we're lucky.” He nudged Maverick forward. “If we're not, we'll never make it... there or anywhere else.”

Doc stepped away from the tree and followed, that statement giving him a new sense of determination. He didn't want to die. That he knew for sure.

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Under the cover of trees, Drake slowly snuck to the spot where he thought the others had been. After a few minutes, he found their tracks. He was a little alarmed at how obvious the imprints were in the mud. In the grass, maybe not so easy to find, but once they got here, there would be no doubt how many there were or which direction they were going.

Sneaking to the edge of the tree, he stepped behind a tree trunk and peered out at the three. They seemed to slowly be making their way in his general direction. Holding his breath, he crept back toward their trail and then took off running toward them. He wondered how far away they were. He hoped far far away.

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“Hold up a minute.” Exhausted, Doc fell against a tree. “I have to rest.”

Derrick turned Maverick toward Doc and stopped him. Wiping the sweat from his face, Henry stopped, too. “We're about halfway there,” Derrick encouraged.

Doc shook his head. “I need a break.” Leaning back against the tree, he slid to the ground and sat down. Sweat rolled down his face and neck, but the chilly breeze quickly cooled him.

Henry sat down on a log. “We'll rest for a few minutes, but we can't stay here long.”

Doc closed his eyes and leaned back against the tree. “I need more than a few minutes. Maybe I can find a place to hide here.” His voice was slow and breathless.

“We need to stick together,” Derrick protested, taking his weight off Maverick. Jumping down, he grimaced as he landed partially on his bad leg. Maverick craned his neck down and started eating grass, not seeming to notice that Trent was still on him.

“I'll take the risk.” Doc let his head hang and didn't open his eyes.

“It's all of us that'd be taking a risk.” Henry's voice was gruff. “If they catch you, they'll use you as a hostage to get to

us.”

Doc shook his head again. “If they catch me, you don’t owe me anything.”

“Maybe we can make it so you can get a ride.” Derrick stared at Maverick calmly eating with Trent on his back.

Doc looked at the horse and then looked at Derrick. “No. You shouldn’t be walking on that leg.”

“I can make it.” Derrick led Maverick over to the log where Henry was sitting and let him resume eating. “Come on. Try it.” Shrugging, Doc groaned as he got up and slowly walked over. Derrick stood on the opposite side of Maverick to keep him from stepping to the side, though he seemed more interested in eating than in his convictions about carrying strange riders anyway. “Go quick,” Derrick instructed, sending up a quick prayer that this would work.

Convinced he needed to spend more time in the gym when he got home, Doc grabbed a hunk of Maverick’s mane and swung his leg over. Trent backed up to avoid getting kicked. Once up, Doc let go of the mane and put both hands on Maverick’s shoulders, trying to steady himself. He wasn’t at all sure he wouldn’t fall off even just sitting here.

Maverick lifted his head and looked back, flicking his ears, not sure how he felt. Derrick grabbed onto his halter and held tight just in case, but Maverick just tugged to the ground and continued eating when Derrick let him.

“Do you want the reins?” Derrick held up the lead rope converted reins.

“No.” Doc’s voice was firm as he shook his head. “You lead him.”

“I can lead him with the halter.” Doc shook his head again. “Okay.” Derrick’s voice was soft as he choked up on the lead rope reins and pulled him forward. Maverick balked some and gave a little buck that nearly gave Doc a heart attack, but it wasn’t enough to throw either him or Trent off. Derrick shot Maverick a dirty look and held him down. After a moment, Maverick relented and calmly followed his boss. Trent held onto Doc to stabilize him, and Doc held tightly to Maverick’s mane, tight enough to annoy Maverick if he hadn’t already determined to follow Derrick submissively.

After watching them go a ways successfully, Henry got up and followed. He tried to scuff out some of the shoe and hoof print in the little clearing before running to catch up

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Hiding in the brush, Drake was on pins and needles, hoping the others were making good time because the gunmen sure were. He had been planning to run and join them, warning them that the gunmen were coming, but after going a ways and not finding them, he had heard the gunmen approaching and decided to drop back behind them. He guessed the only thing he could do was flank them if they caught up with the others.

He wanted to believe that everything would be alright, but every time he saw a drop of blood on the ground next to the hoof prints his heart ached at the thought of how unevenly matched they were. He assumed the blood spots next to the hoof prints meant Derrick had survived the barrage of gunfire he had heard earlier but was wounded. He was wounded. Trent was wounded. Doc was no gunfighter. Hopefully Henry was able-bodied, but he didn’t even know that for sure. He checked his phone every few minutes for reception, but all he ever got was the same old, “no service,” message.

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Derrick glanced up at Doc, stiff as a board, holding on to Maverick for dear life and tried not to smile. “I think we’re almost to the road.”

“I don’t know what good that’s going to do, without a phone,” Henry grumbled, leaning one hand against Maverick’s rump to stead himself as they both stepped over a log.

Derrick glanced back at him. “They’ll be houses not too far away.”

“Well, that’s great. Bring those gunmen up to another person’s doorstep!”

Derrick gritted his teeth. “I’ll go to the house. You stay back and hold the gunmen back... or visa versa.”

“I’ll go to house. I have the badge. Though I find myself wondering about you being able to hold off five gunmen alone.”

"We haven't seen any sign of the gunmen, yet," Derrick argued, hearing the edge on his own voice. "If you hadn't taken our phones, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"It's probably your phone call in the beginning that alerted the gunmen of our location."

"That's impossible! It's a disposable phone! You knew that." Derrick tried not to yell.

"I should have checked on it better," he mumbled. "Did you call anyone else on it?" His voice was accusatory.

"No!" He paused to think a moment. "Well, just Melinda." His voice softened.

"Melinda?" His voice was loud. "The ex-girlfriend of Carlos..."

"That was a long time ago. Are you trying to say she's still..."

"No-o... I'm saying he's probably hacked into her phone."

Derrick looked away. "Carlos isn't that technical. Besides if he wanted me dead, why didn't he kill me when he had a chance?" His voice was still soft and tentative. "He's had plenty of chance."

"The man's a puppet! What he wants doesn't count! He's sold his soul to the organization."

Derrick didn't answer for several moments. "There's the road." He stopped Maverick instead of turning him and leading him through the thicker brush to the road.

"Why'd you stop?" Henry caught up to them and stopped.

"Did you hear something a few moments ago?"

"No."

"Listen." Derrick stepped closer to the stream flowing beside them, then so did Henry.

"It's them." Henry confirmed seriously. He took off the safety from his sidearm.

Derrick stepped back to make sure his voice didn't carry on the water. "They aren't that close." His voice was nearly a whisper. "We're not going to have time to make it to a house, though." He started looking all around and over his shoulder as he talked. "I think you should take Doc and Trent and hunker down on the other side of the road. I'll take Maverick and continue on down the trail in the other direction." It was part question part statement.

Henry nodded slowly. Derrick nodded back, led Maverick over to a log, and helped Doc down. Henry helped Trent and then supported him to walk. "Wait." Derrick stopped them. "Crawl under the brush." It was a loud whisper. Henry just looked back at him like he had lost his mind. "Seriously. I don't want them seeing broken branches where you left the trail."

Henry rolled his eyes and pulled Doc and Trent down to their knees. Derrick shrugged and led Maverick onward, jumping around and making many steps so the trail looked like more than one person. He didn't feel comfortable telling Henry what to do. After all the man was a very experienced police protection agent... but a mountain man, he was not. Maybe it was just his own thought pattern. His mind was always spinning, looking at every situation from every angle and quickly obtaining a back door, so he always had a way out, even if the others didn't. He hoped that wasn't his motive here. After all, as long as he was moving and staying ahead of the gunmen, he could always outrun them on Maverick as long as he didn't let them get too close. He'd forgotten how hard it was to suppress that old urge to run and let the others fend for themselves. Even now, he felt like grabbing a hunk of mane, swinging up on Maverick, and booking it out of there. Instead he forced himself to walk... on his burning leg... and construct a false trail for the enemy.

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Stumbling a little, Drake caught himself on a tree. Holding his breath, he hoped the gunmen in front of him hadn't heard. They didn't seem to. Rubbing his face, he continued on. He was getting tired. He wondered if the gunmen were. He wondered if it ever crossed their minds to give up, go back to the chopper, throw in the towel, live and let live. ... He doubted it.

Getting a glimpse of the road, his heart rate quickened, and he swallowed hard. That meant they must be almost caught up to the others. If there was one thing he didn't want to do, it was catch up. He hoped beyond hope that they had gotten there

long enough ago to get to a house and call for help, but he doubted it. He wished so hard he had given Derrick his cellphone when he'd had that chance. If they were walking down the road when the gunmen followed their trail to the road, they'd be able to be seen for a mile or more probably, unless the road happened to be very curvy. Holding his breath, he stared toward the spot where he figured they had probably gotten out and waited for the inevitable. ... The inevitable that didn't happen. The gunmen walked right on by. Drake resumed breathing. Was he wrong? *If they could see the road, why didn't they go toward it?* He followed, though now he wondered where in the world they were going.

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Hunkered down behind a giant fallen tree, Henry kept his sidearm ready. Barrel resting on top of the log, he kept it aimed toward the road, following the figures as they passed by their exit point deeper into the woods. Relief swept over him as he felt like the false trail was going to work.

Now he had a decision to make. Either he should stay to guard Trent and Doc, or he take this opportunity to run to the nearest house, which wasn't in view either way, and call for help. He didn't know what to do. He glanced at Trent and Doc, who were both leaning back against the log, well hidden by the brush growing in front of the fallen tree... yet they both looked so helpless. Doc looked like he was sleeping or close to it. Trent, breathing hard, stared off into the distance with a glassy look in his eyes.

Henry felt torn. They all needed help. He didn't think he could hold back five gunmen should they double back. Though if he left and something did happen to Trent or Doc, he knew he would never be able to live with himself.

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Not able to shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right, Drake stopped at the spot where he figured the others should have gone to the road and looked around. He didn't see any broken branches that indicated they turned and went toward the road, yet the trail ahead looked a little different somehow. He couldn't put his finger on why.

Absentmindedly checking his phone again as was his routine, he was surprised to see it had service, barely but it did. He decided to go to the road to get better reception, to get farther out of ear-shot of the gunmen, and to double check that the others weren't there. Pushing the branches back, he walked through them toward the road.

Walking down the ditch and back up on the other side to the road, he was a little disappointed not to see any sign of the others. Getting out his phone, he dialed and let the relief sweep over him when his boss answered.

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"What are we going to do, now?" Doc asked, looking at Henry who was sitting next to him now, leaning back against the log.

"I don't know." Concerned, Henry stared off into the distance.

"Why don't I go?" Henry just looked at him. "You stay here and guard Trent, and I'll try to make it to a house."

Henry shook his head. "I can't let you do that alone."

Doc sighed. "We're running out of options."

Henry nodded in agreement to that. "What if you get all the way to the house, and there is no one home? Are you going to have the energy to walk to the next one?"

"How far is the next one?"

Henry shrugged. "Nobody knows."

"Well, we have to do something."

"Yeah." He turned back around to observe the road again. "Hey." He slapped Doc on the arm. "Look." Doc turned around and looked. "That looks like Drake doesn't it?" Part of him wondered if he was only imagining it.

“Sure does.”

“Stay here with Trent.” Henry got up and carefully made his way to the road, looking around and observing every sound, trying to determine if this was a trap. “Drake?” Henry asked stepping onto the road.

Finishing his call, Drake slapped his hand against his sidearm and spun around preparing to draw. “Henry?”

“Yeah.” They walked toward each other.

“Are you alright?” Drake asked as they embraced in a man hug.

“Yeah. It’s good to see you, man.” They released their embrace. “What happened to you?”

“I’ve been following the gunmen. Did you send Derrick to make a false trail?” He looked back in that direction. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s okay. Got grazed in the leg. Heard you took some shrapnel in your arm.” He took his arm and pulled it closer to see it.

“It’s okay.” He pulled it away. “Thought Derrick was a goner with all that shooting till I started seeing hoofprints. Didn’t figure you guys would be leading the horse.”

“No,” Henry agreed.

“Are Doc and Trent okay?”

“They’re fine. Got ‘em hidden.” He pointed in their general direction.

“How long ago’d you split up?” He looked toward the woods again.

“Not long. Maybe five minutes.” He joined Drake’s gaze toward the woods.

Drake’s face changed to concern, but he kept staring toward the woods. “If he’s walking slow enough to make two sets of footprints. They’ve probably almost caught up to him by now.” He paused. “He’ll need help if they catch him.” He glanced back at Henry and held out his phone. “Here. I’ve already called for help. It’s gonna take them a little bit to requisition a chopper. He said not to expect them for close to an hour.”

Henry let out an exaggerated sigh. “We could all be dead by then.”

“Yeah,” Drake agreed, returning his gaze to the woods. “He’d said, he’d try to send some police in cars from town, but they’re still forty-five minutes away.” He paused but didn’t look at Henry. He took a deep breath and took a step toward the woods. “I’ll go see what I can do.”

“Be careful.”

“Always.” He looked back at him and nodded in the direction Henry had come. “Keep Doc and Trent safe... and hidden.” Henry nodded and then gritting his teeth, watched him go.

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“There’s something pretty \*expletive\* strange going on here.” The second gunman noted, staring down at the tracks on the ground.

The leader cursed. “What are you talking about?”

“Look at the tracks.” The second gunman stopped walking. “And look at the pattern of the blood.” He pointed around to it. “The trail’s a lot more obvious now than it used to be.”

“What are you getting at?” The leader growled, stopping momentarily to look where the other gunman was pointing and then resuming walking.

“I think they split up.” The leader and the rest of the group stopped to listen. The second gunman pointed to the hoofprints. The horse isn’t sinking as far into the mud. “I think whoever was riding the horse, got off. Maybe the guy leading the horse is making footprints for two. Maybe we’re just following one guy.” He looked from the tracks up to the leader. “Why

would they be going back into the woods away from the road?"

They stared at each other a moment. Then the leader turned toward the sound of a muffled nicker. "Whoever's out there, we're getting close. You swing to the right. Arch go around to the left. We'll go up the middle."

Derrick ducked further behind the brush, watching as the men, circled around toward Maverick. He sent up a prayer that they wouldn't kill his horse. He'd had no other choice but to tie him up and make a break for it when he heard the gunmen coming close. He didn't even have the time to wait and see what happened. They would be doubling back soon, and he had to get there first and warn the others. His heart raced with the possibility that this could turn into a gun battle.

Soon as the men were out of earshot, Derrick snuck behind the brush and then ran the best he could back toward the road.

"Derrick?"

Derrick stopped in his tracks and turned toward the whisper. *Drake*. He walked toward him. "Did you find the...."

BANG! BANG! Gunshots rang out. Derrick dove for cover behind some brush and a tree. Drake hit the dirt and crawled over behind a log. Derrick dropped back and began making a wide berth toward the gunmen. The gunmen advanced toward Drake as Drake returned fire.

Lying on his stomach in the long grass behind a tangle of downed branches, Derrick held his breath and remained completely silent as the gunmen ran past him and took up positions across from Drake. He watched as Drake rose up from behind the log and fired at the running men. He got one in the arm before ducking back down as they returned a barrage of bullets.

Soon as he was sure everyone's attention was directed toward Drake, Derrick got up and dashed over to a nearby tree. He liked his position back here. He was behind the gunmen and could see each one. They were all spread out. One was on the far right. One was on the far left. Two were in the middle about eight feet apart. All were well concealed behind brush or a log or a rock. The gunman Drake shot in the arm had not advanced but lay where he fell. Derrick's eyes widened as he watched the man use his good arm to pull a grenade off his belt. Derrick took his gun from behind his back and quickly tried to find a position where he could get a good shot as the man used his fingers to loosen the pin. He found a good spot, but before he could get his gun leveled, Drake, noticing the brief silence, emerged from behind the log, saw the grenade man and fired just as the man began to launch the grenade in the air. The bullet exploded the grenade inches above the gunman. One down.

