

# Faith, Family, and Firing Line

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## **Snowy Search**

Beep, Beep, Beep. Groggily, Wade rolled over and hit the alarm. Half yawning, half groaning, Wade stretched as he sat up. Melissa, who had already been awake, rolled over to look at him. "Are you getting up to go look for Derrick?"

Wade nodded, yawning again. "Yep." Leaning against the nightstand, he got out of bed and staggered over to his chest of drawers. "Pray that we find him," he yawned.

Melissa rolled over and switched on the lamp. "I want to go with you." She sat up on the edge of the bed and slipped on her slippers.

Wade's brow furrowed. "You should rest."

"There's no reason not to." She grabbed her robe that was straight over the footboard at the end of the bed. "I don't have a job or anything to keep me here." She wrapped the pink robe around her. "I'm sure you could use an extra pair of eyes." She went over to the closet to get her clothes.

"Our baby's reason not to." He buttoned his jeans and began threading his belt through the loops. "You should rest."

Close drapes over her arm, she stopped in front of Wade on her way to the bathroom and looked in his eyes. "What about my other child? He will be *killed* if we don't find Derrick." He didn't answer, so she looked away and continued to the bathroom.

"I didn't allot time for a shower!" he called after her. "Just get changed. I'll make breakfast." He took off his night shirt, thrust it on the dresser, and put on his day shirt.

Hand on the doorknob, she turned back. "It won't be like for hours."

"The snow stopped. We can look in the dark." He finished buttoning a shirt and went out the door. "Dress warm. I'll have breakfast ready in five minutes. Hurry up."

Frowning down at her cute, khaki carpenter pants, she took them back and exchange them for her flannel lined jeans, guessing he was right. She would have to go rugged for this job.

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Jostling awake when Jim sat back down on the bed, Jess opened her eyes and squinted in the darkness to see the shadow of her husband bent over tying his shoes. "Are you getting up already?" she yawned. "I thought since you had yesterday off..."

"I'm not going to work."

"Yeah." She propped herself up with her arm. "Not till day after tomorrow, right."

"That's right." He yanked the knot tight and sat back up.

"Then where are you going?" She sat up and flipped on the lamp.

Staring straight ahead, he thought a moment but decided just to answer bluntly. "I'm going to look for Derrick."

"Wha-a-at?" She scooted over next to him to look him in the face.

"Derrick was here yesterday," he spoke softly, glancing at her.

"Derrick was here?!" She pointed down. "And you didn't tell me?"

He nodded. "It was Christmas... and your parents... and everything. Then you were asleep by time I got up here." He shrugged.

She looked away. "Why'd he come here?" Her face was concerned.

"Food." Jim stood up and tucked in his shirt.

"Why'd he leave?" She sat up a little straighter, collected her hair in one hand, and pulled it behind her back.

"Doesn't trust anyone, I guess." Jim headed for the door. "He keeps on the move."

"Then why are you trying to find him?" She bounced out of bed, grabbed her robe, and followed him out the door.

"It's a long story," he sighed, buckling his belt as he went down the stairs.

"You can tell me all about it while I fix your breakfast." She hurried after him.

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“You’d think they’d do a better job keeping the roads plowed in town.” Holding onto the door handle, Melissa squinted to see where the lanes were under the inch of fresh fallen snow.

“They’ve obviously been trying,” Wade took the van a little closer to the side of the road. “or it’d be a lot worse than this.” Giving up on trying to find the lane markings, Wade just focused on keeping his right tires near the deep snow that was the edge of the road. “If this is as good as it gets in town, I hope we can get through on the country roads.” Noticing the light turned red up ahead, he braked very lightly, repeatedly, until he was inching toward it. It turned green just before he came to a complete stop. Even pressing the accelerator ever so slightly, his tires still spun as he sped up.

Melissa rubbed her gloved hands together. “I should have packed some blankets in case we get stuck.” She glanced at him with fearful eyes.

Wade reached down and turned up the heat. “We won’t get stuck.”

Melissa grabbed the door as the van swerved a little. “Maybe we should wait a little until the roads clear. Derrick won’t be going anywhere either.” Her eyes stayed fixed on the road, her hand clutching the door.

“You don’t know him,” Wade mumbled as they started to leave the lights of town.

“I know no one could drive in this.” She gasped as the road changed to five inches deep in snow. The van jolted as its tires went from plowed to unplowed terrain. “Wa-a-a-de.”

“Just relax.” He glanced at her. “You wanted to come.” Not answering, she clutched the door tighter.

The further they got out of town, the deeper the snow got. Unable to turn back, Wade kept plowing through at 15 mph, even as the drifts banged against his bumper and the snow threatened to clog his wheel wells. “Wade, we’re going to get stuck.” Her voice was weak yet high pitch. She clutched the door with white knuckle force.

Wade sighed. “If I stop, we’re going to get stuck for sure. There’s nowhere to turn around, and Jim’s isn’t that far anyway.” As the van started to slide, he let it go moment until it hit traction. Then he gently brought it back, very careful not to over correct.

“That last gravel road won’t have been plowed at all.”

“Ya think this one has?” He gave her a look.

“Yes.” She didn’t return the look. She couldn’t pull her eyes from the road.

Wade flipped on the blinkers as they approached Jim’s road, though he didn’t know why. No one else would be stupid enough to be out on a day like this. He clutched the wheel tighter as the van bounced through a drift.

Melissa squealed. “Careful, Wade!” She pushed herself away from the door after banging into it.

“Here.” Wade got the flashlight from between the seats and put it in her lap. “Look down the side roads for Derrick’s truck. He probably parked somewhere and walked through the woods to Jim’s.”

She rolled down the window and flipped on the flashlight, shining it across the fields, the ditch, and down the side roads. “We should have drove through the parking lots in town. It would make a lot more sense for him to sleep there. He’d get himself trapped out here. “

“He wouldn’t risk being seen... or caught on camera.” Wade brought the van back as it bounced on a drift toward the ditch. “Besides he’s very good at getting himself untrapped.”

Melissa kept scanning the area with the light. “I don’t see one other tire track besides ours.”

Wade went into the other lane to avoid a drift. “Just keep looking.”

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“That was good.” Jim got up from the table and took his empty plate over to the sink.

“So, what are you going to do next?” Jess turned around in her chair to look at Jim.

“I think I’ll go outside. See what it’s like out. Maybe saddle one of the horses.” He came back and grabbed his coat from the chair. “I think the best place to find Derrick is going to be in the woods.” He shrugged. “Maybe we’ll get lucky, and he will have decided to come back.” He headed for the kitchen door.

“It’d be nice,” Jess mumbled, taking another sip of coffee. “You got your cellphone?” She glanced over at him.

“Of course,” he grumbled, pulling open the door. A rush of cold air blue inside. “Hey, it’s deep out here.” He looked down at the ten-inch drift of snow in front of his feet that had been held up by the door. “Maybe I should hook plow up to the truck and plow path for Wade to get down the road when he comes.”

“How cold is it?” Jess took another sip of coffee.

Jim glanced at the thermometer. “Twelve degrees. It looks like.” He kicked the drift to make it fall.

She turned to look at him. “Just be careful, and don’t get stuck yourself.”

Jim wagged his head back. “Yes, mom.” Jess rolled her eyes. Jim smiled and went out the door, trudging into the snow. Tiny ice crystals blew into his face. He flipped on his flashlight and swept it back and forth across the snow as he trudged through the knee-deep drifts. The morning was dark and the wind was harsh. He walked to the property line with the woods and shown his light amongst the trees as he made his way toward the barn. The frigid wind whistled through the frozen branches. He squinted to see through the tangle of barren bushes and branches that obstructed his view. Following the tree line, he moved toward the trailhead. Snow pepper down on him from the blowing branches.

Reaching the trailhead, he walked down it a few feet, shining his light down the dark interested path... no tracks... no snow-covered indents... no sign that anyone had passed that way. He turned and continued forward, walking down the passage between the woods and the barn until he got to Maverick’s pasture. He continued down Maverick’s fence line. He looked toward the pasture but couldn’t see the black horse in the darkness. He figured he was probably in the lean-to, seeking shelter from the wind.

Halfway down the fence line, Jim stopped when his light landed on a bit of cloth blowing in the wind, caught on the string of barbed wire at the top of the fence. He pulled the cloth off the barb, quickly recognizing it as part of Derrick’s shirt. Looking up, he shown his light on the blowing branches above him. Noticing some broken branches hanging down, he quickly pieced the story back together. Derrick had climbed up the tree to go over the fence but had fallen when a branch broke and ripped his sleeve on the barbed wire on the way down. He shown his light all around. No tracks. Had to have been when Derrick was there before the snow. No help.

Hearing a horse snort next to them, he shown his light toward maverick slowly approaching the fence. “How’d you weather the storm, old paint?” The horse nickered as he stopped next to him. The sturdy black stallion looked as though he’d been dusted with powdered sugar, a clump of snow on the top of his head. “Don’t have enough sense to stay in your lean-to?” The horse nickered again. “You know, if you weren’t so temperamental, you could have stayed all nice and warm inside the barn with the other horses.” Maverick whinnied, bucked, and kicked his hind legs. “Well, have it your way. You haven’t seen Derrick around, have you?” Maverick grunted and leaned his head over the fence. Jim rubbed the white blaze on the stallion’s face. Maverick closed his eyes a moment, enjoying it.

Startled, Maverick tensed, perked his ears, and grunted at something in the distance. Jim looked that way to see headlights inching down the road... had to be Wade. After a few moments, Maverick pranced through the snow in that direction, high-stepping through the drifts, tail raised yet still touching the snow due to its length. He snorted smoke through his nostrils. The moon came from behind a cloud and reflected off the prancing Stallion, highlighting his regal outline.

Jim watched a few moments more then turned and headed back toward the driveway. He flipped off his flashlight and looked up at the millions of stars sparkling against their black velvet background. Noticing the headlights come to a stop, he ran through the snow to meet Wade. Out of breath, he slowed to a walk as he approached the van. Wade put down the window as he walked up to it. “Wow, you must have a rugged van. I’m not sure my truck could get through some of those drifts in my driveway. Noticing Melissa, he nodded toward her in the passenger seat.

“I think it had something to do with the expert skills of the driver.” Wade tried to regain some levity after that nail-biting experience. Noticing he was still gripping the steering wheel with white knuckle force, he tried to relax.

“Well, that could be.” Jim smiled. He glanced over at Melissa, sitting straight as a board holding onto the door. “I was just going to look in the barn in hopes maybe he came back last night. Want to come with me?”

Wade and Melissa exchanged glances and then got out. “What’s the odds of that?” Wade grumbled as he closed the door.

“You never know.” Jim shrugged. “I can’t believe he would try to drive in that blizzard last night.”

“I could,” Wade muttered.

“If he’s not in here,” Jim continued, “I bet he’s in his truck somewhere in those woods... or maybe still digging out after the snow stopped.” Jim held the door open and let them go in first. “We can search the woods with the horses as soon as it gets light.”

“Probably be too late by then,” Wade mumbled, stopping at the bottom of the loft ladder, staring up at.

Jim walked past him, bounded up the ladder, and turned on the light. “He’s not up here!” Jim looked a little more than came back down.

“He probably just picked up some food and went back to his cabin.”

“I doubt it.” Jim walked past him into the arena room. Wade followed. “If anything, he probably went down south. He said the hunting was bad at his cabin.”

“He’s not in here.” Wade crossed his arms and sat on the edge of the table.

“Well, if he’s not here, we’ll just have to find out where he is.” Jim walked past them, going back out.

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Rolling onto his side, sleeping on the back bench-seat of his truck, Derrick opened his eyes and stared at his knapsack of food in the dim dawn’s light, contemplating getting up. He felt like he’d aged ten years in the last few weeks. He used to enjoy the challenge of living off the land. All he’d gotten out of it this time was tired, hungry, and lonely. Either he had grown out of touch with nature, or there just wasn’t any game up there this year. Spending all day every day trudging through the snow hunting may have been fun at first but it got old pretty quick. Every day seemed to be spent going in circles... hungry circles. More he thought about how he had ended up in that state... isolated... with a bad leg... hungry... fugitives from society... the more he wanted revenge. The only thing the trek through starvation valley had gotten him was a healthy anger for the guy that had put him there, Sandervauh. He’d decided he wasn’t going to live like *that*... *and* he *wasn’t* going to get locked in a cage. There was no more fear in death. The only thing left for him to do was take out as much of Sandervauh’s regime as he could before he died trying.

With the aid of his never before used tablet, a public Wi-Fi signal, his disposable phone, and a couple well-constructed threats to Carlos as well-being, you had been able to effectively piece together the location for his first hit... a drug smuggling warehouse, operating under the guise of a cosmetics factory in southern Illinois.

So, under the cloak of darkness, he gathered his things together and headed south. And made sure to use his debit card at northern Wisconsin gas station before leaving, so hopefully they would think he was somewhere up north. His directional skills and the compass in his truck had proved very useful in keeping him heading south while using only the most remote country roads. And got such a warm feeling when he started to recognize the road names and realize that he was coming into home territory that he wished he could stay. Melancholy, memories flooded back even now. Dismissing them, he sat up and yanked his duffel bag toward him. Time for that was passed. He unzipped it roughly and yanked out an energy bar.

He hadn’t planned to meet up with Jim. It was just business. He needed to pick up some clean clothes, a couple blankets, more ammo, and some food. It was a good place to stop without being seen or caught on video... so he’d stopped. He chopped off a third of the energy bar in one bite. It hadn’t even been in his mind that it was Christmas day, but something about the warmth of the Garland clad ranch house with the smoking chimney and the sparkling Christmas tree in the picture window had drawn him... drawn him enough to sneak around to the kitchen window at an angle that he couldn’t be seen and look inside. He’d watched for several moments that happy little family eating breakfast with the grandparents talking and laughing, hugging and giving thanks. Watched until the pangs of jealousy twisted his stomach so tight that he couldn’t bear to watch any longer. *So, stop thinking about it!* We crumbled the wrapper in his hand and chucked it against the seat. He grabbed a handful

of fig bars that unzipped the duffel bag and tossed it back to its place on the floor. Lying on his back, leaning his head on the door's armrest, he stared up at the ceiling. He had his own life... his own mission... *Death mission? So be it.* ... But he wasn't going down alone.

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"Now what?" Wade of Melissa walked up to Jim was leading was his arms on top of the green metal gate to the pasture, staring at the ball of sunlight light rising slowly over the snowy horizon. This puffy tan carpenter stuck slightly to the metal as he pulled away and stood up.

Jim site. "He's not around here. That's for sure. Time to take some horses and see if he's in the woods?"

"Might as well," Wade mumbled. "Someone should check the road, too."

Jim nodded. "We can check the roads," Jess's parents approached, Kathy holding a bundled-up Morgan. "I think I still recall how to use a plow." And rubbed his gloved hands together.

Jim nodded. "Good idea. We'll search the west section of the park since that's where Derrick crossed over Maverick's fence. Should take about three hours. Then we'll come back and exchange notes."

They nodded. "Sounds good."

"Take good care of my little girl." He put his hand on Morgan's back.

"We will." They headed for the truck.

"I want to go too," Melissa stated, following them toward the barn.

Jim tried not to look surprised. "Riding in the snow is a little more tricky than..."

"I can handle it." Her voice was firm.

"We may not stay on the trails." Wade's voice was soft, hoping he could keep up with Jim himself.

"Good... as long as we find them." She crossed her arms, not allowing herself to be dissuaded.

When they entered the barn, they met Jess, dressed in blue jeans, a Sherpa-lined jean jacket, and brown suede gloves, holding up four halters. "Ready to search the woods now that it's light?"

"You going?"

"Yep." She gathered the lead ropes into a loop. "Mom's going to watch Morgan."

"They are going to search the roads with the plow truck."

"Oh." She glanced toward their house. A tinge of worry crossed her face. "Oh, dad's a great driver." She turned toward the pasture then back toward Jim. "The car seat's in the truck, right?" He nodded. "Good." She turned and bounced out toward the pasture.

Jim got the feeling she was looking forward to this frosty morning ride. He pulled his coat closer as he followed her. Sometimes he didn't understand her. "Who are you getting for Wade and Mellissa?" He caught up to her.

"I thought Wind Walker for Wade. So, Mellissa is coming?"

"Yeah." He glanced down at her hand. "You got four halters."

"Well, I figured she would. How 'bout Painting? She's pretty calm."

"Yeah." He nodded, holding out his hand for half the halters. "I'll get Danny, and who do you want?"

"I was thinking Tex."

"Okay, but he's inside."

“Yeah. Either Tex or Sky Hawk.”

“Yeah, they’d both be good. Tex could probably use the exercise.”

“True. That’s fine, Tex, I mean.” She unlatched the frozen metal gate and pulled it open. “Danny’s inside, too,” she called to him as he started to go to the other pasture.

“Oh, yeah.” He turned around and went back to the barn. Either this day was starting too early, or he didn’t get enough sleep last night.

Wade met him just inside the barn. “So, do you think he’s out there somewhere?”

Jim shrugged as he continued toward the arena. “There’s game out there. Wouldn’t be a bad place to hide out a while. Just have to see, I guess.” The chain clanged as he unlatched it and let it fall against metal gate. Jim walked confidently into the arena toward Danny. Wade latched the gate and followed Jim cautiously through the herd of horses, looking back-and-forth at the ones walking around. “Although, he might continue South.” Jim slipped the halter on Danny’s head and clipped it. “It’d be pretty hard livin’ out there as cold as it’s been.” He led Danny toward a large brown horse relaxing in the opposite corner. “You’d want to be somewhere without people where he could find food.” He put the halter on Tex, rubbed his blaze, and arranged his forelock.

“Well that sounds like your woods.”

Jim shrugged as he led both horses toward the gate. “He might not stick around just because he knows I know he’s here. Then again, and be forced to stick around if he didn’t make it out before the snow. Will just have to see.”

Wade unhooked the chain and hold open the gate. Jim led the horses through it. “I bet he’s out there. We just have to find him.” Wade smiled.

“Hopefully.” Jim forced a tentative smile back.

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Derrick closed his Bible, tossed it inside the duffel bag, sat up, grabbed a bottled water from his pack, and climbed into the front seat. Getting out of here was going to be interesting. He had left Jim’s yesterday just as it was starting to snow. He rode maverick through his pasture, jumped off him over the fence, and height about two miles through the woods until he reached his truck. By time he got there, the gentle falling snow had turned into a real blizzard. He could barely find his truck. Still, his distrust had urged him to go. So, naturally, he did... inching the whole way through the drifting, blinding snow, following the compass South. Four hours, three skids, and one near ditching later, he had decided four-wheel-drive or not, he had better stop. Now the only question was, could he get out of this drifted gravel road and back to the main drag. Going so slow, he couldn’t time the distance, so he had absolutely no idea where he was.

He took a swig of water, twisted the cap back on, set it in the cup holder, and flipped on four-wheel-drive. After driving forward and back for several moments, mainly just spinning his wheels, his front tires finally found gravel and propelled him forward. The truck elevated and bounced over the first drift. Gravel crunched and sputtered under the front tires again, and the truck found enough traction to gun through the second drift. His back tires found traction propelling him faster. Icy snow crystals sputtered up on both sides of his truck creating a glistening haze behind him. Keeping his speed study, he managed to plow through to the stop sign without getting stuck.

He looked both ways. It was a paved road. The eastbound lane was mostly clear. The westbound lane was snowed shut. He opted for the eastbound lane even though she thought he should go West... and hoped for no oncoming traffic.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he came to a main drag, a nicely plowed main drag, to his surprise. He turned south... Highway 40 toward Peoria. Finally, he knew where he was.

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Holding tightly to the reins of her laid-back pinto, sitting straight as a board, Mellissa looked all around wildly for Derrick or danger while Painting, head hanging, calmly walked down the center of the trail, amazing Melissa. She couldn’t hardly see where the trail was for all the snow. Still, Melissa couldn’t share her tranquility. She so desperately wanted things to start working out. Her placid steed had no idea how many things were at stake at this moment. It had been so long since they had

heard any encouraging news relating to Davey, and now it seemed there was an elusive chance they might actually get their son back. She so wanted it to be true.

Staring what she like a long time in one direction, Melissa quickly jerked her gaze back toward chess who was covering the off-trail area about twenty feet to her left. She didn't want to lose track of her. She would be lost in an instant. She had no idea where Jim and Wade were. They had split off about an hour ago. Jim went off trail to the right toward some cave he knew about. Wade went off trail to the left to follow the river.

Melissa gasped as Painting abruptly stopped, causing her to fall forward onto her neck. "You okay!" Jess called.

"I guess so." Melissa sat back up in the saddle. "What happened?"

Jess pointed. "A drift fell off that Evergreen. Startled her."

"Oh." Melissa gasped again and grabbed the horse's mane as another drift tumbled down right in front of them. Painting backed up.

Jess smiled. *A lesser horse would throw you for that.* Painting calmly walked around the drift and continued down the trail without being asked.

## Back to Work

Knocking the ice off his helmet, Jim walked off the curb, through the slushy water, and back to the engine. The devastating apartment fire had started small, just a lit cigarette in someone's trashcan, but it had spread quickly and soon engulfed the whole northwest corner of the building. They had managed to get everyone out safely except two. Jim couldn't help but thinking if Derrick had been there, they might have been able to save those last two. He had a way of defying death not just for himself but also for those around him.

Stopping by the engine, he opened the door, grabbed a bottle of water, untwisted the lid, and leaned back against the truck as he drank it. His steaming breath looked like red and blue smoke illuminated by the flashing emergency lights all around him. He stared at the smoldering black building and shook his head. So much loss. He glanced over at the lifeless, old lady covered by yellow sheet her family mourning all around her. No more so than for them... and for them. And glanced over at the other family across the lot hugging and crying, mourning the loss of their little girl whose body was yet to be recovered. He only wished by some miracle they would find her alive. He doubted it.

Finishing his drink, he twisted the lid back on the empty bottle, tossed it back in the truck, and close the door. Turning back, and paused a second as a rush of cold breeze swept across his face, refreshing him. Then he lifted his mask, strapped it on, and headed back toward the still smoking building.

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"Two cob salads, one cheesy steak fajita pie, two meatloaf plates, one kidney bean casserole." Betty an energetic, middle-aged waitress rattled off as she ran into the kitchen and hung up orders. She spun around and was back out the door before Wade could reply.

"Wade can you get the cob salads?" Mac called as he went over to the warmer and pulled out the cheesy steak fajita pie.

Wade looked up from the soapsuds he had been staring into as he methodically washed the plates. "Sure." He shook

the suds from his hands, dried them off, grabbed a salad plate, and went over to the refrigerated prep table next to Mac and the warmer oven.

Mac glanced sideways at him. "I'd sure like to know what's been wrong with you the last couple days." He scooped out a perfect slice of cheesy savory pie without displacing any of the meetings failing or one crumb of the flaky crust and placed it kitty corner on the plate. Not answering, Wade stared earnestly at the letters as he arranged it on each plate. "Wade!"

"Huh?" Wade jumped and looked around. "What's the matter?"

"That's what I would like to know." Max scooped out a serving of kidney bean casserole onto another plate.

"Sorry." Wade shook his head with the thrust as he arranged a stripe of grilled chicken on the salads. "I just had a lot on my mind lately."

"So it would seem." Mac arranged meatloaf on the last two plates. "There's anything I can do..." He scooped a serving of cheesy potato casserole next to each of the meatloafs.

Wade glanced at him hopefully, deciding to seize the opportunity. "I could really use the last week of January off."

Staring straight ahead and nodding slowly, Mac arranged parsley garnishing each of the plates. "Remind me before we leave. I'll write it down."

"Thanks." Wade arranged a stripe of cheddar cheese next to the chicken, then a stripe of bacon.

Mac came over to the edge of the prep table and scooped a portion of fruit and cottage cheese into a little bowl. "Why?"

Wade debated the pros and cons of telling him what was happening. He decided to wait. "Personal emergency." He arranged the stripe of blue cheese, then the stripe of diced tomatoes. Mac nodded as he returned to the plates he was making. Wade put a little bowl of dressing in the corner of each plate and took them over to the outbound tray.

Mac turned slowly with both meatloaf plates in his hands giving Wade a look as he joined him at the tray. "You know for sure that you're going to have an emergency but last week of January?"

"More than likely several," Wade mumbled, setting the salads down and heading back to the sink.

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Jess flipped on the lights in the barn as she led her chestnut gelding inside. Mellissa hung her head as she followed leading her paint. "I hate to say it," Jess reiterated the obvious, "but I don't think he's in those woods anywhere." She cross-tied Tex and then tugged on the leather strap to loosen the cinch.

Mellissa nodded, cross-tying painting across from them. "I wonder where he is."

Jess shrugged. "He's got the whole country to hide in." She pulled the saddle and blanket off and carried them to the tack room.

"Maybe he went back to his cabin," Mellissa called as she attempted to loosen the knot on her girth but only succeeded in breaking her nail. Squealing involuntarily, she shook her hand as blood seeped around the nail.

Smiling, Jess came to her rescue and loosened the girth. "I doubt it. He told Jim he'd been there."

"So? Doesn't he trust him?" Mellissa's voice held an edge of irritation.

"He doesn't trust anyone." Jess pulled down the saddle and hefted it to the tack room.

"Then where would he go?"

Jess brought back two brushes, handed on to Mellissa and took the other over to Tex. "Where ever you'd least expect him."

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Melinda swung open her front door with usual exuberance. "Thanks for coming." She stepped aside to let Matt and

Taylor inside. "Supper will be ready in a few minutes. Brrr... it's cold out there." She smiled at the baby in Taylor's arms as she closed the door. "It's been kinda lonely around here since mom went home."

"She just left yesterday." Taylor handed the baby to Melinda, took off her coat, and hung it in the closet. "In fact, we were just here a couple of days ago."

"Well, that's true, but...." Melinda bounced the baby as he started to cry.

"You should come back to work." Matt hung up his coat. "You wouldn't be lonely there."

"Mmm...." Melinda grinned at the baby, causing him to smile back. "I usually take Christmas week off though. No other time I'd spend my vacation days. Usually, I'd go home and spend the week with my family, but with Dad gone." She tickled the baby, making him laugh. "It was nice having mom come here." She turned as Taylor walked past without taking the baby. "I'll get used to being alone again. Just need some time."

Taylor walked into the living room. They followed. "You got too used to hanging around are house." She stopped in front of the artificial tree, sparkling with white lights and red ribbons. "Why do I think you might like to come back."

"Taylor!" Matt yelled.

Flustered, Melinda got defensive. "No! ...a... that's not what.... I didn't mean."

"We know." Matt's voice was deep. He glared at Taylor. "She's just in a foul mood tonight. I'm sorry."

Melinda nodded, trying not to let a stray tear escape. "Do you still want to stay?"

"I do." Matt walked toward the tree. "Maybe if someone can keep her mouth shut, we can have a pleasant evening."

"Far be it from me to wreck your pleasant evening."

Matt shot her a warning glance as he straightened one of the red ribbons. "You have a way with decorating trees."

"Thank you." Melinda's voice was strained as she bounced the baby who was starting to cry again.

"I hardly think you'd be good judge of trees."

"I know what looks good." Matt tried to smile.

"How could you?" She looked at Melinda. "You see, we haven't had a tree since Mother died."

"We did a couple of times. You just don't remember." Matt spoke softly.

"I sure don't!"

She spun around and walked toward Melinda. "Of course, I'm sure if you were still there...."

"Knock. It. Off." Matt turned around, exasperated. Still bouncing the baby, Melinda tried not to smile at Matt's reaction. She felt too sorry for him to even be offended. "Can we help you with supper?" Matt's asked, weary.

"No." Melinda shook her head. "It's almost done. I should go check on it." Melinda offered the baby to Taylor.

Taylor crossed her arms and walked past her to the kitchen. "Keep it. You're the one old enough to be a mother, not me."

Matt rolled his eyes, walked over, and took the baby. "Sorry. We'll leave if you want us to."

"No, that's okay," she answered, softly, briefly glancing into his eyes then looking away.

He shrugged. "Whatever you have cooking smells good."

"Enchiladas." She started for the kitchen. "I better check them before...."

"He might starve on your cooking though! It's burning!"

Melinda broke into a run to the kitchen. Matt grimaced at Taylor's innuendo. "Taylor!" he yelled, stiffening.

Feeling the tension, the baby jumped and looked up at him with wide eyes. Matt quickly relaxed and smiled down at the baby before he started to cry. That's all he needed. It didn't work. The baby grabbed his shirt and started to cry. "Oh, hush."

"I told you, you'd burn it."

Matt rolled his eyes, transferred the baby to his shoulder, and rubbed its back as he made his way to the kitchen.

## Located

"Morning." Jim staggered into the kitchen and took the cup of coffee Dan held out for him as he walked past the coffee pot. "Thanks." He plopped down on a chair around the table.

Dan poured himself a cup, went over to the doorpost, leaned against it, and shook his head as he looked back over the group of guys all sprawled out on chairs around the table, staring at their coffee. "They aren't makin' men like they used to. You young pups. There was a day when I coulda gonna to three of those fires and never raise a sweat," Dan bragged. "and we didn't have all the new-fangled, fancy equipment, you young whipper-snappers get spoiled with."

"Yeah, well," Miles groaned as he got up to get another cup of coffee. "I'll believe that when I see it."

"You won't see it." Dan took another swig. "My time's done past, but those were the days, I tell ya."

"Yeah, sure." Richard, Derrick's replaced, lifted his coffee.

"I don't know." Jim sat up a little straighter. "I think...." Interrupted by his vibrating cellphone, Jim answered it. "Hello?"

"Go ahead, change the subject." Dan muttered as Jim walked past him through the door.

Jim smiled back as he went through. Then he walked around the squad in the bay for more privacy. "Hey, Trent, what's up? Any news?"

"Not sure." Trent spoke thoughtfully. "Might have a lead on your prodigal friend."

"Derrick? Really? You know where he's at?"

"Not exactly. Did he say anything to you about pursuing the Sandervauh syndicate?" Trent worked on his computer as he talked.

"No. Is he?"

"He sure is. Gotten two reports of operations he single-handedly took down. One more that he reported as an anonymous tip. And there is one they are investigating right now. We think he's somewhere around Pekin. Yesterday, the police got a tip about a meth lab a few miles out of town. When they got there, they found the lab and three guys gagged and zip tied. Their computer had been wiped clean, but we don't know if they did it or Derrick. Then around midnight they got a hit that his card was used at a gas station just North of Peoria."

"Huh. Look out Sandervauh."

"Yeah, right, and look out Derrick. He's playing with fire."

"He aint got much to lose. They already swore revenge on him."

"It's never wise for the rabbit to stir the fox even if it does think it's faster."

"Yeah. I'd like to think the odds are pretty even, though."

"I'd like to think that too, but they're not. We thought we had him tracked to a small town in Northern Wisconsin. Then he turns up in Southern Illinois. Popular opinion around here is to just let him run. See how many organizations he can take out before they gun him down. I don't know though. There are a lot of people working on the crime syndicate. If he starts getting in the way of operations with the FBI, he's gonna have more enemies than he has right now."

"And Wade's baby?"

"He needs to hand that matter over to the FBI. It's up to him. I can't force him to talk to them, but going right alone with their demands is the surest way to get everyone killed. They have it all worked out, so they don't get burned."

"Why not make them think they're going along and then change the rules?"

"Not my business, friend. Truth be known, I shouldn't even be giving you updates. He just keeps getting himself in deeper and deeper. He's got charges to answer on the matter of holding people against their will. Then there's charges in connection with the warehouse."

"If he was there," Jim interrupted.

"Yeah, and now this. His vigilante pursuit of justice, or whatever it is."

"Can you really fault him for helping to take down illegal and immoral, evil operations?"

"They can fault him and they will if he doesn't go about it in the right manner. They say he shot someone in the first vigilante raid."

"It was probably self-defense."

"Maybe, but that's not what the guy's buddies are saying, and no one's defending Derrick."

"And they wouldn't be if he came back either."

"Yeah, but he's gonna get himself in such a mess, he's gonna need a pardon from the White House in order to be free."

"That's probably what he's thinking, too. I just hope he's not on a suicide mission."

"It'd be a real shame for sure, but he's getting himself boxed in. If you can find him, find him."

"I'd like to. He just moves so fast. If he let you know where he was at around midnight. He's probably long gone from there by now."

"Maybe, but he did stick around until Midnight. He's gonna figure we figured he'd take off, which might make it safe for him to stay. Maybe he figures that's what we'd figure, which might make it safe for him to stay. There's some talk there's a smuggling operation somewhere nearby there. You know, that they used to sneak stuff from the lab."

"You think I should go down there. I don't know. Talk about looking for a needle in a haystack. You think he got information from one of the men where to go."

"Let's put it this way, one of them had two broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and a broken collar bone. Another had a

broken ankle.”

“It must have happened while they were fighting. Derrick wouldn’t torture people.”

“Yeah, just keep thinking the best of him, Jim.”

“Was the guy with the dislocated shoulder zip-tied?”

“His good arm was tied to a post.”

“See.”

“See nothing.”

“Yeah. That’s probably why he called while he was still around instead of trying to get away first. He knew the guy needed medical attention.”

“Yeah. You can be a character witness for him when he gets apprehended. He’s gonna need one.”

Jim squinted and rubbed the bridge of his nose. *Oh, Derrick... Derrick.... Stop making stupid....*

“I’ll tell you something else. I’d bet anything, he’s the one that cleared that computer. I bet he copied it first. Made himself a hit list of Sandervauh’s operations.”

“They’ll be waiting for him.”

“Maybe. Don’t know if the bad guys know he cleared it.”

“And they can all three positively identify him?”

“No, only one guy was able to pick his picture out, and he wasn’t even sure. They said it was dark, and it happened fast.”

“See. Last I heard, you couldn’t positively place him at the warehouse either. Maybe he won’t need a presidential pardon after all.”

“You won’t have much time to find him before he does. Look, he saved my life. I don’t want to see him hang either, but if I find him....”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t look hard.”

“I’m not, but others are, and I’m tellin’ you, he’s headin’ for a bullet either way.”

“Yeah, but they have to catch him first.”

“You catch him first. He’ll listen to you. Look, I have to go.”

“Yeah. Thanks for the update.”

“No problem. Bye.”

“Bye.” Jim hung up and headed back for the kitchen deep in thought.

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“Jessica, that was a delicious breakfast.” Ed got up, put Kathy’s plate on top of his, and took them both to the sink where Jess was doing dishes.