The ground shook. There was an eerie silence on both sides for a few minutes. Derrick glanced back toward the road, wondering if Henry might hear the shots and come help them. If he came, he would be behind them, too. Derrick wondered if that would be enough to make the difference. He didn't dare hold out too much hope.

Seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, Derrick turned toward it and his heart rate sped up. One of the gunmen was making a move toward the road. He aimed his gun but didn't want to fire. In the silence, a lone gunshot from behind them would immediately give away his position, and he wasn't totally sure he was out of each of their lines of fire. Seeing a small rock at his feet, Derrick picked it up and chucked it over the log at Drake.

Drake's reaction was immediate as he partially emerged, scanned the area, and fired three rounds at the gunman heading toward the road. Hitting his target twice, he ducked back down as the other gunmen returned a barrage of bullets into the tree, splintering wood and bark all around him. One thing Derrick had to say for Drake. The guy was fast. Two down. Three to go.

*Now or Never*. Derrick returned his gun to its holster behind him and silently advanced forward toward the shooting gunman to the far right and behind the two in the middle. Staying low, he ran from tree to tree until he was right behind him. He waited a few seconds while the man changed his clip and resumed firing. Then he dove and tackled him, grasping the man's rifle with both hands as he fell. Landing on him, knocked the air out of the man's lungs, enabling Derrick to grab the rifle. In one motion, he yanked it from the man's hands and chucked it back behind one of his trees. He allowed the man to turn and look at him for a brief moment before pulling his fist back and delivering a massive bone-crushing blow, instantly knocking his lights out. He took the man's ammo belt and sidearm, untied and yanked out his shoelace, and then bound the man's hands. Hearing less shooting in front of him, Derrick looked up to see one of the other gunmen stopping to change his clip. Afraid he'd glance back at him, Derrick drove behind the tree where he had tossed the rifle. Three down.

Reaching down for the rifle, Derrick froze as he watched one of the two remaining gunmen pull the pin and throw a grenade high like a flyball right toward Drake. Drake was oblivious. Unable to remove his eyes from the grenade, Derrick reached behind him, pulled his revolver, and fired two without aiming. One of the bullets hit target and took down the grenade just as it was reaching its arch. At the same moment, the two gunmen spun around, weapons drawn, aimed at Derrick. Derrick swallowed and glanced toward the tree, too far to dive for cover. Just as the one started to squeeze the trigger, a shot ran out, his arm went limp, and he dropped the rifle as hot lead ripped through the muscle in his shoulder. The other gunman dropped his rifle and put up his hands. Derrick glanced from the gunmen to Drake as he walked toward them, weapon drawn.

“Thanks.” It was all Derrick could think of to say as Drake approached.

“Cuff ‘em.” Drake tossed two sets of handcuffs to Derrick. Derrick snapped the first pair on the first gunman then looked up as the gunman he had tied earlier got up and started running toward the road. “Hold it!” Drake yelled. “Stop now, or I’ll shoot!” The man kept running. Drake fired but couldn’t get a clear shot through the trees. The other gunman grabbed for Drake’s gun, but Derrick grabbed the gunman’s arm and wrestled the handcuffs on him before taking off running toward the road after the other attacker.

Remembering disarming him, Derrick didn’t go for his gun and wasn’t concerned with staying concealed as he ran. They ran neck and neck down and back up the ditch. Derrick tackled him when they reached center road. They rolled a couple times. Derrick ended up on top and punched the gunman in the face. This time it didn’t faze him. Bringing his knees up, he forced Derrick off of him, kicked him in the side of the face as he stood up, reached down and grabbed him by the front of the shirt. Lifting him to his feet, he punched him hard to further stun him and threw him toward the ditch.

Derrick fell hard onto the gravel road and then let himself roll into the ditch. The gunman reached down to his boot and pulled out a derringer. Then, seeing movement out of the corner of his eye toward his right and behind him, the gunman spun around and fired at the man coming out of the trees.

Henry fell, moments after a bullet ripped through his chest. Hearing the shot, Derrick rolled to his knees, pulled out his gun, assessed the murder, and fired, dropping the gunman. Getting up, Derrick ran toward Henry, rolled up his sleeves, and prepared for CPR. Falling to his knees and sliding through the gravel next to Henry, he checked his neck for a pulse. Feeling none, he crossed his hands on Henry’s chest and began pumping in a rhythmic motion. “Drake! ... Henry’s shot!”

Doc came running out of the woods and over to them. Kneeling next to Henry, he put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding. Derrick paused, checked for a pulse, and then continued CPR. Drake came out of the woods from the other side, going as fast as he could with the other two gunmen walking in front of him.

About five minutes past before Derrick got a pulse when he checked. “I got a heartbeat.”

Doc kept pressure on the wound with one hand and double-checked Derrick with the other. “Yeah. We got him back. Come on, Henry. Stay with us.”

Hearing a chopper whirring toward them, they all looked up. Derrick held his breath as he waited for it to come into view, hoping it was help and not a chopper from the enemy. Relief swept over him as the blue chopper with the red cross on the side came into view.

“The cavalry has arrived,” Drake muttered, staring toward the bird.

They all watched as it came down to land. “That’s about a mile away,” Derrick observed, standing to his feet. Doc kept one hand on Henry’s pulse and the other on the wound the whole time as he watched the chopper and observed the faces of the others. Derrick began slowly backing up, almost nervously. “I’m a going to see about Maverick.” He watched the faces of the others as he backed.

“You can’t put him in the copter,” Drake scoffed.

Derrick didn’t react to the remark. “I’m just going to make sure he’s alright.” His voice was calm but serious. He backed up a few more steps, then turned and headed for the woods.

Doc raised one eyebrow as he watched him go. *He’s not coming back.* Doc allowed himself to think it but not say it. He only wondered where and why.

“Be back here before the chopper leaves! Because we are not waiting for you!” Drake called after him. Doc glanced up

Drake. Apparently, he saw it, too.

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A couple hours past. Derrick guided Maverick through some thicker brush and over some downed trees before coming to a meadow. He had watched from a distance as the medics from the chopper came, checked out Henry, and transported him back to the bird. They hadn't always gotten along, but he prayed Henry would be okay. Watching from a distance as the men made the trek to the chopper, part of him wanted to run and join them like a little boy running for safety, but the stronger part of him wouldn't allow it. He had scoffed at himself for his weakness, gritted his teeth, and turned to go. Now, miles from there, he forced his mind back to where it had been most of yesterday and early this morning... Matt. He had left him... and he had promised to return.

He had a feeling Matt might be in trouble, but he couldn't tell if the feeling was legitimate. He'd struggled with the decision all day yesterday, but finally concluded he had to find out. He'd decided last night that today he would slip away from the safe house when he went on his daily ride and go back to his truck. The attack this morning had complicated that decision. Yesterday, he'd been healthy and well rested. His arm was nearly healed, and he had plans for packing some food to take with him. Now, he was tired, hungry, and wounded again. *Maybe it's just my lot in life.*

"Ho." Staring at a clump of herbs, he dismounted Maverick and walked with him over to them. Reaching down, he picked one of the leaves, broke it, and smelled it. *Yeah, that's it.* Kneeling down, he picked a handful of good leaves and began crushing them in his hands. It'd been a long time since he'd even considered treating himself with nature's medicine, but even though forgotten, it was still there growing wild, waiting for someone to recognize its value once again.

Stretching his leg to the side, he untightened the belt around his thigh, ripped the pantleg open a little further, and stuffed the crushed herbs on his wound. Staring at Maverick, he waited a few moments for the stinging to stop then he retightened the belt around the herbs and the wound.

Grimacing, he grabbed Maverick's leg and used it to help pull himself up to his feet. Pressure in his head from standing too fast blurred his vision. Leaning against Maverick's shoulder, he hung his head and shook it until his vision cleared. Then grabbing a hunk of mane, he swung up over Maverick and continued on.

## Breakout and Rescue

Three days past. Jim, Jess, and Morgan made the best of their confinement in the little, old safehouse. Sometimes it got boring and lonely, but they tried to keep themselves amused by playing games, reading books, baking new recipes, and watching TV. Still, with all their efforts, they were all restless and ready to go home.

Melinda was taken to the same safehouse as Teresa and the kids. Over time she had gotten to know her sister-in-law quite well and learned a lot about the brother she never knew she had. She'd become friends with Teresa and had fun learning domestic arts like crocheting and cross-stitch while they attempted to while away the hours. She secretly hoped when this was all over that they could remain friends, that Trent would be willing to accept her into his family as she had accepted them into her heart.

Trent was still being monitored, treated, and guarded in a facility in Wisconsin. His pleas to be reunited with his family had thus far fallen on deaf ears, and he found himself counting the hours until the trial when hopefully his life could return to some sense of normalcy... if that was indeed possible.

Derrick had fallen off the radar. He bought a disposable phone and sent a text message to Drake, saying that he was fine and not to look for him. Then he turned the phone off so he wouldn't see the reply. He snuck Maverick into Jim's ranch the back way and then headed off to Iowa to search for Matt. He remembered Matt was going to go to that gas station where the man thought he had seen Mark. So, that is where Derrick had headed to try and pick up his trail.

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"You'd better do something," Bruno said as he brought a bowl of shriveled up, untouched oatmeal over to the sink. "or

he's not going to make it to the trial."

Mark swallowed his last gulp of orange juice and stared down at the empty glass in his hand thoughtfully as he leaned back against the counter. "He still won't eat?"

Bruno shook his head as he scraped the gruel into the trash. "He just lays there on the floor like he's waiting to die. Yesterday, he stopped drinking."

Mark sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "Why does he have to be so stubborn." He paused for a moment and looked at Bruno. "Maybe we all'd be better off if he just did."

Bruno returned him a gaze of steel. "I hope you know better than that." Mark looked away. "The boss has a plan and you *know* who's going to get blamed if it goes south."

Mark raised his hands in a shrug. "What can I do?"

Bruno stepped closer... into Mark's space. "You'd better figure something out, and you better figure it out quick. Because if nothing has changed by tonight, I *will* call Sandervauh."

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Feeling overwhelmed, beaten down, and totally useless, Derrick pulled into the only free space at the busy little gas station, which seemed to be the only one in this town. At this rate, it wouldn't be long until his billfold was, too. Three days ago, he drove into the gas station where he thought Matt had been going. Nearly two days later, after asking every person on every shift of employees and probably half their customers, he had found someone that had remembered Matt... or at least someone showing pictures around, looking for a man and a pregnant girl. He said a lady had recognized the picture or Mark from the place where she worked. The only problem was he hadn't remembered the name of the town, only that it was a small town somewhere around Fort Dodge. All day today he had been in nearly every business in every small town around the city and come up absolutely empty.

Rubbing his face roughly and sighing, he flung his truck door open, nearly hitting the post with it, and got out. *Oh, Matt, where did you go? Three days and nothing... not a clue.* It was like he had just vanished from the face of the earth. He hoped he hadn't gone and gotten himself killed. He trudged over to the pump, roughly untwisted his gas lid, put the pump into the gas tank, selected the grade, and squeezed the handle with nearly enough force to break it. He was so sick of going in circles, he wanted to kick something... again.

Leaning back against the pump, he took out his wallet and counted his cash. He'd risked stopping at an ATM in Wisconsin to withdraw five hundred dollars and thankfully no one had been able to use that location information to track him down. Still, he had every dollar budgeted, that was until yesterday. He'd been so hungry, he'd eaten two meals more than what he had allotted for. Now, he had to recalculate.

After a few minutes, the pump clicked off. He put his wallet back in his pocket and went inside to pay. Touching the flyers in his inside coat pocket, he guessed he'd try it again. It was all he could do. Oddly the only one inside at the time, he grabbed a piece of pizza from the warmer and set it on the counter. "Number Five."

"Okie Dokie." The cashier punched in the gas and pizza on his computer. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"Forty-two o' eight."

"Okay." Derrick took his billfold out of his back pocket, set the money on the counter, and pulled the flyer out of his chest coat pocket.

"Out of fifty?" The cashier held the bill up to the light.

"Yeah. Could you tell me if you've ever seen any of these people?" He unfolded the flyer and laid it on the counter.

The man glanced at it as he counted out the change. "What'd they do?"

Derrick wished he could ever get a simple yes or no. "The girl's a high-risk pregnancy. She's been abducted by the man,

suspected human trafficking.”

The man shook his head. “So much hate and violence in this world anymore.”

“Yeah. Have you seen either of them?” Derrick put the change in his wallet.

The man shook his head. “Sorry, son. Wish I could help. Receipt?” He offered it. Derrick took it and stuffed it in his pocket. “It’s just a shame. So much rampant violence. All my life this has been a nice, peaceful, friendly town... and now.” He turned to go.

Derrick started to go too, but then turned back. “What do you mean? Has something else been happening around here?”

“Oh, just the shooting that happened a couple of days ago.” He turned back.

“What shooting?” Derrick’s voice was urgent and interested.

The man walked back to the counter. “Don’t rightly know a lot about it.” He stared into Derrick’s eager face. “There was a shooting at a farm a few miles out of town. The neighbors called it in. When the police got there, they were all gone. They found some shell casings and some evidence that there’d been folks bumming around in the house. I guess it’d been abandoned for quite some time. That’s all I know.”

Derrick held the man’s gaze a few moments, looked down, and then looked back up, his face filling with determination. “Do you know where the house is?”

A hint of suspicion crossed the man’s face, but he reached down and pulled an old newspaper from under the register. “Keep it. The story’s on page nine.”

“Thanks.” Derrick gave a nod, folded the paper, grabbed his pizza, and headed out.” He wasn’t sure he trusted the man not to call the police on him, but that wasn’t going to keep him from checking out the house. It was just going to make him extremely careful about covering his tracks.

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Mark looked around disgustedly as he walked into the dark, dingy room over to Matt lying on the floor helplessly given up. Mark kicked him to get his attention. “Wake up.” Matt looked up at him. “I never thought I’d see the day.” He shook his head. Matt just stared, not understanding. Fire raising in Mark’s belly, he knelt down and roughly rummaged through Matt’s pockets until he found his device. “Don’t you even have enough...” He cursed several times as he pulled it out and turned it on. The battery was nearly dead. He guessed he’d have to go to Matt’s car and look for a charger. “Look, I know what you’re doing!” His voice was deep and held disdain. “You always have to win, don’t you!” He held the device in front of Matt, but Matt refused to look at it. “Come on, you stupid...!” Grabbing Matt by the shirt, he cursed again. Matt refused to look. “You’re not going to win this time.”

Mark stormed out of the room and returned in a few minutes with Taylor and another gunman. They each held one of her arms. She was struggling against them. This time Matt sat up. Her face and arms were bruised. Her lip was bleeding. The men thrust her toward him. Matt scooted over and reached to catch her, succeeding in breaking her fall a little. He could feel her shaking and see her sobbing. He looked up at Mark in disgust.

A smile curled Mark’s lip. “Don’t look at me like that. She was perfectly comfortable in a nice recliner downstairs.” He tossed the device to Matt. Anger flared in Matt’s eyes as he read it, but he didn’t answer. He just tossed the device back with a vengeance. Mark laughed. “Here’s how it’s going to work. You two will stay up here together until Thursday when you go and convince the world of Rip Sandervaugh’s guilt. In the meantime, she doesn’t get a drop of water until you’ve eaten and drank every bit of what we’ve given you.”

Matt clenched his fists and stood to his feet, forcing his legs to hold him. At this moment, he wanted to attack. He wanted to kill. Mark saw it and backed slowly toward the door. It was crazy, but he wasn’t totally sure his father couldn’t find a way to do it. Big Dog followed him but stopped in the doorway and turned back. “You know, it really wasn’t all that bad of a plan.” He walked out and closed the door.

“What are you talking about?” Mark glared at him.

“No better distress signal. You’d better fatten him up before Thursday if you want anyone to believe he’s acting under his own free will.”

“You’re crazy,” Mark scoffed. “He wasn’t planning anything. He’d just rather die than see me win. Besides if he doesn’t convince them, he knows his daughter’s dead.” Mark stopped walking and looked back at the door, suddenly wondering if now since they were together, they might find a way to escape. “Make sure you check on them every three hours.”

Getting to her feet, Taylor crossed her arms and scowled at the mouse eaten bed. “Sorry,” Matt muttered, looking at her, but he didn’t look as penitent as she had expected. Putting her hands on her hips, she started to say something, but then stopped as Matt put his device in his pocket and slid to his knees beside the wall. “Help me.”

Her eyes widened as she watched him move the bed and start pulling loose bricks out of the wall. Realization that he had a plan set in, and she had to wonder if getting here up her had been his plan all along.

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Kneeling next to the large white propane tank, Derrick reached under it and picked up a shell casing... *Nine millimeter... same caliber as Matt’s gun.* This was the only one he found. Everything else had been taken by the police as evidence. He found some holes in the barn, but the bullets had been removed.

Putting the casing in his pocket, he stood and walked to the house. The nippy wind bit into his face as he walked up the icy sidewalk. He kicked one of the decaying wooden steps to the porch to see if it would hold him before walking up.

Ducking under yellow crime scene tape, he walked toward the heavy, white, paint-chipped door. He glanced over the door and then started toward one of the boarded-up windows before turning back. *Wait.* He walked back and stared at the deadbolt on the outside of the door. He searched his mind to remember where he’d seen that before. *Melinda’s house... when she’d been locked in with the poison gas.* He wondered if that was Sandervauh’s trademark or Mark’s or someone’s in his organization. He turned and looked around again to make sure no one was around. Then he walked down the porch, looking at the outside of the house. He didn’t feel a need to break in. The shell casing and the deadbolt was all he needed for proof they had been here. He turned and looked over the landscape. What he needed to know now was where to go from here.”

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Hours past. Sitting on the floor next to the hole in the wall as Matt scraped away at the mortar around the bricks, Taylor listened for every sound, on pins and needles that someone might come in again. It felt like they were coming in every few hours.

Hearing footsteps approaching, she turned to Matt grabbed his arm to alert him and began shoving the bricks back in the wall. They had just gotten the last brick in and turned around when the doorknob began to turn. Taylor rolled her eyes. That was the closest they’d been all day. She didn’t like cutting it that close.

Bruno trudged in carrying a gallon of water and a footlong sub sandwich. He held out the jug of water. Matt got up. His stomach tightened in disgust at the thought of obeying the slob and it churned at the idea of drinking a whole gallon of water and eating a footlong after not eating for so long. He hadn’t been able to do it at lunchtime. His stomach just wouldn’t hold the contents and true to their word they hadn’t given Taylor one drop of water. This would his last chance of the day to earn her some water. The thought ignited fire in his stomach. He clenched his fist as he walked over. “At least give her some decent bedding for the bed.” His teeth were clenched, and his voice was low as he grabbed the jug out of the man’s hand. He took his device out.

The man gave a crooked smile. “I think you need to be more concerned with getting her some water.”

Anger erupted so strong it was reflex to pull back and slam his fist into the man’s face. To Matt’s surprise the man doubled over. Matt tossed the gallon jug to Taylor, kicked the man in the shin, and punched him again as soon as he began to straighten.

“Hey! What’s going on up there!” Taylor heard the yells as she quickly untwisted the lid with shaky hands and ravenously gulped the water before Mark and Big Dog entered the room. She quickly twisted the lid back on when they entered. “Hey, break it up.” Mark and Big Dog grabbed Bruno just as the giant man pulled Matt off his feet and threw him across the room. “What are you doing?” Mark let go of Bruno’s arm as he yanked it away. “You want to kill him?!”

“That’s not such a bad idea.”

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Derrick drove slowly down the gravel road. He’d been searching all day long, every house abandoned or not. All he needed was one house with a deadbolt on the outside of the doors. He figured he’d covered about a twenty-mile radius. He’d used every sneak and camouflage technique he knew of and still got himself in a couple situations that called for some pretty fancy explaining, but he hadn’t gotten himself arrested, yet, so he kept going.

He glanced down the lane to an old, brick farmhouse as he passed. It looked old enough to be abandoned, yet there were lights on and cars in the drive. One looked like it could pass for Melinda’s, but he couldn’t see it that well.

Picking up speed, he drove to the next intersection, came to a stop, and turned his lights off before turning right. Driving slowly, he squinted to see the road in the darkness. He lowered his window to hear when his tires quite crunching gravel and went into the grass and snow.

Seeing a snowy land bridge across the ditch from road to the field, Derrick pulled off onto it. He stretched and cut the engine. Part of him wanted to take a nap. The other part of him figured it would be a lot easier to check the houses in the dark. He wished this one would be it, but he didn’t allow himself to hold out too much hope.

Pulling the keys from the ignition and opening the door, he slowly got out. The night was so dark and cold and quiet, it felt eerie. There wasn’t a sound. There wasn’t a star in the sky. Small, icy snow crystals pelleted his face and neck. A cold breeze blew them against him. Closing his truck door, he buttoned the top button on his jean jacket and started through the snow across the lumpy field.

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Matt used the old screwdriver to chip away the last bit of mortar from what he hoped was the last brick he had to remove. He pried it the rest of the way out and set it to the side with the others. Leaning back on his heels he glanced from the hole to Taylor and back to the hole, trying to figure out if it was big enough. It was hard for him to believe that his baby girl was bigger than he was, but at least it was only temporary.

“Are you done?” Shivering, Taylor pulled the wool blanket closer around her.

“I think so.” He surprised himself by reading her lips in the dim light. “You got that bedding tied together?” He reached for the sheets she had tied in a rope.

“Yeah.” She repositioned herself against the wall. “It’s a good thing you got them to bring us those extra sheets.” This time he glanced down at his device on the floor to read it, but he didn’t answer. “You sure it’s going to be long enough?” She watched as he tied the end to the bed.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, throwing the other end out the window. It didn’t quite reach. He asked for every ounce of strength to lift the bed closer without making a sound. He stared at Taylor’s face for his only clue to if he was making noise.

Kneeling next to the opening, he pulled the sheet rope back up and yanked every knot even tighter. Then he tossed it Taylor. “Figure out how you want it tied around you and get ready to go down.” Taylor lifted the rope and frowned at it, wondering how well the knots would hold. How did she get so lucky to be the first one to test this thing out? “Double knot it.” She glanced at him and back down at the rope. *Nooo kidding.*

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After sprinting across the yard from the field to the overgrown back sidewalk, Derrick crept up the lopsided, cracked, cement steps to the door. Putting his ear to the door, he listened for several moments. Most of the lights had gone out a good ten minutes ago when he was midfield. He hoped everyone was asleep. There weren’t any deadbolts on the doors, but the car out front was Melinda’s. He’d lay money on it.

Satisfied all was quiet, he slowly opened the ripped, white-metal screen door, pulling tight against the hinges as it started to squeak. He used his debit card to unlock the old-fashioned main door and willed it not to squeak as he opened it just wide enough to squeeze through.

Every nerve primed for action, hearing heightened to detect any sound, eyes straining in the darkness, he snuck through

the kitchen, picking up a roll of duct tape from the counter on the way by and put it in his pocket.

Nearing the door from the kitchen to the hallway, Derrick stopped at the sound of snoring and looked in that direction. He wondered if it was a bedroom or a sitting room in that direction. Running his hand along the wall, he crept down the dark hall toward a faint glimmer of light at the end.

Coming to the small circular entryway, he glanced to the right up the steps toward the light and then toward the left into the dark sitting room where the sound of snoring emanating. Turning to the left, he went toward the snoring. He wanted concrete evidence to confirm he was in the right house, but all he could confirm when he got close was that they were two men sleeping on separate couches. The one man wasn't Mark. He was built like the Hulk. The other man could be, but he couldn't tell. He thought maybe he noticed a faint shadow of a tattoo on the side of his neck. Backing up, he went back toward the stairs before one of them woke up.

Coming to the stairs, he held his breath as he touched the railing and tentatively put his weight on the first step. As he feared the step let out such a creak it could have been thunder in contrast with the deafening silence. First, he froze, but then seeing a shadow move in the dim upstairs light, he quickly darted under the staircase for cover.

Above him, he could hear the creaks and scuffs of footsteps coming halfway down the stairs. "Bruno? Is that you?" The man's voice was deep and gruff. Derrick watched the man's shadow on the wall across from the steps. He didn't dare breathe. "Mark?" The man came down a few more steps.

Derrick's heart jumped at a thud against the side of the house. *What was that?* He watched the man's shadow as it turned, and he thudded back upstairs. *Mark. This is the place.*

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Heart pounding, Matt kept glancing over his shoulder as he lowered Taylor the rest of the way down into the snow. He was sure he saw her swing into a window on the way down. He had no idea how hard or how loud of noise it made, but he was sure it had to have made some. He stared out the opening and willed her to untie the rope faster.

Glancing over his shoulder, he jumped up as he saw the doorknob start to turn and the door start to crack open. Swallowing hard, he grabbed the sheets and jumped out the hole. "Hey! Stop!" Big Dog aimed his gun as a threat but didn't fire. He couldn't kill them so there was no need to alert the neighbor's by firing. "Bruno! Mark! They're getting away!" Though too big to go out, he looked out the opening at the two of them running through the snow toward the barns.

Big Dog yelled threats and cursings out the opening before turning and running for the stairs.

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Derrick listened to the men in the living room as they scrambled to their feet and got their guns. He stepped deeper into the corner as lights began to come on and Big Dog thudded down the stairs. He pulled his revolver from behind his back and let his finger find the trigger as he watched the two men run out the front door. Then he waited for the heavy man to get the rest of the way down the stairs and turn toward the door. "Hold it!" He stepped out into the light and leveled his gun. The man froze. "Drop the gun!" Derrick's face didn't waver. The gunman hesitated, tightening his grip instead. Derrick tightened his own grip on the trigger. "Now!" He stared down the barrel ready to fire.

Finally, the man relented and dropped his weapon. "On the ground." The man crossed his arms and refused. *Gre-at.* Derrick took a few steps toward him. "You hear me?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Shoot me. I dare you." He smiled. They stared each other down a few moments. Then Derrick stepped closer into the man's space, daring him to reach for him. When he did, Derrick jumped away putting him off balance and kicked his legs out from under him. Then, quick as was possible, he snatched the tape from his pocket and taped the man's mouth, hands, and feet.

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Leaning back, digging his feet into the snow, Matt used all his might to pull open the large, wooden, sliding door to the old machine shed. The shed was hidden behind the bigger barn. The gunmen weren't there yet, but Matt knew it was only a matter of time.

“Hold it!” Taylor’s heart froze as she heard Mark’s voice in the distance. “It’s their tracks! Come on!” Taylor willed her dad to get the door open faster and then swiftly slipped in as soon as there was enough room. Matt followed, willing his shaky legs to hold him as he leaned into the door shoving it closed.

Taylor hurried around the rusty orange tractor and knelt down behind some boxes in the corner. Finally getting the door closed, Matt came over and strained to lift the heavy boxes, repositioning them around her until she couldn’t be found. Taylor put her face in her hands and then covered her ears, trying to block out the rustles and squeaks coming from the boxes.

Seeing light peek through as the door started to slide open, Matt ducked behind one of the giant tractor tires and watched to see who would come in. It took them a while to get it on track and get the heavy door open. When they did, it was only wide enough for Mark to squeeze in. Bruno kept trying, yanking hard but not succeeding.

Feeling around on the dirty floor, Matt’s hand found an old wrench. He clutched it tightly. Forcing his breathing to slow, he watched Mark’s silhouette as he walked around the other side of the tractor, gun drawn. He turned toward the boxes on that side of the shed and began kicking and dumping them, shouting and swearing the whole time he searched.

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Running, Derrick raced out the door and followed the tracks through the snow. He hoped he wasn’t too late. He’d never heard a gunshot, and he counted that a blessing. Coming to the barn, he skidded to a stop behind it, and peeked around the corner to see the man trying to force the door open to the shed... *only one man*. He quickly pieced together what was going down. Somehow, he had to get in the shed to help Matt and Taylor against Mark, and that was impossible without taking out Goliath first. He started to reach behind him for his revolver but stopped. He couldn’t stomach shooting a man in the back, and he didn’t particularly want to push the man into turning and shooting at him. There was always a chance he’d make a bullseye, which would be terribly lethal for him.

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Matt’s eyes widened and his heart rate quickened as Mark turned and started coming in his direction. He silently moved from the back of the tractor tire to the side. Matt’s eyes darted from Mark’s face to the gun leveled in his hand, and suddenly he knew if Mark met him head-on he was as good as dead... or captured again. *Lord... help us.*

Squeaking, a couple mice jumped from an empty box, sending it falling to the ground. Mark spun around toward the noise. Simultaneously, Matt jumped out and grabbed Mark’s gun arm with one hand and put his other arm around his chest to restrain him as he tried to make him drop the gun. Mark elbowed Matt in the stomach forcing him to double over but not let go. Matt only tightened his grip on Mark’s arm, clasping it with his other hand as well. Mark tried to yank away and assault him with his free arm, but being well accustomed to the dark, Matt dodged everything Mark threw at him. Mark, unable to get his bearings in the dark, nearly tripped and fell a couple of times.

“Mark! Are you alright?” Bruno stopped wrestling with the door long enough to draw his gun and peer in, but he couldn’t see the men in the pitch-blackness.

Doubling back, Derrick went around to the other side of the shed without being seen and then snuck around to the front. Peeking around the corner and seeing Bruno leaning in the shed, Derrick seized the opportunity to sneak up on the man. Seeing no other nonlethal way to subdue the man, Derrick ran at him, jumped on his back, and clutched his arm around him in a choke hold.

Bruno dropped his gun and grabbed Derrick’s arm with both hands prying it a couple inches from his neck. Derrick grabbed hold of his own arm with his other hand, trying to pull it back. Fear shooting through his nervous system, he planned his best strategy for pulling out his gun if it was necessary.

Though knowing he was no match to the brute, iron-armed, mega-giant, Derrick called on every ounce of strength he was obtaining from his adrenaline storehouses and tightened his arm once again. Unable to get air, the man swung around violently, trying to shake Derrick off his back. When that didn’t work, he turned his back toward the shed and rammed himself into it, smashing Derrick between the thick wooden door and his own formidable body. All air escaped Derrick’s lungs as he was squished between the two unmovable objects, but he didn’t let go. He gasped for air as the man lunged forward and then slammed back again. All the air once again escaped Derrick’s body. This time Bruno didn’t lunge forward. He leaned back harder, trying to squish Derrick like a cockroach. Unable to breathe, Derrick was afraid it was going to work. He contemplated releasing the choke hold in hopes the man might return the favor and let him live, but concluding he wouldn’t, he only

tightened his grip determined not to go down alone. Darkness crept in around the edge of his vision. His body began to feel weightless, and moments later he began to fall. When he hit, his lungs automatically began sucking in deep breaths, and after a few moments, he realized his arm was still tightly fixed around the giant's neck. It was the gunman that had fallen, not him. Sitting up, he quickly released his arm and let the gunman breathe. He waited a moment to make sure he was and then immediately grabbed the tape from his pocket and bound him up.

Standing on shaky legs, he walked the few steps to the shed and squeezed in the doorway. He saw the outline of two men wrestling in the shadows but couldn't make out which one was which until he got close. What was obvious was that they were fighting over a gun. Derrick tried to stay out of the trajectory of the waving firearm in case it should go off. "Okay! Drop it!" Derrick drew his own gun and aimed it in their direction, though not exactly at either of them since he couldn't tell which was which. No reaction. Matt couldn't hear him, and Mark was apparently ignoring him. Derrick got closer, straining to see until he could tell them apart. "I said, 'drop it!'" He pushed the barrel of his gun into Mark's back. Mark didn't relent. He only kept fighting. Derrick was beginning to wonder if they were both deaf, now. The barrel of the gun they fought for turned down, facing the ground. Mark pulled it toward them until it was right in between them, inches from either of their stomachs, then he tried to turn it toward Matt. Derrick raised his gun and slammed it down onto the back of Mark's head more in reflex than in intent. Mark's body went limp, and he fell to the ground. Derrick's eyes met Matt's as Mark collapsed in between them and for a brief moment he saw the anguish of a father's worry in those eyes, as he fell to his knees and tried to find a pulse in his son's neck. Derrick's own heart froze with fear when he realized he might have killed him. He hadn't been trying to hit him that hard. Relief swept over Derrick when he detected the relief in Matt's eyes and watched him stand to his feet.