“Yes, sweetie, it sure was. I don’t think I’ll need any lunch today.” Kathy backed up her chair as Morgan approached her. Smiling, she bent down and lifted the little girl into her lap.

“So, what do you want to do today?” Jess dried her dishwasher hands and came over. “Jim should be home any time. There was a big fire last night. I don’t know if he got to bed. He might want to take a nap, but we four could still go and do something. Then, he can join us later.”

"Sure. What are the options?" Kathy draped her arms loosely around Morgan as she bounced her on her knee."

"Well, there's a nice small-town, bowling alley about thirty minutes north of here. If I recall Dad, you used to be pretty good." She smiled at her father. "It's a really nice place. Not too busy, and they are nonsmoking."

"That might be fun." Kathy looked at Ed. "Think you still have that old spin ball in you?"

"The old spin-hook-forty-nine?" Ed made a bowling motion with his arm. "I think I can still pull it out of retirement for just such an occasion."

"Good." Jess smiled. "That'll be fun. Then for supper there's a dinner theater playhouse about forty minutes further. They're going to be performing White Christmas tonight."

"Really?" Kathy smiled at Ed. "That sounds like fun, too."

"If they're not all booked up," he stated a little skeptical.

"I already got the tickets. It's at four. And then there's a Christmas Light Show over in Iowa with some Christmas Village shops to look at nearby."

"Wow, sounds like a fun day!" Kathy patted Morgan's hands together in a patty-cake motion.

"You must have been planning this for a while." Ed smiled.

"Oh, not too long." She smiled back. "I just want to get as much as we can while you guys are here. I want it to be a memorable visit."

"You and Morgan make it memorable." Kathy kissed her grandbaby.

"Hey, I'm home!" Jim called as he came in the front door.

"In the kitchen!" Jess answered. Her eyes met Jim's with a smile as he came in the room then her nose smelled the smoke. "How was work?"

"Busy."

"Yeah. I heard it on the scanner."

"Flip on the news you'd see it there two. That was a massive fire." He went to the counter and poured himself some orange juice.

"Was everyone okay?"

"Two people didn't make it, an older lady and a child." He took a drink. His voice held regret.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." He came over to the table, grabbed a piece of crispy bacon from the plater and sat down.

"I'll get you a plate," Jess offered, getting up.

"I'm not that hungry." He finished that piece and got another. "I could sleep for a week, though."

"We figured." Jess put a couple, still warm pancakes on the plate and brought it over. "We were just planning our day."

"Umm." He smiled at Jess and then her parents. "Something fun?" He reached for the butter and the real maple syrup.

"Sounds fun to me." Kathy smiled back.

"We were going to go up to Lena bowling then to they playhouse and watch White Christmas. Then go over to look at the look at the lights and Christmas Village."

Jim nodded and smiled. "Sounds like a full day."

"You think you can join us for White Christmas at four?"

"I don't know." Jim rubbed his sooty face. "Maybe."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing. Trent thinks I have some fast track to Derrick. He's been spotted down by Pekin."

"Oh really? They think they can find him?"

"No." Jim shook his head. "That's what he wants me to do." He took a bite of buttery, maple pancake.

"Aww, Jim. It'd just be like looking for him here," Jess reasoned. "He's probably long gone."

"That's what I told. If the police can't locate him, he's probably not still there. I pretty much decided, I'm just going to call Wade and tell him. It's his baby. If he wants to go down and look for him, I guess that's his responsibility. I mean, I would, if we had something solid to go on, but as far as I can tell, we don't."

Jess nodded. "That sounds like a pretty good idea." She got up and went back to finish the dishes.

"Yeah." Jim agreed. "I think I'll call him after breakfast." He took another bite. "Hey, these are really good, honey. You should keep this recipe."

"Comfort food, dear." She submerged her hands in the warm soapy water. "Under normal circumstances you get whole wheat flour and made with milk not cream."

"Well, I guess, I always like your pancakes even if they are healthy."

"Good. Your arteries will thank me later."

"I hope so. I better get something out of the sacrifice."

"Don't worry. You will."

"Umm." He took a swig of orange juice and resolved to take smaller bites, so the pancakes would last longer.

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"Scrambled or fried?" Wade looked back from the stove as Mellissa walked in the kitchen.

Holding her queasy stomach, Mellissa sat down at the table, putting her hand up to her hanging head. "Maybe just some orange juice."

"Are you sure? You haven't lived until you've tried Mac's pepper and hash brown scrambled eggs."

"I won't live if I do." She stared a few moments at the orange juice Wade sent down then putting her hand to her mouth ran out of the room.

Wade pulled his phone from his belt as it started to vibrate. "Hello."

"It's Jim. I was just calling to update you on Derrick."

"Do you know where he's at?" Wade hurried back to the stove and pulled the peppers off.

"No, not exactly. I know where he was last night."

"Where?"

"Pekin." He glanced at Mellissa as she came back in, holding her stomach.

"Pekin? That's not that far. Do they think they'll find him?" He hoped not. He needed too.

"They haven't yet. They think he's going after the Sandervauh organization, trying to take it down piece by piece." Realizing what they were talking about, Mellissa came closer, putting her head near his, trying to hear.

Wade's heart froze. "He's gonna get himself killed!"

“Trent thinks so, too.”

Wade groaned, running his hand through his hair. “How can we get in touch with him, tell him not to kill himself, tell him we need him!”

“I don’t know. I was thinking about going down there, but he’s probably not still there. They confirmed he was there by the use of his card at a gas station. That’s exactly how they located him in Wisconsin... hours before he showed up in my barn. I have a feeling that’s the last thing he does before leaving, kinda like, ‘look I’m here,’ but he’s not.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

“I’m just letting you know where things are at.”

“I suppose I should go down there,” Wade mumbled, thoughtfully, “...if I can get off work... no way I could be back by one.”

“Do you have any idea where to look?”

“Where was the gas station?”

“Actually, in Peoria, I think. I don’t remember, but he’s not going to be there. What you need is a clue to where he’s going next.”

“Maybe like hire a private investigator to track him?”

“Be difficult, but maybe a professional could do it.”

“Yeah, how? He doesn’t make friends. He has no family to speak of. He doesn’t even go to bars anymore.”

“His sister.”

“I doubt he’d risk calling her.”

“I know they do call each other every so often. She might be worried if she doesn’t hear from him. He might call her to explain what’s going on.” His voice sounded more like a question.

“I doubt it. He doesn’t explain anything to anyone. Besides where would I get her number?”

“I don’t know. I’m going out to the barn now to feed the horses. I guess, I can look upstairs. Maybe he has it written down somewhere.”

“Thanks. Let me know if you find it. I’d like to know what she has to say.”

“Okay. I will. Bye.”

“Bye.” Wade hung up and looked into Mellissa’s earnest face.

“What’d he say?”

“Didn’t you hear?” He walked back to the stove, absorbed in his own thoughts.

“Parts. Are you going to go down there?”

“I don’t know. There’s got to be some way to find him.” He scraped the bottom of the pan as he flipped the crispy hash browns. He turned to face her, leaning back against the stove. “What we need is someone who knows about this stuff, how to locate someone, I mean.”

Mellissa glanced at a smoking pan. “Uh, Wade.” He turned, pulled it off the stove, put it in the sink, and turned the water on. The grease spit and spirted. “You mean like a private eye or an investigator?” She continued.

“Or an investigative reporter?!” Wade looked up from the sink and turned around. “What about Kara Lee?” He charged to the stove and flipped off the burners. “She even knows Derrick a little bit.” He headed toward the living room. “I think she usually rides about this time in the morning,” He grabbed his coat from the closet. “if she’s in town.”

“Wait a minute!” Mellissa stepped in front of him. “The last thing Derrick needs is a reporter on his trail. We don’t want him to get arrested!” She glanced toward the kitchen as the smoke alarm sounded. “I think you forgot a burner.”

“Can you get it for me.” He headed for the door.

“Wade, wait!” She ran to the door and plastered herself against it. “I am not going to have my baby’s life endangered by some deranged news reporter after a story!”

“She’s not deranged, and she knows how to do something we don’t. Our baby’s life’s already in grave danger because we can’t find Derrick, and we’re running out of time! We don’t have money for a private eye. This is the best we can do!” He pulled her away from the door and opened it.

“I hope so!” She stood in the doorway and called after him. “I really hope this is the best you can do.” Slamming the door, she leaned back against it and shook her head. She did not have a feeling this was going to end well, and she didn’t even exactly know why.

Her eyes went to the smoke wafting from the kitchen. Noticing the screeching beep of the smoke alarm again, she ran into the kitchen. Eyeing the jumping, pan-engulfing flame, she hurried over to the cupboard, grabbed the can of salt, spun to the stove, and dumped half of it on the flame. Then she covered the pan with a lid and pulled it off the burner. Shaking her head again, she walked over to the window to open it. *And to think when I was young, I always thought I was destined for a boring life.* Marrying Wade had changed all that. Banging her hand against the wooden frame, she forced the window up. Cold breeze rushed in, blowing her hair and the curtains.

Turning around, she leaned back against the counter and rested her hand on her stomach. She so desperately wanted he little Davy back. At the same time, she desperately didn’t want anything the happen to Wade. This new baby would need a father. She needed a husband. They had just started to move on. Was it even possible to bring Davy back into their lives? She just didn’t want to lose Wade to some illusive quest that had no realistic path to success.

## Miss Reporter

Jim zipped up his coat as he walked down their shoveled sidewalk and onto their plowed driveway. His breath steamed in front of his face as he put on his gloves. He looked around at all the crystalline scenery, the frosty trees, the glistening ice cycles. The whole world looked frozen in white and blue. Even the air seemed frosty. The sun sparkled off the snow-blanketed ground. Snow weighted down the evergreen branches, filled the flower pots on the window sills, and dusted the backs of the horses. He smiled at two mares racing through their drifted pasture, creating an ice crystal mist that drifted on the breeze.

Stopping next to the barn, he turned and watched as a pink jeep came speeding down the road and turned swiftly into his drive. Slowing less than what was proper, one of her back tires missed the driveway, spirting a deep dent into the snow before returning to the gravel. Smiling, he continued into the barn, hurrying a little to give her plenty of room as she came whizzing toward him.

Shaking his head, he smiled as he blew warm air into in gloved hands as he went into the barn. “Hey, Jim, hold up!” Jumping out of the jeep, she ran after him. Sighing, he hurried up the ladder to get the hay. All he needed right now was fifty questions for Kara Lee Cummins. Soon as he came down the steps toting the bale, he ran smack into Kara Lee and then backed up. “Oh, hi, Jim!” She followed him as he resumed walking. Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, he prepared himself for the

questionnaire.

“Good morning, Kara Lee. How are you doing?” He set down the bale, pulled out his pocket knife, and cut the twine.

“I’m just about losing my mind about this Derrick thing.” She practically stood over him.

*You too?* “Did you have a good Christmas?”

“No, not really. You see, I think....”

“You get to spend some time with your family?” He tried to redirect the conversation again as he pulled off two slabs of hay and tossed them into the first stall.

“My mom’s in a nursing home. Dad moved somewhere out west.”

“Somewhere?” He smiled as he grabbed two more slabs of hay and walked down to the next stall.

She glanced down, guiltily. “I’ve got it written down at home.” She followed him to the stall. “Anyway, about Derrick...” Jim sighed. “I know he’s been here.” Her voice and manner were accusatory. Hands on her hips, she stood right behind him as he pulled open the stall door.

“You do, huh?” He forced the hay into the rationing feed bag and came back out, walking past her to the tack room. “And just how do you know that?”

“I’ve been up in his loft.” She followed him to the tack room.

“So?” He pulled three halters and leads down from their peg.

“Sooo! Most of his clothes are gone!” She followed him to a stall.

He slid open the stall door, went in, and snapped the halter on the inpatient grey gelding. “Kara Lee, Derrick hasn’t lived here for over a month. He’s been helping Matt, remember?” He led the horse past her. She plastered herself against the stall door, afraid she’d get stepped on. “He probably took his stuff with him.”

She hurriedly followed him out of the barn and down the snow-packed path to the pasture. “So, you’re saying that stuff’s at Matt’s?”

Jim gave a slight laugh and a sideways look as he swung open the green pipe-metal gate and led the horse through. “You gonna go check?”

“I don’t have to!” She indignantly pulled the gate closed. “I know he had more clothes up there than that before the trial.” She pulled the gate open for him as he unclipped the lead rope and came back.

Leaning back against the cold metal gate, he rubbed his cowboy hat back-and-forth on his head. “You know, Kara Lee, monthly rent for your horse does not entitle you to free run of the place. Living quarters on this property are private.”

Kara Lee wagged her head, and her eyes narrowed. “I just went up to get a little extra hay for Muchacho. He was hungry.”

“Sure.” Jim rolled his eyes and headed back to the barn. “There’s no hay in the dresser.”

“So, you admit he was here!” She hurried after him.

He rolled his eyes again. “Kara Lee, I don’t keep tabs on him anymore than I do on you.” He skipped the next two horses in line and went straight to Muchacho’s stall. “What makes you so nosy?”

“It’s my job.” She puffed out her chest.

“You take it very seriously.” He went in the stall and haltered Muchacho. Leading him out, he stopped in the doorway and looked Kara Lee in the eye. “Up until now I haven’t seen a need for locks in the barn to set boundaries. That may change.”

She wagged her head, and her eyes danced. “You think a lock would keep me out.”

His face was stern. “If you want to remain boarding here, you need to stay out of other people’s things. That’s

trespassing.”

“Ohhh, and Mr. High and Mighty never looked in his things at all, did he?”

Jim broke the gaze and led Muchacho to the cross tie. “You want me to saddle him for you?” He clipped him in.

“No, I’ve got it.” Jim started to walk away. “Oh, you mind if I go in the tack room and borrow a brush?” She grinned and pointed to the room.

Jim didn’t look back. “Just remember what I said.”

Jim took the next two horses outside and dropped a couple bales of hay over the gate. He passed Kara Lee as he went up to the loft to get hay for the horses staying inside, but he didn’t acknowledge her. Picking up a bale of hay, he heard car crunching down his gravel drive. Setting the hay down, he went to the loft window. He noticed Wade driving in just as Kara Lee was riding out of the barn. She rode up to his van window and started talking. Groaning inwardly, Jim squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. He wished he was down there to break up the conversation. He knew Wade was going to spill his guts. Maybe get Derrick hung. *If you’re going to enlist an ally, friend, don’t choose Benedict Arnold.*

As he walked to the stall, he tried to convince himself that Kara Lee was harmless, but he couldn’t do it. He knew she was just in this for the story... for profit, prestige, and greed. He yanked open the stall door. Unfortunately, he knew Derrick’s story could do that whether he survived or not. He dropped the hay in the feeder and went to the next stall. After all,

He watched them talk for a few moments, trying to convince himself that his distrust for Kara Lee was unfounded. He couldn’t do it. He knew her too well. She didn’t care about people... just prestige. She didn’t care about helping Derrick, she simply wanted to climb the ladder of her career. He grabbed the bale and headed down the ladder. Her last story about the trial had certainly done nothing to exonerate or even cast doubt on Derrick’s guiltiness. She had raised at least one hundred and one questions which she fully intended to answer herself in the next issue. Halfway to the first stall, he set the bale down and turned toward the door. Maybe there was something he could do. He headed out to join Wade and Kara Lee.

He ran into Wade in the entryway. Glancing outside, he saw Kara Lee riding to the trailhead. “What’d you tell her?”

Wade shrugged. His face brightened. “Great news! She thinks she can help us. Maybe even find Derrick.”

Jim rolled his eyes, turned, and headed back for his hay. “Like a rattler.”

Wade threw up his hands as he followed Jim. “What do you have against her?”

“I don’t trust her.”

“Well, I do. Besides, what harm can there be? We’re both going in the same direction, but she’s got more resources. She’s even got private eye friend she thinks she can get to help.”

Jim bent down and cut the twine on the hay. “She doesn’t care about Derrick or the baby. All she wants is lively story with the fireworks ending, which might get your baby killed and land Derrick and jail.”

“I don’t think so.” Wade put his hands in his pockets and looked down, contemplating. “Having a baby get killed wouldn’t make a good story, and she likes Derrick.”

“She’s just a reporter.” He grabbed three slabs and took it to the pregnant mare’s stall. “Real life doesn’t always have a happy ending.”

“But she would want it to... if she’s involved.” His voice was unsure.

“Let’s hope so.” Jim picked up the rest of the hay and carried it to the arena. “Did you tell her everything?”

“What I think she needed to know.” His voice was defensive.

Jim tried unsuccessfully not to roll his eyes again. “Well, you’re never going to get rid of her.” He tossed the hay over the gate and turned back to face him. “Until this thing is over, she’s going to be involved.”

“Maybe she can help.” His voice was soft.

Jim crossed his arms and leaned back against the gate, shrugging. “We’ll pray that she can. We’ll pray for her soul. We

can't change it now."

"Yeah." Wade looked down then back up. "Just because a person isn't a Christian doesn't mean they're not good at what they do."

"Yeah, but it does mean they have different motives." Jim walked past him toward the tack room, stopping abruptly when he saw a fashionably dressed college girl in fur-cuffed boots standing in the entryway. "Samantha?"

"Yes." She walked toward him. "I don't have your number, but I wanted to come and see if you know anything about Derrick. I haven't been able to get a hold of him since before the trial. Can you tell me what's going on? I read this article...." She held out a newspaper. "All I know is what's been on the news. I'm worried about him. Have you seen him recently?" Her voice was as concerned as her face. She still held out the paper. Jim took it, even though he didn't need to reread it.

"Umm." Putting his hand in his pocket, Jim looked down abruptly and then to the side, not sure what to say... not sure who he could trust.

Wade stepped next to him. "We were thinking about contacting you. We were hoping you might know where he's at."

She looked down and shook her head, rubbing her red gloved hands together. "I don't." Her eyes were soggy. "I wish I did. Do you?" Her eyes pleaded with Jim.

Jim folded the paper in his hand, gazing at her sympathetically. "I don't know where he's at."

"But he *is* in a lot of trouble."

Jim nodded. "Afraid so."

"Please tell me what happened." She sat down on a bucket and waited, grazing intently.

"Well," Rubbing his cowboy hat back and forth on his head and walking around a few steps, he tried to think where to start. "When's the last time you talked to him?"

She looked up, trying to hold back tears. "After he rescued Dr. Fredricks and his daughter. He told me he was going to be out of contact for a while and that if anything happened to him to get this paper from his safe deposit box but not to open it until after his funeral." She pulled out an opened envelope from her purse and held it out with teary eyes. "It's his will."

Jim nodded, trying to keep his voice strong. "I don't think anything's happened to him. We would have heard."

She nodded, her eyes pleading. "I know you've been up to his cabin before. I know it can be kind of hard to get to in the winter, but...."

Jim stepped back and looked away. "He's not there," he mumbled, unsure if he should say it.

"What?" They both said at the same time looking at him earnestly.

"Do you know where he is?" Wade questioned.

"Yeah, do you?" Kara Lee walked in, leading Muchacho.

Jim let his head fall back with a sigh. "No, I don't know where he is. I'm just not leaving my wife and my baby right now to go traipsing after him in the Northwoods of Wisconsin. I need to keep them safe. She knows where it is." He nodded to Kara Lee. "Why don't you go up there and look for him?" He addressed her.

Sam's eyes were hopeful. "Would you? I'd even go with you. I just didn't want to go alone."

Kara Lee stared at Jim, eyes narrowed. "Aren't we anxious to get me safely tucked away in a lonesome forest somewhere?"

"Just tryin' to help you with your story, Kara Lee." He smiled concededly.

"Sure you are." Her face turned even more suspicious. "He's coming back here, isn't he?"

Jim rolled his eyes and turned back to the tack room, huffing a laugh. "I've got work to do. My horse's need grain."

“Wait!” Sam jumped up and took a step toward him then stopped and looked from Wade to Kara Lee. She put her palms up in a gesture of desperation. “I don’t even really know what’s going on. Derrick’s been in so much trouble lately. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s all connected,” Wade mumbled.

“Ask Kara Lee,” Jim called from the tack room. “She’s the story girl.” Besides he wanted to know how much she knew.

Sam looked earnestly at Kara Lee. Kara Lee rolled her eyes and hesitated to begin. “Please,” Sam pleaded.

“Okay. You know what happened about the Mansenie thing, right?”

Sam nodded. “There compound was raided and they were all arrested, right?”

“Yeah, but it didn’t end there. They still held Davy, Wade’s son,” She nodded at Wade. “Probably somewhere in Mexico. So, through all this the word got down to a different organization in Mexico, about a cop that they all thought was dead, a cop named Trent. Apparently, when Trent was young, just starting out on the force, he was involved in special operations down in Texas with the DEA. They took down quite a few small up-and-coming drug outfits with the help of an informant named Kip Sandervauh. What they didn’t know was that Kip Sandervauh was actually part of a large underworld organization run by a guy called Rushdecker. His job was to inform on the competition, so the police would take them out. Somewhere along the line, he got just a little careless in covering for Rushdecker. Sandervauh wasn’t there on the day of the raid on the Rushdecker estate. His wife and sister were. They were both killed. Trent’s now living around here and was involved in the Mansenie sting. Rich, Kip’s son, was sent here for revenge to kill Trent’s wife, Teresa, and his sister, Melinda. In the meantime, Mark, who had ties to the Sandervauh ring in California was apparently sent to keep an eye on things, and in the process of time, he decided to kidnap his sister and sell both her and her baby for profit. Then, you know what happened about that, right?” Sam nodded.

Jim, who was listening around the corner, shook his head. *Well, that answers that question. She knows almost everything... except where he is.* He stepped out to rejoin them. Sam glanced at him, her eyes filling with tears. “My parents say he’s gone rogue... killing people... criminals, but they say he’s turned into an executioner.”

Jim shook his head, leaning against a beam. “He’s been turning them over to the police.”

“Who?” Kara looked from Jim to Sam in interest.

“The Sandervauh regime. He’s been hunting them down and taking them out.” Sam pulled a tissue from her purse.

“Really?”

Jim mentally rolled his eyes again. Now, she really knew everything. He could see the wheels turning in Kara Lee’s mind about what an exciting story she could make about a lone freedom fighter, crusader for right while running from the law. *Will you quit trying to sell copy and start thinking about the people.*

“He’s taking down the organization piece by piece... but I don’t think he’s turned into a killer. I don’t believe that, and I haven’t heard that.” Jim continued.

“He’s an outlaw.” Tears streamed down Sam’s face. “He can’t ever come home.”

“He’ll come home.” Jim took a step forward, concern on his face.

“We need him,” Wade stepped next to Jim. “He’s the only one that can save our baby’s life.”

“How can he do that?” Sam looked up at him, sniffing back tears.

“The people he’s after, they have my baby. They want to meet with him.”

“Why?” The question was quiet. Then her voice turned shrill. “Why do they want to meet with him?” Wade looked at Jim. Jim turned his back and stepped away. “Why?” She asked again.

Wade stammered for an answer. “They just wanna, a, talk with him. Dis-cuss....”

“Discuss what?”

“They want to kill him.” Jim blurted out not turning around.

“And you want him to meet them!” Her face was shock, confusion, and accusation all at once as she stared at Wade. Wade looked away. “You want him to give up his life for your baby! You want to ask him to die, so...!”

Jim turned around abruptly. “No! No one wants that.”

“He just said...” She pointed at Wade.

“We just want to tell him what’s going on.” Jim tried to calm the situation. “Of course we don’t want him to sacrifice himself. We want him to clear himself, take down the Sandervauh operation completely, and rescue Davy all at the same time.”

“Now, there’s a tall order.” Kara Lee gave a yeah-right smile.

“But with God’s help will do it.” Jim stared her down.

“If we can find him,” Wade added tentatively.

“I can find him.” Kara Lee puffed out her chest, tossed her head, and smiled. “I’m the only one with the resources to do that.”

“Not true.” Jim wished he’d said it louder.

“How?” Sam looked up at her.

Kara Lee shot Jim a sideways glance on her way to Sam. Gently grabbing Sam’s shoulders, she pulled her up. “I’m a photo journalist, honey. Finding people is my business. I’ve been doing it for years. I’m even friends with a private eye. He’ll help me without charge. So, dry your tears.” She put her arm around her and led her toward the door. “Let’s go for a walk. Anything you can tell me about Derrick’s preferences or habits might help me locate him.” Leading Muchacho, they headed out of the barn and toward the trail. “We need to find him, honey. For his own safety. He’s playing cat and mouse with some dangerous people.”

Jim groaned as they left. “Go with them.” He looked at Wade.

“Wha-a-at?”

“Go with them.” He advanced toward Wade and nudged he toward the door. “We need to know what Sam tells her.”

“Why?” Wade looked back at Jim as he shoved him.

“So, we’re not in the dark.” He pushed him through the door.

“Alright. Alright.” Wade hurried through the tool room, outside, and then jogged after them.

Turning back to the tack room, Jim decided to finish his chores. He wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to be involved in this at all. *He* sure didn’t want to wind up in trouble with the law, and with Kara Lee Cummings at the helm, they might all land in the slammer.

## Mystery Mountain

Derrick eyed his gas gauge again as the gas light flashed on. Point of decision. He’d been driving for hours without coming across a rinky-dink gas station without cameras where he could fill up with the cash he’d gotten out of the atm in Pekin.

Coming to a T in the gravel road, he slowed to a stop and decided to turn right. It was 2 AM and very unlikely that a

rinky-dink gas station would be open at this hour anyway. He was only a few hours away from his destination the Smokey Mountain's so there was no way he was going to risk filling up a constant surveillance 24 Hour joint. There was only one thing left to do, and he couldn't believe he was considering it. He'd done it before when he was young, and he knew he'd remember how, but the thought of siphoning gas after he'd become a Christian kind of scared him. *Thou shalt not steal.* He glanced up toward heaven. *I'll leave them some cash to pay for it.* He still felt guilty. However....

Seeing a farm with two trucks and a van parked in their lane, he flipped off his headlights and slowly turned in. Parking next to the van, he looked up to heaven again as he got out. *It's not stealing. I'm paying for it.* He felt a little better as he walked to the van. The van had a gas cover that had to be popped from the inside. The trucks didn't, but they looked old and rusty. He had to wonder if they had any gas in them. Only one way to find out.

He walked back to his truck, constantly looking in all directions, wishing the light above him on the barn would go out. As quietly as he could, he got in his truck and pulled it around squeezing it in between the rusty truck and the van. Then he pulled out the piece of tubing and the modified basketball air pump from his duffel bag that he had packed just in case, got out, and headed to the truck. To his delight, the truck had about a half of tank. He left enough for them to get to a gas station then went to the other truck that had about a quarter of a tank.

When he was done, he leaned back against the truck and looked at the van, wishing he could get the last bit of gas that he needed. Shaking his head, he decided he wasn't going to break their gas tank latch for a few bucks worth of gas, even if he did pay for it. He'd cross the bridge of needing more gas when he got to it. Standing away from the truck, he shivered against the cold breeze as he pulled out his wallet. He tried the doors on both trucks... locked. He guessed he could leave it in the barn. He tried the passenger's side back door on the van as he went by even though he knew.... *Beep... Beep....* The door slid open. Derrick raised his eyebrows. *Well, what do ya know?* Getting another bill out of his wallet, he put them all together, climbed into the van, put the money on the dash, popped the gas tank, climbed back out, and went to pull his truck around to the other side. The tank was almost full, and it sure felt good when his was. When he was finished, he latched the tank and gazed toward the dark house shrouded in frosty mist. "Thank you." He nodded toward it. Then he glanced up to heaven and repeated in an uncertain voice, "Thank you?" as he got in his truck. Shrugging, he wondered if it was okay. Quietly closing the door, he put it in reverse.

Next stop, Mystery Mountain, or so they called it, where he expected to find a profitable little drug operation tucked into a deserted valley next to a small lake with shipments going in and out by seaplane on a daily basis. Hopefully, operations would be ceasing there shortly... if not he supposed it wouldn't be a bad spot to be buried. He shrugged as he turned onto the gravel road and flipped on the headlights, wondering how his story was going to end.

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Rubbing her face, Kara Lee stretched back in her chair, then thrust herself forward thumping her elbows on the table. Sighing and yawning at the same time, she closed the webpage on her laptop and turned it off. She'd always loved puzzles as a kid, but she was under the mistaken impression they would get easier as she got older. They didn't.

Getting up, she made her way across the living room, into the kitchen, and over to the coffee pot. She'd been researching, calling, driving, talking to informants, and surfing the Internet for the past two days. Yesterday, she had even driven down to Peoria and staked out the jail where Sandervauh's men were. She had watched them get bailed out, get in the car with two other thugs, and drive off. Naturally, like all self-respecting reporters, she had followed them. Eventually, however, they had gotten wise to her and led her down a deserted stretch of road. Then they'd swung their car sideways and blocked the road. She had never backed down a road to the nearest intersection so fast in her entire life.... At least, she still had her life to show for it.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and headed to the fridge for some milk. Deep in thought, she skipped the milk and drank the coffee black as she headed back to the living room. Sitting down on the sofa, she stared at the clock on the wall. She had three options to where he might have gone, and she didn't know if any of them were the right one. There was drug running operation in Arizona. There was a human trafficking ring out of Texas, mostly smuggling people into the US illegally, but it was close to their main headquarters. Then there was a lab tucked away somewhere in Kentucky at a place dubbed, Mystery Mountain. That one would be the hardest to get. The one in Arizona would be the most dangerous. The one in Texas would be the most likely... but she had a gut feeling that Derrick wasn't going to go for that one yet. It was too prominent... too in-your-face. Right now, he seemed to be just taking bites out around the edges and ignoring the nucleus... though she was sure they weren't ignoring him.

She rubbed her face again and groaned. Talk about a wild goose chase. How was she supposed to pick the right one? How was she supposed to know if any of them were right? Mystery Mountain was the closest and kind of fit Derrick's personality... but it wouldn't get him any closer to the main guy... she didn't think.

Lying down on the couch, she put her feet up. Yawning, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes. *Better figure it out my tomorrow, or wherever he is, he'll be gone.* She sat up. *Maybe that's it! That's the key. He's been hitting the places pretty rapidly. Mystery Mountain would be a fairly quick drive and for Derrick a relatively simple hit, out in the wild, plenty of water and game around, minimal surveillance or law enforcement... just him and his enemies.* She bet that's where he went. She was almost sure. That's where her and Amelia, her camera, would be going first thing in the morning.

She blinked open her eye and glanced at her cellphone on the coffee table. She'd made a promise to Wade and Sam to call them with any information, but then again this wasn't really information. It was just a hunch. She wouldn't know for sure until she got down there and saw for herself, right. Besides, they might do something like calling the police...make her lose her story, get Derrick arrested, Wade's baby killed. No, it'll be much better if they don't know until later.

Picking up her phone, she glanced at the time - 1:45am, set her alarm for 5am, pulled the afghan, down around her, closed her eyes, and was immediately asleep.

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Derrick turned off the near vacant Mountain Parkway onto the narrow two-lane road. He glanced at the clock on the dash... just about 5:30 AM. He guessed he better start looking for a safe place to sleep for the day. The cars were increasing as people were heading to work. Part of him wished he could just get there... only about 50 miles away, but he knew it wasn't wise to drive in the light or to hike to his enemies in the day. So he guessed 'd sleep, regain his strength, and wait a few hours for the concealment of darkness again. After all, there was no rush to kill... or be killed.

Seeing a flash of light, he glanced up in the rearview mirror and tightened his grip on the steering wheel as a car came speeding up behind him. He didn't know whether to rabbit or keep it cool. He waited. The car didn't slow or break. It simply zipped around him on a tight curve. Derrick was not only grateful that he went around but also grateful that no one else was coming.

Seeing a windy dirt lane ahead, he slowed and turned onto it. Dirt spurt and rocks bounced, as he accelerated up the steep ascent. Bouncing through the rocks and ruts, he slowed as much as he could without losing momentum and getting stuck in the loose dirt. Three quarters of the way up, his truck started to skid and pulled to the side. He flipped on four-wheel-drive, applied a little more gas, and cranked it hard right. The truck labored, spurted, and then jerked the right. He quickly got the wheel straight and maintain steady pressure on the gas until he was safely to the top. He let out a sigh of relief as he turned onto the narrow book flat land bridge. Driving slow so as not to go over the edge, he made his way to a larger, grassy, unkept, dirt parking lot. He found nicely concealed spot behind rusty crane, turned off his headlights, and parked. He wished he knew if this old quarry was completely abandoned. The lack of tire tracks in the half inch of snow, the rusty crane, the unbeaten down grass said vacant. The lack of grass growing in the lot said occupied. He didn't like gambles. He liked a sure thing. Sure or not. He guessed he'd call this place vacant... mostly because he needed it to be. He didn't like being treed with only one road down, but as far as he'd seen, this seemed to be the best place to hide.

Getting out of his truck, his shoes crunched on frozen grass and scuffed in the gravel as he walked to the back, opened the door, and rummaged through his pack for a peanut butter sandwich. Finding it, he unzipped the baggie and kicked the door closed at the same time. He ate as he walked over to the edge and stared out at the clear, boundless starry sky. He glanced down the sparkling grassy side, glistening in the moonlight and wondered if heaven was so beautiful... wondered if he was about to find out.

Chewing his last bite, he made his way back to his truck for seconds. His breath looked like steam in the moonlight. He rummaged through his duffel for another sandwich then he walked to the other side and stared down the jagged plunging wall of the quarry into the darkness of the bottomless pit. He imagined flames at the bottom shooting up and swallowing those that fell... deeper and deeper... farther and farther... forever tumbling without rest. He prayed his thankfulness that he had been saved from the abyss of death's bottomless pit. He kicked some gravel as he took another bite and walked back to the other side. Enjoying the bright light of the moon shining on his face, he glanced to the side as an owl softly hooted in the distant tree. "Bout time for you to be going to sleep for the day, too, isn't it?" The owl hooted back. Derrick smiled and pulled his collar a little closer to block out the wind. He enjoyed clear, cool nights like this in the low 30's... *'bout just as much as that guy.* He smiled toward a bushy-tailed red fox bouncing over the land bridge and down the grassy side toward the road. Taking another

bite, he sat down on the edge and let his legs dangle over the grassy rock face. He listened to the morning song of the early bird and gazed down to the windy road in the valley, occasional headlights whizzing by in the darkness. Long, brown with crystals frozen weeds blew against his pant leg. He looked up and gazed at the morning star glistening brightly in the east for several moments as the sky gradually lightened to dawn. Yawning he finally got himself to get up. Brushing the snow from his jeans, he headed back to his truck, where he'd wait out the daylight until it was safe to advance again in the darkness.