Derrick glanced around in the darkness of the shed. "Where's your daughter? Is she still inside?" The room lit up as Matt held in the button to light up the screen on his device.

"I'm over here!" Taylor answered before Matt had a chance to. "Get me out of here!" Derrick followed the voice.

"Behind the boxes?"

"Yes." Derrick began moving boxes. Matt tried to help, but he felt too weak to lift the heavy ones. "Thank you." Taylor sprang out as soon as she had a narrow pathway. "I hate mice." She crossed her arms to keep warm and resumed shivering. "Did you get them all?"

"Yeah." Derrick went back to Mark and taped his hands and feet.

"How'd you find us?"

Derrick bent down, grabbed Mark, and flung him over his shoulders. "It wasn't easy." He headed for the door. The others followed. Noticing a board wedged between the wall and the back of the door, he kicked it away and was able to open the sliding door all the way so they didn't have to squeeze through.

They walked past Bruno lying in the snow, yelling indiscernibly and fighting against the tape to get free. Then they went into the house. Taylor put her arm up to block some of the harsh crystals blowing into her face. Trudging through the cold, deep snow, it seemed like forever until they finally reached the house. Each of them felt relief as they entered the still house and got out of the icy elements.

Derrick walked over to the shorter sofa, bent forward, and let Mark fall off his shoulders onto the couch. Taylor sighed and plopped into the recliner, resting her hand on her oversized tummy. "Do you have a phone to call the police?" Her face was urgent as she stared at Derrick.

He only glanced at her. "I'm going to get the other gunman out of the snow." He headed for the door.

"Wait a minute!" He didn't stop. Taylor looked at her father in exaggerated disbelief. Not understanding, Matt cocked his head, tossed her his device, and plopped down on the other couch. She waved him off and tossed back the device. "Oh, never mind." Leaning back, she closed her eyes, relishing the opportunity to rest, even if she did have to wait for Derrick to get around to calling for help.

After a few moments, Derrick returned, gun drawn at the gunman, ordering him into the kitchen. More minutes passed as he tied the man up to a kitchen chair. Then Derrick came back in the living room and collapsed onto the other side of the couch where Matt was sitting. He motioned for Matt's device and then spoke into it. "Tell me what's been going on."

“Just call the \*expletive\* police!”

Not hearing her, Matt answered. “They’re working for Sandervauh... the younger Sandervauh. His father is the one that is arrested. He wants his father to be imprisoned, so that he can take over the organization. I’m supposed to convince everyone to convict the older man or else they’d kill Taylor.”

“Wait. So, the one they have in custody isn’t the guy that was at the cave?” Matt nodded. Derrick stared off a few moments. “Now, it starts to make sense. When they asked me to go identify him, I really thought it was him.”

Matt nodded. “Me too.”

“Are you sure?” Matt nodded. “We both thought the older guy was the one in the cave, who did you need to convince?”

“Trent, Teresa, maybe Jim they thought.”

“Jim identified him.”

Matt shrugged. “Maybe you have to look at him longer to be able to tell.” Derrick stared down, thoughtfully. “Do you have a phone to call the....”

“Has Sandervauh been here?” Derrick interrupted.

“Ye-es?” Matt stared at him, questioningly.

Derrick’s gaze held determination. “These attacks won’t stop until we have him. Even if his father is convicted, we’re still a threat. The trial’s in a couple of days. He’ll probably be here again before then.” His eyes held hope.

Matt’s eyes narrowed. “What are you suggesting?”

“If he comes, we can get him.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “The police can get him.”

“No. If we call the police and get these three booked, word will get back to him.”

“How do you know?” Taylor whined. “I want out of here.”

Matt’s face and voice were firm. “You cannot use Taylor as a decoy.” Matt eyed the cellphone attached to Mark’s belt. Derrick followed his gaze, got up, snatched the cellphone, and put it in his pocket. Then he pulled the keys to the vehicles out of Mark’s pocket and took them, too. “Derrick.” Matt’s voice was low. “You’re holding us against our will.”

“Oh, he won’t. Let’s just walk to the next farmhouse.” Taylor jumped up and then, feeling light-headed, sat back down. Matt stared out the window at the falling snow that had changed from a light sleet to a full out blizzard. “Derrick, listen to me.”

“Matt, I know!” He sat back down, turning toward him as he spoke. “We’ve got three days to get this guy arrested. If we don’t, we could be running from this guy for the rest of our lives. How many times do you think you can cheat death before it will catch up to you?”

“You can’t get him alone.”

Derrick faced forward and leaned back against the couch. “How many people could he bring out here without looking suspicious.”

“Derrick.”

“Besides,” He looked back at Matt. “if he’s trying to take the organization, he can’t tell them what’s really going on.”

“Fine.” Taylor whined. “Do what you want to trap him, but let us go!”

Derrick crossed his arms and stared off. “If I let you go, you’ll go to the police.”

“Derrick, if you’re wrong,” Matt stared at him with steel eyes, “and you get my daughter and grandson killed... after all I

went through to find them... Sandervaugh won't be the only one hunting you down."

Derrick's eyes wavered a little, but he didn't look at Matt. "There's an underground cellar. If Sandervaugh comes, you can go in there until the fighting's over."

"And if Sandervaugh wins?"

"He won't."

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Eight hours past. They all got some much-needed sleep, putting off further arguments until the morning. Matt was the first to wake up. At first, he just laid there on the couch staring up at the ceiling. *New day... new decisions... new responsibilities.* Rolling onto his side, he glanced at Taylor sleeping deeply in the recliner then at Derrick on the floor. Derrick opened one eye and looked at him before going back to sleep. *Light sleeper. Go figure.*

Standing up, Matt headed over to check on Mark again. He'd been a little concerned with how long it had taken Mark to wake up last night, but when he did, he seemed fine. His vitals were normal. His speech was fine. His reflexes seemed normal. He couldn't test his memory because Mark wouldn't talk to him. Still, he worried. He'd stayed awake longer than the others to keep an eye on him. Somehow, even all that Mark had done hadn't changed the fact that he was Matt's son and Matt loved him. Partly, Matt even felt responsible for what his kids had become. Maybe it was all his failures as a father that had caused all this.

Getting closer to Mark, Matt slowed. Apprehension forced him to stop. Mark's face was way too pale. His body was way too still. He didn't see any rise and fall to his chest. The space around him felt like death. Tentatively kneeling down, Matt lifted a shaky hand to Mark's ice-cold neck. He didn't have to check for a pulse, but he did anyway. It only confirmed what he already knew.... Mark was dead.

Respiration quickening, Matt stared into the lifeless face for a few moments as realization hit him like a cement truck. Every second chance was over. His son was in hell.

Jumping up, Matt spun around toward Derrick. Derrick jolted awake, sitting up just as Matt grasped the front of his shirt and pulled him to his feet. "What's wrong?" Derrick grabbed Matt's wrists as Matt threw him against the wall, knocking the air out of him. "Matt!" Derrick gasped for air as Matt pulled him away and then threw him back again. "What's wrong?" Derrick thought of many counter moves but refused to use them. Matt pulled back and punched him in the stomach twice, as hard as he could, but Derrick's abs were so hard it made little to no impact on him. Derrick's eyes were question marks. He stepped forward to reach in Matt's pocket for his device, but Matt kicked him back. Derrick looked around, trying to figure out what was going on. His eyes fell on Mark, and he froze. Matt pushed him against the wall again and began slamming his fist over and over into the side of Derrick's face.

"Dad!" Taylor, unable to understand why Derrick wouldn't defend himself, ran over behind Matt and wrapped her arms around him, pinning his arms to his side. Coherent enough in his blind rage not to hurt his daughter, Matt stopped, but his glare could nearly kill as he stared into Derrick's eyes. Derrick's eyes were soft and shifting as he realized it probably was because of him, Mark died. Taylor's eyes were full of fear as she looked back and forth from Mark's dead body to Derrick's bleeding face. She held tightly, so that Matt couldn't break free without throwing her to the side. "Go." Her eyes and her voice pleaded. Derrick stared into her face a moment then glanced into Matt's furious eyes. "Go-o!"

Stepping to the side, Derrick turned, took Mark's cellphone and keys out of his pocket, and dropped them on the table. Turning the doorknob, he gave one final look back and then walked out the door and toward the field to go back to where he parked his truck. Fear flooded over him as he walked through the snow, and he started to run. He hadn't meant to withhold medical care from anyone. He thought Mark was fine. ... *Could they call it... Murder?*

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Releasing her father, Taylor walked over to Mark in a daze. A cascade of emotions swept over her. She couldn't reconcile which way she felt. *Good riddance to the evil pervert. I'm glad he's dead.* Yet, staring down at his lifeless body, her despising eyes softened some as her mind flashed back to him as a teenager... when she was just a kid, and he was her fearless older brother. With her dad gone all the time, he had mostly raised her until she was eleven when he left.

She crossed her arms. *He left, and he changed.* He was no longer her protector to run to in a thunderstorm. He was a

predator... a killer... a machine devoid of emotion. Her eyes narrowed, and she couldn't be sorry. This was no longer the young man who was the only one in her family to show up at her school play. This was the man that wanted to sell her for profit and kill her if necessary, to save his own skin. Eyes filled with hatred, she glanced back at her father and then kicked the couch and spit on the body before turning and walking away.

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Eight hours past. It was three 'o' clock in the afternoon. The shadows were getting long on the snow, and the sun was waning as Derrick backed out of his hiding place among the trees. He picked this spot to wait because he had a good view of the house in the distance while remaining well-concealed. He had decided to wait and hide-out for two reasons. One, he figured it would be incredibly stupid to be rolling down the road if the police were looking for him. Two, his conscience wouldn't let him leave until he saw that the police had arrived, and Matt and Taylor were safe in protective custody. With his luck, Sandervauh would have shown up right after he left and before the police arrived.

Driving past, he stared at the little abandoned house where so much had happened last night. The barely disturbed snow of this morning was all trodden down. Yellow crime scene tape draped around each of the buildings. A tarp covered the hole in the wall of the bedroom and blew in the blustery wind. He sighed at the memories. Things never worked out right for him. That was why he had determined long ago to live his life alone. Let his life good or bad only affect him. Jim and Jess and their perfect little family had tried to change him. He'd let them, and now he'd probably be running for the rest of his life. Why did he let other people involve him in their problems? He smacked the steering wheel and pressed down harder on the gas. He was more mad than he was sorry. He wanted revenge on the man responsible for wrecking his life... and that would be Sandervauh. In perfect harmony with his thoughts his cellphone began to vibrate. *It's about time.* "Hello." His voice was angry.

"Hey, man, what's up? Doin' okay?"

"A lot better than you'd hope."

"Hey, man, what are you talking about? I've got only the best wishes for you, man. I don't want nothin' to happen to you. Hey, sorry, I couldn't call you back earlier, but..."

"But you had to get your bosses together to listen in. Just cut the stalling Carlos. I know you're trying to track me. I'll save you the trouble. I'm still here at the farmhouse where I took down two of Sandervaugh's best men last night. You tell Sandervauh what he already knows. He can't take me down... but maybe... for the right price... he can buy me off. Ask him how much his life is worth because if he doesn't, I'm coming for him. You tell him, I know where everyone is located in protective custody. You tell him I value his life to be around two-million and the lives of each of the people set to testify at one million."

"You're crazy." Carlos voice held shock and admiration.

"It's been said. Tell him if he wants to try and kill me... again. I'll be waiting for him at the old Renzfield factory. Tell him to bring a lot of guns or a lot of money."

Carlos gave a nervous laugh. "I don't believe you." He paused. "I know you, man. You can't murd-er." His voice was unsure. "You're too afraid of... hell." His voice got softer and more tentative with every syllable.

Derrick's voice didn't weaken. "You tell him! Tell him, I'll be waiting!"

Carlos's voice was nearly a whisper. "Well... if I can find him. Sandervaugh, you said, right? The older or the younger?"

"Carlos, I'll make it easy for you." His voice went from cynical to angry. "Just turn around!" He flipped the phone closed and chucked it out the window into a passing stream.

## Finish... Even when Misjudged

High noon – the day before the trial. Derrick continued to wait on the roof of the abandoned apartment building across the street from the abandon Renzfield factory. He rubbed his face to clear his vision. He felt like he'd been staring at the building forever. He was beginning to wonder if he'd made a mistake. *Maybe Carlos doesn't know how to contact Sandervaugh.*

He quickly shook his head. He couldn't buy that. Maybe Sandervauh had just laughed at his demands. He had made them purposely high because he didn't want to just be paid off by a middleman. He wanted Sandervauh to come after him personally and try to take him down. Maybe Sandervauh didn't think he was worth the trouble anymore. Maybe word had gotten back that he was on the wrong side of the law right now, and Sandervauh figured he wouldn't go back to testify. *Not a bad conclusion. ...or maybe....* Derrick jerked his attention toward the sound of an approaching helicopter. *...or maybe not.* Getting up, he stepped behind the dumpster next to him. He couldn't help smiling as he watched the chopper land.

Leaning against the cold, metal dumpster, he counted as the gunmen piled out. *Seven... and Sandervauh.* Relief swept over him as he recognized Sandervauh. He was a little afraid he wouldn't come himself. He wished he knew if Sandervauh planned to pay him off or take him out. Watching them file in the door, he guessed it didn't matter.

After waiting a couple of moments to make sure no one came back out. He walked to the edge of the roof and looked down. *Figures.* At least four black SUVs pulled off the street and parked by the doors. Gunmen got out to guard the lower exits.

Turning to his left, Derrick walked across the roof to the side of the apartment. He had hoped to be able to enter by a lower level door, but he guessed, now he was going to have to take the catwalk option and follow them in on the roof.

Coming to the edge of the roof, he crouched down and swung down onto the fire escape. He climbed down about one floor before deciding that his fire escape was close enough to the fire escape on the building next to him to jump. Climbing onto the yellow paint-chipped railing, heart pounding, he took a deep breath, pushed off, and jumped. He felt like he was flying slow motion over a deep abyss before his hands connected stingingly to the railing on the other side. Ignoring the sting, he tightened his grip around the railing as his legs banged into the metal below. Grimacing slightly at the sting in his knee, he contracted his biceps and pulled himself over the railing and onto the grated landing.

Not pausing to rest, he jogged up the steps and pulled himself onto the roof. *Just one more building,* and he would be at the catwalk. Slowing to catch his breath, he jogged across the roof until the gap between buildings came into view. *Close enough.* Eyes widening, he picked up speed, ran to the edge, and pushing off with all his might, jumped. Soaring over the ally, he landed on his feet and rolled, allowing himself a fist bump as he ran across the roof to the catwalk. *Now for the tricky part.*

Coming to a stop, he stared for a few moments at the encased walkway. Part of him wished it wasn't enclosed so he could just climb down and walk across like normal people. *But what would be the fun in that?* Taking a couple deep breaths, he knelt and swung down from the roof onto the clear plastic bubble enclosing the walkway. Trying not to look down, he crawled carefully across the street, making every effort not to slip and fall to an untimely end.

Reaching the other side, he grabbed the edge of the building, stood, and pulled himself up. Taking a minute, he slowly walked across the roof, forcing his breathing to slow and his weak legs not to shake. Stopping at the edge of the roof, he looked down into the cluttered ally, up and down the fire escapes, and then back and forth between the two roofs, trying to judge their distance.

Backing up, he took a running start and leaped... not hard enough or far enough. Reaching out, thrusting his body forward, his fingertips just barely grasped the edge. His body swung hard into the concrete wall. Not having enough grip to pull himself up, he looked down and around for an option. The fire escape was about a foot to his left. Getting a swinging start, he gave his best swing sideways and let go.

Freefalling, he was about two stories down before his hands connected with the metal railing. Ouch. He blinked his eyes closed, gritted his teeth, and swallowed, trying to manage the sting radiating through his hands and all the way up his arms as he pulled himself up, over the railing, and onto the landing. Slowly, he walked up the escape and climbed onto the roof. *One more to go.*

Coming to the other side of the roof, he allowed himself to sit down and rest a minute while he assessed the situation to get onto the last roof. There was a fire escape on the factory, but not on the building he was on. Also, the fire escape ended on this level while the factory building had another story to it with just a little rusty ladder bolted to the side of the building to go up to the roof... and then if he made it up there, what would be waiting for him. He couldn't help the apprehension. He hated anything that felt like a dead-end street, and that's what this was beginning to feel like... like maybe whatever went into that building might not come back out. Clenching his jaw, he stood up and dusted the snow off his pants. He couldn't turn back now, even if he wanted too.

Taking a jogging start, he jumped and easily connected with the ladder. Grasping tight, he held himself up so his feet

could find a rung to stand on. Then he carefully and quietly climbed to the roof, listening to the voices all around him. Seeing a man on the ground round the corner and come into the ally, he started to freeze. Thinking better of it, he kept going but prayed the man wouldn't look up.

*Phase two.* He climbed onto the roof, and... *Whoops.* He ducked behind another smaller half-story that was built in the middle, moments before the gunman saw him. He wondered when he had come back. Looking around the corner, he watched the man, gun drawn, circling around the chopper.

Eyes widening, Derrick pulled his gun out as the man slowed to a stop on the side of the chopper that faced the street. Putting one foot on the runner, he leaned against the chopper, rested his rifle against his chest, and stared off into the distant sky. Seizing the brief opportunity, staying low, Derrick ran up behind the other side of the chopper, crawled underneath, grabbed the gunman legs and yanked back, causing the gunman to fall flat on his face, knocking a tooth out on the concrete and rendering him unconscious. Taking two zip ties from his pocket, Derrick tied his hands and feet and then gagged him with one of the pieces of cloth he had cut from a blanket. Taking a deep breath, he stood up and walked to the door. Opening it felt akin to opening Pandora's box.

Halfway down the dim, locker-lined hallway, he saw the heavy brown-metal door slowly start to open. Instantly, he swung to the side in the gap between two sets of rusty blue lockers. "Isay the boss's lossin' it. Isay, why he be up here? We just come from up 'ere, Isay."

"Because he isn't anywhere else." The gunman replied flatly as they walked down the hall.

"Maybe it's a trick. Maybe he never intended to show up. Maybe the police they come any minute?"

"So what? All they can do is weapons charges. You afraid of..." *WHAM!* Derrick jumped out and kicked him in the face midsentence, knocking him on his back to the ground. Then he spun around and slammed his fist into the other's guys face three times fast... *bam, bam, bam...* and followed with a crushing left cross that brought him stunned to his knees. Derrick quickly bound him with zip ties and gagged him then repeated the process with his unconscious friend. Afraid Sandervaugh might send a search party for them, he opened two of the lockers and stuffed them inside. *Two down.*

Going to the door, he opened it carefully and peered out. Seeing nothing and hearing nothing, he silently walked through the massive corridor and over to the stairs. About halfway down the first flight, he heard voices.

"It came from up there!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah! Come on!"

Grabbing the yellow, metal railing, Derrick swung up on the lower railing then reached and grabbed the upper railing on the top floor, pulled himself up and over and then flattened himself against the wall, hiding behind a wide metal beam. Derrick waited impatiently for several moments until the men neared the top. Then, jumping out, he grabbed hold of the railing and using it as a pommel horse, swung his legs over it and into the men. His feet connected with the outer guy's face, and his knees pummeled into the first guy's throat.

The outer guy lost consciousness immediately from the impact with Derrick's feet. They both went tumbling one over the other all the way down the stairs. Derrick followed them down the stairs. They were both unconscious by time they reached the bottom. Derrick tied and gagged them and then flung each of them over his shoulders and carried them each up the stairs and stuffed them in a locker. Then he resumed his quest downstairs.

After covering the whole first floor, which was mostly offices, and finding no one, he returned to the stairwell and went down a floor. That floor looked more like a factory, open floor plan, giant metal racks that used to hold skids, a couple abandoned forklifts, some old boxes. The room was so huge, he felt swallowed up by space. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he searched through the shadows around the metal racks and equipment, gun drawn.

"Hey! Hey! What the! Hey! Help! ... HELP!"

Derrick turned toward the distant yells, concluding they were coming from someone on his floor. Carefully approaching toward the sound, he stopped and peered around the corner of a rack at the silhouette of a tall, gangly gunman, flopping around like a ragdoll, upside down, on the end of a rope hanging by his ankle from a rafter on the very high ceiling. Derrick knew

how high firsthand from when he set the trap. Not somewhere he would want to be dangling from, but for the gunman... *perfect*. He smiled as he turned to go. *Five down*.

Taking his gun from its holster, Derrick turned back toward the staircase, hoping that one or two of the dangler's coworkers would come to his rescue. There were two staircases, so he didn't know for sure... he only hoped... *Who-a!* He ducked behind a metal beam holding up a wall as someone emerged from the stairwell. Leaning back against the wall, the man's image registered in his mind. *Sandervauh!*

Without pausing to consider, Derrick jumped out and grabbed Sandervauh from behind. Wrapping his arm around Sandervauh's neck and pulling Sandervauh's arm behind him, he forced him to drop his weapon. Swinging around, Sandervauh his shield, he pointed his revolver at the two other men emerging from the stairwell. "Drop 'em!"

Staring at Sandervauh nearly choking in Derrick's grasp, the two gunmen slowly lowered their weapons. "The ammo belts too!" Derrick ordered. After the men complied, Derrick lessened his grip around Sandervauh's neck, allowing him more air.

"Look, I brought your money," Sandervauh gasped.

"How much?"

"Nine million." Derrick's stomach tightened at the thought of all that money. "I'll give you all the men you need and two million now. Then you get the other five million when you have eliminated all the witnesses."

Derrick's mind raced for a way to keep the five million without murdering his friends. "I thought you wanted a couple witnesses so that..."

"Benson, go get the money!" Sandervauh outyelled him. "Tritlin, go with him. Hurry!"

"Hey!" Derrick stopped them. They looked back. "Come back, unarmed." They paused, nodded, turned, and left.

When they were out of earshot, Sandervauh continued. "You and Carlos will be the witnesses."

"Carlos is going to come back and testify?" Derrick scoffed.

"He will. He has a plea deal pending."

"Why nine million? Should be seven."

"Nine. Wade and Mellissa are part of the liability."

"Why?" Sandervauh refused to answer. "Okay. Then what?"

"What do you mean, 'then what?'"

"The trial's over and everything has gone according to plan. Then what?"

"Then you can either leave, or you can have a very powerful position in my organization, million-dollar weekly compensation and multimillion-dollar accommodations. You'll never think about money again for the rest of your life."

Derrick couldn't help being nearly breathless from the possibility. He felt like he was no good around people, and all his life he'd given anything to be one-hundred percent financially independent. Then he would never have to work or deal with people again. If only there was a way... without selling his soul to the devil... and killing his best friend. Rebolstering his gun, he grabbed a zip tie from his pocket, forced Sandervauh's hands together, and bound him. "What are you..." Derrick gagged him.

"Let's go." Grabbing Sandervauh by his coat, he forced him toward the stairwell and began yanking him up each step. Halfway up the steps, Sandervauh let his feet go out from under him, trying to fall and trying to take Derrick with him. Grabbing the railing, Derrick held tight to Sandervauh and lifted him back to his feet, detecting noticeable disappointment from Sandervauh that his plan hadn't worked.

Hearing distant voices as they reached the top, Derrick looked over his shoulder as he pushed Sandervauh toward the locker hallway. Smiling at the approaching voices, Sandervauh resisted going further, but Derrick forced him forward, threatening to knock him out if he didn't comply. Coming to the roof, he could hear the voices getting louder. Derrick looked around for options as he approached the helicopter. Speedily, he zip-tied Sandervauh to the blade, opened the engine

compartment, yanked out a hose, tossed it over the side, and began running as he heard the gunmen coming.

Derrick reached the edge of the roof and jumped just as the gunmen scattered onto the roof. Hitting the cement of the lower-roofed building next to the factory, Derrick rolled to break the impact then immediately got up, ran back toward the factory, and jumped, connecting with the metal railing of the fire escape. Glancing up the whole time, expecting gunmen, Derrick didn't pause for breath as he ran down the steps, grabbed the railing, and flung himself over onto to the black, hard plastic lid of the dumpster below.

Crawling behind the dumpster, he sent a precomposed text to 911, which included all the pertinent information about the case but left out anything that would identify him as the sender. Then he headed out on a mission to flatten a tire on each of the six cars parked around the building below.

The first two cars were no problem. He simply snuck up to them and forced his knife into a tire or two. The third SUV, he had to fight with a guard. The fourth one, he was so focused on avoiding the guard at the door that he didn't see the gunman sneaking up behind him. "Hold it." Derrick froze as a hard, metal gun barrel jammed into his back. Slowly, he raised his hands as he noticed the gunman turning his head, suddenly distracted by a distant voice. "Hey, Tristo, I found...." WHAM! Derrick spun around and delivered a massive round house kick so strong that it was instant lights-out when his foot connected with the gunman's face. *Phew.* Derrick would have whistled his relief if it wouldn't alert the enemy. He slit the tire and quickly jogged toward the next one, staying low and weaving in and out stuff for cover.

"He's got to be around here somewhere! Ray and Johnson didn't knock themselves out!"

"It's like he disappeared."

"Well, he didn't! And a bullet will take him down the same as any man!"

Derrick ducked behind some boxes as he saw a couple police cars approaching, lights and sirens off. Smiling, he dashed back to a dumpster behind the two talking gunmen. Grabbing a junk baseball, he chucked it at one of them, hitting him squarely in the back of the head, not hard enough to hurt him just enough to get his attention. It worked. The gunman turned and let out a barrage of bullets in Derrick's direction. Derrick plastered himself against the metal dumpster and smiled to himself as the lights and sirens came on.

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Midnight. Jim and Jess slept peacefully, oblivious to the massive standoff and take down of many members of the Sandervauh syndicate. Jim woke up and flipped on his lamp as his disposable cellphone began to ring. Jess rolled over and looked at him sleepily. "What is it?"

"I don't know." He stared at the phone. "The caller ID's just a number."

"Then we shouldn't answer it, right?" She yawned and propped her head up with her hand.

Jim nodded slowly as the phone went to voicemail. "I guess." He kept staring at it. "Probably just a wrong number." The phone began to ring again, and he answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey, Jim, it's Derrick. How are you?"

"Derrick! Where are you? I heard what happened!"

"They have a warrant out for my arrest, yet?" Derrick's voice was gloomy.

"I don't know, but I do know you need to come back and clear yourself." Jim's voice was urgent.

"You talk to Matt?"

"No." Jim's voice softened. "You saved his life. I don't know how he could hold it against you... even if it was his son. I mean, his son was trying to kill him!"

"Believe me. He holds it against me." His voice was still resigned and borderline depressed.

"You're going to come back for the trial, aren't you? Whenever that is. They've postponed it for now until they can find

the right Sandervauh. I mean, our part. I guess, they still have some charges to bring against him.” He paused, “Where are you?”

“Lying in the bottom of a dumpster... appropriate isn’t it?”

“Oh, come on, Derrick. Snap out of it.” He paused. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“I thought I heard a police siren.”

“Yeah. He’s the last one. I think. Just leaving.” His voice was monotone.

“You’re with the police?”

“No. I’m in the dumpster... remember?”

“Derrick, what’s going on?” His voice was commanding.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“I want to know, now.”

“Fine.” He paused. “They may have caught the younger Sandervauh... not positive though. It’s hard to tell in the dumpster.”

“Are you alright?”

“Sure. Why not.” It was more of a melancholy statement.

“Are you coming back?”

“I don’t know. I’ll talk to you later.” He hung up the phone.

Jess looked at Jim as he hung up the phone. “Does the prodigal return?”

Jim shook his head. “I have a feeling he’s gotten himself more trouble than he can handle... or at least he thinks he does.”

When all was finally quiet and dark again, Derrick pulled himself out of the dumpster and began walking down the dark alley, unsure what to do now. He couldn’t bring himself to turn himself in and risk being jailed. Even the thought of confinement caused his whole body to literally shake. Staring into the darkness as he walked, he pulled his cellphone from his pocket and clutched it harder and harder until it crushed then he bent down and tossed it in the sewer. No one was going to track him. No one was going to take him... not alive anyway.

## Aftermath

A melancholy mood seemed to fill the immediate atmosphere as Jim, Jess, Trent, Teresa, Matt, and Melinda walked down the courthouse steps toward their own cars. Everyone was immersed in their own thoughts. Concern prevailed after the rulings. While the younger Sandervauh had been sentenced to a minimum of forty years, his father had been released on time served, a fine, and probation. He had already vowed revenge on Derrick. The judge had warned if any of the witness got even so much as one nuisance phone call that could be traced back to him, he would be behind bars before sundown. No one was quite sure if that would protect them all or not. They were all thankful to be going home, but no one could be quite sure that home was even safe.

Jim was also concerned about Derrick. He hadn’t heard from him since the night the police had captured Sandervauh. No one had been able to locate him to contact him to come to the trial. There were rumors that he had hooked up with Carlos down in Mexico and other rumors that he had run to the wilderness of Canada. Some rumors were even circulating that he had been killed by one of Sandervauh’s top henchmen. Jim was getting so sick of rumors and predictions of gloom and doom. He

could believe that Derrick was on the run, but he wouldn't believe that he had joined with the forces of evil like Carlos had. He believed that Derrick had been instrumental in the capture of Sandervauh, even if there was no evidence to corroborate that. He just wouldn't believe that Derrick had joined forces with them, no matter what the gunmen said.

Matt's mind was on Taylor. She had gone into Labor Day before yesterday and delivered yesterday afternoon. It had been difficult. She had been in labor nearly twenty-four hours before they decided to take the baby by c-section. After all the effort, she wound up with quite a handsome little boy with lungs of iron. He only wished she had looked more impressed. He hoped she wasn't still considering giving it up for adoption, but he had a feeling she was. They were both still in the hospital, but last he heard, she would be able to come home tomorrow.

Trent walked with his arm around Teresa, so happy to be going home to his own home, reunited with his wife and kids. Everything in him wanted to put a closing parenthesis around this chapter in his life and pick up where he had left off before any of this started. His home was waiting. His job was waiting. His wife and kids were all ready to move on with their life together.

Melinda thought about Matt. He had so much on his plate right now. Taylor and the baby coming home in a couple days. His surgery at the end of the week. She prayed daily that the surgery would work, and he would get his hearing back. She missed him so much at the hospital. It seemed like a different place around there without him. They had to hire three doctors to replace him and none of them were even half as good. She'd seen two people get misdiagnosed already. Even the nurses he used to jump on regularly for incompetence, missed him. She'd seen him gradually change a lot since he had accepted Christ. He was softer and more open. Now that she desired to talk with him and learn about him, she couldn't very easily. She wanted so badly for him to be able to hear again... for his life to get back to normal... if that was possible with Taylor and the baby.

Jess smiled as she looked up into the sky and watched the first flurries of the day start to spiral down. She so wanted a white Christmas this year, and it looked like they were going to get it. Christmas was less than a week away, and they still had so much to do. After all they'd been through the last few weeks, she wanted this to be one of their best Christmases ever. Her parents would be back in a few days and then they would all go out together and cut down a tree. Her efforts to get Morgan excited had worked, and the little girl couldn't wait to see what was going to be for her under the tree. Jess couldn't wait to get back to her quaint country home and start decorating. She so hoped that adventure and danger had ended in their life at least for a long while. She was ready for a nice, quiet, merry Christmas.

"Well, I guess, I'll see you all later." Matt who was in the middle of the group started to split for his car.

"Hey," Jim took his arm to stop him and to lift his device closer. "Good luck on the surgery in a couple days. We'll be praying for you."

Matt read it and nodded. "Thanks."