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Yawning, Kara Lee cracked her knuckles, widened her eyes, and clutched harder to the steering wheel twisting her hands to try and keep herself awake as the traffic increased and the cars multiplied as they went whizzing around her. She guessed she must be getting close to Indianapolis. She shook her head again and try to become more alert. Most of the drive she had just kept it on cruise, absentmindedly driving half-asleep, but now she figured, readjusting herself in the seat, she better wake up and pay attention. She smiled as she gazed over at the brilliant orange sunrise in the eastern sky then quickly yanked her attention back as passing semi drifted into her lane. "Hey!" She let her car drift onto the shoulder to give him more room. "Jerk!" She yelled after him as he finished passing and came back into the right-hand lane. "Gonna get us all killed," she mumbled.

Feeling herself phone vibrate again, she pulled it out of her pocket and tossed it on the passenger seat. She didn't have to look at the number. She knew who was... Wade... again. Glancing from the right-hand exit sign to the left-hand exit sign, she flipped on her blinkers and sputtered over into the middle lane in front of a car who was taking too much time deciding whether or not it wanted to pass. *Wade*. She glanced over at the missed call blinking on her phone and shook her head. She had thought that telling him she was onto something and she needed a couple days to sniff it out was friendly suggestion to lay off for a while. He hadn't gotten the message. His overly frequent inquiries on how things were progressing were enough to make her consider taking the battery out of her phone... or at least turning it off.

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"Hi, this is Jim." Jim walked out of the kitchen of the fire station where everyone was gathered for lunch into the bay to answers phone.

"Hey, Jim, it's Wade."

"Oh, hi, Wade." Jim rubbed the bridge of his nose and tried to sound more enthusiastic as he put his foot up on the running board of the engine. "Get any news yet?"

"No. Kara Lee texted me this morning and said she was onto something and going to check it out. I offered to go with her and help out, but she never answered me. I asked her what was going on, and she doesn't answer me. I tried calling her, and she doesn't answer me. Do you think something is wrong?"

"No."

"Then why doesn't she answer me?"

Jim yawned. "Wouldn't surprise me if you don't find out what's going on until it gets published in the Wall Street Journal."

"Oh, come on."

"Seriously, Wade, you're thinking of this as a matter of life and death, and she's thinking about it as letters on a page at ten cents a word... or whatever they get paid for it."

"I don't think she's that coldhearted." Wade's voice was unsure.

"I don't think she's going to involve you at all. She *may* give you the baby back at the end if everything goes according to plan."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Sorry I called. I was just wondering if you might have some idea about how to get a hold of her."

"Haven't got a clue." Jim leaned back against the engine.

"Maybe if you called her.... I mean... a... Maybe she'd a..."

BURRRUZZZ!!!

“Sorry, Wade! Gotta go!” He hung up and ran to get his gear.

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Starting to dream, Derrick rolled back and forth a couple of times before rolling off the bench seat in the back of the truck onto his duffel bag and other supplies. Waking up, he quickly rolled back onto the seat, hoping he hadn't crunched his crackers. Rolling onto his stomach, he reached down, unzipped his duffel bag, pulled the crackers out. Sitting up, he took a stack pack from the box and opened it. *A little crummy but not bad.* Eating a couple at a time, he pulled out his phone to see what time was. *Almost time to go. Hour maybe.* Yanking on the door handle, he pushed the truck door open and got out into the misty dusk. *Foggy tonight.*

Stretching, he walked to the edge and stared down, squinting to see the road. He was thankful for the fog. Maybe he could leave a little early because of it. Cringing on crackers, he stretched again, thankful for the long winter nights and shorter days. A blustery gust of wind sent a chill through his body. He shivered against it and then took a deep breath of the cool air, enjoying it. It was several minutes before he saw a lone car slowly make its way down the foggy mountain road. *No one out tonight. Safe to go?*

He glanced toward the shrouded, foggy orange fireball slowly setting behind the mountain peaks as he walked back to his truck. *Zero hour.* He ate a couple more crackers as he got in the driver's seat, buckled, sent up a prayer for safety, put 'er in reverse, and headed across the lot and the land bridge, then down the steep, little, windy lane, and finally back on solid road. He flipped on his CD player. Head 'em up. Move 'em out.... He glanced up in his rearview mirror and frowned. *Who said you could be behind me?*

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Kara Lee clutched the steering wheel tighter with sweaty palms as she turned onto a bumpy, unkept dirt road. She turned on her brights. Her heartrate quickened. The little one lane road, covered by a canopy of trees was very narrow, very unkept, very dark. Swallowing hard, she reminded herself that was why she loved this job... the adventure and excitement. Ninety-nine percent of the time, she loved being independent. IT was just that other one percent that got to her sometimes. Slowing the car, she tried to rein in her imagination and press onward. A couple years ago the feelings of isolation had become so strong that she had relented to accepting a partner. That had lasted all of two weeks before they were both in danger of going down for the other one's homicide.

Glancing around at the waving pines, she bounced through a rut and then gasped as a deer bounded across the road in front of her. She was going so slow all she had to do was take her foot off the gas in order to stop. Her heart jumped as a ghostly wind whistled through the evergreens. She took a deep breath. *Come on, Kara Lee, get a hold of yourself, or you're going to end up running home like a baby.* She craned her neck. In the distance, she could barely spot a meadow. As she approached it, she nodded to herself. *Great place to park.*

She squinted to see any downed trees or barriers as she slowly pulled the jeep off the road, tightly in between two trees and into the open meadow. She eyed her surroundings for a good place to park, concealed from the road... or lane... or trail... or whatever it was. Finding a likely spot, she slowly drove the jeep, under the sagging branches of a giant cedar close to the trunk until she felt completely concealed by its willowing limbs. She let out a sigh, put it in park, and fell back against the seat. Now, all she had to do was muster the courage to get out. *Oh, come on, Kara Lee. You're a death-defying reporter and... ..and one day death's going to get the better of you. Oh, shut up.* Grabbing the handle, she forced the door open and got out. The chilled air caused her to shiver. She grabbed her coat and flashlight from the front seat, slammed the door, and got her pack from the back seat, flinging it over her shoulders and snapping the strap in front in a single motion. Then decisively sweeping her flashlight beam in front of her, she marched toward the road. Running home was not an option. She was a death-defying reporter. She *always* got her story and she *always* made it out alive... so far.

Gasping, she jumped as a fox jumped from a bush right next to her and ran in front of her over to a thicket across the way. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to laugh, but it sounded very sarcastic, even to her. Maybe she should have told Wade where she was going. Then at least they would have some idea where to go to recover her body.

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Hand out the window, Derrick enjoyed the cool night breeze blowing against him as he drove down the narrow yet

paved unlined country road. A few more minutes and he figured he could start looking for a place to park. He sucked in a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. He loved this world... too bad he wasn't long for it. His only comfort was that if God created this world and the next, then the next must be just as beautiful.

Seeing an unpaved lane, he pulled to a stop, wondering if that was a likely place. Staring at it, he tried to decide if it was hunting lane or if it led to a house. There were no tracks in the fresh fallen dusting of snow... but it wasn't terribly overgrown either. He decided to turn and see. The chilly night seemed darker than usual. She didn't know if it was just because he was in the woods or if it was going to snow again. He figured he'd already had his fair share of blizzards, and he wasn't expecting one in Kentucky... but that didn't mean anything.

He drove slowly down the rutted lane until after about a mile, it stopped. He turned on his brights and squinted to see in the distance... a nice cleared, grassy spot just for him. He carefully pulled his truck off the road and into the clearing, around a stack of chopped wood, and behind a clump of trees where he turned off his headlights and parked. *Perfect.*

Grabbing his small duffel bag and his coat, he got out, stretched, and took a deep breath the frosty air. He smiled at an owl hooting beside him. *Beautiful night, Lord.* He traipsed through the snow dusted clearing, kicked a frosty log out of the way, pulled his compass from his pocket and shone his flashlight on it. *That away.* He pointed, kicking a pile of snow-covered leaves. Finding a likely spot to get through the trees, he moved some branches and started to climb, heading northwest. *Onward and upward.*

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Walking out of the Mac's diner, Wade pulled his phone out of his pocket hoping for a missed call. No such luck. He frowned. Finding Kara Lee's number in his phonebook, he dialed her... again. It went straight to voicemail. Angry, he thrust his phone back in his pocket. *She's a liar.* Kicking cloud of snow hard, he accidentally hit someone's car with it. *Oops.* He looked around to make sure no one saw.

Looking up at the starry sky, he sighed. He felt so helpless. She said she was going to keep him informed. She said she was going to update him. She said she was going to help. Was she working on this case, or had she found something else? If she was, what was she doing? Slipping a little on the ice, he grabbed his van mirror to steady himself. She had just picked his brain and went off on her own, and now she won't discuss what's going on. He sure hoped Jim wasn't right that she might mess things up worse than they are now. He got his key out and unlocked the door. He had this terrible feeling that he was going to wake up one morning with the headlines reading that Derrick had been caught, and his cell phone reading that Davey had been killed.

He got in and turned on the van. Still, he had to give Derrick some credit. Even if she messed things up royally, he would have to go downhill along ways to let himself get arrested. He was banking on that. Nothing had really changed. He turned up the heat. He was still betting on Kara Lee and to find him, and on Derrick to keep from getting caught. And if he was any kind of judge of human nature... He put it in reverse. ... that's exactly what would happen.

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Out of breath after climbing a steep ravine, Kara Lee stopped and plopped down on the snow dusted ground. She'd been hiking for hours... but it felt like days. Rolling onto her stomach, she had to remind herself that she loved a good adventure. She just hoped it wasn't all for nothing... and this hunch was anything from a sure thing. She rested her forehead on her forearms and closed her eyes. Still, there was nothing like the satisfaction of a good hunch panning out. ... And there was nothing like the defeat and coming up empty. She pushed herself to her knees moments before drifting asleep. *Come on, Kara Lee. Wake up. One more hour tops.* She just hoped when she finally got there, that her story was there. Standing up, she brushed yourself off. So far, she had found no evidence at all of the man she was tracking... or of anyone at all alive and breathing in this forsaken wilderness. She started to walk muttering, "No one else is stupid enough to be out here on a night like this. Derrick's probably sleeping in his nice warm truck somewhere."

She pulled her phone from her pocket to check the time. Four missed calls. *No prize for guessing who.* She checked anyway. *Wade. ...Of course.* Didn't the man realized she was working... And that she had no news. She was a little surprised that her phone getting reception though. She checked the signal.... No signal. *Figures.* She looked at the time. *Twelve forty-seven.* She ducked under branch and stepped over a log at the same time. Even if Derrick wasn't there, she hoped at least the drug dealers were. She would hate for all this effort to be for nothing.

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Stopping behind a tree, breath smoking from running down the hill, Derrick spied the complex of cabins shrouded by mist in the clearing. This was the place. Seen the moonlight reflect off the lake, he zipped his coat higher and put up the hood, hoping the moonlight wouldn't reveal him if anyone was around. He didn't see anyone around.

Hearing something to his right, he jumped to the left of the tree and held his breath, freezing, until he saw a small doe emerged from the bushes. *Only a deer.* Relaxing, he darted behind another tree closer to the cabins. Everything was quiet. The only movement was the smoke rising from one of the chimneys. He figured that's where they were sleeping.

Staying low, ran softly over to the side of the first cabin. He crept to the window and looked in. It was filled with all kinds of boxes, but he couldn't tell if they were supplies or product. Feeling the window give, he slowly began to push it getting about an inch before it started to squeak. He stopped, but that was all he needed. One whiff and he knew that was their stash.

Senses heightened, he repeatedly looked in all directions as he snuck to the second cabin. That one had their supplies. Third cabin. That was the lab. That only left the fourth cabin... the most dangerous. He heard snoring as he approached. Unfortunately, the window was on the dark side of the house. Poking his head up, he squinted to see, but he just couldn't tell how many were in there. Suddenly fearful, he ducked down and snuck away.

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Huffing and puffing, clumping and crunching, Kara Lee trudged up what she hoped was her final hill. Finally reaching the top, she fell to her knees panting for air. Finally oxygenated, she lifted her eyes to see smoke coming from the valley. *That has to be... somebody anyway.*

Forcing herself to her feet, she fell back down again. "Come on, Kara Lee. This is what you came for. You're going to be able to find anything out in the morning. You'll have to wait till it gets dark again. Then you'll be wondering all day." She forced herself up again, and began trudging down the hill... the long hill. About a quarter of the way down, her nerves set on edge. She looked every way. She heard every sound. "Kara!" A loud whisper caused her to jump, spin three sixty in the air, and come down lopsided. Losing her balance, she tumbling backwards down the hill. Someone ran after her, stopped her tumble and pulled her up by her backpack.

"Derrick?" She sat back down in the snow dusted leaves when he released her. "I've been looking everywhere for you!" She put her hand over her turbo charged heart. "You scared me!"

"Better me than them!" he replied in a loud whisper, glaring toward the cabins then back toward her.

"Ye-eah." She pulled her knees up to her chest than turned to look down at the cabins. "Are they down there? The drug dealers?"

"What do you know about them?" He asked, suspiciously, stepping back and leaning against a tree.

"I know they are part of Sandervauh's organization. I know you're here to take them out."

Cracking his neck to the side, he stared down at the cabins. "How do you rate coming across all this information?" He glanced sideways at her.

She wagged her head, confidently. "I have my ways."

He nodded. "I guess you do." Then he turned to look at her. "Why?"

She raised the palms of her hands in a shrug. "Why not?"

He deepened his voice. His eyes narrowed. "Why are you following me?"

Her heart sped up a moment with fear of those steely eyes. She had never realized before that he was one to be feared. She tried to brush the feeling off. He wouldn't hurt her... she hoped. "Who says I'm following you?" Her voice accidentally squeaked. "We just happen to be going in the same direction." She stood up, feeling subdominant on the ground.

"Uh huh." He looked skeptical. "You just woke up one day and thought it sounded like fun to track down the Sandervauh cartel... alone."

“You bet.” She brushed the snow off her tan cargo pants without looking at him. “That’s what we reporters do. Find a good story and chase it. One hundred percent.”

“And it doesn’t have to do with me at all?”

She grinned up at him “*You* make a great story!”

Setting his jaw, he stared back at the cabins. “I’m not a commodity for you to sell like corn.”

“No, but your story would make a great commodity.” She grinned again.

He turned and looked her in the eye. “I don’t like me or my story being used by you.”

She wagged her head and grinned. “What you gonna do about it?”

Gritting his teeth, he turned to walk away. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

“Wait.” She laughed, grabbing his arm.

He turned around abruptly and scowled. “Shhh! Go ahead and get yourself killed if you want but not me.” He turned again. “Maybe I should just go somewhere else.” He turned back. “Somewhere where you can’t find me.”

She wagged her head again. “I can find you anywhere.”

“Don’t count on it.” He turned again.

“Wait.” She put her hand up, but didn’t grab him this time. “I’ll cooperate.” She chuckled. “All I want to do is watch. I won’t get in the way.” She let her eyes dance until he couldn’t help but stare into them. “Just talk to me a bit. What are you planning to do about them?” She motioned toward the cabins.

“You can see what I’m doing.”

Exasperated, she rolled her eyes and let her hands slap her legs as they fell to her sides. “No. Actually, I can’t. Seems to me you’re just nipping at their heels, trying to annoy them, maybe trying to provoke them, but why?” She raised her palms again. “What’s your plan? Do you have a plan?”

He held her gaze. “I’m afraid if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Her eyes narrowed and she wagged her head once very slow. “Fi-ine. Like I need you to tell me what’s going on.” She puffed out her chest. “I’ll figure it out on my own.”

Nodding, Derrick tried unsuccessfully to hold back a smile as he turned to go. “Ok. Well, good luck.”

She took a step forward than back, trying to decide whether or not to follow him. She decided not to, opting to try and preserve her self-reliant image. All she had to do was watch the cabins and wait for him to make his move. She just hoped it wasn’t until morning, because she had to get some sleep. Going down the hill a little farther, she stopped when she figured she was close enough to hear any commotion. Then she untied her sleeping bag from her backpack and bedded down behind some bushes.

Derrick wagged his head slowly as he watched her from the top of the hill behind some cover. He wondered how much that subzero sleeping bag cost. She looked snug as a bug, using her backpack for a pillow and snacking on some cereal bars for supper.

He had to ration his food. Couldn’t eat anymore till morning, even though he was hungry. She could just waltz in take a few pictures and waltz right out. He was staking his life on this mission. ...but then maybe she was, too... by her own foolishness. He tried to judge the distance in yards she was from the complex. However far it was, it was too close. You’d never catch him beddin’ down that close to the enemy. If she wasn’t so frustrating, he might go warn her what could happen. He shook his head as he turned and went further to his tree. She’d never listen. *Serves her right if she did get caught.*

Finding his tree, he sat down and rolled under the evergreen that went all the way down to the ground. *A lot better cover than a few bushes.* He rolled all the way to the trunk where there was more room... where he had his stuff stowed. *If there’s one thing she’s not, it’s my responsibility.* Taking his scrawny blanket from his pack, he covered himself and used his arm

for a pillow. *After all, she's using me for profit. Probably turn me in if there's a reward.* He believed she would. *Get yourself killed. See if I care. Be one less thing I'd have to worry about.*

## Staking out Danger

The next morning when Jim got home, Jess met him at the door, pen and paper in hand. Jim had to smile as he stepped from the frozen tundra to his warm, cozy house. If this was one of her make-a-list days, he had better be ready to get serious about having fun. Of course, he figured at least half the days since her parents had arrived had been like that. "So, what's on the docket for today?" He walked past her to hang up his coat. "Well," tapping her paper with her pen, she followed him. "I thought we'd go out for breakfast somewhere."

"How 'bout Mac's? They've got good omelets there."

"Yeah." She followed him to the kitchen. "Or we could get some breakfast sandwiches and eat them in the car on the way to Thunder Mountain."

"Thunder Mountain?" He glanced back at her. "Are we going skiing?" He stopped at the refrigerator and pulled out the orange juice.

"You know how my parents use to love to ski. They haven't even seen snow in years where they live."

"Yeah, and if they break something they won't be going back for a while either." He tipped the bottle and took a long drink out of the carton.

She gave him a look. "I assume they'll be doing cross-country, but you and me and take on those hills, and we can bring Morgan's snow tube she got for Christmas. She's dying to try it out."

"Yeah, I guess so." He took another swig as he grabbed a bagel.

"They even have fireworks tonight for New Year's Eve!" Her eyes brightened then saddened. "Since we only have two more days."

"Until they visit again."

"Four years... or longer." A stray tear threatened.

"Then they'll be back." He got out some strawberry cream cheese, too, draped his arm around her neck momentarily. Then he took it away and walked to the table. "Absence makes the heart grows fonder."

Smiling back, she pulled a blueberry yogurt from the fridge. I kinda wanted to go to that indoor rodeo near the quad cities, too. That starts around six, but then we'd miss the fireworks over the ski hill."

"Oh well, fireworks are better for the Fourth of July anyway." He spread the cream cheese on his bagel.

"And then there's the watch party at the church. We really should go to that. I'd have to make some salads to take. That goes from four till midnight. Or we could go to the rodeo and just get to church later."

Jim shook his head. "They'll be expecting your parents at church."

"I suppose so. We'll just have to go skiing and be back around two-thirty or three to make the salads. Just stay till ten or eleven if we wanted too, so the night's not too late for Morgan."

Jim shrugged. "She'd probably love a late night. Nothing to do tomorrow." He took a bite.

"Well," She flipped the page of her notepad. "I thought tomorrow we'd..."

Jim laughed, interrupting her. "How 'bout giving your parents a chance to rest on their last day here before they hit the road again?"

Jess shrugged. "I just want them to have a good time... to make some memories with their granddaughter."

"They've probably made enough memories to last a lifetime already."

"Or at least four years?" Her eyes got a faraway look as she absentmindedly ate her yogurt.

"How 'bout one day's worth of memories talking in the living room, sitting around the Christmas tree and the fireplace."

"We did that on Christmas... mostly. Just drove around to look at Christmas lights after."

"Nice wasn't it? Nice enough to repeat on New Year's."

She gave him a look. "Stick in the mud." He smiled back. Stirring her yogurt, she shrugged. "I suppose we could consider it." She ate her last spoonful of yogurt and walked to the trash. "Did you get enough sleep at the station last night?"

"Yeah. A little choppy, but all and all."

"What do ya mean?" She popped some toast in the toaster.

"Three calls each fifteen minutes tops from start to finish."

"Where ya able to get back to sleep afterwards."

"Sure." He went to the fridge and got a yogurt. "I'm all for livin' it up today if your parents are up to it."

"Oh, I'm sure they are."

Jim smiled back. "I don't know. Your dad looked like he was walking a little crooked after the indoor amusement park the other day."

"Oh, that's just cause he got hit with that golf club." She spun around and got the butter out of the fridge. "He's plenty recovered from that. We don't do as much on the days when you're gone at work. We want you to have fun with us!" She took the butter dish over to the toaster.

"Lucky me," he mumbled.

"What?" She used the butter knife to get the toast out of the plate.

"Oh, nothing." He came and put his arms around her. "I like having fun with you and your parents." He moved her long hair back and kissed her neck repeatedly.

"Jim." She giggled as she finished buttering the toast then pulled away. "What if they should walk in?"

"What? We're married."

"Jim." She rolled her eyes and set the toast on the table, taking a piece and leaving one for him. "Heard anything more about Derrick?"

Jim shook his head as he came over and took his piece. "Not really. Wade thinks Kara Lee's on the trail of something."

"Already. Well that's fast." She sat down but turned toward him.

"Yeah. Dangerous, too. We'd better start praying for Derrick's safety."

Smiling, Jess wacked him on the arm, laughing lightly. "She may be a little exuberant..."

"And self-serving," Jim finished, leaning back against the table.

"Well, I kind of like her." Jess finished her toast. "She's a doer, and she's good at what she does. She's not perfect..."

“Neither are her intentions, I’m afraid.”

“Well, maybe she won’t even find him.”

“We can hope.” Finishing his toast, he went back to the fridge.

Jess smiled. “Well, I think Derrick can take care of himself. The only way he’s gonna know about the ransom is if someone finds him.”

Jim gave a partial relenting nod as he peered into the fridge. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Well,” Jess slapped the tabletop as she got up. “I’ve got an hour before Morgan wakes up. I think I’m gonna go out and take care of the horse’s this morning. Don’t want to miss that gorgeous sunrise.”

“I’ll help ya.” He grabbed a few string cheeses and hurried to join her walking out.

“Well, that’s nice.” She held onto the back of his shirt and snuggled up close to his side. “You don’t have to,” she stated for good measure even though she wanted him to.

“That’s okay.” He put his arm around her. “It’ll go faster with two.”

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Scrunched in a ball, his face half in his jacket and half covered by his tilted cowboy hat, Derrick resisted the urge to get up. After finally finding a warm position in getting a few hours sleep, the prospect of getting up to forge out in the bitter cold and pick a fight with several deranged drug dealers and their pilot really didn’t sound all that appealing. However... Tilting his cowboy hat back, he stared through the branches out at the glistening frozen dew. ...that’s why he’d come.

Stretching, he shivered at a cold breeze rushing past his neck. *Zero hour.* Would have been a lot safer to take them last night... but he wanted the pilot in the plane too. He figured they wouldn’t come if they lost contact with their crew. So... He rolled out from under the tree. The show would have to wait to begin until all the guests had arrived. His breath steamed in front of an amber ray of morning sunlight. Standing to his feet, he wondered what had become of Kara Lee. Brushing the snow from his jeans, he hoped she hadn’t complicated matters by going and getting herself captured.

He hiked over and down a ways until he could see Kara Lee’s camp. As he expected, she wasn’t there. He scanned the area with his eyes, not seeing her. Shrugging, he went down a little closer, constantly maneuvering his vision to take in all areas around him. He squinted to see the complex and people moving around it outside. He sent up a prayer that either the fresh fallen snow had covered his tracks around their place or that they wouldn’t notice a difference between his and theirs.

Ducking behind trees, he got a little closer than he wanted to in order to see. One guy was going in the main cabin. Another was getting water from the lake. The other two were loading up the stash on to a small trailer attached to a lawnmower. He had to smile at the image of them loading a lawnmower in the snow to transport drugs from the cabin to the lake. He wondered where they got it. Not seeing Kara, he turned back, shrugging. He guessed he’d run into her sooner or later... unfortunately.

Recurring hunger pangs, caused him to turn and climb back up the hill, though keeping his ears primed to hear any approaching aircraft. The only sound in the mystic stillness was the mournful cry of a lone whippoorwill in a distant tree. Snow peppered down around him as the wind gently ruffled through the branched.

Reaching his evergreen, he jerked his gaze to the right, hearing the crunch of an approaching intruder. Then SNAP! The sound of a breaking branch felt almost deafening in the silence. Instantly, he lunged forward into the tree, plowing through the prickly branches. Finding a gap, he turned around, pulled out his revolver, leveled it in his only clear line of vision and waited.

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Back flat against the trunk of a tall maple, Kara Lee looked all around, listening intently. There was no way the person she was following hadn’t heard that. She was forty-nine percent sure she was following Derrick’s tracks, and if a gunshot didn’t pierce through the airway in the next two seconds, she might be fifty-one percent sure. She banged her head back against the tree. She could kick herself for being so clumsy... just like her mom had always said... if there was anything within one hundred miles to trip over, she would find it. She’d been so focused on the tracks ahead that she hadn’t even noticed the branch right under her foot until her foot was 2cm above it. It had been one of those slow-motion moments for sure. She saw the branch,

stopped her foot, tried to lunge forward or hop back at the same time and only succeeded in falling kur-crunch on top of the whole conglomeration of limbs. *Seriously that branch must have been drying since World War II to have so much crunch stored inside it.*

After several moments of continued existence, her heartrate began to stabilize. Turning, she leaned against the maple's hefty trunk, peeked around the side, and gazed all around. No one was staring her down with a machine gun. Maybe she was safe after all. Maybe it hadn't been as loud as she had first thought. Maybe she was good to go. Getting her confidence back, she continued on her quest following the tracks of the lone humanoid, which she hoped was Derrick.

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Derrick's eyes widened and his hand tightened on the trigger as the dark figure of a human can into view. He didn't see a long gun. He squinted and craned his neck, trying to determine its gender in the darkness. He watched it follow his trail a few more minutes then dart behind a nearby tree, look out, and dart across his trail behind another. He relaxed his arms a little. *Has to be....* He smiled as the figure came more into view as she darted across his trail again behind another tree. *...Kara Lee Cummings.*

He returned his gun to its holster and then took a few steps out from the trunk of the tree to get a better view. Smiling as he watched her slowly follow the end of his trail, staring down intently on each track then stopping right in front of the tree. Hands on her hips, she lifted her eyes up the tree, staring practically right at him, yet not seeing him. Then after a moment, she looked back toward the ground and turned to walk around it. Derrick couldn't resist. Soon as she turned, he jumped out and grabbed her shoulders. Face jerking toward him surprise, she started to scream at the top of her lungs. She got out about one syllable before Derrick got his hand up to her mouth and lunged forward tackling her to the ground. She kned him hard in the stomach which had absolutely no impact against his strong muscles. She struggled against him. It was another couple of moments before kneeling over her in the snow, he saw her face register who he was. "What's the matter with you?!" He slowly removed his hand from her mouth, but kept her pinned. "You want to bring the whole underworld down on top of us?!" He spoke in a loud whisper.

"Wha- you I wil ow who.... Get off of me!"

"Oh, yeah." Releasing her arm and lifting his knee over her, he sat down next to her. "I was wondering what happened to you."

Sitting up, she shook her head to release the snow from her shortish red pony tail. "Well, you, I, we..." Putting her hands in the snow, she pushed herself back from him, a little shook about how defenseless she was against his strong arms holding her down. "What were you doing hiding in that tree?" She asked accusingly.

He shrugged. "It's a more effective for not getting killed than running back and forth between trees twenty feet apart while following someone that you don't know."

She stiffened and tossed her head at the same time. "I figured it was you."

"Oom." He smiled. "You sure scream loud for thinking it was me. Who did you think would hear you way out here?"

She jerked her gaze over her shoulder in realization toward the cabins. "You think they heard."

"No." His voice was calm. "Someone covered your mouth. Remember?" He laughed lightly.

"Well," She jumped to her feet and brushed herself off. "I'm glad you find this amusing. That whole herd of murders will probably descend on us in a couple of minutes!"

Shaking his head, he stood up. "We're far enough away."

"Well!" She threw her hands on her hips and pulled herself to her full five-foot-two height. "I think that was pretty inconsiderate of you! After all, I mean, you, I, who gave you the right to, I think, if you think...." She talked swiftly and motioned with her hands, pointing at him.

He laughed again at outraged demeanor and judgmental stance. *So small and so indignant.* "I didn't know you'd scream. Who'd think. I mean, the big bad bounty hunter...."

She picked up a ball of snow and threw it at him. "I am not a bounty hunter. I'm a respected investigative reporter." She

turned and walked away.

He followed her. "Yeah, I can see the newsprint right now. The Take-down of the Great Sandervaugh Regime. Written by the late Kara Lee Cummings."

Outraged, she turned around and shoved him. "Why don't you go jump in that lake down there!"

He laughed again as he stepped back. "Where you by any chance looking for me, Kara Lee?"

Her hands threw back to her hips. "Well, I was, but maybe now I'll just go home!"

"Now, there's the best news I heard all week." He chuckled.

She puffed her chest and tossed her head. "You need me!"

He scoffed as he turned back toward his tree. "As much as an impacted wisdom tooth."

She followed him indignantly. "There's six of them down there."

"And more on the way." He walked into his tree.

She raised her hands back to her hips. "You're going to need me for back up!" She yell-whispered into the pine.

"Actually," He pushed aside some snow-laden branches, causing the flakes to fall as he reemerged with his duffle bag. "I've been doing just fine on my own." He let the branches go, allowing the snow to fly in her face. She ducked to avoid getting whacked even though they were far enough away.

"Oh, come on, now." She jogged to catch up with him. She jogged to catch up with him. "You can't take them all on, all alone." She fell in behind him as the path narrowed, powerwalking to keep up, and ducking the branches that flew back after he pushed them away. She was breathless by time Derrick finally stopped at the top of the hill overlooking the cabin complex. Stopping beside him, bringing her hands to her hips, she bent forward sucking in deep breaths of much needed air. She could kick him for standing there so stalwart and unaffected by the hike.

"So," Derrick dropped his bag by a nearby log, brushed the snow off, and sat down. "You gonna tell me yet how you found this place and what made you figure I'd be coming her?"

Shrugging, she walked over to the log, debating whether to tell him about Wade and Mellissa's baby or to wait on that. She sat down on the other end of the log, watching as he unzipped his bag and got out a can of pineapple. "Out of all the places I found. This place best fit your profile and your currant pattern."

"You think you know how I think?" He popped the lid and gave her a sideways glance.

She shrugged, rubbing her hands together. "Apparently, I'm not that far off."

He shrugged as he pulled out a plastic fork. *Apparently not.* "How many places did you find?" He took a bite.

"Four. I worked hard and that's all I could find. I figured maybe that's all you'd be able to find, too."

He straightened, stretching a little as he ate, not looking at her. "I have more than four." She nodded, leaning her elbows down on her knees. "No. I mean where did you start at? You got your information just off the internet or what?"

She looked at him. "Well, I didn't break into a lab and copy their hard drive before I left."

"Yeah." Not reacting, he tipped his can and drank the juice so he could get to the pineapple easier. "Who do you know that did that?"

She rolled her eyes. "You?"

He laughed. "Do tell. Not a bad idea though." He dumped pineapple chunks into his mouth and chewed staring down into the can. Kara stared at him, trying to read him. It frustrated her that she couldn't.

"Did you know Sandervaugh swore revenge on you?"

"Which one?" Finishing the pineapple, he set down the can and rummaged through his pack for a can of chicken.

"The older one." Her voice betrayed her frustration.

"Guess he can say whatever he wants." He used his can opener to open the chicken.

Rolling her eyes, she looked away deciding the only way to get him to talk was to win his trust. ... How in the world was she supposed to do that? "I've been a member of some underground dark websites for years. They can help you get into other ones."

"Omm." He ate the chicken with his fork.

"That and my private eye friend and some contacts within the police and FBI. That's how I found this place."

"Huh." He didn't look at her just stared at his food as he ate.

"I have a lot of resources. I could help you take down Sandervauh, even clear your name?" Her eyes questioned as she stared at him.

He finished chewing, put the two cans and the fork together, slid down to the end of the log, dug a hole through a snow drift and used the can to dig through the frozen sod. "I don't need any help." Kara Lee rolled her eyes and looked away, trying to figure out plan c. He placed the cans in the hole, recovered the dirt and the mound of snow than stood up. "You get some breakfast?" He really didn't feel like offering her any of his diminishing supply, but he felt guilty.

She nodded as she stood up. "I ate earlier."

He nodded. *Good.*

"So, what's the plan here?" She motioned toward the cabins, putting her hands in her pockets for warmth as she sat back down.

"Why should I tell you?" He leaned his shoulder against the cold bark of an old oak and stared down toward the frosty cabins, his gaze following the chimney smoke into the misty morning sky toward the warm orange ball of sunlight just starting to emerge over the hill. The snow-covered limbs and pine boughs shrouding parts of the view only added to the ambiance. The fluffy, fresh fallen snow powdered the wilted weeds around the lake like sugar, and the bright red and blue birds peppered the air with crystals every time they landed on a branch. He let the beauty of the scene calm him.

Kara Lee stared out at the beauty as well, but her mind raced with questions and planning. "Let me help you. We can take these guys together." She studied his face. Still staring at the lake, he slowly shook his head. "Fine." She took her little camera from her pocket, turned it on, and adjusted the setting. "Then I'll figure it out on my own. I don't need to know your plan." She stared at her camera, but in her peripheral vision, she could see him turn and look at her.

"My plan is to do this alone."

"Fine." Her heart sped up as he stared at her. Trying to release tension, she lifted the camera, focused it, and snapped a picture of a cardinal, immediately realizing from Derrick's face as he stepped forward, looked toward the complex and then at her that she should have turned off the flash. "Sorry." She flipped off the flash.

"Look, a," He looked down, then back up, over and then back as he bent down and pulled a rope from his bag. "it's not my intention to be threatening, but it's also not my intention to get killed. Since you're here by no fault of mine...." He stepped toward her.

She jumped up, her eyes widening. "You wouldn't dare!"

He nodded. "Afraid so."

Shoving her camera in her pocket, she slowly backed eyes glued on him as he slowly advanced. Stuttering, she tried to think of some logical threat that would stop him. She couldn't come up with a thing. She backed quicker glancing from side to side, looking for a viable escape route. She thought about screaming but that was no good. She was surrounded by outlaws, even Derrick!

As he got closer, she spun and bolted, asking her once track star legs for every ounce of speed they could muster.

Adrenaline surged. To her surprise, she managed to stay ahead, down their trail, through the trees, over a log, up a hill, and... Wham! ...tackled at the top, face first, chin hitting the ground, breath escaping her, helpless as Derrick tied her hands then her feet and lifted her over his strong shoulders. Normally, she would have kicked and scratched and struggled, hopeless or not, instead her heart fluttered as he draped her over his strong neck. Turning her upside-down head to the side, she looked into his face as he grabbed the ropes of her bound hands together with ropes of her bound feet in front of him and started to walk. She didn't see anything but determination to complete the task ahead. If he turned to look at her, she would have returned him a condemning scowl, but he didn't even seem to notice her, engrossed in his own thoughts and strategy. He was simply removing her like a piece of dead wood from the path so he wouldn't trip over her in the up and coming. He was simply taking her to a predetermined location where he would likely secure her and leave her until his conquest was completed at which time he hopefully would return and release her. ... Hopefully. ... Looking away from his strong set face toward the swiftly passing ground, she decided she better start thinking how she was going to get free if he didn't happen to return. *Yeah! What if he doesn't come back? What about all the work you did to get here... to get your story?* Her mind raised for a logical argument he would buy... even if it wasn't true. She turned and lifted her head to look at him. "Look, what if I promised not to take any pictures. I could leave my camera in my bag." He huffed a laugh and kept walking. "What if I promise not to write my story until after you're done with your revenge or whatever it is?" He ignored her. "Listen to me!" She thrust her head up and latched her teeth into the side of his neck hard till she could taste his blood. Throwing his head to the side he wacked his skull into her forehead, forcing her loose. *Ouch.* Her vision blurred as her head fell back to his chest. "Look, would you rather...." She couldn't pull together her thoughts. "I'm trying to bargain here!"

Derrick gave her a look as he set her down next a large sturdy-branched oak. Lying on her back, she stared up at the massive structure of branches above her and tried to think of a better argument as frosty brown leaves floated from its branches down on top of her. "My words good." Her voice squeaked.

"Yeah." *Right.* He finished the thought in his mind. "But I think I'd rather remove the temptation to begin with." He wiped his blood-dripping neck with his shoulder as he knelt down and pulled her cellphone and camera from her pocket and put it in his.

"That's stealing!"

"Sue me," he suggested as he stood back up, took a deep breath, and then bent down, grabbed her belt and the rope around her ankles and hoisted her up to the bottom limb, which was about even to his chest.

"Hey!" she gasped, her breath escaping her as her stomach landed on the limb and she hung helplessly staring at the ground, unable to fall either way before Derrick swung up beside her, grabbed the back of her belt and hoisted her up to the next branch. She tried to yank her wrists apart, but the rope wouldn't give. "What do you think you're doing?!" She tried to sound as outraged as she felt, but her voice squeaked.

"Would think the brilliant reporter would have that figured out by now." He climbed to the next branch then yanked her up after.

Her stomach tightened at the height. The ground seemed to spin, so did her head. Her heart rate quickened at the realization she had no way to break her fall should he drop her. "But I hiked all the way up her." The unwanted whine returned.

"We all make mistakes." He tossed her one higher.

"But this is my livelihood. It's like stealing my paycheck!"

He climbed to the next branch. "Glad to hear some of us still get a paycheck, wish I had that luxury." He hoisted her again, but this time set her down seated next to the trunk of the tree instead of on her stomach. She swayed to the side to look down and started to fall, gasping. He grabbed the rope around her hands and pulled her back up. Eyes closed, breath rapid, heart thudding, she mouthed a reluctant, "Thank you," then couldn't figure out why since it was his fault she was up here.

"Better secure you good here so that doesn't happen again." He started to untie her legs.

She mentally shook her head. If only her hands were free so she could strangle him. "You..." She tried to catch her breath. "You got something against shackling your prisoners on solid ground?"

"Nothing original about that." He wrapped the rope several times around her middle and the trunk of the tree, tight enough to be secure but loose enough to keep her hands behind her back from getting crushed.

Keeping her eyes squeezed shut, she uttered breathlessly. "This height is making me sick." The front of his coat brushed against her face as he tied a triple knot in the rope.

"Don't worry." He yanked the last knot tight then sat back away from her on the sturdy limb. "No way you can fall."

Fear turned to anger at the levity in his voice. She threw open her eyes and gritted her teeth. "Why. The. Tree?"

"You don't want to be seen, do you?" He slapped her shoe and then started to climb down.

"Wait."

He sat back up. "What?"

"Don't leave me up here all alone. What if you don't come back?" Her voice quivered.

"I'll be back." He swung down to the branch below her.

"Please, wait."

He stood up on the branch and leaned his forearms on her branch just in front of her feet. "Now what?"

"I'm serious. I don't have any water or a phone or a knife. If you don't come back, I'll die."

"Nooo. You'll find a way to get free. I know you." He started down again.

Her stomach tightened in anger. She wanted to curse him. "I'll scream."

He stood back up, gazed at her, and slowly pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. "It's a little dirty. I really didn't want to gag you with it ... but for your own safety."

"I was just threatening." She looked away. "I won't scream."

"Just remember. They're the only other ones out here," He thumbed over his shoulder toward the cabin. "and if they catch you, they'll do a lot worse than tie you up."

"Keep trying to justify yourself, Derrick." She didn't look at him.

He shrugged and headed down. "I'll be back."

"You do that." She glanced after him then looked back up when the height made her head spin. Rolling her eyes and rubbing her wrists back and forth, she tried to loosen her bonds.

## **Taking on the Mystery Mountain Mob**

"Wade!" Mellissa gasped sitting straight up in bed and grabbing the back of Wade's shirt.

"Wha- What?" Wade jostled awake, trying to turn over to face her, yet getting hung up with her grasp on his shirt. "What's the matter?" His voice was groggy.

"They killed him!" Her voice was haunted.

"Who killed who?" He rolled over on top of her hand, but still couldn't see her because of the dark.

"Davy." She released his shirt and put her hands to her face. "I just had the most terrible dream."

"And that's all it was, honey." He sleepily sat up. "They're not going to do anything to Davy. Their whole plot to catch Derrick rests on him."

Tears welled in her eyes. "He kept calling and calling for me. "Mommy! Mommy help! Mommy help me. I couldn't find him." She began to sob.

"Honey," he reached over and flipped on the lamp. "it was just a dream." He pulled back the curtain to let some sunlight in just as the alarm went off. He hit the snooze.

"I know, but maybe it's a sign. Maybe we shouldn't chase them. What if Kara Lee's putting pressure on them? Maybe they'll get nervous and cut their losses." She turned toward him, her eyes full of fear.

His eyes didn't reciprocate the feeling. His voice deepened with disapproval. "Kara Lee is probably sitting in front of her cozy fireplace with her laptop, drinking coffee and working on the plans for a more lucrative story. She probably couldn't come up with anything, and she doesn't want to tell me."

"Maybe we can drive over to her house and talk to her." She sniffed back tears.

Wade stared straight ahead, arms crossed. "She probably isn't there. Besides why would she answer the door if she won't answer her phone." He laid down.

Mellissa laid back down and rolled onto her side. "Wade?" He glanced toward her. She rested her hand on his chest. "Call her again," she pleaded.

"Why? Just to fill up her voicemail."

"You don't have to leave a message, but call her. Even if she is busy on something else, maybe she found out something that we can use to find him."

"Fine." He glanced over at the clock on the night stand. "At nine 'o clock."

She nodded. "Thank you."

\*\*\*\*\*

Gazing through the bare branches of bunched up bushes, Derrick watched the four gunmen hurriedly carrying duffle bag after duffle bag from the shed down to the lake. Derrick kept waiting for them to slow down as a cue they were almost done. He'd been primed and ready to make a move when they'd emptied the first shed then they moved on to the second one. He was amazed at all the stuff they had. He kept evaluating and reevaluating the circumstances to make sure his plan was the right one.

Startled at the interrupted silence, Derrick looked up toward the approaching roar. *Zero hour. Ready or not here they come.* He gazed up as glimmers of white plane flashed through the gaps in the canopy of trees. High in the sky, it became fully visible over the clearing that was the lake. He watched a gunman waved a white towel signaling all clear. He watched as it swooped down and splash-landed in the water, skimming across the top and coming to a rest near the dock. There were two inside. The second man through a rope to the man on the dock as the pilot killed the throttle. Another gunman, wiping sweat from his face, dropped his duffels and ran onto the dock to help his comrade tie it off.

*The time is now.* They were all here. Derrick scanned the area again to make sure his planned course was the least conspicuous. Then he headed down to the cabin. He had to be quiet. He had to be calm. He had to go unnoticed as he restrained six gunmen one by one. If any one of them alerted the others, it would be all over. Becoming aware of his steaming breath, he put his mouth in his coat and tried to slow down his breathing. He stepped carefully around twigs and leaves. Darted carefully from tree to tree, ducked behind bushes, and belly crawled behind fallen logs when necessary until he finally approached close to the back of the far cabin. Leaning against a tree, he stared dejectedly. At the closest point, there was still a good ten feet of open snow between him and the cabin. He couldn't tell if anyone was still in it. He knew he needed to move fast or there wouldn't be. *Now or never.* Dropping to his knees, he crawled through the snow, dragging his legs, so his path just looked like two lines instead of footprints. *Might as well confuse them anyway.* He crawled to the small dirty window and stood up. He couldn't hardly see thing through the dirt and cobwebs into the dark cabin. Seeing the shadow of a man moving toward the door, he ducked back down and crawled over to the back door. He carefully pulled down the cord, silently raising the board that kept it shut and opened it just a crack, just enough to see the gunman heading out with two duffels. He looked around. No one else. Keep it tight against the hinges, he tried unsuccessfully to keep it from squeaking at all as he pulled it open, parting the webbed homes of the spiders that lived there. Soon as it was open wide enough, he went in, closed it, and ran to the dark side of the home, out of sight of the approaching gunman. He hurried around the edge until he got to the side of the open front

door. He paused for a brief second, nerves priming. Clenching his fist, he raised his hand sideways straight up. Derrick's eyes widened and his heart rate quickened as the man stepped in. Instantly, he dropped his fist behind the gunman's head and pounded like a hammer against the back of his skull. The gunman dropped, never knowing what hit him. Derrick caught him, drug him along the dark wall out of sight of the doorway, to the back door, through it, and into the woods, using the man's body imprint to cover his tracks until they were concealed. Bending down, he slung him over his shoulders and ran with him through the woods until he reached a good isolated tree. Pulling his tape from his leg pocket, he taped the man's mouth, his wrist together and then his ankles. *One down. Five to go.* He tied him to the tree and ran through the woods back out front to see what was going on.

The rest of the men were all lined up from their pile of bags to the plane, tossing the bags one to the other and into the plane. *To efficient.* He needed more time. He watched as one of the men missed his catch and the bag went tumbling into the lake. "You stupid \*bleep\* \*bleep\* \*bleep\*!" The man dove into the water and went down for the bag. Nothing. He came up of air as the others watched and cursed. He went down again. Nothing. He came up and went down three more times before the leader instructed him to get out of there and go radio in that they were going to be a bag short. The man pulled himself out of the water and hanging his head trudged toward the cabin. *This would be a great time to take out their communications system.* Derrick ran around through the woods to the back of the cabin. *No back door. Two stories. That window.* Looking up, he gazed at the ledge at the bottom of the window only a couple feet above his head. Backing up, he took a running start and jumped. Fixing his fingers tightly on the ledge, he forced himself not to slam the rest of his body loudly against the wall. He only hit lightly. Hoping that was good enough. He pulled himself up until his feet touched the ledge. He pushed the window down from the top and crawled through. He could hear the man explaining their loss below him, right below him. He ventured to the edge of the loft to see the man talking on a mic plugged into a computer below. There was no time to formulate a plan. The man finished talking and unplugged the mic. Derrick shook his head, planted his hands on the railing and swung over, down and down. The man looked up and stretched out his hands, impact. Derrick, landing on the man's chest, tackled him to the ground, knocking the air out of him. Utilizing the breathless opportunity, Derrick slammed his fist into the man's face. Lights out.

Picking up the cord, Derrick pulled it out of the computer and then unplugged the second half of the cord and yanked the box of the other half, breaking it. Then he flipped the laptop over and took the battery out and put it in his pocket. Then just to be on the safe side found the router and broke its cord. He hoped that meant they were safe from communication. He checked for a signal on Kara's cell phone. Still no signal. He hoped that applied to everyone. He taped the man's mouth, hands, and feet. He worked as fast as humanly possible then jumped up and ran to the window to see if anyone else was coming. He didn't know whether to wait for a friend to come in and check on him and then take him, or lock this guy in and go on the offensive against the other four.

He stood to the side as he looked out the window. Three were still down by the lake. The fourth was coming up to the far cabin. They had apparently notice that their supply of drugs had stopped building. Derrick locked the front door, turned, and raced back up the stairs, two at a time, ran across the loft, scrunched, and jumped through the open top half of the window rolling when he hit the ground. He jumped up and ran quietly staying close to the buildings back to the old shed, not even caring about footprints. "Rex!" He heard the man calling inside. "Rex, where are you?" He sounded as if he stepped outside. "Rex!" He was back in. Derrick put his hand on the cord that opened the door, but didn't know when to pull it. If he burst in, he'd probably get shot. If he didn't, he would go down and tell his buddies that Rex was gone, and they would all be up here.

The man stepped back out front. "Hey," he yelled. "Rex is gone!"

"What?"

"Rex is gone!"

"Are you \*bleep\* sure? Look around back!" The man headed around back. Derrick quickly ducked in side. "Jud, go help him." Derrick went around to the front door. *It worked once. Maybe it'll work again.* His heart rate quickened. *Unless they come in the back.* He released the safety on his holster. He heard Jud coming up the old wooden porch. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the laptop battery from his pocket and raised his hand. Then as soon as the man stepped in, POW! Jud instantly crumbled to the ground. He just hoped he hadn't hit him too hard. The last thing he wanted to do was kill again. Just then the back door began to squeak. He reached for his revolver. The man came in, gun drawn and level. Derrick pulled and fired, heart center. So much, for his no kill resolve. So much for ever trying to go back to a normal life. Surging with adrenaline, Derrick started to shake as he holstered his gun and ran for the back door after noticing the other two yelling and running up the hill from the lake. He jumped over the gunman and raced through the back door and to the woods. His heart tugged at the thought of jumping over a dying man instead of rendering cpr, but there was nothing else he could do. He reached the woods just as they

reached the cabin. Ducking behind a tree, he cracked his neck and tried to stop shaking. At first all he could hear was cursing from the cabin. Then groaning as apparently the one he hit over the head woke up. "He's dead!" The pilot yelled over the groaning. Derrick watched the outline of the pilot leaning over the man in the doorway. He could get a clear shot if he wanted to. He didn't. "Get out of the doorway! There's a \*bleep\* \*bleep\* around here somewhere."

The pilot moved. "Agents. The fuzz."

"I don't know." Gun drawn the leader went out front. "Go check the \*bleep\* house." He yelled at the groaning man.

Derrick moved around the trees, closer to the front, watching the burly man look around. "You see tracks out back?" The leader asked the pilot.

"Few not \*bleep\* many."

The leader nodded. "I don't feel a \*bleep\* army around."

"It's locked!" The gunman called from the house. Marco's tied up inside.

"It could be that \*bleep\* lone wolf. The one they've been warning about."

Gun drawn, the pilot looked all around, turning in a circle. "Well, I'm getting out of here," he muttered.

Leader grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "We still got like forty bags to load!"

"I'll get 'em next time around!" He yanked away. "I'm not risking my \*bleep\* neck for your lack of security!" He headed down to the lake.

Leader followed. "Come on! One \*bleep\* man! We can take him and be done with him."

"You do that!" The pilot hurried across the dock. "Once you've secured your territory, I'll be back."

"What about your \*bleep\* man?"

"He's dead. Bury him where he can't be found. Dump him in the lake." He got in the plane. Leader threw him one last bag. He caught it and closed the door.

Breathlessly, Derrick ran full speed through the wood toward the west side of the lake. He knew if he could get there in time, he could get a clear shot to bring the plane down. He wanted that plane down. He wanted those bags of poisonous drugs in the lake. He didn't want to fail this mission. He heard the plane engine rumble into action. He ran faster. He could hear the propeller start to spin as the sound carried across the lake. He ran faster. He could hear the plane start to take off. He ran faster. He could see the beach and the lake. He ran. He could see the plane coming straight toward him. He ran on the beach. Closer and closer it came. He reached for his gun. No time. It lifted from the water. Without breaking stride, he vaulted off a log, jumping high. As the plane swooped overhead, his hands connected around the slippery pontoon, hugging it. His legs hit the ends of some branches as they ascended. Plane tilted up, he loosened his hold and let himself slide down the pontoon to the metal bar connecting the plane and the pontoon. Grasping it and one of its crossbars, he used it to pull himself up onto the pontoon. Sitting there, his heart rate quickened and his body threatened to shake as they soared over the evergreens. Glancing down, he felt dizzy. He forced himself to look at the plane. He tried to stop the visions of himself plunging 300 ft to his death. He forced himself calm as he scooted toward the door handle. He stopped. *There's no way I'm getting that door open.* Plan B. He took out his gun. He aimed it at the window toward the pilot. The plane swerved. He held on. The plane ascended straight up. *Oh no.* Derrick grasped his arms around the pontoon, hugging it. Squeezing his biceps, he held on with all his might as the pilot conducted a series of several loop to loops. Derrick's whole body shook involuntarily as the pilot leveled out again. He forced himself calm. *Well, that didn't work.* Plan C. He looked up. *If this doesn't work, receive my spirit.* He grabbed the metal bar again with one hand. Reached his gun up with the other and wacked the window hard... harder... harder.... It broke. The plane swerved as wind rushed in. He broke away the remaining glass, put his hand on the window frame, cutting it a little on the remaining glass, and climbed in, gun drawn.

"You \*bleep\* \*bleep\* \*bleep\* idiot! You're gonna kill us both!"

"Better than dying alone." He leaned against the copilot's seat gun aimed at the pilot's head. "Now, land this thing."

"Nothing doing!" The pilot yelled over the wind and the plane's beeping. "They'll kill me if I lose this load! You'll kill me

if I land!”

“I won’t kill you. You can take your chances on getting away.”

“No way! We die we die together! I’m not landing this \*bleep\* \*bleep\*!”

“Wanna bet?” Derrick reached for the parachute and put in on with one hand, keeping his gun trained with the other. He could see a clearing in the distance. “That clearing’s probably a lake! You’re gonna land it there!”

“No!”

“You are, or I am!” Derrick aimed his gun. No reaction. He stepped forward, ready to hit the man over the head. The pilot pulled a derringer from his vest. Derrick shot. The pilot slumped over the controls. The plane began to dive. Dizzy, ears popping, Derrick yanked the pilot from his seat. Dead. He grabbed the yoke as he looked out the window. They were heading straight for the lake. “That’ll work.”

Derrick raced for the broken window and jumped through, seconds before the plane’s tail clipped the top of a tree and it made a nose dive straight into the lake. Derrick pulled the cord, but the parachute didn’t have time to open. He plunged hard into the freezing lake. The icy water sent shockwaves through his body. He held his breath as he plunged beneath the surface, almost unable to keep from gasping from the pain. It felt like an eternity before he came back up, broke the surface, and could gasp for air. Trying to move, he felt paralyzed from the shock and the cold. Bubbles rose from the plane to his left, and his heart tore with the fact that he had killed again. He didn’t want to be a killer. His stomach wrenched. He would throw up if there had been any food left in him. Almost subconsciously, he unbuckled the parachute from him and began to swim numbly to shore. His head ached. He felt dazed. He saw blood dripping in the water in front of him, but didn’t register that it was his. The longer he was in the water the harder it got to think. He felt like his brain was freezing up. It took every ounce of energy he had to move his frozen body. Almost to land, he started to shut down and sink. He jolted and lunged himself forward, swimming and then pushing off the bottom of the lake with nearly numb legs. Chest deep water.... Waist deep water.... His legs buckled. He fell. He got to his knees. He shook. He grabbed a snowy root from the bank above him and tried to pull himself up. For a brief second, he stood on quivering legs and then fell. Using the root again, he pulled himself halfway up the bank and let the water drain off. He rubbed his numb legs vigorously with his nearly numb hands. He grabbed another root on top the bank and pulled himself up next to the tree. His body began to shake violently. He used the tree to pull him to his feet. He hugged the tree until his body stopped shaking enough to stand, which took several minutes.

Though still finding it difficult to think, he knew he couldn’t sit down. He knew he had to gather wood and start a fire. He knew he could only sit down when the fire was going strong enough to warm him. Wobbly and shaky, he ventured away from his tree on his quest for dry wood. A few steps away, freezing tears stinging his eyes, every muscle in his throat and stomach strained, he looked up toward heaven. *I’m sorry! I’m sorry I killed again.* He inhaled a strained breath because he had to. *I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry!* Peace swept over him, relaxing him. *It was self-defense.*

## Reporter in Distress

Kara Lee held her breath as she watched the three gunmen milling around on the ground beneath her tree. If she was a praying girl, she would pray that they didn’t look up. “Why are we following his tracks way out here anyway?” Judd complained.

“I told you to find Rex, you....” Leader cursed him several times.

“I’m with Jud.” Marco leaned against a tree. “He wouldn’t have had time to lug him way out here.”

Leader cursed again. “He was carrying someone out here. I can tell by the tracks. He set ‘im down right there.” He pointed to an imprint Kara Lee had made. Kara closed her eyes and started reciting the Lord’s Prayer. *Our father which ourt in heaven, hallowed be thy name....*

“Well, he isn’t here, now,” Judd complained, kicking a branch in front of him.

Leader stepped back and leaned against a tree. “Maybe we just don’t see him.” He looked around and then looked up right at Kara Lee. “Well, what do we have here?” Kara Lee opened her eyes. Her mouth went dry and her heart began to thud. She didn’t answer. “How’d you get trussed up way up there, sweetness?” He kicked Judd in the leg. “Get her down.”

Kara tried to calm her thudding heart as the man climbed toward her. “He did it.” She cleared her throat, trying to deepen the squeak from her voice. “He did it.”

“Who?”

“The man who was after you.” She leaned forward as Judd climbed up to the limb next to her and cut her ropes with his six-inch blade.

“Just who are you, sweetness?”

She slapped Judd’s hand away as he tried to help her down. She swung down effortlessly on her own and stood calmly before the leader with her chest puffed out. “Private Investigator.” She glanced sideways at Judd struggling to climb down. “Kelly of Mason and Kelly.” She held out her hand to shake.

Leader looked unconvinced. “Never heard of you.”

“Kip Sandervauh hired me.” She stepped to the side as Judd swung down next to her.

“He’s in jail.”

“I know that,” she spoke confidently. “I talked to him last week? Maybe the week before. He hired me to find this Derrick guy who’s been causing you so much grief.”

“He hired a girl.” He laughed

“He did.” She puffed her chest out again. “And Mason. He might fit better with your chauvinistic philosophies, but he is not here today.”

“Oh, where is he?”

“New York, working on the Brownman case. Truth be known, I have a better record than he does. Mr. Sandervauh was able to see through his own ego to notice that. You want to know about this Derrick or not?”

“Sure. Why not?” Leader leaned against a tree.

“Can we go back to your cabin?” She rubbed her hands together. “I’ve been stuck up in that tree for quite some time.”

“Sure. Why not?” He leaned away from the tree and motioned with his gun for her to go first. “Marco, you keep looking for Rex.” Kara confidently marched in front of him toward the cabin, her mind racing for what to say next.

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Knees clutched tight against his chest for warmth yet still shivering intermittently, Derrick scooted closed to the blazing fire. The area around the fire was still wet from melted snow yet warm. His one side was warm and nearly dry while his other side was still wet and cold. Pretty soon, he figured he should brave the chilly wind that would cut through him when he uncurled and turn around, so he could semi-dry his other side. He felt an unrelenting urgency to get moving along with a burning desire to lay down next to the heat and take a nap, yet he hadn’t the ambition to make the decision, so he just sat there, staring off, thinking, overwarming his one side, and in his opinion accomplishing nothing. *After all, why try? What have I really accomplished? Taken a small fraction of evil from the world, a very small fraction... killed some people... sent some souls to hell.* He stared into the jumping flames. Was it really a worth it?

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Nearly to the main cabin, Kara Lee stopped walking and turned around. “You know it took me weeks to track that guy down. This delay could easily make me lose him again, and Sandervauh would not like that one bit.” She crossed her arms and tried to look intimidating.

"Yeah, you don't have to worry about that." He walked up next to her and nudged her with his gun.

She resumed walking, arms still crossed. "That's all I've been concerned with for weeks. Why all of a sudden do you think I need abandon my mission."

"Because he's dead." The leader proclaimed smugly.

"Su-rrre." She wasn't sure, but she sounded like it. "You apparently don't know Derrick." She walked up the steps.

"Neither do you." He stopped on the porch and grabbed her arm to make her face him.

Sending him an unimpressed look, she didn't react to the pain, and she held tight so he couldn't uncross her arms. "What makes you think so?"

"He finally did something stupid." He bobbed his head and grinned.

"What?"

"He grabbed onto one of the pontoons of the plane and went up with it."

"Wha-a-at?" She refused to look convinced cause she wasn't. *He wouldn't do something that dumb... would he?*

"It's true." He nodded.

"Did you see him fall?"

"No, but I saw the plane start to loop, and he was way above the trees."

Kara's face fell. The invincible man had finally bought the farm. She felt like crying. Leader quickly picked up on her emotion with judgement and suspicion. Shockwaves pulsed through her nerves with urgency to correct the impression. She shrugged. "I admired him. You would have too if you'd gotten to know him like I have. It's a real waste. He was a talented guy."

"Weren't you paid to take him out?" His face spelled suspicion.

"Nope just find him. That's my business." She shrugged. "He's just business." She tried to convince herself. "I knew he couldn't keep on living the way he was goin.' Still... he's surprised me before." She shrugged again. "Oh, well, we all gotta go sometime." She sighed, regretfully.

His suspicion turned to a smile of conceit. "You were stuck on him."

She stiffened and frowned. "I was hired to find him. I found him. My job is done. You're my witness. He's dead." Man, she was lyin' her cover so good, she was about believing it herself.

He shook his head, still smirking. "You're gonna have to produce a body."

"Think so?" He nodded, slowly. "Well, then I better get at it." She turned to go.

"Not so fast." He grabbed her arm and yanked her in the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

Women. Nearly completely dry and warm, Derrick stretched out, lying down beside the fire. If he was on his own, he could just get up and move along on his way, free as a bird, everyone thinking he was dead. *Stay out of circulation... relax... recuperate... eat and sleep.* Hands behind his head, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the thought of complete relaxation and freedom for as long as possible... until he had to remind himself of Kara Lee. *Chuck it all for an uninvited female.* He sighed and plopped his forearm over his face to block the light. He wanted to wish that she was still calmly and quietly sitting in her tree waiting for his return, but he couldn't make himself believe it. She was probably already in the cabin, surrounded by her enemies, captured. He hoped not. Rolling onto his side and covering his face with his arm again, he halfway let himself sleep. Ten more minutes then he would put the fire out and get going.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Morning, doctor." Melinda walked past Matt, who was leaning against his elbows on the nurse's station counter studying some papers. He glanced up at her and grunted as she walked around him at the end of the U-shaped counter and

inside to her computer.

"How's Mrs. Jackson?" he grumbled, not looking up.

"Her temperature spiked last night." She typed the password to unlock the computer. "She has some redness, pain, and swelling around the incision sight. "Dr. Gardner prescribed Tetracycline IV and ibuprofen. It was down to a hundred point two this morning." She spoke absentmindedly as she typed.

"How high was it last night?" He flipped to the last page, folding them along the staple.

"One o' three point eight." She backspaced four spaces and started typing again. "Her vitals are good."

Matt grunted, flipped the pages back to their original condition, and slapped them down on the stack harder than intended.

Melinda glanced up from her computer at him. "Something wrong?"

"Just the joys of working with incompetent people."

"Oh." She looked back down and resumed typing. "What'd they do?"

"Trying to give a patient who's seriously allergic to amoxicillin penicillin."

"Oh. Did they test him?" She glanced up. Matt just glared. "Maybe there weren't any other viable options. Well, an allergy to amoxicillin doesn't always exclude the option to...." She glanced up into his glare again and sighed. "Didn't the baby sleep at all last night?"

"Not one wink."

"Well, maybe if she tries walking him back and forth, or has she?"

Her attention span for that is about five minutes, and she bounces him so much he's gonna wind up with the bends."

She stared at him, blankly. "The bends?"

"You know," he moved his hands up and down, swiftly, "bubbles in his blood from all that shaking."

Grinning, she looked down, trying not to laugh too much. "Maybe driving him around in the car would help."

"I don't want to encourage her to go out driving around that late!" he sounded shocked. "She's liable to end up in a bar or something," he muttered the last part.

Melinda smiled again. "So, go with her."

"I'm not supposed to be awake at two o' clock in the morning! Not when I'm supposed to leave for work around five!"

"Well, you were anyway!" She reminded him and then went back to typing. They both glanced back and forth realizing they were being too loud.

"I'm still hoping sometime she'd start acquiring some motherly instincts," he muttered walking closer and leaning against a white metal beam near her desk.

"Give her five to ten years," she replied dryly, not looking up from her typing. Matt grumbled something indiscernible. "Well, you could give her some extra help. She is still just a kid herself." He glared again. She could feel it, but she didn't look up.

"She. Tried. Everything that was wrong... for forty-five minutes. Then she came in my room, dumped the baby next to me, and went to bed."

Melinda tried to hold back a laugh at the mental image. "Well, you did say you'd take care of it if she didn't abort it."

Matt muttered something as he stood up from the beam. "Who asked for your two cents worth anyway?"

Melinda kept typing. "Pretty sure you did." Matt muttered something indiscernible again and walked away. Smiling to herself, she kept typing. *That man needs a wife again.*

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Kara Lee intermittently passed back and forth next to the far wall. "I fail to see what your plan is. You'll never get that thing working again." She looked at the man holding and staring at the two halves of the broken cord.

"You better hope he does?" Leader growled.

"Why?" She tried not to sound intimidated. "I don't see why you don't just let me go and finish my job."

"No one leaves until we all leave together!" He out yelled her.

"Then let's all leave together!" She yelled back indignantly, hoping for a different environment where it might be easier to escape.

"You'd better shut up!" He aimed his handgun at her head. "I make the decisions around here, and **no one ... no one...** dares to question my authority.

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Slowing down, Derrick tried to force himself faster. His legs burned from exhaustion and at the same time stung from the cold. His core was warm, but not enough to make him sweat. He wanted to fall down and sleep. He needed some food for energy. He guessed he could find his pack again when he got back, finish his crackers and break open a can of tuna. Maybe he could find Kara Lee's pack before he rescued her. He was betting she'd have better options... and she owed him big time for coming back for her. Wishing, he thought how terribly nice it would be if he could just untie her, and they could cut out without incident. *Wishful thinking.*

Seeing the tree in the distance, he slowed to a walk and heightened his senses to detect any enemies. His breath smoked. A squirrel jumped from limb to branch, peppering him with snow. It felt good. Approaching, he craned his neck to get a better view, up, up, up. *Nothing.* He let his head hang. *Totally and completely vacant.* He looked up again. *Why can't life ever be easy? Your food's still there. Thanks.* He looked around at all the different sized tracks in the snow. They'd gotten her alright. Tired, he leaned back against a tree and sighed. He wondered if they had found the guy he's tied up in the woods. *Probably, if they found Kara Lee.* That would make four of them. He looked up again. *She did say she could take care of herself.* No reply. Hanging, his head, he kicked his heel back against the tree. He wondered if he could live with himself if he just walked away. *Go find your food. Okay.* He stood away from the tree and began walking in that direction. He felt like she was safe, for now anyway. At least, he could postpone the decision... *eat where I can watch the house maybe... try and size up the situation.*

Walking to his evergreen. He fingered her phone in his pocket. He wondered. He felt like she was safe now. Maybe if he saw that she was holding her own. Maybe he could cut out and just call the police when he was in the clear. He was going to call them anyway for Sandervauh's men. He could just tell them that they have a hostage, and let the police handle freeing her. *After all, that's what they get paid for.* He looked up again. *And if I free her, I'll be stuck with her again.* He felt the phone vibrate. Missed call. He looked at it. Wade? Why would Wade be calling her? Coming to his tree, he ducked in between the prickly branches, went in, and retrieved his bag. Absentmindedly carrying it as he thought, he went down the hill to find a good vantage point to sit and eat and try to figure out why Wade would be calling Kara Lee.

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"I don't know!" Judd threw the cords and the router box down. "I'm not an electrician. There's got to be an easier way."

"Sure." Boss chomped on a pretzel. "You wanna walk ten miles *at least* to the nearest reception point?"

"We just gotta get out of all these trees," Jud mumbled. "I bet we could get reception on the lake."

"I'm no dictator." Boss chomped another pretzel. "Your choice. Fix the cord. Walk the miles. Build a raft. Just decide, so we can find out if that plane made it... and if she's legit!"

"You think that \*bleep\* got it to crash?"

"How should I \*bleeping\* know?!"

"I'm gonna go outside and look, we've gotta have something that'll float." He kicked the router to the side and turned toward the door. Just as he did, Marco and Rex came in."

“Took you \*bleeping\* long enough to find him.”

“Yeah,” Marco mumbled, closing the door.

“Was it him?” Boss growled.

“Who?”

“Derrick!”

Rex stared at him blankly. “The guy that bushwhacked me?”

“Yes!”

“How should I \*bleep\* know? Like I asked him his \*bleeping\* name! Didn’t even really see him.” He rubbed his throbbing head.