Teresa, arm looped in Trent's, turned slightly and added. "Our family's going to pause at ten 'o clock to stop and pray for you when you go in." Matt gave a slight smile and nodded in her direction.

"Me too," Melinda said, "but I guess that's a given since I'm going to be right there with him." She smiled.

Everyone veered toward their own cars. "Merry Christmas, everyone!" Jess called after them as they headed toward their own truck.

Teresa and Melinda turned back and waved. "Merry Christmas!"

## A Merry Christmas for Some

"'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house all the creatures were stirring... even a mouse?" Jim came back in the living room with what he hoped was the last box of ornaments.

Holding a red Christmas ball in one hand, Jess put her other hand on her hip as she turned toward him. "There better not be!"

He smiled. "Is this the last box?"

"I think so." She turned toward the plump white pine and dangled the ball on one of its branches. "There should be another small red tote somewhere, but I think we got enough. This one isn't as tall as usual."

"That's because it's *fluffy*." He sat down on the couch and picked up his once hot mint cocoa and began stirring the candy cane. "And since that is deemed to be the most important factor when locating the *perfect* Christmas tree, I'd say it's just fine." He took a sip. "Besides, I distinctly remember getting a unanimous vote of approval from all members of the gang before I began sawing."

"I know. It is perfect." She hung another ornament. "Short, but cute."

Jim smiled again, then yawned. "You know it's past midnight."

"Very well aware." She grabbed two ornaments and arranged them both a once and then stepped back to make sure everything looked even. "If someone had gone with us earlier to cut down the tree, we wouldn't...."

"I had to work yesterday! The day before I had to help foal that new colt. The day before that...."

Jess let out an exaggerated sigh and then grinned. "Excuses... excuses."

"All one hundred percent credible ones, though." He got up, walked behind her, and draped his arms around her.

She used the opportunity to hand him an ornament. "Here. This one goes at the top."

Giving her a look, he took the ornament and reached it to the top of the tree, right near the blinking angel. "Someday we're going to get a tree short enough for you to reach the whole thing."

"Absolutely not!" She put her hands on her hips and returned the look. "I don't do little fiberoptics!"

"Why not? We got one at the station."

Mumbling, she returned to decorating. "I guess I should be impressed that you got anything at all. You should see the station across town. They even have lights outside."

"Bet *they* don't got a tree." He paused. "Besides I think fiberoptic's very pretty."

"Um hmm." She handed him another ornament. "You think it's a lot less work."

"Well, you got me there," he mumbled as he plopped the hook on an upper branch.

Smiling and shaking her head, she leaned back against his chest and pulled his arms back around her. "It sure is good to be home, isn't it?" She stared at the twinkling multicolored lights dancing around the tree.

"Um hmm." Bending down, he kissed the side of her neck.

"Jim!" Giggling, she elbowed him in the stomach. "You're digressing from the matter at hand." Bending down, she grabbed two more ornaments and handed one to him.

"Oh al-right." He took the blue icicle and tried to find a vacant spot that wouldn't make Jess feel that the tree looked lopsided.

She quickly resupplied him with another. "We'd better hurry if you want to go to bed soon because we still have those extra five presents to wrap."

"That's okay." He wrapped his arms around her again and stared over her shoulder at the blazing flames in the fireplace. "I like spending a nice romantic evening with my wife, trimming the tree."

Resting her hand on his arm, she smiled, and they both stayed like that for several moments, him staring at the fire, her staring at the tree... until interruption came by way of a loud gasp as Jess pulled away and spun around to face him. "The turkey!"

As the words registered, Jim let his heart settle a little from where it had jumped in his throat. "The turkey?"

Her eyes widened even further. "Did you take it out?!" Still stunned by the sudden change, Jim simply shook his head. "Oh, Jim!" Spinning around, Jess ran toward the kitchen. "I hope it thaws in time!"

Alone with nothing but his crackling fire, Jim stared down at the frosty pink ball in his hand, sighed, and hung it on the best branch he could find. Cocking his head, he looked at it and then shook his head. If he left it there, she was definitely going to say it made the tree look lopsided.

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Nodding with satisfaction, Melinda set down her last sterling silver fork next to her last Christmas China place setting. Pulling a wrinkle out of the red, holly-embroidered tablecloth, she stepped back, put her hands on her hips and gazed over the entire table and centerpiece. *Looks pretty good...* if she did say so herself.

She had been planning to decorate the table tomorrow, but she couldn't sleep, so she decided to do it tonight. Walking around the table, she pushed the high-stem crystal glasses closer to the plates. Tonight, felt like *deja vous* to the night before Thanksgiving. She was sure glad tomorrow wouldn't be a repeat. So much had happened since then... *many good things*, she reminded herself hopefully. She so hoped tomorrow would be a good day. Taylor had seemed so bitter last time she had talked to her. She hoped the young lady could cheer up for Christmas.

*It'll be good to see Matt again.* She hadn't seen him since he got home from the hospital. She couldn't wait till he was released to go back to work in January. She wouldn't have believed a few months ago how much she would miss seeing him at work every day.

Derrick wouldn't be here this time. She was about done trying to figure him out. The guy was too complex. She hoped he was alright. It would be a debit for the world if he wasn't. He had amazing instincts for survival and rescue that few could rival. She'd heard many stories about the lost causes that only he could rescue. He had this ironclad reputation for always making it out, always being the one to get away, and if you were with him... well....

She pushed the evergreens closer around one of the candles in the centerpiece. Still, she wouldn't want his life, it seemed like he was ever pursuing or being pursued by danger... *always* running for his life. Still... She fluffed a poinsettia. ...she couldn't help wanting to cheer him on. She refused to believe the rumors that he had turned bad and gone after the money on the other side. People were always saying he was volatile, self-centered, didn't care about anything, had very little use for other people. Those people were only looking at his rough exterior and not his track record. After all, he hadn't needed to help Matt when he did. He wasn't obligated. Still, there was no whitewashing the fact that it had been plain wrong to deny medical attention to Mark... even if he was a criminal. She wanted to ask Matt about what really happened sometime, maybe tomorrow now that he could hear her.

Backing up, she turned off the dining room lights and headed for the kitchen. She'd just double check to make sure she'd put all the food away, then she guessed she'd head for bed. After all, she had to get up early to get the ham in the oven. She hoped tomorrow turned out to be a good day. She hoped everyone would have a good time... especially Taylor. She wasn't at all sure Taylor knew what a good time was anymore.

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"What are you doing up already?" Mellissa pulled her robe tighter around her as she walked into the kitchen and glanced around at the open flour and sugar sacks, the flour sprinkled all over the flour, the empty yeast packets lying around, the left-over cinnamon goo on the counter, and the unused stick of butter sitting so close to the stove it was melting.

"Good morning, honey! Come on in and sit down. Thought I'd make you breakfast for a change.... You've been so tired lately." His voice trailed off as he reached in the fridge and pulled out cream cheese and milk. "You haven't lived until you've had made-from-scratch cinnamon rolls!"

Mellissa crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "Are you criticizing my premade cinnamon rolls, now?" She wasn't sure she liked this new Chef mentality. It felt like competition for her kitchen... even though she didn't really like to cook.

"Honey, they aren't yours. They're...." She scowled at him. "Never mind. Wait till you try these! It's Mac's signature recipe. We've been making them so much, I practically have it memorized. Of course, I had to cut it in tenths." He broke the seal on the milk.

"I hope you divided right," She muttered, not able to help her skepticism.

"Ahh." He opened the oven door, breathing in the fragrant steam and gazing at the plump, browning rolls. "Perfecto." He spun around, smiled at Mellissa, and headed for his mixing bowl. "Almost done."

Walking to the table, she watched him dump in cream cheese and butter then turn on the mixer. The whirring made her seasick. Putting her hand to her stomach, she caught herself on the table and stared at the wall to stop the spinning. "Uh, Wade?"

"Yes, honey?" He didn't look at her as he added a couple glugs of milk to the mixture.

Sitting down, she looked over at the counter dripping with cinnamon sugar and splattered with bits of dough. Then she glanced at the stove, expecting smoke to start billowing out any minute. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Honey. Re-laxxx. I'm a professional cook, now." He flipped off the beaters and headed back to the stove just as the timer buzzed.

"Ye-eah but..." Her voice trailed off as he opened the oven door and so much steam escaped it almost resembled smoke. Her mind envisioned the last time he had tried to make cinnamon rolls... the prepackaged kind. They had wound up with tiny neatly arranged chunks of charcoal on a burnt cookie sheet and minor smoke damage.

"Ahh, beautiful." He pulled out a nine by fifteen pan overflowing with gooey, golden, drippy cinnamon rolls. Mellissa's mouth dropped. She just didn't believe it. *What happened?* Right before her eyes her husband had changed from the terror of America's test kitchen into Betty Crocker! She walked over to stove to get a closer look at them as Wade hurried back to his mixing bowl. Turning toward him, she opened her mouth to say something just as a cloud of powdered sugar puffed from the mixing bowl as he dumped the whole bag at once. Crossing her arms, she watched as he turned on the mixer and loose powdered sugar hazed the air. Smiling, she shook her head as he began coughing from the smoke. *Maybe he isn't quite Betty Crocker, yet. ... What a relief!* She'd about reconciled herself to losing kitchen status permanently. ... Of course, she would have a new status very soon. Feeling light-headed again, she pulled her eyes from the mixer and leaned back against the stove.

Flipping off the mixer, Wade brought the bowl of whipped frosting over to the cinnamon rolls. "You okay, honey?" He began drizzling the frosting in a decorative motion.

"Just tired." She watched him drizzle the frosting over some and smooth it thicker over others.

"You've been tired a lot lately. Maybe you should go see your doctor."

"I already did."

"Oh, good. Well, what did she say?"

"She said the problems will correct themselves in about seven months' time." A tentative smile pursed her lips.

Mouth dropping slightly as realization set in, Wade forgot about the bowl in his hand letting it tip so much that the frosting flooded that corner of the cinnamon rolls. "Wade!" She pulled the bowl from his hands.

He kept staring at her. "You, you, you, mean, uh, um, oh wow! We, we're, we're gonna have a, a, a..." Mellissa nodded ecstatically. "Oh, wow!" He grabbed her into a hug and lifting her from her feet spun her around. "Thank you, Lord! You're wonderful!" After spinning her several times, he set her down but kept ahold of her, sure that that had made her dizzy. Holding on to him, she smiled back. They both held each other's excited gaze for several moments, before Wade, regaining his sense of responsibility, supported her more staunchly and guided her over to the table. "You better get some rest. You need to conserve your strength for when the baby comes."

"Wade, that's over seven months away."

"No sense waiting till the last minute." He helped her into the chair.

"Thank you, but I'm really fine. I worked all through my last pregnancy with Davy, remember?"

Rushing to the fridge he didn't seem to hear her. "We'd better get you something to eat, orange juice or egg nog?" Knowing her, he reached for the egg nog as he spoke.

“Egg nog sounds delicious.”

“Are you sure you should? I mean, orange juice has all that vitamin C.”

“Wade, it’s Christmas. I’ll reform tomorrow. Besides egg nog probably has calcium.”

“Does it?” He turned the carton to read the label as he brought it over.

“Did you iron this?” She pulled the edge of her red and gold Christmas tablecloth.

“I did.” He poured the cinnamony egg nog into the long stem crystal glass in front of her.

“I didn’t even know you knew where I kept my good China. The table’s lovely.” She gazed over it.

“Why thank you.” He went back to the fridge and pulled out a crystal bowl heaped with a multicolored fruit salad.

“Maybe after I have this chef thing down pat, I’ll get into interior design.” He scooped the salad into her small crystal bowl and then some into his. Then whistling he went to get the cinnamon rolls. Smiling, she admired the salad, sliced strawberries, bananas, green and purple grapes, pineapple, and kiwi all mixed together with sugary coconut. “Wow, Wade, I’m impressed.”

Grinning, he set the pan of mammoth sweet rolls on the corner of the table and began cutting them apart. Cinnamon syrup dripped from the knife in between each slice. “Wait until you try these. You haven’t lived till you’ve tasted one of Mac’s Espresso extraordinaire....”

“Espresso?”

“Oh, you know what I mean.” He grabbed the pancake turner and slipped it under the first roll.

“I hope not.”

As he lifted it, a tantalizing aroma filled the atmosphere through the escaping steam. Melted frosting and cinnamon sugar trickled down the sides. “And wa-lla.” He set it on her plate with a self-satisfied grin and then went back to get one for himself.

“Wow.” She stared at it, eyes widening, mouthwatering. “All I’ve got to say is, ‘I better not get morning sickness today.’” She glanced up at him. “What do you have planned for dinner?”

“Ahh ha.” He plopped down in his chair and cut off a piece of the outside layer of his roll. “You’ll have to wait and see.” He put it in his mouth and closed his eyes in delight as he chewed it. “Umm. Sensational.”

Mellissa just glanced down at hers, not wanting to spoil the beauty of the place setting by eating it. To her, the room had such a quaint, peaceful, magical feel to it, from the soft Christmas music in the background to the snow falling outside to her blooming poinsettia he had plopped in the middle of the table for a centerpiece. She wished for this moment to be frozen in time.

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“Good morning, honey.”

Jess glanced back from the electric skillet after putting the first two slices of bacon on it. “Good morning, mom. Sleep well?”

“I had a wonderful night’s sleep, did you?” She sat down at the table.

“I always have a great night’s sleep when Jim’s home... and you woke up with about perfect timing.” She kept placing bacon until the electric skillet was full. “Breakfast should be ready in about ten or fifteen minutes. Is Dad coming?”

“He was still reading his Bible when I came down, but I can go up and tell him when you’re about ready.”

Jess nodded. “Oh, and,” She hurried over to the oven. “For the *fiesta resistance*....” She opened the oven door to let the aroma waft out.

“Blueberry muffins!” They both said together and then laughed.

"Just because *I know*, you like them as much as I do." She closed the oven door and headed back to the griddle.

"You come by it naturally. Where's Jim?"

Jess lifted the first piece of bacon to check under it. "Oh, he, a, ran out to feed and water the horses, Hmm..." She put it back down, deciding to give it a few more seconds. "before Morgan wakes up."

"Oh, let me wake her." Kathy stood back up, eagerly.

Jess smiled. "Okay. I'm sure she'd enjoy that... but remind her, there's no opening presents until after dinner." Jess thrust her fork in an up and down motion as if pointing her finger.

Kathy smiled at the fork. "Yes, dear."

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Whistling Jingle Bells, Jim lugged out the last two buckets of water he needed for the final heated water trough. The cold wind bit his face as he exited the barn and walked up the sloping, frozen hill to the pasture gate. In the summer, he resorted to a hose, but in the winter, the job still required a bucket brigade. One of the mares standing at the gate nudged his arm as he entered, causing some of the water to slosh over the edge. "Hey, quit that." He headed for the trough. She followed him, nickering occasionally. "I don't want to hear it. You got to spend the day inside yesterday. Today is Blacky's turn." She nudged him again as he dumped it. At least this time the water went in the trough. "Write a letter to your senator," he mumbled as he walked back to the gate. She followed him to it, but not through it; he saw to that.

Coming back inside, he stomped the snow off his boots and dumped the buckets over by the faucet. Now, all he had to do was toss down a few bales of hay, and.... He whistled as he bounded up the steps, into the loft, and over to the stack of hay. He grabbed the top bail and.... "Hey, Jim."

*YIPE!* He jumped back ten feet letting the bail fall as Derrick stepped out from behind the stack of hay. "Don't do that to me!" He tried to remind himself how to breathe. Derrick couldn't help smiling. "What are you doing here? Where have you been? You know how many people have been looking for you?"

"Not many I hope."

"Well, most people do consider it a lost cause." He walked toward him. "Hey, friend." He grabbed his arm and pulled him into a rough man hug, slapping his back and then pushing him away. "Hey, what's going on? I tried to call you."

"Yeah." Derrick glanced down as he stepped back. "I decided I didn't want to be contacted. They had plenty of witnesses."