Cursing under his breath, Boss stood up, grabbing a hand full of pretzels from the box and muttering something about the kind of help he got sent to him. “You stay here and guard her!” He ordered Rex as he headed toward the door with Jud and Marco following.

## Run, Jump, Swim, but Don’t Freeze

Munching on a cracker, Derrick watched the three guys milling around the cabin and walking down to the lake as if they were looking for something or trying to figure something out. *This would be a good time.* He putted the rest of his stack pack back in his duffel, zipped it, and tossed it under a nearby evergreen. If he could get down there and get her out before those guys got back, he would only have one guy to deal with again. Not that he couldn’t take them all on if he had to, but he was a lot more comfortable with a one on one situation. Running around the cabin through the trees, he glanced periodically at the men by the lake until they were obscured from view. Thankfully, it looked like they were engulfed in some project that would afford him the time. He ran quickly through the woods to the back side of the cabin. He darted across the clearing to the log wall and jumped... missed. He jumped again. His fingertips caught the edge of the ledge but then slipped off. Taking a deep breath, he backed up, ran, and jumped. Getting a good grip and managing not to slam the rest of his body into the wall, he pulled himself up, stood on the ledge, and slipped through the top of the still open window. He was surprised no one had closed it. He was glad no one had locked it. Hearing voices, he quietly snuck across the loft to the railing, pulled his gun, and paused to listen.

“Sure Sandervauh sent a girl alone to try and take out a guy that’s been \*bleep\* \*bleeping\* all our midwestern operations.”

“He didn’t hire me to take him out. He hired me to find him. That’s my job, and I’m good at it.”

*Wh-a-at?* Derrick listened in interest.

“Yeah well. I’ve never heard of no Mason and Kelly.”

*Mason and Kelly?*

“I’m sure there are a lot of things you don’t hear about living way out here.”

Jud sneered. “We don’t always live way out here. Just how much do you know about Sandervauh?”

“Some.” Her voice accidentally shook.

“Oh, come on. You work for a man. Your jobs investigating. You must know quite a bit about him.”

“He was in jail when our professional relationship began. As you know he keeps his business dealings closely guarded.”

“But you don’t care what those dealings are?”

“No.” Attempts to keep her voice confident failed.

“He just picked you out of the yellow pages, huh?”

“Noo.” Silence penetrated as he stared, accusingly. “We were referred to him by a mutual friend.” Her heart rate quickened. Every nerve in her body wanted to run for it.

“Who?”

Her blood pressure spiked, giving her a headache. “I’m not at liberty to disclose that information.”

Rex laughed. “You know, I don’t for one second believe you.” Derrick, listening, nodded. He didn’t either, and it was a good thing for her because if he did, he’d turn tail and head back out that window.

Holstering his gun, Derrick watched as Rex, grin on his face, gun pointed up, turned and walked toward Kara Lee. Nervously, she backed up. Leaning his hands on the railing, Derrick readied himself to jump. Rex holstered his gun. Kara backed up again. “I’ll scream!”

“Who’s gonna care?” He stepped into Derrick’s range. Derrick swung himself up and over. Totally consumed with Kara, Rex didn’t even look up as Derrick crashed into him. Hitting his head on the floor, Rex lost consciousness without further assistance.

“Oh, perfect timing!” Kara Lee ran over to him. “Am I glad to see you!” Derrick checked Rex’s pulse, relieved it was still beating.

“You work for Sandervauh, huh?” Derrick decided to double check what he believed.

“No!” Her face spelled shock. “No, I a, no!”

“That’s what you told him.” Derrick stood up.

“I was just trying to buy time. I’m a... so glad you came back!” She fell into him, hugging him. He just stood there, so she stepped back, though she wanted to hold him longer. “I work for Wade. I could show you on my phone.” She looked fearfully toward the door. “I’ll tell you everything, but first, can we get out of here?” She stepped toward the door.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Not that way.” He took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs. She followed. They ran up to the loft and over to the window. She looked out then over at Derrick, questioning. “I’ll go first. Then you come. I’ll catch you if you fall.” She nodded. He climbed through the window onto the ledge and then grabbing the ledge, lowered himself down. Standing under the window, he held his hands out ready to catch her if she fell.

Taking a deep breath, holding onto the window frame, she carefully crawled through, stood on the ledge, and then kneeling down grabbing the ledge scooted off. Dangling from the ledge, she didn’t let go to fall the last few feet. Reaching up, Derrick grabbed her around the waist. She let go. He lowered her down to the ground, took her hand, and they ran off to the woods and through them until stopping near the evergreen where Derrick stashed his pack.

Dropping her hand, Derrick ducked into the tree to retrieve his bag. She walked back and forth hand on her side head tilted back trying to catch her breath. Reemerging, Derrick stood up, slung his pack around his neck and under his arm toward his back. Then he grabbed her hand again and started to run. She pulled back. He stopped and looked at her. “It won’t be long before they realize what happened.”

“I gotta catch my breath.” Walking around, she inhaled deeply. “Don’t you want to check my phone to see if I’m telling the truth?” she asked breathlessly, trying to divert his attention to something other than staring at her, annoyed.

“I saw the missed call from Wade.” He took out her phone. “Good thing you keep it in this waterproof case.” He tossed it up and caught it.

“Why? Did ya drop it in the water?” Outraged, she reached for it.

He pulled it away and put it back in his pocket. “Later.”

“It’s my phone!” She reached for his pocket. He stepped away.

“Yeah, and I’ll bury it with you if you don’t get going!”

“Fine.” She sucked in a final deep breath and then wagging her head said, “Let’s go.”

“Good.” He grabbed her hand and took off running. Her legs burned to keep up, but she tried. She was a little touched that he was trying to keep her with him when he could easily get away on his own. His MO was to ditch people and run. He’d always figured she’d have to be three times as good as normal just to keep him in her sights. She tightened her grip on his hand as he jumped over a log and pulled her after, proud of herself for not tripping.

“Do you... know... where... we’re going?” she asked breathless. Her lungs burned when she tried to talk. She couldn’t believe how fast they were going. He was literally pulling her with him.

“Yes.” He didn’t sound breathless at all.

“Are... we... close?” Her legs started to go from burning to numb.

He glanced back at her. “No.”

Her face fell. “Then we... we gotta slow down.” She pulled back on his hand.

“Not yet.” He tightened his grip.

Fire in her stomach burned, her natural inclination would be to protest such a directive, but she didn’t. She looked up at his determined profile, curiously. She trusted him to get himself out, and she wanted to come along for the ride. She was afraid to protest... afraid he would dump her. She tried to put her mind on something else... something other than her burning legs and lungs. She guessed when she fell over, he would have to decide whether to leave her or carry her. Her heart wasn’t pounding because he was pulling her.

Suddenly as she thought on other things, her eyes widened and her heart jumped when she heard the distant sound of an ATV. “They’re coming!” He nodded. “They’ll kill us!”

“They haven’t yet.” He pulled her even faster.

“We can’t out run an ATV!” She blurted it in one breath. “Why didn’t you... disable it?!”

“I didn’t see it.”

“What... what are... we gonna do?!”

“You’ll see.”

Her mouth dropped, not liking that foreshadowing. She thought of twenty rebuttals but kept silent. She wondered if her life should be flashing in front of her right now. The engine whirring got louder. She tightened her grip and leaned back, trying to get more from him and less from her as her legs felt on the brink of failing. It worked momentarily.

“We’re gonna jump!” They ran from the woods to a clearing.

She lifted her eyes toward the approaching cliff they were headed straight for. “What?!” She pulled back, but he wouldn’t release her. “What... we... no... we...!” They were halfway across the clearing. She saw a flash of the ATV emerging from the woods. Zero hour. She was trapped. The decision was clear... death or death. She gripped his hand and ran forward on her own strength, opting to die with Derrick. They jumped. She shook her head as they went over. It finally happened. He finally lost his mind... and her, too. Freefall. A gun shot rang out. Wind rushed past her like a cyclone. She heard herself scream. Their grips ripped apart. Down... down.... She stared at the nearing water. Down... Splash! She stiffened and gasped as she hit the frigid water. She forced her breathing stopped as her head went under and she sunk like a fishing weight. Down... down.... Her lungs burned. Down... Every nerve in her body screamed for air! Up... *Air!* Up... *Air!* Up... She broke the surface. *Air!* She gasped desperately, treading water and gasping. *Air... Help!* Her overheated body quickly cooled. *Help me!* She felt a strong hand grab the back of her shirt. She turned her head. *Derrick. Life-saving, Derrick.* The natural urge was to grab and cling to him, but she didn’t dare, knowing she could cause them both to drown. Her forehead started to throb. She put her hand to it and felt a lump. She turned her head to see land. Her heart sank. *Long ways off.* She glanced up at Derrick’s face. No worry. No fear. Just teeth gritting determination. She smiled. Somehow, though reality would say they should drown, she felt safe. He glanced down at her and his expression softened. She looked away. Her body felt heavy as if it was turning to ice. She closed her eyes.

“Hey!” He shook her. She looked at him. “Wake up!” He rolled onto his stomach and flipped her over at the same time. Icy river water rushed into her open mouth. She absentmindedly swallowed it. “Swim with me.” Still holding her, he propelled himself forward with his feet and free hand. She tried to swim. It was an effort just to keep from sinking. Water flowed into her mouth again. She strained her neck to keep her head up. Weakly, she began to kick, though she could barely feel her legs. “Good.” He kicked harder beside her. They went on for several yards. Tired, she quit and began to sink. Her head plunged under the water. She grabbed Derrick’s coat but was too weak to lift herself. She felt him grab the back of her coat and lift her to the surface of the water. She lifted her head and breathed though she was too weak to gasp at this point. “We’re almost there. Kick.” She tried but couldn’t and began to sink. She felt him thrust her up, flip her over, and go back to his original method of toting her.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“Just stay awake.” His voice sounded angry, but his body didn’t feel like it. She rested as he worked, following orders to stay awake.

Several yards later, she glanced toward land. Now, they were almost there. *Maybe we will make it.* Energy and fear surged threw her at the same time. She flipped herself over and kicked, hearing the water splash, though she couldn’t feel it. Derrick flipped over and kicked hard beside her. The last several yards went fast. The water got shallow. Derrick stood up next to her. She tried to stand but fell. Her heart fluttered as he reached down for her, his strong neck right in front of her face as he put one arm under her knees and the other around her back. She marveled at his strength as he picked her up. Can nothing hurt him? She put her arm around his neck and held onto his coat shoulder as he climbed up the bank, set her down in the snow, and then collapsed next to her, his hot breath steaming. “You’re something else, you know.” She stared at him, intrigued.

He glanced back. “You don’t do to bad yourself.”

She laughed, feeling quite inadequate compared to him. “You’re craz-y!” She laughed again. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

He shyly smiled back. “Well, so did you.”

“Somewhat, I guess.” She weakly crushed a snowball in her frozen hand and held it up. “You know what this is?” He smiled. She threw it at him. “Who jumps eighty feet into a frozen river in the middle of the winter?”

“People being chased by murderers.” He sat up. “Besides it’s not frozen yet. Look.” He pointed to snow falling from some branches. “See it’s melting. Probably in the high thirties by now.”

She huffed sarcastically. “Low thirties, maybe.” Finally, she began to shiver as her body tried to warm.

“Come on.” He stood up. “We need to go before they find us.”

“There on the other side of the river and up on a mountain!” She was hoping for more time to rest.

“So, we’ve bought some time, but they can eventually come down and cross it. Don’t forget they have an ATV and we’re on foot.” She mumbled something and crossed her arms. He kicked her boot. “Come on, you keep sitting there you’re gonna turn into an ice sculpture.”

She sent him an unimpressed glance then glanced at his gun, showing under his coat. “You had a gun! Why didn’t you shoot at them?”

“Come on, Kara, I thought you didn’t want to commit suicide.”

“So, so,” she motioned toward the river. “So, you jump off a cliff instead?!”

He nodded. “It was are only chance.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“People in their right mind don’t live long.” He kicked her boot again. “Come on.”

“Fine.” Muttering and fumbling, she pushed herself to her frozen feet, fell, and tried again. He offered his hand. She cursed him under her breath and then laughed as she managed to stand that time. Looking in his face for return humor, her heart tugged with guilt when all she got was disapproval. “Sorry.” She glanced away. She limped toward him and then fell. She

cursed herself and felt like crying. "I can't do this!"

"Yes, you can." He reached down and pulled her up. She held tightly to his coat. He draped her right arm over his shoulder. She grabbed tight to his coat shoulder. He put his left arm under her left arm and held onto the side of her coat. Supporting her, he began to walk. Resting her head on his chest, she walked next to him. Shivering against him, she coveting the warmth that radiated from him. They walked in silence for near an hour.

"How far... \*bleep\*..." Shivering, she cursed as she stumbled. "How far until we get to your car?" I mean, today still, or are we gonna... have to find... a place to sleep... out here tonight?"

"We should make it today, yet, maybe tonight." He hefted her higher, trying to displace some of her weight from his hip. "We can't sleep out here tonight, not when we're wet, not if they could still be following."

Shivering, she nodded. "Can we stop and build a fire sometime?"

"No." His voice was firm. "They might see it."

She nodded, tightening her grip in his shoulder and pulling herself up again. "Don't suppose we have any food?" He shook his head. "You lose your pack in the lake?"

He nodded. "My spare ammunition, too. We can't stop and chance them catching up."

"Oh, goody goody gumdrop." She thumped her head down on his chest. "Isn't life full of whipped cream and cherry choices. I can either freeze with you or get shot by them."

He smiled. "You didn't have to follow me out here. You want to tell me why Wade hired you to find me? You want to tell me how he got the money to hire you? You wanna tell me how he enticed you to come after me without any money?"

She shook her head. "No not really. Not right now."

"I want my phone back." She tried to stand away from him and reach for his pocket but fell right back into him.

"Why?"

"Because it's MY phone."

"Not good enough."

She sighed. "Because we might run into a signal somewhere along here. I can keep an eye on it. If we do, we can call for help!"

"You can call for help. I can call for a lethal injection."

"There's no death penalty in Illinois."

"Wow, Kara Lee, that makes me feel so much better! I'd rather die than live in a cage."

"Well, did you murder someone?"

"No, but they think so."

"Then it will be proven."

"Dream... on."

"You've got friends."

"Who?"

She thought a moment. "Jim and Jess." She paused. "Me."

He laughed. "You just as soon stab me in the back as look at me."

Her voice softened as she looked down. "You saved my life. You didn't have to come back for me. Why did you?"

“Temporary insanity.”

There were a few moments of silence. “Well, I won’t forget it. Kind of a class act to help someone you don’t trust.” She studied his face, but he didn’t react. She sighed. “What are you gonna do when we get to your car?”

“Guess I’ll either take you to your car or drop you off in town somewhere.”

“Some towns have license plate cameras.” She studied his face.

“Yeah, they do.”

“You got that figured out, huh?”

He shrugged. “Hopefully.” She kept staring into his face. He shrugged again with his face. “Someday I’ll get hung, I reckon, until then just keep on keepin’ on.”

She nodded, thoughtfully. “All you can do, I guess... unless you go for broke and try to clear yourself.”

“I’m no gambler.”

## New Year’s Eve

“Hurry up, Morgan!” Jess yelled as she zipped the pack of ham shut that Jim had just gotten out for his sandwich. “Every time I think we’re just about ready to go something else comes up.”

Jim looked down at the sandwich in his hand, wondering if he was talking about him or Morgan. “I’ve been ready to go for an hour.” He watched her spin from one item to the next, picking up the kitchen. “What’s the rush? It doesn’t start for a half an hour.”

She gave him a look as she put her armload of his sandwich supplies back in the fridge. “And it takes us twenty-five minutes to get there.”

“Twenty,” Jim insisted as he took another bite.

“And we haven’t even left, yet!” She brought out the two large salad bowls covered in cling wrap and set them on the counter, closing the door with her foot. “Maybe you like walking in late....” Her eyes lifted to her mom and dad walking in with Morgan in tow. “Oh, good, are we all set?”

“All present and accounted for.” Ed raised his hand.

“We’re not going to be late,” Jim insisted, putting his last bite of sandwich in his mouth. Soon as his hands were free, she picked up the salads and handed them to him.

“Good. Let’s go then.” She grabbed her coat from the kitchen chair and followed her parents, shoeing them out toward the garage.

“You get a nap, young man?” Ed called back to Jim as they all hurried out.

“No.” Jim flipped off the lights on his way past.

“Me either. Don’t blame me. She inherited all that energy from her mother’s side of the family.”

Kathy smiled as they all hurried into the garage. “Good healthy pep never hurt anyone,” she insisted.

“Yeah,” Ed laughed. “Unless you didn’t happen to inherit it and you marry someone who did.”

Jim smiled as he went around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. “Oh, I’ve got pep. It just tends to run out before hers does.” He set the salads on a blanket and then bunched up the blanket around them to keep them in place.

“Well, that’s what I’m sayin’, Son.” Ed leaned against the car door as Kathy buckled Morgan in her car seat.

“Come on, Ed.” Kathy pulled him into the back seat with her. Jim went around to the passenger’s side since Jess was apparently driving. She was already buckled, had the garage door up, the car on, the shifter in drive, and the car rolling before he got his door closed.

“And were off!” Kathy announced.

“Yeah.” Jim opened his door to get his seatbelt unstuck as they bolted down the drive.

“Again!” Ed reiterated.

“Oh, Ed, be quiet.” Kathy playfully slapped his arm.

“At least no one broke anything skiing,” Jim pointed out, finally getting buckled two farms down the road.

“You came pretty close that one time, son. Hey what’s that green salad you made. It looks pretty good for something green.”

Jess smiled, glancing in the rearview mirror at her dad. “It’s called pistachio salad. Pistachio pudding, whipped cream, chopped pecans, and pineapple.”

“Looks good. I’ll have to try some.”

“Yeah, good idea.” Jim glanced at him. “You don’t want more than half a bowl left when we bring it home or she spends the next two nights wondering where the recipe went wrong.”

“Oh, you!” Jess slapped his arm.

“It’s true,” Jim insisted. “I had to eat so much of this broccoli and bacon concoction she made last time, I didn’t have any room for anything else.”

Ed laughed. Jess briefly glared in Jim’s direction. “You said you liked that!”

“Oh, it was terrible,” Jim admitted.

“Really?” Jess cocked her head as she stared at the road. “I wonder what I did wrong.”

“Oh, no,” Jim groaned. “Here we go.”

“Oh, don’t listen to him, honey,” Kathy piped up. “You know men and broccoli.”

“Men and broccoli,” Morgan repeated.

“That’s right.” Kathy looked at the little girl. “They just don’t know what’s good for them.”

“But we know what tastes good! Don’t we, son?”

“Yeah, Jim agreed.”

Unsure, Jess still looked worried, trying to reply the recipe in her mind. “The other one’s potato salad.” She spoke absentmindedly.

“Yes, dear, I recognized that one.”

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“I thought you said we were close to the car.” Kara Lee stumbled over a rock, but hurried to keep up with him. At least, she was somewhat warm and walking on her own at this point, but she was starting to feel sick. Everything in her body told her to stop. Everything in her mind told her she had to keep going. Her eyes filled with fear as they walked into a clearing and she looked around at the darkening sky. She looked at Derrick. He looked weary, too. The realization that they could still both die out here was never so strong.

Derrick stopped, turned around, and waited for her. “We are. Hurry up.”

“Well, I’m doing,” She leaned on the trunk of a fallen tree as she stepped over it. “the best I can.” She stumbled over it and fell into Derrick. He held her up until she got her bearings, but he didn’t seem as strong as normal. “Thank you.” She resumed limping beside him. “How far?” Her voice was weary.

“A mile, maybe two.”

At that news, she fell into him, sideways. “I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can.” He put his arm around her again and helped her along.

“No. I’m lucky to be walking at all after that suicide plunge you took me on.”

“No one asked you to come out here.” He stopped next to her as her grip on him loosened and she slid to the ground.

“I know it.” She laid down, panting. “Just go and let me die in peace.”

Looking up, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m not just going to leave you here.”

“When you get reception, call the police or the rangers or something.”

“Come on.” He grabbed her arm and pulled her up. “We’re almost there.” She fell into his arm, clutching his sleeve to hold her up. He could feel her body shaking. He felt her forehead with his free hand. It was warm. He felt the bump he’d forgotten was there. “I’d probably make better time carrying you.” He waited for her reaction.

“Oh, please, do!” She felt selfish but also desperate. She rolled against him until she was behind him. Then she draped her arms around his neck and asking for every ounce of strength, jumped. To her surprise, he caught her and resumed walking. She shook her head, unable to believe how strong he was. She only hoped he could keep it up, at least long enough to get her out of there. Turning her head, she rested it on his shoulder but tried not to fall asleep. She felt his left leg shake every now and then, but he kept going. He wouldn’t fall.

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Matt yawned as he pulled his car into his driveway. Everyone except for Melinda had been surprised when he turned down the extra two hours of overtime offered to him at the end of his shift. *She was right. I’ve got family responsibilities I shouldn’t be shirking.* Maybe I can get a nap. He didn’t understand how such a little pint-sized package could make him so tired, but he was.

Yawning, he waited for the garage door to get all the way up before pulling in. He glanced at the clock as he shifted to park. *Four-fifteen. Wonder if Taylor will have supper ready?* He never knew what to expect. Sometimes she did. Sometimes she didn’t. Sometimes she wasn’t even home and he had to go track down his grandson at Mrs. Sander’s.

He stretched as he got out. At least, she usually left a note. At least, she didn’t go out every night, usually only like once or twice a week. He had to keep reminding himself that she was still just a kid. Until two weeks ago he had assumed she was always taking the baby with her. He ran his hand through his hair as he walked around the car and up the steps into the house. That was until Mrs. Sander’s had brought the baby home early because she needed to go help a sick friend. He’d lost his temper at her for not telling him the truth about where she was going and where the baby was. She’d solved that problem by not telling him where she was going at all. He shook his head as he flipped on the kitchen light. He guessed he had dumped her off at Mrs. Sanders plenty of times when she was growing up. Maybe she just thought that was normal... that he would think to check there. He shook his head at himself for being so rough with her. He’d been a father how many years and still didn’t know how. *No supper.* He opened the refrigerator door, pulled out the hamburger, and set it on the counter. Then he went to the living room to check on Taylor and Ricky. He called the baby Richard because it was his father’s name and his own middle name. Since she couldn’t decide on a name, he guessed he had to call him something.

Hearing the baby coo as he entered the living room, he went over to the crib and looked down at the contented little guy, lying on his back, clutching his stuffed tiger toy. Matt put his finger down for Ricky to grab, which he did almost immediately. He held it tight as if not wanting Matt to leave. “Where’s your mommy?” Matt looked around. “Huh?” He shook his finger loose and started to walk away. Ricky cried softly. “Just looking for your mommy.” He glanced down the dark hallway. He looked up the dark stairs. Ricky cried again. Matt stepped back and smiled. Ricky smiled back, laughing and clutching his toy tighter. Matt hummed a nurse rhyme for Rich to her as he stepped away again. He headed for the stairs when a note on the

desk caught his eye. *She wouldn't dare.* He went over and picked it up.

~Have somewhere I have to go. Can't take the baby. Melinda promised you'd leave work at four. I have to leave at three-fifty-five, so the baby will be alone ten minutes. Mrs. Sanders is out of town, or I would have taken him there. I'm sure you'll understand since you left us alone a lot longer than that. ~ Taylor. *Obviously.*

"Not when you were one month old!" He waded the paper and threw it in the trashcan. In fact, there were two years after his wife had died before his oldest became thirteen that he had nearly lost his job three times because he'd refused to leave them at all without a sitter. At least twice, he'd taken them all three to work with him. He smiled at that memory. *What a mess that was. And those weren't even the times I almost got fired!* He walked back to the crib, shaking his head the whole way. He stared down at Ricky cooing up at him and smiled. "What am I'm going to do with your mother? I'm trying to be understanding... but it's not working... nothing is." He half talked to Ricky and half prayed the words. "Come on." He lifted the little guy, who instantly grabbed his coat when he got close enough. "Get you some supper." Then I guess cook something for me. He didn't feel like cooking. He didn't feel like spending the night alone watching the baby. He'd rather be working. At least with the baby, he wasn't totally alone... but pretty much. "I never left your mother alone until she was thirteen!" He defended himself to the baby. Ricky only stared back, cluelessly. "Oh, I'll get you your bottle. Maybe we can go eat out somewhere afterwards. It's not like you have a regular sleeping schedule anyway."

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Grimacing privately in the darkness, Derrick hefted Kara Lee higher on his back as he walked up what he hoped was the final hill, his legs and arms burning.

Kara yawned half-asleep, head on his shoulder. "Almost there?" Still wet, a shiver went through her body despite being right up against Derrick's warm body.

"Yeah." Derrick hefted her again as she started to slip. "If you're getting cold, you better start walking again." Eyes closed; she shook her head on his shoulder. "Yes." Slowly loosening his grip, he let her slide down.

"Derrick!" Clasp her arms around his neck to keep from falling, she momentarily cut off his air. He just waited for her to get her bearings and get to her feet. Shivering more away from him, she crossed her arms for warmth and walked by his side. "How much further is it? It seems like we've been walking for...."

"Right over there." He pointed.

"Where?" She craned her neck to see, but then shrugging just followed him. They stopped in front of a pile of brush. She watched as Derrick started removing the branches and she started to see the first few glints of metal flashing in the moonlight. "You had that well hidden... very well hidden." He didn't answer. She helped him remove the rest of the branches. When they were done, she crossed her arms and looked at him. "Now what?"

"Get in."

She walked around to the passenger's side. "You gonna take me to my car?"

He smiled. "You know where it is from here."

She looked around as she got in. "No, but if you give me my phone, I can figure it out."

He shook his head. "I'll drop you off in town somewhere. Then you can figure it out."

"Fine." She yanked the seatbelt out with a thrust and buckled. "Well, let's go!" she ordered as he put it in drive. He gave her a look as he slowly drove over the bumpy ground and through the trees to the one lane dirt road. He drove carefully and quietly, repeatedly looking in all his mirrors.

"Can you reach me my water?" He glanced toward her. "It's in the back."

"Yeah," she mumbled, unbuckling. She reached in the back, grabbed his big metal water bottle and a small plastic bottle from his twenty-four pack for her. She'd forgotten how thirsty she was. "Mind?" She held up the plastic bottle. He shook his head. She untwisted the lid and drank it all in one sitting and then she undid the lid on his big metal one and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He took it in one hand, trying not to spill it as they bounced through rut after rut. He finally decided to stop to

get a drink. While he was drinking, Kara Lee's phone vibrated. He took it out of his pocket. She reached for it. He pulled it away as he checked the missed call. "Wade again." He put it down in the pocket by the door out of her reach. He glanced at her, barely making out her outline in the moonlight. "You gonna tell me why he keeps calling you?"

Crossing her arms, she plopped back against the seat. "I told you I was working for him."

"Why? Why in the world would Wade want to find me?"

She looked out the side window into the darkness. "Come back with me and ask him."

Huffing a laugh, he started going again. "Yeah. One of your tricks, huh?"

"Why ask me when you know you won't believe me?"

"Try me?"

"You say you got some food back there?" Unbuckling, she turned and sat on her knees, searching through his duffle on the backseat.

"Help yourself."

She glanced at him. "Thanks. You want something?"

"Yeah. Get me a couple energy bars."

Nodding, she blindly grabbed two bars and handed them to him and then got a stack of crackers for herself and sat the seat back up.

"Now about Wade...." He slowed to a stop and then turned off from the dirt road onto a narrow, paved country road. Munching on a cracker, she stared at him, wishing she could see more of his face. "Well?" He glanced at her.

"Okay." She relented. "He needs you."

"Why?"

"Satoro's got his baby now. They want to trade Davey for you." She stared at him, but didn't see any reaction. "Well?"

"I'm trying to decide whether or not to believe you." He stared straight at the road.

She sighed exaggeratedly taking another bite. "See. I told you."

"When?" He glanced toward her.

"January 31<sup>st</sup>."

"Where?"

"Wyoming."

"Wyoming?!"

"A place called Red Rim Rock."

"Where's that?"

"We don't know."

Derrick stared toward the road, thinking. "How are we gonna get there if we don't know where it's at. He said half to himself half to her."

"He's supposed to be sending further instructions to Wade's phone closer to the day."

Derrick cracked his neck. "So, Wade wants me to go with him and give my life up in exchange for his son's." His voice held hints of bitterness.

“No.”

“Then what?”

“He wants you to help get his son back and then miraculously escape like you always do.”

“Yeah. That’d be a miracle for sure.”

“Come... on... Derrick. You’re too modest.” She reclined her seat again, turned around, and searched through his bag, finding some sugar-free brownie bites. She sat back up, poured herself a handful and then offered him the bag. “You sure eat good for a fugitive.”

“Yeah, and getting it’s not that easy.” He reached his hand in the bag and got a handful.

“Well, you could drop me off at the store and give me the money. I could replenish your supply.”

“No.”

“Why?” She put a bite in her mouth.

“I don’t trust you.”

She shrugged. “Your privilege, I guess.”

“You gonna help, Wade?”

“I don’t know. He went to the police, I assume.”

“I don’t know.” He glanced toward her again, skeptically. “What?” She threw her hands up. “I don’t.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Whatever. Contact Wade and find out.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You do that.”

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“That’s not how you spell, ‘trellis.’” Jess corrected Jim.

“You sure?” He started to take his letter tiles back.

“Positive. It’s supposed to have two ls,” she added.

“Yeah, she’s right,” Stan contributed. “I just checked on my phone.”

“Alright,” Jim yawned. “Then I’ll have to draw one.” He exchanged a letter for one in the pile.

“After the kind of day I had today, I don’t even care if you cheat,” Hillary spoke while arranging her letters.

“I wasn’t trying to cheat!” Jim insisted.

“Kinsley got stung by a bee. Edwin broke two of my best China dishes. And Joslynn got a letter from her teacher on her spelling grades!”

“I’m sorry it’s been a bad day.” Jess exchanged a letter for a letter.

“Not your fault, honey. It’s just I should be in bed by now, but nothin’ would do but the kids had to come tonight. I hope they’re have a *good* time.” She exchanged a letter.

“Oh, I’m sure they are,” Jess speculated. She glanced over at Morgan playing duck-duck-goose with the other little ones and a teenaged moderator.

Stan arranged the word ‘kitten’ around an existing t. “That might put me in the lead,” he proclaimed, proudly.

Not so fast, honey. Stan's wife quickly arranged, Q-U-I-C above his k. "Talley my points!"

"Women." Stan added the points. "Always want to be one step ahead of you."

"Is she?" Jim asked.

"Yep." Stan put down his pencil. Stan's wife, Connie, Grinned.

"Well, let me see here." Jim arranged his letters. "I think a few of those points will be coming my way."

"That's not how you spell it." Matt walked up behind him, munching on a brownie.

"I know that!" Jim let himself sound offended. "I was just arranging! Care to join us, Doc?"

"No, I'll just supervise."

"Oh, well, I could always use that," Jim mumbled, sarcastically as he put his f, l, o, and r around a u. There we go flour," he stated proudly.

"Apparently you do," Matt criticized, "If you would have used the w and put it around that e, you would have gotten more points. More points in that kind of flower."

Jim turned around and gave him a look. "Hey, friend, good to see you. You just get here?"

"No, I've been here a while." He took another bite. "Was talking with some folks outside watching the kids and the snowball fight."

"That sounds cold." Jess discreetly changed a letter. She didn't want people to think she was illiterate. It was just that this was only the second time she'd ever played this game. "Did Taylor come?" she asked, grateful to see Hillary exchange a letter, then disappointed to see Stan put up another word beginning with Jim's l. *Thanks a lot, Honey.*

"No." Matt walked behind Jess but to the side to see her letters.

Jim made a fist and put it to his mouth, speaking with a yawn. "Staying home with the baby?"

"No, the baby's here." Matt kept studying Jess's letters. "Switch the e and the s... the t and the a. Bring the g over from the corner and put the r after it," Matt muttered while the others played.

*Hey! A Word!* Jess didn't know whether to be excited or embarrassed for not finding it herself. She concluded the game was generally unimportant, *but* at least, she'd have a little better score at the end. If Morgan would only start screaming and run down the hall or something at least she'd have a good mommy reason to leave, but it hadn't happened in over an hour, and she was about giving up hope. "You're turn, honey." Jim brought her back to reality.

"Oh, yes," she hadn't even noticed what Jim had played. She took her letters and arranged them around an existing r, instantly noticing Matt and Stan smile at the same time. What?

"That definitely looks like a *gr-r-eat* word," Stan announced. They all, but Hillary and herself, laughed.

"*That* is an illegal formation!" Hillary criticized with crossed arms.

Jess studied the word again, her face turning red upon realization. "Oh, uh, two rs." She took one away and pushed the word back together. "Well, he told me..." She thumbed over her shoulder as she put the letter back.

"Oh?" Hillary raised her eyebrows. "None of the rest of us are playing doubles."

Jim choked on a laugh, half from Hillary's judgmental attitude over a simple game and half because of his wife's flustered response to it. "Oh, um, well," Jess looked over at Morgan just as she got knocked down by a boy chasing her as the goose. "Oh, poor, baby." She got up and hurried over even though Morgan simply hopped up, unphased. "You okay, honey?" She picked her up and started to walk out. *After all, she's still too young to be mentally scarred for life by the actions of a suddenly dotting mother, and it might just save me the embarrassment of having to finish that silly game of... Ahh!* She swung sideways plastering herself against the wall as two boys came flying around the corner, nearly running into her. She peered around the corner to see if the hallway was safe before trying again.

"Hey, come back!" Jim called after her, laughter still in his voice. "You'll just have to fill in for her, Doc, until she gets back." He reached for his sleeve and pulled him down into the chair.

"Yes, you are partly to blame for her sudden absence," Hillary acknowledged. Matt stared down at the letters, trying not to give her a look.

"Yeah. Share some of that medical lingo with us, doc." Stan put up the word shot around Jess's t. Jim tried not to roll his eyes. This game was definitely not evenly matched. He figured they could all be a lot happier if it wasn't for Mr. and Mrs. Dictionary over there hogging all the points.

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"Where's town?" Stretching, Kara Lee yawned as they turned off the side road onto the interstate.

"A few miles down," Derrick answered.

She nodded. "Where you gonna drop me off?" She yawned.

"Here." He pulled over on the shoulder.

"What?!" She sat up straight as a board.

"This is where you get off." He glanced at the side road he wanted to turn on up ahead.

"How far is it to Manchester?"

"Three or four miles, I guess."

"Why don't you drop me off in town. It's small they aren't going to be monitoring their traffic cameras for...."

"Kara Lee, get out."

Her mind raced for an argument to get him to change his mind. It was true. She was strong and independent, but she had a limit. She was sore and hungry and dog tired. Fear rose in her chest. Anxiety sent adrenaline rushing through her. She wasn't sure she could do it. Her mind raced through all her feminine whiles that always worked on men. *Too bad none of them will work on him.* She turned in desperation to the honest approach. "I can't walk four miles!" She blurted out.

"You'll make it." His face glowed in the moonlight, soft yet unwavering.

"After all I've been through, you expect me to walk four miles to town."

"Yes."

She didn't know what good repeating herself would do, but it was all she had. "I can't walk four miles tonight!" She let her eyes spell desperation.

He sighed and gave her a look. "Give me your word you won't sic the police or anyone else on me when you get to a phone."

She raised her right hand. "I swear. Just take me to town." Her eyes pleaded. She was really surprised that he would think she would call the cops on him, but then he didn't trust anyone.

He glanced back at her as he put the shifter in drive and went back on the road. He didn't trust her one bit. At least if he dropped her off four miles away, he would have a good hour to get away. He felt very claustrophobic about taking her right into town where, she could turn him in within 5-10 minutes. "I'll drop you off at the exit. Be less than a mile to a phone." *Sleep well when you get there. I'll be spending the rest of the right winding down every dirt and gravel road in the country running for my life... since I can't trust you.*

Rubbing her face, she groaned. "Fine. ... Thank you." *Can't you trust anyone? I gave you my word.*

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"Mellissa, I'm home," Wade called as he came in the door. She hadn't been home when he left. He was glad she was

still up. He liked coming home to a warm, well-lit house, even though he was over an hour later than normal.

"I'm in the kitchen," she called back.

He hung his coat in the closet and went into the kitchen. "Still doing dishes? Must have been some supper I missed."

"You better believe it." She dunked her plate in the rinse water. "Gourmet's delight. A variable feast. Grilled cheese and tomato soup." She smiled at him. "I didn't get home till about seven, and then I wanted to do the onboarding before I ate." She submerged her hands deep in the soapy water to find the knife and spoon to wash.

"You got the job then?" He leaned back against the counter, watching her finish her dishes.

She nodded. "Just part time, but working at home will work out great with the baby coming." He nodded. "Sorry, I wasn't back in time to give you the car. I tried calling you to see when you'd be off. I would have come pick you up."

"That's okay. Yeah, I didn't see your call till I got home. Pete didn't mind dropping me off. He practically goes by here on his way home."

"Oom." She nodded. "He take you to work, too?" She pulled the drain on her dish water.

Wade shook his head. "No, but it was a nice day for a walk."

Laughing, she looked up at him. "Wade, it was only a high of eight degrees today."

He shrugged. "I know, but it was bright and sunny."

She gave another slight laugh, shaking her head as she put the last few dishes in the strainer. "Want some supper?"

He shook his head. "I ate out."

She looked surprised. "I thought we were all out of money for the week."

He nodded. "Mac, was feeling generous."

"Oh." She walked up to him and leaned back against his chest and shoulder. "We could still make a midnight snack, watch a New Year's type movie, and ring in the new year together."

"Yeah." He started to put his arms around her just as his cellphone rang in his pocket. He answered it. "Hello."

"Hey, Wade. It's Kara Lee."

"Hi! Do you have any news?"

"Well, I found him."

"You found him?!" Wade stood up from the counter in excitement, pushing Mellissa off of him. She faced him, watching him earnestly, straining to hear. "Did you tell him? Is he gonna help us?"

"I told him. He said he would think about it."

"Is he with you? Can I talk to him?" Wade spoke swiftly.

"No, he's gone, but I told him the date and everything. He said he might contact you." Wade's heart sank at the news of Derrick's noncommittal response. *But at least he didn't say, 'no.'* "Which brings me to my problem," Kara Lee continued. "I'm stuck down here in Manchester Kentucky with no car, identification, or money." She was sure glad she had left all her cards in her jeep a few hours ago when she was captured, but now....

"How'd that happen?"

"It's a long story. I thought that since I'm basically working for you, without compensation that you would come down here and take me to my jeep. It's about two hours away."

"Kentucky?" His mind went to the half of tank of gas left in their van, his own lack of cash, and his job.

“Yes! I got in this mess helping you!” She spoke judgmentally, even though she knew she wasn’t doing this job for him.

Wade glanced into Mellissa’s questioning eyes. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you. You’ll have to call me back at the number I called you. It’s for the main desk at the hotel here I will be sleeping in the lobby waiting for you.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do,” he repeated.

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.” She hung up the phone, pushed it toward the hotel clerk, who was sorting some papers a ways away and smiled at him as he nodded toward her. Turning, she took her cellphone out of her pocket as she walked back to her chair for the night. She wondered if there was some place she could buy a replacement battery in this town. She failed to see how Derrick thought taking her battery would give him more time to get away. It took her like thirty-five minutes to get to a phone, and she wasn’t even trying to rat him out. Although after walking all that ways in the dark and cold, she was just about mad enough to do it. She plopped down in the chair and leaned back. I won’t though. She stared toward the silent TV in the corner and all the people milling around town square to see the ball drop in about two hours.

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Jess glanced at Morgan sleepily trudging over to their table. “It looks like someone’s ready to call it a night.”

Drawing a letter from the pile, Jim nodded, smiling as Morgan reached them and collapsed her little arms and head on Jess’s leg. Swiveling sideways, Jess pulled Morgan onto her lap. “Getting sleepy, little one?”

Shaking her head, Morgan yawned, “No,” laid her head on her mommy’s chest and closed her eyes. Jess wrapped her arms around her and swiveled back toward the table.

Stan sent a smile their way. Connie was too engrossed in the puzzle to notice. “Are you sure that’s how you spell carcinoma,” she asked.

“Who knows,” Stan turned back toward the game, distressed at Matt’s sudden rise to the top of the leader board.

“That’s how I always spell it,” Matt said.

“I’m willing to take his word for it.” Jess put her c and t around his last a in the word. After all, she was merely vying with Hilary for second to last place.

Connie quickly looked it up on her phone. “What’s it matter anyway?” Stan asked. “He’ll win anyway there’s only five letters left to draw from.”

“That’s the wrong attitude,” Connie corrected, scrolling through the results on her phone. “I’m only seven points behind.”

“Yeah, but I’m fifteen.”

“He’s right.” Connie relented, grumbling as she put her phone down.

“Sorry,” Matt shrugged.

“We should probably be going pretty soon anyway,” Jim began as his phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket to answer it. “Hey, Wade, what’s up?”

“Got a favor to ask you. Where are you at?” He could hear the noise in the background.

“Church. New Year’s Eve service,” Jim answered, putting o-a-l under Matt’s c.

“Oh, yeah. Forgot about that.”

“You have tomorrow off right?”

“Ye-ah.”

“I don’t. Besides I have a pregnant wife.”

Jim gave the phone a look. “Jess has some stuff planned, though. It’s that last day her parents will be here.”

“All I need is for you to run down to Kentucky and pick up Kara Lee for me.”

Jim gave a slightly sarcastic laugh. “That’s all, huh? What’d she do? Crash that jeep of hers?” Everyone at the table turned and looked at him, curiously. He smiled back.

“Apparently she left it somewhere along with all her cards, money, and identification. There are no taxis or car rentals where she’s at. I thought about renting one for her.”

“Well, that’s a fine pickle she got herself into.”

“It’s only about seven hours away, fourteen hours round trip. Leave at seven be back at nine. What could be more perfect?”

“Not going!” Jim accidently yelled and then smiled as everyone looked at him again. As his turn came around again, he put his x under Matt’s other A in carcinoma.

“Be a pal, Jim, if I have to go, I could lose my job and you know how long it took me to get it.”

“I’ll talk it over with Jess.”

“You’re the best.”

“Yeah, well, not yet.”

“Thanks for thinking about it anyway.”

“No problem. Hey, wait, did she find....”

“Yes, she found him. She told him. She said he’s thinking about it.”

“Hm. Okay. Bye.” Hanging up, he looked down at his four remaining letters as his turn came around again. G,P,W, Z. He looked at the puzzle, the empty pile of tiles, and back at his letters. I think I’m out.”

“Me, too,” Jess added.

“Yeah,” Hilary conceded.

“I’m not,” Matt said, holding up his last two letters.

“Naturally,” Connie mumbled.

“What do ya got, Doc?” Stan asked. Matt put his c and p above an existing r.

“Abbreviations don’t count,” Connie declared as she started adding up the total points. Matt took them back. Jim yawned and stretched as he stood up. Jess’s parents were also meandering over, though stopping to talk periodically on the way. Holding Morgan, Jess stood up. “Wait a minute, you two,” Connie waved her pencil at them. “You have to wait for the final tally.”

“Why you want to rub salt in the wound?” Jim yawned again as he stood up.

“Actually, you didn’t do that bad,” Connie pointed her pencil at him while looking down studying the paper.

“You clobbered me and Hillary,” Jess informed him in a loud whisper.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Hillary yawned as she stood up. “I wonder what happened to all my kids.” She looked around, not seeing them.

“Ask a high schooler,” Jess suggested.

"Yeah." Hillary started walking away.

"First place by eight points, Dr Fredricks... second place, yours truly... and third place goes to my favorite husband in the world." Connie announced.

"Big surprise," Jim mumbled.

"Still, it was fun," Jess added, trying to kneel down with her arms full of baby to get her purse. Jim met her halfway and got it for her. "Thanks."

Stan stood up at the same time Matt did. "How 'bout it, doc? Gonna stay and pray in the new year with us?"

Matt shrugged, "Maybe. I better check on Ricky first."

"Okay. Well hurry back, Doc," Stan slapped his arm. "We'll wait to choose the game until you get here." Matt nodded and walked toward the hallway, merging with Jim and Jess at the kitchen where they stopped to get the leftover salads as Jess's parents took Morgan out to the car.

"How's it goin', Matt?" Jim asked picking up a nearly empty salad bowl and handing the other to Jess.

"Oh, pretty good. I was just going down to the nurse to check on Ricky." He pointed toward the hall as Jim emerged from the kitchen.

"Gonna stay till midnight?" Jess asked, coming out behind him.

"Might as well. Have the day off tomorrow." He paused. "I wonder where the salad bowl is that I brought." He didn't recognize the ones sitting there.

"Oh, Mary told me it was there by the sink." Jim pointed. "I was supposed to tell you." Matt nodded, absentmindedly.

"Must have been good," Jess remarked, "since it's all gone. What was it?"

"I'm not sure," Matt replied, absentmindedly as they started toward the hall.

"Wha-at?" Jess chuckled. "You don't know what you brought?"

Matt shook his head as she stopped by the nursery door. "The lid was on it." He stared off.

Jim and Jess both just looked at him a moment. Not getting a response, Jim shrugged. "Well, that'll do it!" He smiled.

Snapping back into reality, Matt looked at them. "I mean Melinda made it."

"Ohhh," they both said together.

"Where is Melinda?" Jess asked. "I didn't see her."

"She had to go into work at the last minute. I wasn't going to come either, but then I decided I didn't want her salad to go to waste, so I brought it." Matt gave himself a look to match Jess's questioning one. Shrugging, he tried to think of a way to fix that lousy explanation, but he couldn't come up with anything.

"Well, we're all glad you could make it." Jim gently slapped him on the shoulder with his free hand as they started to go again.

"Yeah. See you later." Matt kept trying to figure out a better way he could have phrased his explanation as he opened the nursery door.

Jess waited until they got to the foyer before turning to Jim and asking in a rather accusatory tone. "Where are we going tomorrow?"

"Kentucky?"

"That's my parent's last day! I have the meal all planned and half prepared!" Her voice was a little higher-pitched than she had hoped.

"I know." Jim looked down and rubbed his forehead. "Wade's in a jam. You know how he asked Kara Lee to find Derrick?"

"Ye-ah."

"Well, apparently she did."

"Is he coming back?" She leaned back against the cold glass door in the dimly lit foyer.

Jim shrugged with his face. "He didn't say, but she told him what was going on. I guess he's mulling it over... but, a, in the process of finding him, she got separated from her car, her money, and her driver's license." Jess rolled her eyes. Jim smiled. "She needs someone to go pick her up. Wade works tomorrow."

"Can't he ask off for an emergency?"

Jim slowly shook his head. "You know what the economy's like right now. You know how long it took him to get that job."

Jess sighed. Her eyes moved back and forth as she searched her mind for a solution. "Doesn't she have any friends around there that could help her out?"

"Apparently not."

"Um." She looked up at him sheepishly. "Matt said he had the day off tomorrow."

"If he's got the day off, he has plans."

"So do we!" she yell-whispered. "It'll be at least four years until I get to see my folks again around Christmas and that's if we can even manage to reserve them this time of year again!"

"Okay, I'll ask him." They reply was a hundred percent a response to her emotional plea. He paused. "He's gonna want to know why he's going down to Kentucky to pick up Kara Lee."

"Not necessarily."

Jim nodded. "Oh, yes, he is."

"Just tell him Kara Lee got herself stranded, and we're not available to go."

"So, why should he go?" he spoke in a loud, passionate whisper. "He doesn't even know her?"

"Shhh! Well, neither do we. We simply board her horse."

"But we know Wade, and that's why we're going!"

"Well, so does he."

Jim groaned, rubbing his head. "Jess, you're talking in circles. Should I tell him the whole story, or not?"

"No!" she paused. "Just ask him. If he needs more information, we'll have to think of something else."

"Alright." He walked down to the nurse and went in, glancing down to make sure he didn't step on the wooden blocks or plastic bears scattered around. Martha was sitting in the rocker rocking a sleeping infant. Matt was standing in the middle of the room talking to a college student he didn't recognize who was holding a squirming Ricky. Jim put his hand on his shoulder to get his attention. Matt stopped talking, turned, and looked at him. "When you get a moment, I got something to ask you." He turned back and went out.

Matt turned to go after him. He glanced back at the young lady. "If you just walk back and forth with him a few minutes, he should calm down." Ricky started to cry and reach. Matt turned back, took him from her without explanation, and walked out.

"Got quite a little handful there," Jim acknowledged as Matt came out and closed the door behind him.

“Yeah.” Matt held him with one arm, bouncing him a bit. “What’s up?”

“How would you like a miniature vacation tomorrow on your day off?” Jim tried to sell the idea but didn’t know how.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh,” Jim leaned back against the wall, his mind racing for the right words. “A family friend got themselves in a pickle. They’re stranded in Kentucky, and they need some help. You know Jess’s parents are here. It’s their last day tomorrow and...”

“Who is it?” Matt glanced at Ricky as he started gurgling up spit.

“Kara Lee. Maybe you remember her?”

“Yeah.” He glanced at Ricky again. “How does a professional reporter get herself stranded?”

Jim shrugged. “I didn’t get all the details. First time I’ve heard of it happening to her, though.”

Matt nodded. “I did have some plans tomorrow, but, um...” He thought a minute. He wondered if it had anything to do with Derrick. *Probably not. Why would she go to all that trouble to find him?* “Why was she down in Kentucky?”

Jim shrugged, though he knew that wasn’t totally honest. “Following the lead on a story, I guess.”

Matt thought again, staring off into the distance. *She was at the trial covering the story. Why should I care what happened to Derrick anyway? Go all the way down there to settle my curiosity? Why not? It’s better than staying home, watching the baby all day. Somebody’s got to watch him since his mother’s never around. You did promise to go over to Melinda’s for supper. You should spend some time with your daughter if she happens to be around. What about Jim? It’s obviously important to him, or he wouldn’t ask. What about Derrick? What was going on with him? Haven’t heard anything about him since the trial. He lost his job. He’s living the life of a fugitive... if he’s alive at all. All because of me and my daughter and my no good son. He saved my life. Guess I ruined his... with some help from him.* Flames clouded his mental eye. At least Derrick was alive and forgiven. There were no more chances for his wayward son to repent. His life was over, and his chances were gone. Anger rose in Matt’s belly but quickly quenched. *Derrick wouldn’t have been there at all if it wasn’t for me... and it wasn’t his fault. He’d found that out yesterday.*

“Matt?”

Matt looked back at Jim. “Yeah.... I’ll go.” He spoke hesitantly.

“You will?” Jim couldn’t help his surprise.

Matt nodded slowly. “Tell me where to go exactly.”

Jim nodded. “I’ll send you a text with the address.” Matt nodded slowly. “Hey, thanks a lot,” Jim slapped his arm, lightly. “You just made my wife very happy.”

Matt nodded again. “That’s okay.” He turned to go. “Guess I’ll tell the others, I’m heading out.”

“Didn’t mean to cut your night short.”

“Not you.” He nodded toward the baby as he knocked on the nurse’s door. “Can I get our diaper bag?” He asked as the young lady answered. She nodded and got it for him.

“Thanks again, buddy.” Jim turned to go.

Matt nodded back as he took the diaper bag and headed back to the fellowship hall to tell Stan he wouldn’t be joining them for another game after all. He figured if he was going to drive all the way down to Kentucky, he might as well do it now and make it back in time for Melinda’s dinner. *Taylor had better be home when I get there.* He glanced down at his watch ten-thirty. He wouldn’t make any beats on it. He took out his cellphone with his free hand and texted. ~ I need you to come home and watch the baby. Have to leave in forty-five minutes. ~ He wondered what the likelihood of her doing that was. To his surprise he got a text back before he was even done talking to Stan. ~I’m home. Where are you going?~

*Well, good. Wonders never cease. ~Kentucky.~*

~What!~

~Helping a friend of a friend.~

~Oh. ???~ Matt smiled at her reply as he turned back toward the hallway with a slight wave goodbye to Stan and Connie. She was completely perplexed at his behavior since he had become a Christian. He'd always been driven by duty and doing what's right, but all his actions had been driven by selfish motivation. After his wife died especially, he'd stopped caring about anyone. He intentionally lived as a robot, void of emotion. After he invited Christ in his life, he changed. His life found peace, contentment, new meaning, and joy. He wasn't perfect, just different enough to totally confuse his daughter. He wasn't sure if she approved of the new him or not. He guessed it depended on the circumstance. He kind of understood her though. She was becoming everything he used to be minus the sense of duty.

Coming to the foyer, he covered Ricky with his blanket, pushed open the door with his free hand, and walked out into the calm, frosty night. The moon was bright and the sky was clear. *Other than the fact that it's in the single digits...* He shivered in the cold. *...I guess it's not a bad night to be driving down to Kentucky.*

## New Year's Day

Lying on the couch in the hotel lobby, Kara Lee stared up at the ceiling. She was dog tired, but she didn't want to sleep out here. At least, she had gotten a little nap in Derrick's truck. She wondered where he was by now. She smiled at her mental image of the two of them jumping off the cliff into the icy waters below. *That's the stuff movies are made of. Too bad no one else saw it.* She wondered what Derrick thought of her. She was intrigued by him. His dear-death, run and fight, never go down mentality fascinated her. She had heard people say, "the man can get out of anything." She was beginning to think it was true. She wished he was fascinated by her. She wished he had a better opinion of her work. She wished that he could clear his name and join her on her quest for the next big story. *The adventure of a life time... to bring the hidden things to light.* She envisioned them together fighting of enemies and the elements, searching for the truth and telling it too the world from hunger in Africa to inequality in the suburbs to war-torn Ukraine. *Unfortunately, it was just a dream.* No matter what she did, he just didn't seem to really like her. Of course, she didn't get the impression that he went out of his way for any girl. Maybe he just needed help getting rid of that torch he was still carrying for Monica. Maybe he just had too many other things on his mind. Maybe if she could help him clear his name. *The power of the pen is mighty. How in the world can I turn the image of a lone wolf, above the law crusader into the image of a misunderstood, innocent man that got pulled into the situation against his will... a victim of circumstances.* She glanced toward the TV. *Shaping public opinion through the written word. It's what I do. The thought sounds a lot easier than it would be, especially since he is a lone crusader with little regard for the law.* She watched as huge glittery numbers filled the TV screen, ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one! Happy New Year! *Yeah, happy new year.*

She rolled onto her stomach, stared down at the maroon carpet, let her arm fall off the couch, and played with a piece of paper on the floor, remembering Derrick's touch when he carried her. *He sure is strong, gentle, but strong.* She wondered if the police caught the drug dealers. *Probably won't even go out to look until tomorrow morning.* He kept hoping they wouldn't track the call back to her. She didn't really think they could since she left an anonymous tip from a cellphone curtesy of a homeless drunk sleeping outside the auto shop. She smiled wondering what she would say if somehow they did track her down for questioning. *"I'm from the agency of Mason and Kelly, and we are investigating..." Hahaha. No. More like, "I plead the fifth," or "I hit my head on a rock, and I just can't remember, officer," or "Me? You mean, me? You think, I was there?"* Smiling, she flipped back over on her back. She supposed she'd come up with something should the predicament present itself.

Glancing toward the TV again, she pulled her cellphone from her pocket. Staring at the blank screen, she wished for a battery. *At least I could text Clint and wish him a Happy New Year. He may be no Derrick, but at least he would share me some love.*

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*Happy New Year.* Parked behind a Spruce tree off the side of the road, Derrick glanced at the clock as he lowered his seat back. Soon as it was down, his hand fell from the button and his eyes closed. His mind went back to happier New Years. He remembered the celebrations at his Grandma's house as a child before she passed away. He remembered his first New Year

with Monica, playing board games all night in front of the warm fire in their off the grid cabin. He remembered last year, the New Year's Eve celebration at the church and then a great New Year's meal with Jim and Jessica, Wade and Mellissa.

As he started to drift to sleep, he remembered all the New Years he spent alone at his apartment or at the bar. He wondered if that was what his life was destined to be... alone. Sometimes if he was lucky, he'd be able to pick up hours and work both New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, celebrating with the other guys that had to work. He guessed that part of his life was over now, too. *Like. I. Care.* Eyes still closed, he started to reach for a water bottle from his pack, but instead his arm fell weakly to the floor and his mind drifted asleep.

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Sipping hot cocoa in front of a blazing fireplace, Jim and Jess's eyes connected as the Grandfather clock began to chime. "Happy New Year," Jim said, putting his large hand behind her neck under her long soft hair and pulling her forward for a kiss. They met with a long intimate kiss that sent chills up both of their spines before parting and staring back at the blazing flames. All the lights off except for the multicolored Christmas tree lights, the orange flames seemed to dance and glow in the darkness. Sitting on opposite sides of the fire, staring into the flames, Jess scooted next to Jim, leaning against his chest then snuggling close as he put his arm around her. "We should go to bed pretty soon. I don't want to be tired for our last day tomorrow."

Jim chuckled. "It's not our last day. They'll be back... Lord willing."

"I know, but it will be our last day for quite some time."

"Yeah." He held her tighter and kissed the side of her neck. "But who knows if this moment will ever come again."

"It will." She sipped the rest of her cocoa. "We can make it a tradition, but for tonight, my cocoa's all gone, and it's getting late."

Jim smiled. "Okay, we can go," he relented, but instead they lingered ten minutes longer just snuggled together staring at the flames until Jess finally pulled away and said, "Okay, we need to get going. We've got responsibilities tomorrow. I want to get up early and make cinnamon rolls."

Stretching Jim got up, too. "Seven's early enough. I'll put out the fire."

Nodding, she held out her hand for his mug. He gave it to her, and she took them to the kitchen.

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Matt glanced at the clock as he drove. A new year is upon us. He wondered what the new year would bring. Last year had been quite interesting, and this year was starting out the same. Of course with his profession, he couldn't ever call his life dull, but usually outside situations didn't impact him so personally. He glanced at the green road sign as he went past. Still over an hour to Peoria. He wished he was further than he was. He hoped his discussion with Taylor before he left had made some sort of impact. Unfortunately, he doubted it. He wanted some way to get her to be excited about the baby, protective of it like most mothers. It just wasn't happening. He was becoming rapidly convinced that she really didn't want it. At forty-three years old he was going to become the father of an infant again. He had the distinct feeling that he better start now or Taylor wasn't going to wait until she was eighteen to run away to be free.

He set the cruise on fifty-nine, not expecting any policeman would want to get out in this cold weather to write him a ticket. He turned on some gentle background music. One thing he was looking forward to was going over to Melinda's for dinner, and he did not want to miss it. He never really considered life sending love his way again until recently. He figured since Sandra died, he would spend the rest of his life married to his work. However, more and more lately a majority of his thoughts seemed to tend toward Melinda. He'd wonder where she was at or what she was doing. He'd even found himself worrying about her if she seemed to be having a bad day or going the wrong way at work just so he would run into her. He wondered if she thought that often about him. He knew she loved taking care of Richie on her days off, and she seemed to enjoy coming over to help out. He wondered if he rated as high with her as the baby did. He was hopefully optimistic that he did.

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"That must be it." Matt told himself as he turned into the hotel Jim had texted him. He parked near the door and got out. All night he'd been thinking of a hundred greetings, a hundred ways to question her, but couldn't decide on a single thing to

say. He guessed, "Hello," would work.

He walked through the large glass doors and into the fancy, new-looking lobby. He looked around for.... *Over there.* He walked into the small dining area where five tables had people eating breakfast, he stopped at Kara Lee's. She looked up at him in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to get you and take you to your car." He sat down across from her, wondering where she got the money for breakfast if she was broke.

"I thought Jim and Jess were going to come."

Matt nodded. "They had some family responsibilities today. So, they asked me to come instead."

"Oh." She resumed eating her cereal. Matt could see her mind racing, he wondered what she was thinking.

Kara Lee ate quickly. She was not expecting that. Why in the world would he come down here? Does he know about Derrick? Does he want to see Derrick arrested. Will he tie me in with Derrick and turn me into the police? If he does, will they put two and two together that I was the one that gave the anonymous tip? I wonder how many years you can get for aiding a fugitive? Adrenaline began to pump through her veins. Feeling Matt staring at her, she smiled up at him and tried not to look nervous, though she knew she was eating too fast. "Well, that was good." She stood up to take her dishes to the return. "You want something before we go."

"No. I'm okay." He stretched as he stood up.

"Yeah. You know I was kind of expecting Jim. I figured he'd pay for my breakfast and add it to my boarding fee."

Matt smiled as he took out his wallet. "Well, I'll pay for your breakfast, and you don't have to pay me back." He walked toward the counter.

"Tha-anks." She gazed after him suspiciously, not knowing what to make of him. He is a doctor. *Maybe he just enjoys throwing his money around for breakfast... and at least seven hours worth of gas.* She shook her head. *No. He's after something.* She watched him laugh with the clerk. *In a good mood, too.* When he got done paying, she followed him out to his SUV and got in the passenger's side. They buckled up simultaneously, looked at each other, and started talking at the same time. "Go ahead." Kara looked away.

Matt glanced at the back up camera as he backed the car up. "I was just curious what brought you all the way down here, and how you got separated from your car."

"My work brought me down here. I'm sorry I can't tell you what story I'm working on." She stared out the window.

Matt nodded as he stopped at the road. "Which way am I turning. Where's your car?"

"Oh. Turn right. You'll get on the Mountain Parkway headed South. I'll tell you where to turn off when we get there. Not sure of the name of the road."

Nodding, he turned right. "You always call Jim when you get stranded on the job, or is he involved in the case somehow?"

"Sometimes I call him... sometimes other friends. Usually, I can get out of the situation myself. If had my ID or some money it would have been easier. I asked the 24hr taxi service in town to trust me, and they wouldn't. Besides they said that they don't go that far. I asked a couple people in the hotel for a ride, and they said, 'No.' Besides you have to be careful who you ask for a ride these days. I asked a guy once that looked alright and ended up two hours west of where I wanted to be at his farm house. After I cooled him off, I ended up hitching a ride with a neighbor to a town an hour further away just so I could get a bus back to where I started."

"Hmm. How'd you get back to your car that time?"

"A semi driver took me to the exit, and I ended up walking the last five miles on my own. I was a nervous wreck the whole time that he wasn't going to stop, though. Thought I might end up in California or something."

Matt laughed. "Where had you started at?"

"I was in Kansas that time."

"Well, it's awful nice of Jim and Jess to drive hours away to pick you up sometimes." His said skeptically while sneaking a glance at her.

"Yeah, it is." She stared off expressionless. "Don't worry I'll pay you the same fee I pay them." *Then Wade can pay me back.* She gritted her teeth.

Matt nodded again as he merged onto the parkway. "Not necessary. So," He decided to get straight to the point as he passed a semi. "Did you find Derrick?" He glanced at her.

She forced her expression not to change. She forced her heart rate to calm before answering. "I wasn't down here looking for Derrick," she lied. "What made you think that?"

"The fact that you asked Jim or Wade to come get you." He'd figured that out from the phone call during the game last night.

"I didn't ask Wade. I asked Jim like I have before." She lied again. "I don't know where you get your information."

He nodded again as he passed another semi. "Well, if you do happen to see him, you can tell him that he didn't end up killing my son after all."

"What do you mean?" She stared out the window.

"He took a suicide pill, a high dose of fentanyl."

She nodded semi-enthusiastically. "Well, that's good." She paused. "I can't tell him. I don't know where he is, and I'm not looking for him. Turn here."

Matt slowed and turned. "Okay. I just thought you'd like to know, in case you run into him sometime in your travels."

"I won't."

## Southern Yacht Felons

Darting back and forth from behind object to object, Derrick made his way from the edge of the condo building to behind the boathouse. Peering around the edge of the boathouse, he studied the elegant line of yachts tied to the spotless white-washed dock. *Fancy.* This was definitely not the neighborhood he had been expecting. He had been expecting a dirty, rusty, greasy, hook and chain shipyard, filled with massive, loud-honking supply-chain ships not Fido's first-class yacht shop and poodle parlor. He wondered which of these white-collar, rhinestone millionaires were moonlighting in human commodities. Which one of these tidy gentlemen gathers his wealth from the suffering of others? *Fun, fun, fun...* Noticing a spot of mud his pant leg had gotten on the clean yellow siding, he knelt down and brushed it off. *Boy, oh, boy, I bet if they catch me here, they won't even try me before sending me to San Quentin and throwing away the key. Nah, probably make national news. That there's the difference between rich and poor. While poor'll just quietly pull the trigger, rich have to make a big production to justify their actions before dropping the floor and hanging an innocent man. Well, at least semi innocent.* While his intentions were good, he guessed he to admit that he had broken at least ten of their seventy-five posted rules... the first being No Trespassing, the second being vandalism when he broke their shiny, brass, see-your-reflection padlock. *Sure wasn't very sturdy, though.* He glanced toward the rust-free silver chain blowing in the warm Georgia breeze on the dock and then down at the crystal-clean water. *Even the water seems bluer. ... Of all the situations you could get yourself into this has got to be the dumbest.* He bet there was a camera on every boat. *Dumb, dumb, dumb.... Although the one I want might not have a camera on it, not if they are engaging in illegal activity.* He hoped. Derrick studied the condos looking for security cameras. He just didn't see any. *Maybe since they are a gated community, they figure they don't need them. ... Can't bank on that.* He turned and looked toward the sea. Maybe it would be safest to swim from boat to boat. He glanced at his watch. He had to decide soon. According to his information, the girls should have gotten picked up from another boat out at sea earlier this morning. They should be waiting here now for a limousine to take them to a holding home in Atlanta. He had forty minutes to find them. Well, here goes nothing.

"Who are you looking for?" a child's voice asked.

Jumping ten feet and spinning one-eighty in the air, he landed facing the little girl that had snuck up behind him. "Where did you come from?"

Leaning up against the dirt-free shack with her immaculate dress, holding her designer doll, she pointed toward the condos. "I live here." *Wonderful.* "The corner one. I was out on the terrace and heard you jump over the gate next to me. Then I watched you sneak over behind this boat house just like James Bond," she giggled. He smiled. "A little dirtier, though." She stared at his clothes.

"Yeah. I guess I should have changed this morning." He glanced back toward the water. "I was just going to go for a swim."

"Why?"

"To clean up?" Clutching her doll, she smiled up at him. She looked so sweet and innocent; his heart tugged at the thought of the world she was going to have to grow up in. Hopefully, she had good parents that could protect her for as long as possible. "You know; you really shouldn't talk to strangers. You should go back up to your house and give your doll a tea party."

"I already did that. Who are you looking for?"

"Some bad people. You really should go back to your house. If you want to help me, don't tell anyone about me for an hour."

"There's no one to tell. There's no one home."

Derrick cringed. "Sweetie, you shouldn't tell people that."

"Why not?"

"Never mind. Just go back where it's safe, please."

"I want to watch."

Derrick sighed, kneeling down in front of her. "Alright Agent 99, did you see any boats come in around ten, ten-thirty?"

"Uh huh," she nodded.

"Which one?" He spoke softly.

"That one." She pointed. "The big blue and white one."

Derrick stood up to get a better view... the last boat at the end of the line of docks. "Hmm." At least, it was the last one before the wooded shore line. That makes it good for a fast get away. He knelt back down. "Alright now, Agent 99, I'm going to swim out there and scout around, but I need to be inconspicuous. Do you know what that means?"

She nodded. "It means you don't want anyone to see you."

He nodded. "That's right. So, if you are going to watch me, stay back here so people can't see you watching me. Don't call to me. Don't follow me... or you could ruin a lot of hard work." *And a beautiful life of freedom.* "Okay?"

She nodded, smiling, her dolls head under her chin. "I won't blow your cover."

He smiled back, getting up. "Good."

She followed him to the end of the boat house and then stopped and watched as he strolled the rest of the way to the water's edge, hands in his pockets, wind ruffling through his black hair. Glancing around, he sat on the bank and quietly hopped down into the water. Warm ocean waves lapped into his shoulders and neck. *Big improvement from that icy mountain lake yesterday.* He swam silently next to the edge, keeping his head turned toward the bank away from any security cameras that might be on the other boats. Pulling himself up with a rock, he glanced over the bank toward the condos, looking for anyone outside. He didn't see anyone. *No one wants to be out on the grey, windy weekday?* He felt thankful. *Well, that's good.* The churning water slapped into the back of his head as he sunk back down.