"Thanks to you!" Derrick looked back up at him, questioningly. "They found out that Sandervauh's geek squad had located the safe house for me and Jess and the one for Teresa and Melinda. They were trying to contact him while he was at the factory. Luckily, they never got his approval to make the hit. So, there's another time you saved my life."

Derrick shrugged and looked away. "You probably would have been able to get out of it anyway." Then he looked back.

"Maybe... but it's pretty hard to make war against a bazooka and a helicopter."

"Yeah." Derrick's voice was soft, and he looked down again. There were a few moments of silence between them. Jim tried to figure out what to say and how to say it.

"So, are you back, buddy. You gonna fight the charges?"

Derrick's pleading eyes jerked back up at him. "What are the charges?"

Jim's eyes were pleading right back at him. "Go find out."

Derrick cracked his neck hard with a snap, crossed his arms, and looked away. "No."

Jim looked down and then back at up him, shaking his head slightly. "I don't know what they are officially. They're saying you refused aid to a dying man and you held six people against their will."

Derrick's eyes ignited with fire as he looked back at Jim. "It doesn't matter that three of them were killers!"

Jim shrugged. "Tell them that!"

"And he was not dying the night before!" He looked away.

Jim looked unconvinced. "How do you know that?"

"I've been around death my whole life. I know when someone's at risk for it."

Jim shrugged again. "Maybe you were wrong." Derrick shot him a look and headed for the stairs. "What." Jim grabbed his arm. Derrick jerked it away. "There's supposed to be a snowstorm coming."

"No kidding! Give me some credit. I know how to read nature even if I can't read people!"

"Really?" Jim wanted to ask how he knew. He never knew Derrick to carry a smartphone. "How have you been living the past few weeks? I happen to know you haven't used your credit card or been back to your bank." Derrick just glared, causing Jim to shrug again. "Take it easy. I'm not the one that's been tracking you. You want some food? You look like you've lost weight."

Derrick's face softened. He looked down and walked a couple steps away. "That would be good of you."

"Is that why you came?"

Derrick shrugged. "I've been living off the land, but it's been kind of a hard winter the last week or so."

"Are you still using your truck?" Jim asked curiously. Not answering, Derrick kept walking away. "Why don't you turn yourself in? At least you'd have food and a warm place to sleep."

Derrick spun back around, his eyes blazing with fire. "No one's going to lock me up!" Jim took a step back and stiffened, the look enough to make him cautious. Derrick, noticing the change, softened his gaze a little. Shifting his weight, he ran his hand through his hair and slapped it down against his side. "I'm not dange-rous!" His voice broke. "I only defended myself."

"And others," Jim added, cautiously. "You have a lot of people in your corner. Trent's a good ally to have."

Derrick gave a sarcastic laugh. "He won't hang with me long when the chips are down." He resumed walking around.

"You don't know that. You saved his life. There's Henry and Drake, too. I've never heard Drake say a bad word about you."

"Henry would... and Trent's not wired for... gratitude. He's got the whole world split into right and wrong, and there's nothing in between. It doesn't matter what you've done for him, if he believes you've done something wrong, he'll turn on you."

There was silence a moment. "Do you believe you did something wrong?"

Looking back at Jim, Derrick stopped walking, leaned back against the hay and stared off into the distance. "I never should have gotten involved with Matt. He just seemed so helpless, but it was none of my business."

"Yeah, well, if you hadn't, you never would have gotten Sandervauh."

Derrick shrugged and resumed walking. "True."

"The issue is, you could have still gotten him the same way you did if you had called the police right away for Matt and Taylor."

"But I didn't know that!" His voice was a strained low volume yell as he turned back toward Jim.

"Did you pray about it?" Jim's voice was rather matter-a-fact.

"I don't remember." He walked away again.

"That's convenient," Jim mumbled.

“Look!” Derrick spun back around with his hands out. “I made a mistake!”

“Yes, you did!” Derrick looked away, turned, and ran his hand through his hair. Jim didn’t look away, but his voice softened. “You should have called the police immediately. No one has the right to hold captives....” His voice strengthened again. “Whether they *believe* they’re in the right or not.”

“Yeah, well, it’s done!” Derrick spun around sharply and faced him. His face earnest. “I can’t change the past!” he yelled, holding Jim’s gaze for several moments before breaking it and walking away. “What do you want me to do?” He raised his hands again in a gesture that suggested there was nothing he could do.

Jim’s face lightened, allowing a slight, hopeful smile. “Do you really want to know?”

Derrick glanced at him. “No.”

“Look, you’re suspended from your job. You can’t have much money left. You’re having trouble finding food and surviving in the cold. You don’t have many options left.”

“I can make it.”

“What are you going to do, cease to exist, quit contributing to life completely. Just live off the land like an animal until the day you die?”

“It’s preferable to rotting in jail!” He held Jim’s gaze a moment, shook his head, ran his hand through his hair, sat down on the bed, took his coat off, and laid down. “You gonna tell the police I was here?” He rested his forearm over his eyes.

Jim took a few steps toward him. “No.” His voice was soft. “Not unless they ask.” He stared down at him a moment. His shirt was torn and dirty. Dried blood covered a couple of the tears. His jeans were torn and bloody where a bullet had creased his thigh. He looked rail thin. He was breathing hard. Sweat dripped down the sides of his neck. “I’ll bring you some of our dinner after we make it. If I can get away before that, I’ll bring you some bread and lunchmeat.”

Derrick took his arm from his face and looked up at him with pleading eyes. “Maybe some energy bars or a jar of peanut butter?”

Looking up, Jim leaned back against the curved wooden beam holding the roof and wall and sighed. “I shouldn’t support you in running away.”

Derrick’s face fell and he returned his arm to rest over it. “Fine. I don’t need any support. If you don’t want to bring me any food, that’s fine. I’ll just leave.”

Jim looked back at him. “And you’ll die! That snowstorm’s supposed to be a bad one.”

Derrick shook his head and spoke groggily. “I’d rather die free than live in a cage.”

Jim just stared at him for several minutes as he fell asleep, then shaking his own head, he walked over and picked up the bale of hay that had fallen to the ground. He wished he knew what to do. He lugged the bale down the stairs. He guessed he didn’t have a choice. He couldn’t betray his friend, even if he felt Derrick was making the wrong decision. It was still his decision. Carrying the bale out to the pasture, he prayed for his friend, prayed he’d make the right decision, prayed he’d survive. He looked like he could be half dead lying there. He couldn’t believe how relentless the guy was. Anyone else, he could simply say he was calling the police, and in that condition, they wouldn’t be able to fight it. Not Derrick. He’d go out and fight the snow storm... without food if necessary... and ten to one, he’d make it.

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“Hi, come on in! Whoa, that wind’s cold! Starting to snow already.” Melinda gently pulled Matt and Taylor inside the door. “Oh, look at that little one!” Melinda leaned toward the bundle in Taylor’s arms and offered her finger to the baby. “Can I hold it?” Melinda’s eyes were sparkling.

Taylor’s eyes nowhere near matched her enthusiasm. “Be my guest.” She nearly flopped the baby into Melinda’s arms.

Matt rolled his eyes. Melinda tried not to react. “Aren’t you a handsome boy?” She stared into the little one’s wide-eyed and slobbery face. The little guy grasped tight hold on her finger. “How’s he sleeping at night, now?” Melinda turned ever-

cheerfully toward them.

“Better than he was, at least,” Taylor mumbled, arms crossed.

“Turning soft music on at night did seem to help him.” Matt tried to force a smile on his hard-set face.

“Well, good.” Melinda looked down at the baby and then back up at Matt. “It’s so good to have you able to hear again!”

He nodded. “I missed it.”

“Well, go ahead and sit down,” Melinda directed them as they entered the dining room. “Mom should be here any minute. She’s just running a little late today, probably ‘cause of the snow.”

“There’s no rush.” Matt pulled a chair out for Taylor. Taylor scowled at him but plopped down. Matt rolled his eyes and walked away.

Melinda pulled her keys from her pocket for the baby to play with and sat down. “Everything going okay?” She stared questioningly at Taylor.

“If you like being in prison your whole life then everything’s going just fine.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “No one forced you to become pregnant.”

“No, but someone sure forced me not to terminate it!”

“You mean terminate the baby! Call it what it is!” Matt yelled, leaning against the back of a chair. The baby started to cry. Taylor rolled her eyes and turned away.

Melinda, grimacing at all the noise, bounced the baby in her arms, trying to get it calmed down. “Come on, guys. It’s Christmas! We need a little ho-ho-ho in here.”

“Ho. Ho,” Taylor replied, dryly.

Melinda smiled. “Have you decided yet about returning to school next semester?”

“I want to.” Taylor’s voice began the sentence with emphasis and ended with a sigh.

Melinda glanced from Taylor to Matt. Matt crossed his arms. “I think she should retake the year next year.”

“He just wants me tied down to this baby.” Taylor motioned to it in disdain.

Melinda gave a look like, *aww*, and glanced down into the baby’s contented, gurgling face. “The baby’s only been here for less than two weeks!” Matt added.

“But I’ve,” Taylor jumped up and pointed to herself. “been tied down to him for nearly a year.” She looked from Matt to Melinda. “He won’t let me give it away.” She wagged her head toward her father and stared at Melinda for support.

Melinda held the baby tighter, her face helpless. “I’d take him.”

“Well, you take him then, and I’ll go back to school!” She put her hands on her hips and then crossed her arms.

Melinda looked down into the baby’s face and smiled, gently. “Maybe we can work something out.” She glanced back up at Matt whose hard-set face didn’t look sold.

Taylor thumbed over her shoulder at her dad. “He wants me to become attached to it!” Her voice and face were accusatory.

Melinda looked down, trying to conceal a laugh at Taylor’s outrage. “Well, dear, it is your baby.”

“Not for long. Not if I have my way.” She directed a defiant glance toward Matt.

“Well, this is one time you’re not going to get your way!” Matt walked toward her, but she refused to back up or even acknowledge him. “Because I want my grandson.” Now, his voice was accusatory.

"Then you raise him!" She stared him down, defiantly.

"I will if I have to." He nodded.

Giving a half smile, she wagged her head and walked away. "Poor kid."

Matt ground his teeth. Melinda tried to figure out how to mediate. "Staying home can be awful lonely especially for someone so young. There are some good daycares in town." She smiled hopefully. The smile was not returned by either party.

"He is too young for a daycare." Matt's voice was a low growl.

"Oh. Well..." Melinda stood up as the doorbell rang. "Come on, guys," She handed the baby back to Taylor. "cheer up. It's Christmas!" She hurried out of the room.

Matt just glared at Taylor. "What?" She glared back.

"I don't see how you can have so little regard for your own flesh and blood."

She wagged her head. "Maybe I come by it naturally." She stared at him. His expression didn't soften. "What do you want me to do, give up my whole life for this baby!"

"No, actually, all I want you to do is name it. Name the baby, Taylor!"

Taylor looked away. "I'm working on it."

"Hi, mom, come on in." Melinda did her utmost to stay upbeat as she opened the door, trying not to be pushed back by the cold blast of wind that hit her. "Sorry. I didn't know I locked the door."

"That's okay, honey." Maggie hurried in from the cold and took her hat and scarf off. "Boy, is it cold out there!" She handed her hat and scarf to Melinda and took her coat off. "And that snow, it's bad in spots."

"Really? It just started here." Melinda spoke absentmindedly, her mind obviously somewhere else."

"You alright, honey?" Maggie rubbed her daughter's arm. Melinda smiled back at her and nodded. Maggie pulled her into a hug. "Merry Christmas, Sweetie."

Melinda hugged her back. "Merry Christmas, Mom."

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Wade lifted the lid of the saucepan on the back burner. "And that looks good, too."

Sitting at the table watching him, Mellissa shook her head. "I just can't get over it. I'd never believe someone could change sooo... radically."

"You know, honey." He opened the oven door and breathed in the sweet and sour aroma of ham balls. "You'd probably be more comfortable relaxing in the living room. You know, for the baby."

"No, no. That's okay. Me and the baby are fine. This is more entertaining." Wade smiled to himself as he turned the nine by thirteen pans in the oven. *Why do people always feel that way about watching me cook?* "Hey, I think your phone's ringing." Mellissa started to get up.

"Who'd be calling me on Christmas? He closed the oven door.

"I'll go and see." She headed toward the ringing in the living room in attempt to track down his phone.

"Tell whoever it is to call back tomorrow!" He headed toward the fridge.

"It's Carlos!" She called back as she answered it. *Carlos?* He spun around, hit the button to turn off the oven, and ran toward the living room. Mellissa was already yelling into the phone when he got there. "I don't know how you can call yourself a fireman! How can you let other people call you a hero! Honestly, I just don't understand how you can sleep at night! A more worthless piece of humanity, I have never met! A man that would stoop so low as to use a helpless little baby as a bargaining chip...."

"Honey, Honey!" Wade pulled the phone away from her. "Hey-ey, Carlos. Sorry about.... What?"

"I said, 'the deal's off!'" He repeated loudly.

"Look, man, she didn't mean to...."

"It's not because of that. I'm used to hysterical women. My hand was forced. I have to...."

"Carlos, you can't do that. You know it's our baby! The picture you sent us from the Christmas party, that's him. You know who has our baby! You can't just...!"

"Will you listen to me?!" Carlos outyelled him.

"Go ahead." Mellissa sat on the edge of the coffee table, trying desperately to understand their conversation, though the phone wasn't on speaker.

"You can still get the baby back, just not as planned."

"How then?" Wade's voice was suspicious.

"Tell Derrick to bring fifty grand to Red Rim Chimney Rock in Wyoming one month from today."

"Twenty-five thousand." Wade tried to haggle.

"It's nonnegotiable, Wade. Just make sure Derrick's there on January twenty-fifth before midnight and wait for someone to come with the baby. If not, you will be receiving a live video feed on your cellphone... one you won't want to watch."

"You'll kill our baby?" Wade's voice was grave. Mellissa gasped and unsuccessfully grabbed for the phone.

"Not me. I'm only the messenger. This whole business has been taken over by another party."

"Who?"

"Do you understand the message?" His voice was monotone.

"Wait a minute! No one knows where Derrick is at! No one can find him!"

"You'd better be the one who can, or your baby has exactly one month to live." His voice grew colder.

Wade swallowed hard and grimaced. "It's Sandervauh, isn't it? He threatened to kill Derrick, and this is how he's going to do it? He doesn't plan to give Davy back. He only plans to kill Derrick."

There was a momentary pause and some background noise. "Your baby will be there, alive. My boss is prepared to send you a live video of the child at ten am that morning. Two people may accompany Derrick, unarmed. They may not be cops. If you carry out his wishes completely, my boss has no interest in the baby's life. However, the baby will die if Derrick is not at the Red Rim Chimney rock one month from today." The phone disconnected.

"Wait! Where's the rock! Ohhh...." Wade slammed down the phone on the table.

"What'd he say?"

"He said, Derrick, no one else, must be at a place called Red Rim Chimney rock with fifty thousand dollars one month from today. Two guys can go with him." He rubbed his face wearily. "Presumably to take the baby back after they kill Derrick."

"Sandervauh?" Her voice and face were haunted.

"Who else?" Wade stood up and walked away.

"But no one can find Derrick!" Her voice was shrill.

Wade rubbed his hand over his face again then slapped it down at his side as he turned around sharply. "Even if we could find him, I can't ask him to go out for us on a... death mission!" His voice held strain and passion.

"Maybe he won't get killed." Wade groaned and turned away again. "No, seriously. He has a reputation for always being

the one who can get away.” Her voice was anguished.

“And what if he can’t?” Wade turned back again. “What if we get out baby back and Derrick dies? Could you live with that?”

Mellissa looked down. “I don’t know.” Her voice was soft. “Davy’s just a baby.” She looked back up at him. “He’s got his whole life ahead of him! You’d die for him... and so would I.” Her eyes were pleading. Wade stared at her for several moments, then turned back around and resumed pacing. She stood up and raised the palms of her hands in emotion. “You have to at least see what he says! At least find him and talk to him! You can’t just let them kill our baby on livestream!” She plopped back down on the table and let herself cry.