Holding his breath, he silently dove under the first dock. Eyes closed because of the salt water, he tried to gauge when to come up. Misjudging he came up too soon and knocked his head on the dock. Lungs burning for air, he went back down and kicked hard to get to the end. Feeling a difference in the water, he came up again, this time gasping for air as he broke the surface away from the dock. *Finally. That dock didn't look that wide.* He breathed deeply as he swam next to shore, readying himself for the next dive. *Here we go.* He took a deep breath and dove again, kicking hard the whole way until he felt the water change. He repeated the process for two more docks. About to come up from the last dock, he heard voices. Where'd they come from. His mind raced, knowing he couldn't surface right in front of them. He envisioned the middle walking path dock lined with pretty wood benches and knew that's where they were. *No boats attached to that dock. No cover.* He dove deeper and kept swimming, trying not to kick hard and make a notable stir in the water. His lungs burned. His mouth and throat wanted to suck in something. His bruised arm and leg hurt from yesterday. His cuts stung in the salt water. Finally, he felt the water change and knew he was under the walking dock. Thankfully, it was set higher than the water, unlike the rest. He came up under the dock for air, forcing himself not to gasp loudly as he listened to the laughing and chatter above him. He took several moments to catch his breath, though he felt a need to rush. After staring toward the next set of boats and docks, he sucked in a deep breath and dove again, deep to not create waves but swam hard since he had to cover fifteen feet of open water and then five feet of dock. He didn't make it. Needing air, he came up before the dock and quickly swam behind a boat's pontoon. He jerked his gaze toward the walking couple then let out a sigh of relief to see them sitting on a bench, backs to him, pointing and laughing in their own world. Good. Holding onto the pontoon, he sucked in air for several moments before diving again. He dove under that dock and two more. Emerging from the third dock, he hung onto a dangling yellow line and looked toward the last boat, trying to size up the situation. He didn't see anything. He swam over to a boat. Bobbing behind the pontoon, he scanned the dock of the boxy yacht. He was certain there had to be a guard somewhere. He maneuvered down the pontoon to the other end and did a pushup on it to raise himself higher. *There he is.* A lone gunman sat on the rope-off bow in a camp chair. He ducked back down. *He the only one? Maybe the others are in the cabin.* He ducked under the pontoon, dove down, and swam to the yacht, coming up near the stern. He'd bet anything the cabin door was being guarded by the gunman at the bow.

Running his hand along the bottom of the boat, Derrick stopped when he came to the ladder. He took his gloves out of his pocket and put them on. He reached for the bottom rung and silently pulled himself up on deck. Mind racing to figure out how to overpower the gunman without being notice, he was surprised to stand up right in front of the door. Shrugging, he silently turned the unlocked door knob and went down the narrow stairs. *Maybe this is the wrong boat.* The door at the bottom of the stairs was locked. *Maybe not.* He took out his multipurpose hairpin he had found on the ground a few weeks ago and worked on the lock. He tried to be quiet, but hearing Multilanguage chatter inside, he figured they had noticed him. The hairpin didn't work for this lock, so he got out his debit card instead. That worked. Holding his breath, he quietly opened the door and stepped in to the gazes of nearly twenty young ladies crowded in the little space, some sitting on the couch and floor others standing. Some were Asian. Some were Middle Eastern. Some were chattering at him in a foreign language. Others were silent. He gauged their ages from thirteen to nineteen... maybe a couple in their twenties. "Shhh..." They quieted. "Anyone speak English?" he asked quietly. One of the youngest girls raised her hand. "You speak English?"

"Yes. I speak. Some." He eyes looked to him for confirmation on her English.

He nodded. "Good." He paused. "You want to work for these men, or you want to be free?" She shrugged. "Well, I'll give you a choice. Can you swim?" She nodded. "Okay. Come with me." He held out his hand. She looked to the others for approval. A couple of them shrugged. Others looked away. She walked over and took his hand. "Great." He held it firmly and hurried with her out the door, closing it locked behind him. He wanted them to stay here for evidence against the boat. They hurried up the stairs and across the deck. Derrick went silently down the ladder and into the water and then spotted her in case she fell as she climbed down. "Okay, let's go," he whispered, taking her hand and swimming silently with her to the shore at the woods. Swimming behind a tree, he glanced back, grateful to see no change. He lifted her up on shore and then climbed up after her. Taking her hand, he ran with her to the wood's edge. Seeing Agent 99 still watching, he waved to her to come and then ducked back into the woods as she ran over. "What's your name?" he asked the middle eastern girl.

"Nasheena."

Derrick nodded as the cute little pigtailed blonde came running with her doll. His heart tugged at involving her even a little. "Hey, Agent 99. This is Nasheena."

"Is she the one you were looking for?"

"Uh huh. Her and her friends. She has about twenty friends in that boat." He nodded toward it.

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Now, what I need you two to do is go to the front desk and ask to make a phone call. Okay? Call 911, and Nasheena, I need you to say that you and your friends came over on a boat and that you wish to be free.”

She cocked her head. “Why?”

“Because they won’t be good to you. Believe me. You don’t have much time, so you need to hurry. Okay? So, go call that number and tell them that you and your friends wish to be free. That is the proper way to enter this country. Otherwise, you aren’t going like where you’re going, believe me. Then give her the phone, and she will give them the address. Okay?” They both nodded. “Good.” He put Nasheena’s hand in Agent 99’s and pushed them along. “Try to just say that you found her outside... at least for an hour. Only tell them about me if you have to.”

“But who are you?” She looked back as he pushed them forward.

“Nobody. Go. Hurry.” He watched them run to the main door at the same time watching the boat. The sleeping guard didn’t begin to notice. As soon as they were inside, he turned and began booking it through the woods, mentally planning how to get back to his truck.

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Jim smiled at the Christmas music playing in the background as he walked into the toasty, cinnamon-smelling kitchen. “Any more cinnamon rolls around?” he asked walking toward Jess, who was peeling potatoes over the trashcan.

“Ye-esss, but you should wait for dinner. I want you to be hungry after all the work I’m putting into this. I even made pies for deserts.”

“I see that.” He leaned over the still-steaming apple pie on the stove and inhaled the sweet cinnamony aroma. “I’d settle for a piece of that, too.”

Glancing from her potato, she smiled at him. “That’s for desert. Dinner will be ready in a little less than an hour. You could have some of the grape salad.”

“Well, I guess that’s better than nothing.” He went over to the wintery decorated table. Pine boughs wrapped with ribbon encircled a festive red candle. Glittery snowmen figurines, one by a mailbox... others throwing snowballs, completed the centerpiece. He scooped a big spoonful of grapes covered in a sweet and nutty cream cheese sauce into his holly leaf decorated china bowl and walked back as he ate it.

Jess glanced at him. “Mom and Dad still out in the barn with Morgan?”

Jim nodded. “They love that new foal.”

“Is the fire going?”

He nodded as he ate. “All ready for them when they come back in.”

“Good.”

Jim took out his cellphone as it started to vibrate. He glanced at Jess. “It’s Trent.”

She nodded as she diced the potato in large squares into the pan. “Aren’t you going to answer it.”

“I don’t know what to say. Should I tell him about Kara Lee being down in Kentucky?”

“Why? We don’t know why she’s down there.”

Jim bobbed his head back and forth. “Not officially, but we have a pretty good idea. I should call Wade back and see if she found him.”

“Maybe Trent knows.” She nodded impatiently toward the still ringing phone.

“Oh. Alright.” He answered it. “Hey, Trent, what’s up?” His voice was accidently weary.

"Hey, Jim, having a good New Years?"

It was. "Yep. How 'bout you?"

"Oh, pretty good. Wish we could have come to church last night, but I had to work late."

"Yeah. Sorry you missed it. I saw John there. He come with Kyle?"

"Yes. He did. Those two are becoming fast friends." He paused. "Hey, have you heard from Derrick lately?"

"No. Why?"

"Just checking. We got a tip on some drug dealers in Kentucky and then found out Kara Lee was down there."

"Yeah, I, a," he stuttered. "I heard she was down there."

"Did she find him?"

"You'll have to ask her. Did you get the drug dealers?"

"Uh huh... three alive and two bodies. One body was in the wreckage of a plane that floated to shore with a large cargo of Cocaine. Every fish in that lake is high today." Jim huffed a laugh. "We are afraid Derrick might have been in that plane." He paused and waited for a reaction. Silence.

"Why?" Jim asked, tentatively.

"We're still piecing together that story. I hear the hoods aren't being real cooperative. Then we got a report about a little girl in Georgia this morning, finding another little girl outside her home, who was a victim of human trafficking. In fact, they found a yacht full of women that had been picked up from a freighter at sea, mostly from parts of Asia. A couple of them said something to an interpreter about a tall, dark young man breaking in and taking the little girl out."

"You think that was Derrick?"

"We don't know. The timetable's not really working out. He would have had to make really good time if our figures are correct. He can't just be ignoring sleep either. They're looking for him, but nothing, yet."

"So what do you want from me?"

"To know if you know if he's still alive."

Jim hesitated, not knowing how to answer that. "Um." He looked at Jess who was also listening through the speaker phone. She shrugged. "I don't know. I... I haven't heard that he isn't."

"Okay. That's what I wanted to know. One more thing. The autopsy report came back on Mark. He killed himself with a suicide pill. Matt and Taylor haven't filed a complaint, so I doubt there will be any charges there. Actually, he's doing a great job finding covert operations. He must have some great information. I know some people that would like to work with him. It'd be a lot safer for him than going rogue the way he is now."

"Yeah," Jim answered, hesitantly. "Kind of doubt you'll be able to convince him of that."

"Sooner or later, he's going to get himself killed if he keeps going like this. I know a lot of people that are amazed he hasn't gotten killed already. I'm one of them."

"Yeah. ... You mean you won't charge him with anything if he comes in?"

"Well, um, I'm not the prosecutor. As far as I know they don't have any evidence of him being at any of the locations that went down... no DNA... no finger prints."

"Just gunmen that all say he was there."

"So far, no one's been able to give us an accurate description of him. We've removed any pictures of him from the internet, so they can't find it that way. Even the women in the boat... two gave a pretty close description of him in general, no identifying marks. The only one that could manage a computer sketch didn't come close at all. We showed his picture along with two others, only three of the eighteen picked him out. He keeps himself covered so the tattoo on his left arm isn't visible

nor the scare on his right.”

“What about the little girl?”

“She didn’t pick him out, but she was probably lying. She insists he was short and fat.”

Jim laughed. “Well maybe it wasn’t him.”

“Yeah, right. Wanna bet? The other little girl said she hadn’t seen him at all. She can lie with a straight face. I never figured him to be a charmer. I guess he can, though.”

“What? They fly you down there?”

“Webcam. I couldn’t get her to talk either. She just kept saying that she found the other girl on the beach then she buried her head in her doll and started to cry.”

Jim smiled. “You couldn’t pay me to do your job. What about the drug dealers?”

“Three different descriptions, one was close, the others weren’t. It didn’t sound like any of them saw his face.”

“Huh.” He paused. “Like I said, I haven’t seen him, but if I hear from him, I’ll tell him what you said.”

“I appreciate it.”

## New Year’s Day Dinner

Melinda stared off into the distance as she absentmindedly ate her maple sugar pecan pie. “This is really good, honey,” Maggie said as she took a bite. “You’ll have to give me the recipe.”

Melinda looked at her and tried to smile through her gloomy eyes. “It took me an hour to find that recipe on the internet. “It is supposed to be award winning.”

Maggie looked down at it and set her fork beside her plate. “Well, maybe we should just wait until your fellow gets here.”

Melinda shrugged. “He’d probably like pumpkin better anyway. I just wish he would have called me earlier to say he’d be late so I could have waited to put the turkey in.”

“He was just trying to be nice, honey. He knew you’d slept late, and he didn’t want to wake you. Besides everything else will be fresh, and that will taste just fine rewarmed.”

“I hope so.”

“Is he still planning to be here at three-thirty?”

“Last I heard.” She absentmindedly took another bite.

“Well, that’s not too far off.”

“As long as he doesn’t call and say he’s not coming.”

“I don’t think he’ll do that. It sounded like he wants to come.”

“I want him to come.” Her eyes were nearly pleading as she looked at her mom. “Do you think I’m wrong for falling for a guy over five years older than me?”

“No, what would be wrong with it? It’s not even that unusual.”

“I don’t know.” She raked her hand through the front of her long blonde hair, pushing it back behind her shoulders. “I don’t understand my feelings. Right now, I feel like my heart would rend in half if he said he didn’t want me, and yet... it really

wasn't that long ago that I couldn't stand to work with him." She stared off a moment and then jerked her gaze back to her mom. "He used to curse at me, you know. He used to curse at me all the time..." She slowly wagged her head back and forth. "... the other nurses, too. He used to have a violent temper."

"Was this before or after he got saved."

"Before." She spoke quietly.

"Your father used to have a vile temper before he got saved."

Melinda's eyes pleaded again. "How do you know someone won't revert back to their old ways?"

Maggie only shrugged. "Your father didn't." Melinda looked away, wishing for more reassurance than that. "I think you used the wrong word when you said violent." Melinda looked back. "His whole life has been dedicated to helping people, hasn't it?" Melinda nodded. "You've never heard of him intentionally trying to harm a patient... or anyone else." Melinda thought a moment and shook her head. "I think what you meant was that he was a difficult person to like. He was married before, wasn't he?"

Melinda nodded. "But his kids didn't turn out that well."

"Yeah, but you can't judge a person by their kids," Maggie stood up and picked up her empty plate. "except in my case." She hugged Melinda on her way past. "I would be honored if people judged my parenting skills by you."

Melinda smiled as she watched her mom go into the kitchen. "I love you, mom," she whispered.

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Sitting in her jeep, Kara Lee tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as she stared off into the snow-frosted trees. She couldn't decide whether to go out again or not. Logically, she felt as though she should have traumatized enough by her most recent excursion to want to go back home get some hot cocoa, call a guy, and enjoy her New Year. However, she hated going back empty handed. *After all this work, all the near-death effort, I don't have one picture to confirm my story. There is no way I'm coming back here to get a picture if I go all the way home. It's now or never. Do I really need one? It could be the difference between selling the story or not.* She sighed. *It looks so cold out.* She watched as sparkling snow tumbled down from a nearby tree. *Not horrible, though.* She wondered if she'd even would be able to use the story. *Might end up walking five miles there and five miles back. Might get caught out another night out in the cold. Might not even be able to use the story.* She thumped her head back on the seat. *I've got to have those pictures.* Zipping up her coat, she locked her real id and cards in the glove box, grabbed her camera from the passenger's seat, and got out, shaking her head. *Why do I do this work?* The wind whipped past her as she opened the door, but it didn't feel as cold as she was expecting. *It'll get colder. Just wait.* Kneeling down in the snow, she dug a spot behind her front tire and buried her key. She'd learned from experience not to take it with her. She'd had it taken away to many times. Half the underworld probably had a key to her car at this point.

Venturing back into the trees, walking between the falling tree-snows, she wondered if the police were still out there. *Make for a good picture. Yeah, that'd make for an exciting New Year's... if I get caught. Oh, hi, officer, beautiful snow scenes out here, aren't there? Mildred Mackentire at your service. Map it and snap it. That's my motto. Maybe you've seen my work pictured in Sights of the Forest or Majesty's Mountains?* She smiled as she walked. *Good thing I have me to keep myself entertained on these long treacherous journeys.*

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"Maybe it's this baby that is making me nostalgic." Rocking in the rocker, Melinda stared down into Ricky's bright, lively blue eyes as he exuberantly sucked his bottle.

"Just don't let your feelings for him dictate your feelings for his father. I mean grandfather."

"I'm trying not to. It's a little hard to sort out though." She tilted the bottle down to give Ricky a chance to swallow. He quickly grabbed it again and pulled it back. "He has a mind of his own already."

Maggie looked up from the magazine she was reading across the room, sitting, legs crossed on the couch. "I like Matt." She turned the page. "He seems like an honorable man."

Lowering the bottle again, she stared off. "I never heard anyone accuse him of doing anything dishonorable even before

he was saved.” Ricky screeched as he reached. Glancing down she gave the bottle back to him. “I should go put the casseroles in the oven.”

“I can take him,” Maggie suggested. “The young man’s supposed to be here in about forty-five minutes, right?”

Melinda nodded as she stared down at Ricky. “Young man.” She huffed a laugh. “He’s a grandfather. Does that make me old enough to be a grandmother?”

“Oh, you have your whole lives ahead of you.” She flipped the magazine closed and straightened her skirt as she got up.

“Or at least half of it anyway.”

Reaching Melinda, Maggie held out her arms. “Here. Give me that little guy. You need to go put the dinner on. It never hurts to make a good impression. You never know how things will work out.”

Nodding, she got up, handed over Ricky, and headed for the kitchen. As she entered the bright kitchen, her phone went off. She glanced at the number as she answered it. *Matt. Please don’t say you’re not coming.* “Hello?”

“Hi, do you have any idea where my daughter and grandson are? I don’t know why I keep having these illusions that someday she’ll grow up and be responsible. She only gets worse! Every day I hope it’s a new day, a fresh start, she wants to be a good mother, but no! Every day she proves she doesn’t! I mean if I don’t just take over the care of that baby, we could wind up with social services at our door. How would that look? ... Maybe I should just drop it off at a day care every morning and insist she go back to school. Just raise the baby myself and let her have it back when she proves she’s responsible enough....”

“Matt!” She had to interrupt to get a word in edgewise.

“What?”

“The baby’s here.”

“Oh.” He paused. “Well, why doesn’t she have the common decency to leave me a note? How long does it take to send a text? You know last week she took the kid to a rock concert? I’m surprised they let her in. He’ll probably have subpar hearing for life. Is she over there, too?”

“No.”

“Where is she?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Wonderful. I’m the one that’s going to end up in trouble with social services.”

Melinda had to smile at his tone. “I was just about to put dinner in. Are you back already?”

“Yeah, maybe I should go look for her. I don’t know where she’d go.”

Melinda pulled the casserole from the fridge with one hand and slid it in the oven. “You know, you can always text her, too.”

“Yeah, I guess. There’s nothing I like more than getting vague, nonspecific answers.”

She half smiled as she turned on the oven. “Well, invite her over for dinner when you do. I already did. She said she’d think about it.”

“Okay. I’ll do that, and I should be over in a few minutes.”

“Okay. Look forward to seeing you.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

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Kara Lee crossed her arms for warmth as she shivered against the wind. There was nothing she hated worse than underestimating how cold it was going to be. It made her feel so insecure, like she might freeze to death. She kept her mind focused

on finding her pack because in there was food, some extra shirts she could layer, and a blanket. Feeling over whelmed by the elements, she began to wonder if she had bitten off more than she could chew. She had felt good after the night's rest, but it hadn't lasted long. Now, she felt weak and tired, afraid she might not be able to handle a situation should one come into play. She put her hood up. She kept telling herself that she had to be almost there. Her brow furrowed as she gazed toward the waning sun, shining weakly through the trunks of the trees. She nearly jumped at the hoot of an owl from a nearby tree. Cracking her neck, she forced herself to calm down. *Get a hold of yourself. Danger is the name of the game. You haven't gotten taken out, yet.*

Relief swept over her as she saw faint glimpses of the cabin clearing in the distance. She wondered if it would be safe to stay inside for tonight. She had heard on the early morning news that the police were investigating a tip about drug dealers in the mountains. She wondered if they had them all cleared out. *Only one way to find out.* Reaching the top of the hill, she clutched the camera firmly that was swinging from her neck and began to jog down the hill toward the cabins and her pack that was buried halfway down under a tree.

Reaching halfway, she stopped and then walked around looking for her tree. Finding it, she crawled under it, snow melting on her gloves and pant legs. She pulled out her pack and looked inside, tilting it toward the sun to see. All there. Nodding, she zipped it back shut, tossed it partway under the tree, and headed further down to get her pictures. Her senses heightened as she got close. She didn't see any signs of life, no lights, no smoke. The door was still open to the one shed. Ducking behind a tree trunk, she turned on her camera found the perfect brightness setting for the dim light and took two pictures of the cabin complex. Then turning, she took two pictures of the peaceful dock and lake. It was beautiful with the snow glistening around the blue water and the orange sky in the background. That picture alone made her want to sell this story.

Turning her camera off, she jogged back to her pack, grabbed a couple energy bars, and then headed through the woods toward the back of the complex. She had every intention of getting in if at all safe and getting some pictures of the inside where she was held. A few feet further, she noticed a glimmer of yellow that she hadn't noticed before. Staring toward the shed, she tried to figure out what it was, until suddenly it hit her. Crime scene tape. Great that means that bad guys are likely gone. Bad. That means I might not be able to get in without removing the tape. Maybe through that back window. Do I really want to spend the night in a restricted crime scene even if it is warmer? Her mind raced to remember everything she touched. She wondered if they had dusted for fingerprints, yet.

Running faster, she circled around the side and ended in the back, walking cautiously out in the open toward the cabin. She looked up. The window wasn't covered. Now if only I have enough bounce to get back up there. After her first try she was afraid she wouldn't. After five tries, she barely got her finger tips on the window sill, but fell back down. Giving it everything she had, she leapt, made it, and pulled herself up and in. Falling onto the carpeted floor, she squinted to see in the nearly dark house. Running her gloved hand on the wall, she looked for a light switch. Stumbling toward the banister, she ran her gloved hand down it, trying to get rid of any fingerprints her or Derrick might had left earlier and walked downstairs. Then she ran her hand along the wall until she found the light switch. Finding it, she flipped it on lightening the room. She gagged at the sight of a puddle of blood on the floor inside and a chalked body mark. Her hands shook as she lifted her camera and turned it on. Avoiding the areas were police had removed items and the chalk body mark, she took a picture of the rest of the room. She flipped of the light and headed back upstairs. Cold night or not, she wasn't rooming in here tonight.

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"That was great." Matt took his napkin from his lap and put it next to his pate. "Your cooking just keeps getting better and better."

Melinda smiled. "Mom's been teaching me."

"Yeah." Maggie laughed as she got up. "And now she's cooking better than I ever did." She started clearing the table.

Melinda got up and started helping. "We still have pie for dessert. I'll bring them in." She went to the kitchen with the mashed potatoes and the pasta salad and came back holding two pies. "Pecan?" She lifted the half-gone, crunchy pecan pie, dripping in sugary syrup. "Or pumpkin?" She lifted the creamy pumpkin pie, each piece decorated with a fancy dollop of whipped cream.

"They both look very good. I see the pecan must have been popular."

She gazed toward it, sheepishly. "It was. It's a new recipe. Made with real maple syrup."

Matt smiled. "Well, who am I to buck popular opinion. Give me that one, so I can see what all the fuss is about."

"Okay," she smiled, hurrying back to the kitchen. "Ice cream with it?" She called over her shoulder.

"Sure. Sounds good." He was just going to assume it was vanilla and not something weird like bubblegum or licorice. Getting up, he helped Maggie clear the table.

"Oh, you don't have to do that, Dr. Fredricks."

He shrugged. "No reason not, too."

"Why, yes there is, you're our guest."

Melinda came hurrying back in with two plates of pie and handed one to her mom the other to Matt."

"Thank you, honey." Maggie looked down at her pecan pie, convinced she'd never get tired of it, even if this was her third piece today. *I'll probably be ten pounds heavier tomorrow.* She had a feeling she was emotionally eating for her daughter's sake. Melinda hurried back to the kitchen and reemerged with her pie.

"Let's go in the living room. We can finish this later." Maggie nodded, and they all headed into the living room. Maggie and Melinda sat on the couch. Matt sat in the chair. They all stared toward the sparkling Christmas tree in silence a moment as they ate. "I'm sorry Taylor couldn't make it tonight." Melinda spoke more to break the silence than because she wanted to bring up that subject again.

"Yeah. I guess she had some stuff going on with friends." Matt avoided the subject, too. He only hoped that she wasn't in someone's basement getting drunk or high. He guessed he had no reason to suspect that. He'd never seen any evidence of a drinking or drug addiction. It was just all this sudden urge for total independence that worried him. He guessed she'd always been independent. He guessed he made her that way. Maybe the responsibility of a baby was just bringing it out more than usual. He'd go look for her except he was tired of chasing her around town. He couldn't even ground her because she'd just ignore him and leave anyway. He wished she was eighteen instead of still his responsibility. "Well, back to work tomorrow." Matt started a new subject.

"Yep, bright and early for you, huh?" Melinda glanced over at the clock.

"Yeah. Normal. 5am tomorrow." She nodded as she took another bite. "I'll probably wait up for Taylor anyway before I go to bed." I wanted to give her the rest of the month before going back to school, but maybe she should start right away. Maybe it would be easier for her to start right at the beginning of the semester. I don't see any signs of separation anxiety between her and the baby," he stated, dryly.

Melinda nodded again. "Maybe that would be best. If she's getting discontent at home, at least going to school would give her a purpose to her days and a goal to work toward. Probably better than her trying to find other ways to amuse herself."

Raising his eyebrows, Matt nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Probably." He took a bite of ice cream mixed with pie. Finishing, his pie, he yawned and stretched back, putting his pie down on the end table next to him. "I should probably be going pretty soon, though. It was a long night last night."

"I bet. Did you sleep at all last night?"

He shook his head. "Maybe waiting up for her is a little optimistic. I guess I can talk to her in the morning. I guess I could text her and request that she come home early." He yawned again. "My requests just don't seem to be getting very far these days."

"Why don't I try texting her?" Melinda suggested.

"Go ahead." Matt closed his eyes briefly and then opened them. "I better go get Richie before I fall asleep here." He got up.

"I'll help you." Melinda got up and followed him to the crib in the corner. Picking up the diaper bag on her way past, she stuffed the blanket, rattle, teething ring, towel, and extra diapers back in it. Matt got the baby carrier and put it by the crib. Melinda shook down the contents of the diaper bag and then zipped it up.

Matt picked up Richey gently, trying not to wake him up. Richey blinked open his eyes to look at Matt but then closed

them again, cooing once before drifting back to sleep. Matt gently set him in the baby carrier, buckled him up, and snugly covered him with two blankets. Melinda handed him the diaper bag as he picked up the baby carrier. "Thanks." Flinging the diaper bag over his shoulder like any good mother, he headed for the door. "Thanks again for the supper. It was great."

"We'll have to do it again sometime." She held the door open for him.

Yawning, he nodded. "I look forward to it. Maybe I can take you out to eat sometime next week to return the favor."

"Sounds good." Melinda smiled, cheerfully. "And I'll text Taylor. It's seven, now. Why don't I ask her if she can be home by ten? Maybe you can set your alarm and just wake up enough to see if she's in?"

Matt nodded, yawning again as he walked to his car. "Okay. Thanks."

A tinge of worry crossed Melinda's face, though not really. "Be safe. You want me to drive you. You look awful tired." She already knew the answer to that.

"No. I can drive fine." His voice held a tinge of annoyance as she put Richey in the back seat and strapped in his baby carrier.

"Just asking." She stepped back in the doorway.

"Thanks for caring." He glanced at her beautiful frame silhouetted by the light behind her as he got in his SUV. Smiling at the warmth he felt around her, he started the engine and backed out of the drive.

## Surprise Visitor

Staring at their fiftieth blazing fire for the season with his hundred and fiftieth mug of hot cocoa in his hands, Jim stared halfway toward the old time show in television and half at the twinkling lights on their white pine. Arm around Jess, surrounded by family in his nice, warm, safe house, he felt perfectly contented. He really didn't want to get up to go bring the horse's in and feed them, but he guessed someone had to. Yawning, he stretched as the Christmas Classic went to commercial. "I guess I'd better go feed the horses. Wanna go with me?" He looked playfully hopeful toward Jess though he knew the answer.

"Uh uh." Curled up next to the arm of the couch hot cocoa in hand, she pulled the afghan up higher. "Have fun."

"Be funner with two."

"Oom." She curled up tighter and took another sip. "That's a matter of opinion."

Smiling, he went to the closet to get his coat. "Okay. I'll go by myself, all alone."

"Take heart, son." Ed looked up from the book he was reading by the fire. "After a few more years, you'll get used to it."

Jess threw the couch pillow at him. He caught it and set it down by his chair. "I don't mind going out with him. It's just that by time I get changed into my barn clothes, he could already be done."

"Hear that, son?" Ed said, looking back down at his book. "You'd better change into your barn clothes before going out there."

"Oom." Jim zipped up his coat. "I think these just became my barn clothes." He headed toward the door and opened it, letting a rush of cold air in. "See you later if I don't freeze out there."

"Don't freeze out there," Jess advised as she unmuted the TV as the show came back on.

"Yeah," Jim yawned as he trudged down the snow-dusted steps, across the big circle drive, and to the barn. He jumped back as a drift of snow fell from the roof right in front of him. "Huh," he yawned as he stepped over it and walked inside. Yawning, Jim flipped on the light as he walked into the barn. Drowsily turning toward the loft, Jim jumped three feet as someone stepped out of the shadows. He reached to his belt for his gun before the stranger's face registered. "Derrick?"

"It's me." He stepped into the light. "How's it going?" His voice was weary.

Sighing with relief, Jim leaned back against the wall. "Where did you come from? I thought you were in Georgia."

"Good. Hopefully, everybody does." He stepped forward and leaned sideways against the stall stairs.

"You weren't in Georgia?"

"This morning. That was a long time ago."

"You can say that again." Jim stepped away from the wall and thumbed toward the house. "Try keeping up with Jess and her mom for a day. Last I knew we were going to stay home today. At least, we did for half of it." Derrick smiled. He picked up two slabs of hay from the open bale he had behind the ladder and headed for the next stall. "You feeding my horses?" Jim picked up a couple slabs of hay and followed him.

"Nothing else to do, right now. You got a new foal over there," he pointed to the other side of the barn.

"Oh, really," He glanced over his shoulder and then headed over there. "She dropped her foal? When did that happen?"

"About an hour ago, forty-five minutes, maybe."

"How long have you been here?" Jim called back as he pulled open the stall door and went in. Smiling, he brushed some of the wetness off the new foal's face.

"A little longer than that, I guess. She was about ready to go when I got here." Derrick came midway over to fill up the water bucket.

Jim redirected his attention from the new colt back to his long-lost wayward friend. "So, where have you been all this time? Did you hear about Mark?"

"What about him?" Derrick muttered as he lugged the water back to the stall.

"He killed himself with pills." Jim followed him.

"When?" Derrick looked back as he pulled open the stall.

"That night! What do you mean when?"

"I don't know." Derrick ran his hand through his sweaty black hair as he walked in and dumped that water. "I just mean I didn't see him do it."

"No one did, but from what I hear you don't have any charges pending against you. In fact, they'd like to know where you're getting your information."

"Yeah." He pushed the horse to the side as he walked out and closed the door. "They knew I was in Georgia today, huh?"

"No, a," Jim stood back as Derrick went past him back to the hay. "they think you might have been. They don't know for sure."

Derrick returned a single nod as he walked back with the hay to the next stall. "What about the others?"

"Well, I heard something about an operation in Pekin. Kara Lee got herself stranded in Kentucky. I haven't heard that they can connect you to either of them."

"Noo. Never." He fed the next horse and came back for the water. "What about Kara Lee? She make it back okay?"

"I don't know." Jim slid the stall door closed behind him as he came out with the empty bucket. "Matt went down to get her, but he dropped her off at her jeep. I haven't heard if she made it back, yet. You met her somewhere down there then?"

"More like we happened to ran into each other at a mutual location."

"Kara Lee doesn't just *happen* to do anything."

“Tell me about it.” Derrick leaned back against the stall door, staring down toward the concrete floor. “Tell me about Wade.”

“Well, you could always ask him, but from what I understand, Carlos asking around about Davy, trying to find him. He figured it’d go better for him if he could bring back the baby, you know like a hero and everything. I guess he contacted Wade and Mellissa when he thought he found him. Somehow the word got around about the baby being connected to Wade and Wade being somewhat connected to you and the Sandervauh regime got a hold of Davy first.”

Derrick walked away toward the arena viewing room. “Who’s in charge of the Sandervauh organization, now?”

“You expect me to know? I thought you were the one with all the information about them.”

He shook his head as he went into the arena room. “Bits and pieces. Enough to keep biting him around the edges.” He opened the cupboard and took out a box of energy bars. “You sure keep this place stocked.” He took a bar out, leaned back against the sink, and unwrapped it.

“Just in case a hungry friend should stop by and need it.”

Huffing a laugh, Derrick glanced up at him sheepishly. “Mind if that hungry friend takes some when he leaves?”

“That’s why it’s there. Where’s the friend going to go?”

Derrick shook his head. “Don’t know yet. Got a couple different options.” He took a big bite.

“Turned into a lone crusader?”

“Just trying to take out an evil blight on society... as much as I can before they take me.” He gave another half-smile before taking another bite. Then he shrugged. “Got nothing else to do. If I’m gonna go down anyway. Might as well, go down hard.”

“Why go down at all? Trent’s offering you a chance to be free?”

“Sure, he is.” Derrick huffed a laugh. “He’s only a sergeant of a small-town police force. They’re just using him to try and pull me in.”

“You don’t know that.” Jim leaned back against the wall. “Trent’s always been honest with me.”

“Yeah, as far as you know.”

“Yeah, what if you miss your chance? What if this is your one chance to clear yourself, and you miss it?”

“Clear myself. They’ve been updating you on where I’m at and what I’m doing. The only thing they want is for me to join forces with them, to work under their command instead of working alone, to follow their rules and be their pawn!” He spoke angrily.

“But you’d have back up and a lot more intelligence.”

“I’d get myself hung! ... by one side or the other. You expect me to try and remember five hundred pages of protocol when someone’s comin’ for my throat? I know right and wrong. That’s my boss.”

“Just consider the offer carefully. You get in too deep, you might not have another chance. Just remember you don’t have to go after them. That was your own idea.”

“No. It was theirs.” He tossed the wrapper in the trash and got out another. “They swore out a death wish on me. Even if I could clear my name of all charges, they’d still be gunning for me.”

Jim shrugged and looked toward the ground. There was silence a moment. “What about Wade?”

Derrick grunted bitterly. “Me for the kid.”

“No!” Jim looked shocked. “He’s supposed to bring fifty-thousand to exchange for Davy. They want you to come with him, but Wade doesn’t expect you to give yourself up.”

"How's he expect me to avoid it?" His voice still held a tinge of anger.

Jim shrugged. "I guess you two will have to figure that out."

"Yeah." Derrick took another forceful bite. "Where's Wade figure he's gonna get fifty thousand dollars... rob a bank?"

Jim shrugged again. "He's working on it, though. We loaned him three."

Derrick huffed. "Only forty-seven thousand to go."

Jim looked down and then back up. "Come on, man, don't get bitter."

Derrick ran his hand threw his hair and then slammed it back down, hitting the cabinet behind him. "I'm trying not to." He raked his hand through his hair again. "Maybe it is a good idea."