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“Well, Jessica, that was one meal well worth waiting for.” Ed folded his napkin and leaned back in his chair.

“Yes, it was delicious, honey,” Kathy agreed.

“Ummy,” Morgan agreed.

Jess smiled at Morgan, glanced at Jim who was staring off into the distance again, and then smiled back at her parents. “I’m glad you liked it. A little nontraditional timing wise but....”

“That’s okay. We all like loppers,” Kathy encouraged.

“Besides we’ll all be more hungry for pie later, and I for one am looking forward to tasting those pies.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to seeing how Jess and Morgan like the presents we brought for them. So, let’s get this mess cleaned up,” Kathy got up and started collecting plates. “so, we can see.”

“Presents!” Morgan hopped up excitedly.

“Here, honey.” Kathy handed the little girl a basket of dinner rolls. “Can you take this in the kitchen for grandma?”

“Sur,” Morgan answered softly, carefully carrying the basket toward the kitchen.

Jess began collecting the silverware. “I’ll put the food away,” Jim quickly offered, seeming to instantly snap out of his daydreams. Jess was almost startled by the sound of his voice.

“I’ll help you, my boy,” Ed offered, standing up and slapping Jim on the back as he reached for the mashed potatoes.

“Oh, that’s okay. I got it.” Jim glanced at him. “You’ll never be able to figure out the container to lid ratio and filing system. Why don’t you and Morgan go in the living room and start shaking presents?” Ed laughed in response. “And make sure the fire’s going. If there’s one thing I learned about Jess, she won’t open presents until the fire’s going, the Christmas music is playing, and the Christmas story had been read.”

Ed laughed again. “Guess we trained her right after all.” Jim smiled and pulled the grape salad near the potatoes. “Well, Morgan,” Ed looked at the little one bounding back in the room. “Want to go with Grandpa and get the family room all ready for present time?” He offered his hand.

“Sur.” Biting her lip, she skipped toward him and took his hand.

“How are you at starting fires?” he whispered toward her as they left the room.

Jim smiled as he watched them walk off, hand in hand. The he went and took out the extra plate he had hid in the china cabinet and started to fill it with food. He’d gathered a few things and taken them to Derrick earlier, the bread and lunch meat he had promised, along with a few boxes of energy bars and a jar of peanut butter that Derrick had asked for, not because he wanted to help him run away, but because he wanted Derrick to trust him and know they were still friends, so hopefully he could get him to give up his run from justice. He wouldn’t be going anywhere in this snowstorm, anyway. Jim slapped on a generous helping of mashed potatoes in between the grape salad and the turkey, then he reached for the green beans. He rehearsed his argument in his mind again. This time he would make sure he relayed it to Derrick. Last time he had gone out, Derrick had been in a dead sleep, and he couldn’t bring himself to wake him. This time he would wake him and would make him listen. He covered the plate with foil, hid it back in the cabinet, and hurried to the kitchen to retrieve containers and lids for the

leftovers.

After getting all the food stowed away in the fridge, Jim turned toward Jess who was doing the dishes with her mom. "Hey, Jess." Turning off the water, she turned to look at him but kept her hands in the soapy water holding the plate. "Since you two are still doing dishes, I'm going to run out and feed the horses, so it's done for the night."

Jess nodded and turned back to her dishes. "Good idea. Don't get lost in all that snow."

Jim forced a laugh as he headed back to the dining room to get the plate before grabbing his coat and going out by way of the garage. The biting wind blasted snow in his face the minute he stepped outside threatening to throw him backwards. Even with their outdoor lights, he could only see a very faint outline of their barn through the snow. For a moment, he was a little afraid, he might get lost just going from the house to the barn. Halfway there, he was a little alarmed as he looked back and couldn't see the house at all, but the light to the barn was getting clearer, so he kept going.

His feet were nearly numb as he trudged through the last few feet of seven-inch-deep fresh fallen snow. Relief hit him at the same time as the warm air as he pushed through the doors into the barn. "Hey, Derrick!" He called, flipping on the light. He was a little surprised Derrick didn't at least have one light on. He wondered if he was still asleep. He jogged up the steps two at a time to the loft. The place seemed eerily quiet. "Hey, Derrick!" Reaching the top, he hopped up onto the wood-plank floor, switched on the light, and turned toward the bed. He was gone. Squeezing his eyes closed in a grimace, Jim groaned and rubbed the back of his neck. *Oh, Derrick.... That's stupid!*

Turning, he flipped off the lights and went back down the stairs into the viewing room. Shaking his head, he put the plate down on the table. Turning, he walked to the cupboards, he knew Derrick had a few things left in there from before. He wondered if Derrick remembered. Empty. *He did.* That was probably what he had mainly come for. Still, Jim was glad he'd given him some extra food. He hoped somehow the guy had a chance out there. He wished he knew if he had his truck somewhere close by or if he was trying to survive the storm without it. *Ohh, Derrick... He leaned back against the window. ...be safe.* Jim looked up and closed his eyes. *Please, keep him safe.*

Feeling his cellphone vibrate, Jim took it out of his pocket, answering it as he walked back to the table and put his foot up on the chair. "Hey, Wade. Having a good Christmas?"

"It had its moments." Wade's voice was about as sad as Jim's. "Mellissa's pregnant," he stated.

"He-ey! Really? Well, congratulations, Wade! That's wonderful!" Jim's voice brightened right up with that happy news. Wade's didn't.

"Yeah." His voice was flat.

"Hey, what's wrong, buddy? You sound sorta... depressed."

"Oh, I don't know. You haven't seen Derrick around lately, have you?"

Jim's eyebrows jumped in surprise. *Popular guy. You're looking for him too?* "Why?"

"Have you seen him?!" Wade voice changed to hopeful anticipation.

"What's going on? Why would you want to see Derrick?" *They issue a reward or something?*

"I have to find him, or Davy will be killed."

"Davy! You found him?" *Why not another shock for the day?*

"Sandervauh has him."

"Sandervauh! How did that happen?!" Jim was surprised at the amount of outrage in his own voice.

"How should I know. We've been communicating with Carlos about the baby. Somehow, he ran across him down there, and he was going to rescue him and use that act as a bargaining chip to get back into the country. Somehow Sandervauh got wind of it, I guess. Now they have the baby, and they're holding him for ransom!"

"Oh, no." Jim rubbed his forehead. This day was going to give him a headache yet.

"He said if I want Davy back, Derrick has to bring fifty thousand dollars to a place called Red Rim Castle rock before midnight one month from today." He paused. "Otherwise they are going to livestream Davy's death to my phone."

Jim groaned. "You know he doesn't plan to let Derrick live."

"I told him that. He said two others could come with Derrick to the meet, presumably to take the baby back if Derrick is unable to return."

"So basically, you're trading Derrick for the baby." Jim's voice was both matter-a-fact and accusatory.

"Yeah." Wade's voice was soft. "That's Sandervauh's plan..., but that doesn't have to be our plan, does it?"

"No-o." Jim sighed. "How do you plan to find Derrick?"

"I was hoping you might know where he is." Wade's voice was tentative.

"No. I have no idea. He was here, but he left some time ago."

"He was there today?!"

"Yeah, but we can't track him. The news says there are cars in the ditch all over the place. I couldn't even hardly see to get to my barn. I don't even know if Derrick's driving or walking."

"Either way he couldn't have gotten far! Walking!" Wade accidentally yelled the last word. "He'll die out there!"

"Yeah, was kind of thinking the same thing. He doesn't intend to. He took some extra food, blankets, and ammo."

"First thing in the morning when this snow's stopped, we have to start looking! Probably in the woods behind your property! If he's got his truck, he could be long gone."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. He's got to try and conserve gas!" Wade's voice was hyper. "The more he uses, the more chances he takes stopping to fill it up. Besides how much money could he have?"

"He could have stopped and borrowed some from somebody."

"Okay. So, we'll call around and ask. Come on, Jim. Together we can find him. Maybe even get Sandervauh put away for good! What do you say?"

"I don't know." Jim spoke thoughtfully. "I've been kind of hoping the Sandervauh organization was done with. Been kind of hoping to get out of the danger zone for a while." Silence on the other end. "I'll go with you for a while on my days off and see where this leads, but that's all I can promise right now." Jim's voice was firm. "I have a family to think about, too."

"Sure. I understand. I appreciate any help you can give me."

"Well, I hope it works out for you. I hope you can get Davy back safe... and I'll try to help." His voice was tentative. "We'll just see what I have to do."

"Okay. Thanks, friend."

"Okay. See you in the morning. What time?"

"I'll be at your house around six."

"Wade, it won't even be light out, yet."

"We can still drive around. I want to be ready."

"Alright. See you then." Jim hung up the phone and headed for the door. Shaking his head, he flipped off the light and went to get the hay for the horses. At least no one could accuse his life of being boring.

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"How's it coming?" Melinda walked into the guest room where Taylor was just getting finished changing her little baby.

"I'll be there in a minute." Taylor's eyes and voice were weary.

"I just thought maybe I could help." She approached, slowly and tentatively.

"No, I'd better do it myself." Taylor's voice was dramatically exasperated. "You see my dad wants us to become attached, glued together, inseparable, together forever and forever!"

Melinda tried not to laugh at the rising drama and perhaps anxiety level in her voice. "I'm sure that's not true. He certainly wasn't glued to his kids."

"No, but mom was. There's a different playbook for girls. A women's place is in the home." She wagged her head as she recited the last sentence.

"I doubt that's true. He works with professional women all the time. I think he just wants you to get to accept the baby, maybe even learn to love him before you hand his care off to someone else."

Taylor stopped buttoning up the baby's onesie and looked at her. "How can I learn to love something I resent?" Her eyes pleaded for an answer.

Melinda looked down, running her finger on the edge of the dresser. "Maybe this isn't a good example because I doubt your father ever resented you, but he did push you away when your mother died." She glanced up at Taylor. Taylor looked away and finished buttoning the baby. "He learned to love you again..., but not on his own. Do you remember when he changed?"

Taylor looked up and stared at the mirror thoughtfully. "Yeah, sort of." She stared for several moments, thinking. Then suddenly, her face and her voice hardened. "It was after he almost lost me in that waterfall accident." She picked up the baby, lying him on her shoulder, and walked away, bouncing him a little as she paced.

"No-o." Melinda's face was soft as she turned to look at her. "It was after he accepted Christ into his life."

"If you're looking for a convert, you'd better look somewhere else." She sat down in the rocking chair and began rocking both of them.

"I'm not looking for a convert." Melinda tried to be patient. "You wanted to know how to love." She kept her voice soft. "You can't know how to love unless you know Christ because He is love."

"He's dead."

"Not hardly."

"Look, I don't plan to get hung up with your religion, so you might as well not waste your time. It's just another chain society tries to hang on you to force you to be good and to keep up with their norms." Her voice was angry.

"No, God is a person, who created man in his own image to take care of His earth, to talk with until man sinned."

"The world was formed over millions of years by a series of genetic mutations," Taylor argued.

"Do you believe there is a God?" Melinda watched her earnestly.

Taylor didn't look back. She stared off into the distance thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"How many questions can you answer? Why is the earth here? Why are people here? Why do people wear clothes? Why does everything die?" She paused. "Why is right right and wrong wrong?"

"Why is it?"

Melinda thought a moment. "Because life doesn't work right. You can't have happiness and peace when you live wrong. Take Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery, when you do it, it sort of messes your life up, doesn't it?"

Taylor forced eye connect with fiery eyes. "It's this \*expletive\* baby that's messing my life up. If it wasn't for my father's high moral values, I could have taken care of this baby, and my life would have been fine."

"Without guilt? I hope you don't believe that."

Taylor looked away. "I don't know."

"The way God made it to work is one man and one woman together their whole lives unless somebody dies. Then they'll be happy." Taylor shot her a 'yeah right' look. "Well, I mean if they're the right ones... if they're meant for each other."

"Nice out," she replied flatly.

"Well, I do know people that have been happy for decades! Probably because they have enough determination to hang together when the going gets rough!" Taylor kept giving her the look. "Well, I don't know! I've never been married!"

"Some of us don't want to wind up a spinster at thirty-five," she wagged her head sarcastically.

Melinda gritted her teeth, fire ignited in her belly. "Well, you *don't* have to worry about that." Melinda tried to ease the growl in her voice. "You sure do change your mind a lot. A minute ago, you wanted what I have, a career over a baby."

Eyes softening, Taylor looked down at the baby. "I wonder what ever happened to Jack." She stared at him a moment, then her face hardened again. "He didn't want a baby either."

"Taylor what you and Jack *both need* is to find out how to make life *work*. You find that out in the Bible." Her voice pleaded. Taylor didn't look at her or answer. "The heart is deceitful and *desperately* wicked. Who can know it? There is none righteous no not one. There is none that understandeth. There is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way. They are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (Rom. 3:10-12) The way of peace have they not known (Rom. 3:17) There is a way which seemeth right to a man, but the end thereof is the way of death. The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 6:23) For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (Jn. 3:16) But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8) For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Rom. 10:13) That 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. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Rom 10:9-10) Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out. (Acts 3:19). This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for *then* thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and *then* thou shalt have good success. (Josh. 1:9)." Melinda tried to study Taylor's face, but she couldn't read her reaction.

Taylor continued to stare off. "I want to have a little fun in life. What's wrong with that? I don't want to become a little church mouse."

Melinda wondered a moment if that's what Taylor considered her. "Taylor, what you did, didn't wind up being any fun, and eliminating the problem, so you had that on your conscious, wouldn't have been any fun either. If you become a follower of Christ, your ideas about what is fun will change."

Fire ignited in Taylor's eyes. "So, if I become a Christian, sitting around at a picnic with a bunch of old ladies discussing our babies will suddenly become fun?" Her voice held disdain.

"Old ladies don't have babies," Melinda replied, way too matter-a-factly.

"Oh, come on!" Taylor stood up too fast, flinging the baby up to her chest too hard, causing it to cry. "You're not going to brainwash me, so stop trying! Here!" She thrust the crying baby into Melinda's arms and stormed out.

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Pulling his coat collar tighter around him, Jim trudged through the blowing snow back toward the house. Watching his feet, he made sure to walk a straight line until the house came into view. The biting cold made his legs feel heavy as he climbed the front steps, but a smile quickly brightened his face as he walked into his nice cozy home and a rush of warm air refreshed him. He hung his coat in the closet, and then rubbing his hands together made his way to the fire.

"Finally. I was about ready to send out a search party." Jess walked into the living room with her steamy mug of tea. "All the horses okay?"

"All the horses are nice and comfortable in the barn."

“Everyone happy?” She smiled as she sat down on the couch.

Jim nodded. “Well, everyone but Maverick. He seems a little disturbed with the crowd in the arena. Somewhere along the line, he didn’t get the memo that horses are supposed to be herd animals.”

“Why don’t you put him in a stall by himself?” Kathy wondered.

Jim smiled toward her. “Last time we tried that, he liked to kick down the walls. If there’s one thing he hates worse than crowds, it’s confinement.” *And some people say, animals don’t take after their owners.*

Jess smiled too, recalling that day. “Well, we’re all ready for you to read us the Christmas story.” Jess got up, took his Bible from the table, and brought it over to him at the fire.

“Alrighty.” Jim sat down on the mantel. “Let’s get this show on the road.” Jim thumbed through the Bible to Luke two and began. “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning the child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Then he prayed and thanked the Lord for many specific blessings from their last year and asked for an equally good and even better year to come.

“Okie dokie.” Jess sprung up and went over to the tree. “Morgan, come help me pass out presents.” The little girl ran over to her mommy and Jess put a little present in her hands. “There you go. Take that one to daddy.” Jim held out his hands and Morgan ran over to him. Jess took one to her spot and gave one to her dad. “Here. Take this one to Grandma.” Jess handed another little one to Morgan, and Morgan ran it over.

“Thank you, Sweetie.” Morgan smiled and ran back for another.

Jim leaned back against the brick on his fireplace and just watched the exchanges of words and glances between the members of his precious little family, feeling very strongly at that moment, that he would do absolutely anything, as long as it wasn’t against God’s law, to protect it.