"What?"

"The exchange... if we can get the head guy there, maybe we can bring him in." Jim was grateful he said "bring him in" instead of "take him out." "Red Rim Castle Rock?"

"That's the place." Jim studied Derrick's face as he stared off into the distance while chewing. "What are you thinking about?"

"Carlos."

"You think you can find him?" Jim came over to get an energy bar even though he wasn't really hungry after two weeks of feasting.

"I know how he thinks, or at least I used to. We used to be friends, remember?"

"I remember." Jim could see the wheels turning in Derrick's mind as he unwrapped the energy bar. "Why don't you stick around here a few days? Give yourself some time to think. I could bring Wade over if you like?"

"No!" He glanced at Jim and then resumed staring off. "At least not now. I'll stick around tonight, I guess. Decide what I'm going to do tomorrow." His voice trailed off.

"Good." Jim lightly punched his upper arm. "I'll get you a proper supper." He headed for the door.

"I'm good! Don't bother." Derrick called after him.

"It's no bother." Jim turned back.

Derrick stood away from the counter, looking a little nervous. "I don't want anyone else to know I'm here."

"They won't."

"They'll notice some of the food is missing."

Jim conceded. "Jess might. Her parents won't. She won't tell anyone. You know that." Derrick didn't react. "Look, come to the back, kitchen door in five minutes, I'll hand a plate out to you." Derrick looked unsure. "You'll enjoy it. Give yourself a chance to relax. You're safe here." Derrick looked unsure. "Okay?" He didn't respond. "Come on." Jim motioned to him. "Flip off the lights and come with me to the house. We'll go around back. No one will see us. They're all watching a movie in the living room." He looked at his phone. "Nearly eleven. They maybe heading to bed by now."

Relenting, Derrick followed him. He flipped off the inside lights and then the outside lights as well. They walked together through the darkness across the old familiar circle drive, around the house, and to the back door. Jim unlocked it and went in first. He went to the hall to see the lights were out and that they had all headed to bed. He came back and motioning for Derrick to come in. "Come on. They're all in bed."

Derrick hesitantly went into the bright, warm, cinnamon-smelling kitchen. He'd nearly forgotten what the inside of a home looked like. He stood by the door and watched as Jim got a plate and fork, quietly pulled several items from the fridge, and began filling the plate with fried chicken, creamy grape salad, co-slaw, cheesy ham and hash browns, and lemon meringue pie. He had to admit it looked mighty good. Jim heaped it full and handed it to him. "I leave for work around six-thirty in the

morning,” Jim whispered. “Maybe I’ll see you before I leave. Hopefully, I’ll see ya when I get back.”

Derrick looked unsure. “Don’t know,” he whispered back.

“If not, take anything you need from the barn. The foods there for you. The gas can’s in the workroom. Your truck around?”

He nodded. “It’s around.”

Jim nodded back. “You need anything from in here?”

Surprised by the offer, Derrick shook his head. “You’re a good friend.”

“Don’t forget that. If you need a friend, I’m here. Just keep yourself on the right side of God’s law, and pray about the decision your making now.”

Derrick’s eyes filled with pain. “I don’t have a decision!” It was a passionate whisper. “I get put in jail even for one night, I’ll be killed. If Sandervaugh finds out where I am....”

“Just pray about it.”

“Fine.” Turning, he opened the door and went back out into the cold. Turning his head so his cowboy hat blocked the wind, he headed through the snow back to the barn. He wished it was as simple as Jim was making it. *Everything is fine. Your name is clear. Find a job, and start living life again.* Life was far from fine, nothing had changed. He was still a bright red target to both sides of the law. The only thing that had changed was that Wade had gotten himself dealt into the mess. *Wonderful.*

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After eating one last small piece of pie before work tomorrow, at least that’s what he told himself, Jim put everything back in the fridge, turned off the lights, and headed up stairs. When he entered his room, Jess sat up in bed and looked at him. “You sure gone a long time. You come in the back door?” He nodded, not knowing whether to tell her or not. “Is Derrick back?” she questioned hesitantly.

Unbuttoning his shirt toward the wall, he turned and gave her a look, not knowing where she got her psychic powers. “What makes you think that?”

She raised the palms of her hands in a shrug. “Just a feeling. You came in the back door and spent so long downstairs before coming up. You give him some supper?”

“Yeah.” Still perplexed, he kept staring at her as he finished unbuttoning his shirt. “How’d you know it was him?”

She shrugged again. “I just figured. Did you tell him about Mark?”

“I told him.” Jim stepped behind the dresser and changed from his jeans to his pajama pants.

“Sooo... is he going to stay?” Her eyes were filled with curiosity.

“He’s mulling it over.” Jim yanked the drawstring tight and tied it. “I’d say if the look in his eyes was any indication the answer is, ‘no.’” He took off his open shirt and put it on the dresser.

“Did you tell him about Wade and Davy?” she asked as he climbed into bed and pulled up the sheets. Jim nodded. “What’d he say?” She gazed toward him interest.

“He didn’t give much indication how he was going to respond to that.” He rolled onto his side not facing her, trying to avoid the subject.

“Where is he?”

“Where you’d expect.”

“In the barn?”

“Um hum,” Jim replied, yawning, eyes closed.

“Has he changed any?”

“Why would he change?”

“Well, he’s been running from the law living like a fugitive for over a month now. Don’t you figure he has to steal to get food?”

“No.” Jim sounded offended as he rolled back over. “I don’t figure that.”

Surprised at his offended tone, she shrugged. “Just seemed sorta logical. He was pretty wild before he got saved.”

Jim rolled back over with force. “He changed. Besides he wasn’t a thief before that either... at least not as an adult.” Jim stared into the darkness wondering now if that was in his past. *It is logical if one doesn’t have food, they might resort to.... No.... He’s smart enough to find food. Besides that could be why he keeps coming back here. I keep him stocked up. Boy, I wonder how many years I could get for that?*

“Does he have that look?”

“What look?”

“Like a man determined to complete his mission no matter who or what gets in his way?”

“Noo.” Jim tried to remember. “He just looked tired. I haven’t seen him get that look since before he got saved. I think he cares about people, now.” He didn’t like the hesitancy in his own voice.

“Just be careful. He’s driven... and he’s always had that reputation for getting too deep into dangerous situations and then just barely making it out when the one’s around him didn’t.”

“That reputation also preceded his salvation.” Jim didn’t know why he felt such a need to defend the guy, especially too his wife. Maybe it was just this simple. *We are friends.*

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Eating his pie first, standing in the doorway of the barn, Derrick watched the house as the last light from upstairs flipped off. He wanted to trust them, but he had to watch that everything went down normally. If all the lights had flipped back on downstairs that might have been a cue that something was wrong, and he would want to get closer to see if they were arguing about whether to turn him in. Staring toward the dark house, standing half in the warmth of the barn and half in the icy breeze, Derrick had to wonder what they thought about him. Jim seemed pretty straight forward. He wanted to trust him. They’d been through a lot together down through the years. Generally speaking, he could count on Jim being honest to a fault and open with how he felt. He wondered what Jess thought. He wondered if they both generally regarded him as a criminal? He guessed he was a fugitive. He didn’t like that thought now any more now than he ever did. His whole life people were always suspicious of him, cautious around him, treated him like he had something to hide... sometimes he did... yet he always wanted what Jim had... for people to feel comfortable around him... to take him at face value. *All my life people have thought of me as a criminal... as a kid in the home... as a teenager running away... as a young adult with a wife, living all alone in the forest. They thought of me as a fugitive then. They blamed me for her death... and rightly so. I try for good. It turns out bad. Criminal. All my life I’ve been trying to prove them wrong. Even as a paramedic... even saving lives... they still thought that. I could save two people’s lives and all they’d say is, “You sold your partner out. You left him to die...” even if he had a real clear way out. I never asked them to go with me. Was I supposed to escort them to safety and leave the others to burn alive when I could get them out? Good’s never good enough. What about now? I’m only playing the hand that was dealt me. I don’t have any other choice if I want to stay alive! I’m doing my best to do what’s right. Good just aint good enough.* Hanging his head, he turned to go back in the barn. *Sandervauh will probably win.* Thrusting his head up, he gritted his teeth. But not without a fight... not without a fight.

Walking into the dark arena room, he flipped on the lamp that would give the least about of light even though he wished he could make the room bright and warm like Jim’s house. Not wise. He took out a plate from the cupboard, put the fried chicken on it, and slid it in the preheated oven. He got the empty pack he had brought with him and started filling it with the energy bars, canned meat and veggies, canned fruit, and crackers that Jim had stocked in the cupboard. He smiled to himself. *At least I have one friend... so far.* He smiled again at the three extra-large cans of natural one ingredient peanut butter. *A friend that know me, too.* He stuffed them in the bag. *What about Wade... Jim’s friend?... He’d just as soon turn me in as look at me. Only reason he wants me is to get his son back. He couldn’t care less if I survive or not.* He zipped the duffle bag and put it by the door. He took the chicken out, turned off the stove, put it back on the plates with the salads, took it over to the table,

and sat down. *Why play into Sandervauh's hand? Why meet his man on his terms? Why not just keep punching him around the edges? ... Because of Wade. ... I've got a good plan going here. Why let Wade mess things up. Why walk straight into the jaws of death when I can keep nipping at its heels and escaping? ... Because of Wade and Mellissa. ... After all! What have they ever done for me?!* He looked up. Feeling an angry presence above him, he looked back down and took a tentative bite. *Why should I risk my life for him when he doesn't even really like me?* His mind went back to the cross. He glanced up. *Yeah, but you're perfect. I'm... I'm... I'm...* He looked down and took another bite. *Not.* Getting up, he went over and got a notepad and pen from the end table. *Sitting back down, he started working out a code he could text to Carlos with Jim's spare phone. Maybe it'll work out. Maybe there's a way to get Wade's baby back and take down the acting head of the organization at the same time. Maybe. Maybe we'll all go out in a blaze of glory. Maybe not.* He wrote as he ate. *Maybe they'll go straight down to the blaze of hell.*

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Startled awake by a loud ding, Carlos jumped out of bed, grabbed his knife, and flipped open the blade all in one motion before realizing it was only his cellphone. Looking back and forth several times in the darkness, more from habit than from logic, he picked up the cellphone from the nightstand and sat back down on the bed. He rolled his eyes at himself as he opened the text message. Life was making him so jumpy lately he felt like it was ridiculous. Anymore, he never knew when he went to bed if he'd actually wake up the next morning. He glanced at the return number before reading the text message. He didn't recognize it, but he recognized the message. *Old bar-time code. Only be Derrick.*

~Howard Call is sick. Took me by surprise. Got bad on Thursday. Has to have a surgery. Does not feel very secure. His life is on the line. They have to act very very soon. You keep him front in your thoughts, please.~

He opened the drawer of the night stand, pulled out a pad and pen, flipped on the light, and began pulling the key word out of each sentence in order. Short and sweet. ~Call me on a secure line soon, please.~ He wrote the return number at the bottom of the piece of paper. Sure. He folded the paper, put it in his pocket, tossed the pad and pen back in the drawer, shoved it shut, flipped off the light, and laid back down. *Where am I supposed to find a secure line? Do I know yours is?* He smiled. *I know you \*sly fox in Spanish\*. It be secure.* He closed his eyes and then opened them again, wondering what Derrick wanted. If he was compliant, he would bring the number to those that would be drooling to get it so that they could track down Derrick's location. If he was smart, he'd call Derrick and see if there was some way to get himself out of this mess. He wondered which one he was. He wondered how long Derrick would wait for him to call. The man who takes down Derrick could be a big hero, women, tequila, lots of pesos, big house.... *Everything I could want... in exchange for the blood of one old warn-out friend. All we'd have to do is call the number, track the location, and call the police to go get him. Once in the jail....* He stared out into the darkness, envisioning a line of dancing girls swooning for him. He envisioned Derrick's lifeless body in a cell, his lifeless eyes staring up at him. *The number. Call it... or report it.*

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Jim woke up a half an hour before his alarm went off to the sound of his cellphone ringing. Rolling over in bed, he picked it up and walked out to the hall, trying not to wake up Jess. "Hello," he yawned, leaning his shoulder against the wall as he talked.

"Hey, Jim it's Wade."

"Morning, Wade." He yawned again.

"So, how'd it go, picking up Kara Lee yesterday?"

"Oh, yeah," He rubbed his face with his free hand trying to wake up. "We didn't end up going down there. Matt went down to get here."

"What!" That yell woke Jim up. "How did that happen?"

"He doesn't know why she was down there... at least not for us."

"You asked him to go down there... of all people!"

"Come on, Wade, she knows who Matt is. She wouldn't tell him anything that she thinks would jeopardize her story."

"Why did you ask Dr. Fredricks?"

“Because we weren’t really able to go down there, and he was. “Why don’t you call Kara Lee and ask her what’s going on?”

“I tried. I can’t get a hold of her. That’s why I called you. Do you know if they made it back alright?”

“No.” Jim looked at the clock on his phone. “It’s not quite five. I have to leave for work at six-thirty. I’ll call him around six and ask him how it went. He should be up by then. Tell me if you get a hold of Kara Lee before then. Maybe it’s just too early for her.”

“I couldn’t get her yesterday either.”

“Huh.” He yawned once more. “Well, I’ll call him in an hour and ask how it went.”

“O-k, um, well, I’m gonna go out for a run, but I’ll be back in an hour. Could you call me and let me know?”

“Sure. Bye.”

“Bye.” Jim disconnected the phone and headed back to his room to get changed. He felt a little guilty for not telling Wade that Derrick was probably still right out in his barn. He knew if he told him that he would drop everything and rush over, which wouldn’t be fair to Derrick and could be bad for all of them if anyone was watching Wade. Putting on his pants and buttoning up his cowboy shirt, he decided just to let Derrick know again how important this was to Wade and ask him to contact him or at least give him a message. He hurried down the stairs, put on his coat and work gloves and headed out the front door. It was still dark out, but the sky was just beginning to brighten to dawn. The air was icy cold, yet it smelled fresh and clean. The night was still and silent, no annoying breeze to cut through his jacket. He hurried across his frosty, snow-clumped drive over to the barn and went inside. He loved how his barn was partially heated as he left the icy-chill outside, all except one day out of every winter month when he got his electric bill, other than that he loved it for both himself and the animals.

Flipping on the light, Jim headed into the arena room. The whole barn was dark and quiet. Suddenly, he wondered if Derrick had cut out last night after all. It wasn’t normal for him to sleep until five. With a quick glance around, he concluded Derrick wasn’t in there. He noticed the dishes washed and drip-dried in the rack. He opened the cupboard door and saw that all the food was gone except one box of fruit and nut bars. He concluded Derrick was gone, but decided to go up to the loft and check anyway.

He jogged up the steps and hoisted himself up into the loft. To his surprise Derrick was there, sleeping in the bed. He couldn’t believe Derrick didn’t wake up when he walked up right next to him and whispered his name. Boy, is he out of it. He sat down on the bed. “Derrick?” Derrick didn’t stir. Shaking his head, Jim reached for his arm and jostled him, “Hey, wake up.” Derrick opened his eyes and instinctively put his hand down to his revolver on his belt. “You shoot me and Jess will never forgive you.”

Half yawning half groaning for having to wake up, Derrick put his hands to his face and rubbed it to wake himself up. “What time is it?” he yawned again.

“‘bout five.”

Derrick nodded. “Man, I didn’t even hear you come up.” He pushed himself upright, leaning back against the wall.

“Yeah, you looked dead to the world.”

“As long as it only looked that way,” he yawned again. “I guess that’s alright.” He stretched.

Jim smiled as he stood up from the bed. “Wade called a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah.” Derrick looked at him in interest.

“I didn’t tell him you were here.” Derrick visibly relaxed. “But I think you should talk to him. He’s really uptight about this whole situation. They’ve been looking for Davy for so long. They used to go to the police department every day asking for updates... now that they know he’s alive....”

“Now, that they know he’s alive... what are the police doing about it?”

“I don’t think he’s told them. Trent doesn’t act like he knows.” Jim walked toward the frosty loft window and gaze

outside into the darkness illuminated by their outside lights.

“Why not?”

Jim shrugged, glancing back. “I guess he’s lost faith in them.”

“But he doesn’t figure the likelihood of any of us making it out of there alive if we go just us is zero to none like I do, huh?” He sat up on the side of his bed and slipped on his hiking boots.

“Apparently not.” Jim paused and looked back. “We’ve gone up against some pretty tough odds before.”

Derrick glanced up from tying his boots. “Yeah, but this is suicide. They’ve got a lot of weapon resources they can use. It just doesn’t make any sense to walk straight into the front door of his carefully planned trap.”

“Since when have we ever walked into the front door of anything?” He sent Derrick a sly half-smile.

Derrick returned him a disapproving gaze. “You know you have a family to think of.”

“Yeah.” Jim returned his gaze back out the window. “I know. I really didn’t want to get involved.”

“And I oughta go for broke since I’m already involved.” Derrick walked over to his duffle bag and put it on the bed, getting out an energy bar and unwrapping it. “You know, I’d still like to know how Kara Lee found me.”

Jim shrugged as he looked back. “Why didn’t you ask her?”

“She wasn’t much on details.” He walked around as he ate.

Jim glanced at the stuffed gym bag on the bed. “You gonna keep on your crusade to take them down one by one or...” his voice was hesitant. “... or you gonna give them over to themselves and start clearing your name.”

“They’ll be no peace for me until they’re stopped. They’ll make sure of that.” He took another bite.

“You still got locations?” Jim’s voice was soft but curious.

“No not really.” Derrick didn’t look at him. “Some government task force took down three of my leads before I got there.” He shrugged. “Guess that works for me. Maybe it’s time to start a new phase, specifically target their human trafficking enterprise.” He glanced at Jim. “See if I can find one pint-sized half-breed before the end of the month.”

Jim tried not to smile at Derrick’s use of the derogatory nickname. “I don’t think Wade would appreciate you calling his son....”

“Yeah, well, I don’t appreciate that little Comanche tryin’ to get me killed before my time.”

“Come on, Derrick, you’d be goin’ after them anyway. Might as well, kill two birds with one stone. Better to free the innocent then to just take out the evil anyway.”

“Theoretically.” He turned to look at him. “In reality it just makes it twice as hard cause you have to worry about a bunch of innocent people not getting hurt in the battle. Besides it’s also a lot more people that could identify me. Right now....” He ran his hand around his sidearm. “Right now, I can even carry legally because technically speaking to my knowledge I haven’t even been charged with a crime.”

“Great time to clear your name then,” Jim hinted.

“Nooo.” He paused. “Time I turn myself in I’ll be charged with thirty counts of something.” He took the last bite, rolled up the foil wrapper in his hand, and tossed it in the trash.

Jim smile toward him. “What about Wade right now? He’s makin’ himself a wreck tryin’ to figure out how to find you? Ya might run into Kara Lee again.”

Derrick rolled his eyes, exaggeratedly. “Let’s hope not.” He thought a moment as he finished chewing. “Tell Wade I’ll keep an eye out for Davy, but tell him not to tell anyone, especially not Kara Lee!”

“Ehhh....” Jim groaned. “You can’t count on that.”

"Yeah." Derrick walked away and then turned back. "Just tell him... tell him I'll be in touch," He shrugged. "that I'll try and get in contact with him the week before."

Jim nodded. "I guess that's about as specific as you can get."

"Yeah." Derrick walked back to the bed and zipped up his gym bag. "I put my dirty clothes in your washer last night." He picked up the bag and started heading downstairs.

"Sure," Jim followed him. "You heading out? Might as well, take a shower and eat some breakfast. No one knows you're here."

"I'm just getting ready." He hopped down, skipping the last two steps and headed for the arena room. "I borrowed your spare prepaid phone. I'm expecting a call before I leave."

"You left my number with someone?"

"Carlos."

"Carlos!" Jim hurried after him into the arena room and over to the washer and dryer. "Thanks a lot, Derrick! What if they decide to track you here? Just what I wanted to do before breakfast... engage in mortal combat!" His voice squeaked at the end.

Derrick smiled back at him. "I betting Carlos won't turn the number over to them. If he does..."

"Yeah, if he does...!" He paused and rubbed his face with both hands. "Ahh.... Now, I'm not sure if I should go to work."

"I thought about asking you if I could just take it and then calling later, but..."

"Don't ask! If you get caught with it and they ask me how you got it..."

"Well, I'm not just gonna steal it... besides someone could be tracking its location, anyway," he mumbled the last part.

Jim groaned again, rubbing his face. "Too complicated."

"They'd probably figure I wouldn't hang around from the location of the call anyway."

"Gre-eat," Jim let out a sarcastic laugh. "What should I do... put a sign on each corner of the pasture and at the drive... paint it on the barn roof so they can read it from the air. To all it may concern, Derrick aint here! ... He just used my phone and left."

Derrick huffed a laugh, relived Jim wasn't angry. He looked away. "Hey, I try to be as careful as possible. It's a deadly chess game for sure. I wouldn't intentionally put your family in danger."

"Ahh... I guess, I owe you anyway." He pulled a couple shirts from the dryer and folded them. "I'm tryin' to get over it... as Jess says, 'A wise man once said, 'You can't scare me with heaven.'" He handed the shirts to Derrick. "You figure your phone's hacked?"

"By both sides... I think. I threw it out." He pulled the rest of the clothes from the dryer.

Jim nodded and let out a long sigh as he closed the dryer door. "You know, it's been a pretty peaceful Thanksgiving and Christmas here lately. I've been getting to enjoy it."

"Huh." Derrick zipped up the bag after putting the last shirt inside. "Good thing you have me to add a little excitement to your dull life."

"That's okay! I never said it was dull. Don't do me any favors!" Jim quickly added. "I get my excitement from burning buildings... or at least I used to." He stared at Derrick, playfully accusatory.

Derrick huffed a laugh at Jim's expression. "I'll try to bear that in mind." He paused and then looked at him seriously. "I'll do my best to keep your life peaceful."

Derrick nodded and shrugged at the same time. "I've found that peace is basically internal and not really based on external circumstances."

Jim nodded, his face showing concern. "I wish he'd call while I'm here. I'd like to hear it. You know so maybe I can tell if..."

"I'd tell you if I thought..." His voice was tentative. Jim nodded and looked away.

"Look." Derrick put the phone down on the table. "I'm gonna take a shower." He glanced over to the bathroom. "Tell me if he calls."

Jim nodded and put the phone in his pocket. "I'll go take care of the horses. I'll get you if he calls." Derrick nodded in return. Jim turned to go, praying that Carlos would call before he had to go to work. He kept praying the whole time as he fed and let out the horses... that Carlos would call and that they wouldn't track his phone. The more time that went on, the more he worried.

Jim glanced to the side at Derrick walking toward him as he pulled open the last stall door. "Nothing, yet?" Derrick asked, stepping back as Jim led the Palomino out in front of him.

Jim shook his head as he led the golden Stallion out the barn and into the snow. Derrick followed. "Maybe I should get going and take the phone with me... if you're okay with that. Probably should destroy it after the call. Don't like staying in one place too long."

Jim nodded. "Why don't you wait a little while longer until I have to leave for work anyway. I don't know about taking my phone." He rubbed his cowboy head back and forth, trying to figure out what to do.

"Hopefully, he'll..." The phone sounded just as they reached the green metal gate.

Jim pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the number. Not recognizing it, he handed it to Derrick and watched a moment before pulling open the gate and leading the horse through it.

Breath steaming as he took a deep breath, Derrick answered it and put it on speakerphone. "Hello?" There was a lot of background noise on the other end.

"Derrick?" The voice was faraway and choppy.

"Hey, Carlos, where are you at, on a secure..."

"At an amigo's cantina. He let me use his phone. Can't talk long. What's up?" Jim squinted to study Derrick's face in the darkness as he came back through the gate.

"Heard you were looking for Wade's baby ta make ya a hero before you tried to come back."

"Heard you're waging war on one of the most powerful organizations in the continent."

"Lovin' every minute of it!" Derrick lied.

"Sure, man. Lovin' the taste of death?"

"Haven't tasted it, yet."

"You will. Satoro's onto you." He spoke softly.

"By you?" Derrick walked with Jim back to the barn.

"I try to stay away from that Ombra. Only bad I do is to stay alive. You know that. We used to be friends. You know me." His voice lowered with thought. "I'm not evil."

"I remember how proud you used to be of your family. I remember what it did to you when you learned your family's business had been taken over by those thugs. I remember how you stayed drunk for four days straight after learning...!"

"Man, what do you want?"

"I want you to remember what your life used to be like, what your family's life used to be like before they horned in and took it away from you!"

“Man, don’t try to cut me in with you. You’re goin’ down a dead-end street!”

“You’re livin’ in the gutter! Don’t you want out?”

“I’m alive, and I’m living in a house, which is more than you can say!” Carlos replied in a loud, emphatic whisper. “I repeat, man! What do ya want?”

“Peace. Same as you. Sometimes the only way you can have that is to take down those who won’t leave you alone.”

“They... they’ve been leaving me alone.” His tentative voice accidentally shook.

“Do tell.”

“Look, I know enough to mind my own business! I don’t know anything that will help you, not unless you come to this side of the boarder.” He paused. “I might be able to show ya some things. ... They get wind you’re here, an’ I’ll rat you out faster than el Toro spinning in the ring.”

“I’d figure.” They walked through the barn back to the arena room.

“I figure ta keep breathing.”

“You know where Davy’s at?” Derrick went in the arena room first. Jim followed.

“Nope. In the States somewhere.”

“Sure.” Derrick put his foot up on the chair and leaned forward on his knee as he talked.

“So, don’t believe me. That’s what I heard.”

“I may be down there sometime. We’ll see. Give Satoro a message for me.”

“Like I’m tellin’ him you called me!”

“Why don’t you make him think I’m down there? Give ‘im a good trail to chase.” Derrick stood away from the chair and walked over to the cupboard above the sink.

“Man, you go to any more of those locations from that laptop, they’ll blow you into tomorrow. Don’t know how you’ve kept out of their sights so far.”

“Talent.”

“Yeah right.”

“Tell ‘im, I’ll be around at the exchange for Davy, but I won’t be part of it! Once it’s done, I’ll talk directly to Satoro if he’s there. Otherwise, no dice.” He pulled a box of energy bars from the cupboard and opened them.

“Man, with talk like that, you won’t make it to tomorrow much less the exchange. No one talks to Satoro like that? Man, you like blood? You should see what he did to his last wife!”

“Tell him, Carlos. Somehow between now and the exchange work it into the conversation.”

“You’re crazy, man. Write ‘im a letter. Send it to me. I’ll see he gets it.”

“Maybe I’ll deliver it personally just so I can see you crawl up his house at midnight, slip it under his door, an’ run away.”

“Man, you think we’re still friends?” His voice held resentment.

“Not really, but if your smart you’d count me your ally instead of Satoro.” He took a bar from the box and began unwrapping it.

“Man, you aint got a chance. I’ll go with whoever’s winning, but you aint got a chance. You’ll never make it to that exchange.”

“Don’t bet on it. Talk to ya later.”

"It'd surprise me, but maybe we will. Bye."

Derrick closed the flip-top phone and handed it back to Jim. Jim looked at it as he accepted it. "Thanks." His voice held a tinge of sarcasm.

"I better be going." Derrick took a bite of energy bar then headed out the room and back up to the loft to get his other bag.

"Don't you want a real breakfast before you leave?" Jim followed him up the ladder and into the loft.

"No." Derrick grabbed second large duffel and flung the strap over his head, the strap catching on his left shoulder at the same time as the bag wacked into his right side. "Probably stayed here too long already. Don't worry. I don't think he had anyone tracing the call."

"Then what's the rush?"

"You forget that both sides are after me."

"They wouldn't hack into my phones." Jim stared down at the phone in his hand, thoughtfully. "Trent would tell me if..."

"I wouldn't bank on that. You know him better," Derrick headed down the ladder. "but I'd guess he's a cop first and a friend second."

"I don't know." Jim kept staring at the phone, thoughtfully, as he followed Derrick down the ladder.

Derrick charged into the arena room, grabbed his other bag, snatched another energy bar on his way past and headed out the barn. Jim followed him through the tool room and out into the sunny but frigid wind-nipping day. "Be careful." Jim watched him head quickly toward the woods.

"Will be. Thanks for the supplies." In less than two minutes, he had made it to the woods and disappeared among the snowy branches.

## Truck Stop Stake-Out

Two weeks flew by in nothing flat for Derrick. There were so many possibilities, so many roads to follow, so much to do, so little time. There were only two days left before he needed to be back to meet up with Wade. *Fourteen twenty-four hour days and what do I have to show for them? Two operations taken down for sure. Two more hopefully the police took out from my anonymous tip. Doesn't seem like much... not for fourteen days... not for all those miles I covered... not for all that work... and danger. No closer to being free to return to normal life. Not much closer to finding Davy before they have to fall in line with the doomsday journey, the final walk, the suicide march... just follow Satoro's directions to the land of breath-no-more.* He had even nearly drowned crossing the rio grande during high water. He'd spent three days hiking incognito to a small town that had promised to provide information. It did. The names of several families involved in smuggling girls in and out of Wisconsin, and the name of a woman that operated several holding houses for women and children, somewhere around St. Louis. The only thing that was missing was one minor, but very important detail... *location... location... location.... After all, some might consider Wisconsin a big state.* He wacked his head back against his truck's headrest, impatiently. *Some might also consider St. Louis a big city.* He stared at the next in what seemed like an endless parade of semis coming into the truck stop every few minutes. *Fill up then backup into a parking spot for the night.* He wished he could watch three or four at the same time. Of course, that was impossible. At least, the parade was starting to come to a close, along with the night. *Soon it'll be Sunday morning... one day closer to doomsday.* He wacked his head back hard again trying to stay awake. He'd spent all day scouting all the truck stops around, trying to find the one that looked mostly likely to be work be captive girls. He'd come up with several but decided on this one. It was in a small town a little ways outside of St. Louis. It didn't have much in it other than the truck stop, a couple bars, an old, maybe vacant church, some houses, an auto repair shop.... That's where he was at. Carefully camouflaged between a wrecked truck with its airbags out and a little red car with a flat tire and its bumper half off. Hoping his truck didn't look too with it, he'd found an old tarp in the corner of the lot, waded up and covered in wet leaves and draped it partway over the

hood. He'd felt a lot better about their appearance after that. *Now, if I could only feel better about something happening at this truck stop tonight.* He couldn't help being angry if he had chosen the wrong one.

Suddenly, almost surprisingly, he was what looked like... maybe... He sat up straighter and watched as an older black car and a black SUV drove into an empty lot on the south side of the truck stop, parked and turned off their lights. He was on the on the west side behind the truck stop. He figured they were a good quarter mile away, maybe more. He leaned forward on his steering wheel, trying to see in the darkness, but it was no good. That's one thing that made this spot seem like an ideal location. Poor lighting. Of course, he had pulled out the bulb from the corner light, illuminating the cars at the repair shop, but the lot across the street had no lights. There were no streetlights on the road going by the west side or in the empty lot, and only one light sparsely lit up the back truck-parking lot and it was near the pumps. There was better lighting in the front of the station were the cars stopped.

He watched as the outlines of several girls crossed the dark road and then made their way across the far side of the parking lot near him and away from the light of the building and the pumps. He leaned back, making sure none of him was illuminated by the moonbeam crossing his steering wheel. Five girls. Three seemed to be in one group that walked more confidently, carelessly. Two others seemed to be in group of their own, holding hands, looking around... mostly back toward the vacant lot, close enough to him that he could see the fear in their eyes. That was good enough for him.

He waited until the girls were far down the lot, fanning out through the long row of trucks. Then he flipped the switch so his inside truck lights wouldn't come on and silently got out. Staying low, he snuck behind his truck and then behind the other wounded autos in line before coming to the end of the repairman's lot. He stopped in the corner of the nine-foot-tall chain-link fence and stared toward the distant trucks, wondering if he was far enough away from the light to climb over here or if he should walk west some. He decided to turn and get a little more distance before jumping, grabbing the fence, climbing, and then flinging himself over, landing briefly on his feet before dropping to his knees into the snow-dusted leaves that covered the ground in the small space between three trees, in the vastly overgrown forest. Weaving through spindly trees, pushing back branches, he trekked parallel to the truck stop until he figured he was near the line of trucks and sufficiently out of the light enough to head over to them.

Coming to the edge of the trees, he watched as a sexy girl with bushy, lightly pulled back, blonde-streaked hair, wearing a mini-skirt, high-heels, and a skimpy shirt tied up right below her rib-cage to show off a sculpted abdomen talked adamantly outside the driver's side door to a fat, slobbish trucker who had the semi door-open, one hefty, sweat-pant clothed leg hanging out, puffing cigarette smoke puffing down at her as they talked. What a way to make a living. He glanced back in anger toward the lot where he knew their captures were waiting. Fire rose from his stomach through his chest, but was suddenly chilled by the thought of himself lying in a pool of blood, lifeless on the asphalt, should one of the girls call him out. He only hoped that one of the seemingly new girls would trust him enough to go with him. That would seem like a tall order after all they'd been through and with the threats that were undoubtedly hanging over their heads, but he hoped so... he prayed so. He waited until she got in the truck with the man.

Then, when the coast was clear, finding the darkest shadow, he ran from the woods to the back of the nearest truck, ducking behind it. *Man, what'll I do if they are all already in trucks.* He could just see him walking back to this first truck with his last hundred in tow to try and convince Trixie to give up the slob for a decently built firefighter... with ulterior motives.

He dashed from truck to truck, looking in between each for one of the two he wanted. He passed up two, hoping he would even recognize them by their actions since he couldn't see much more. Next truck... nothing. Next truck... nothing. Next truck... noth... opps.... He ducked back. That's one of them. He peeked out again. Shoulders slumped, twisting her foot into the gravel on the pavement, she stammered nervously to a nicer-looking trucker as best she could without making eye contact. Mind-racing, Derrick searched for a plan, a speech, a way to get her away from him casually. Tell me what to say, Lord. I need to know if... or should I... or.... He watched as shaking his head, the trucker closed the door. Or that'll work, too. Without thinking, he stepped out in between trucks before she turned to go in front of his to the next one. "Hey!" He whispered, waving. "Hey, psst..." She looked back at him, stood a little straighter, and slightly cocked her head. "Hey, come here a minute." He motioned for her. Fear crossing her face, she looked the other way, trying to decide. "Hey, I just want to ask you something." He put his hands out, open to his sides, so that she could see he wasn't holding anything. She started to turn the other way again. "Hey, I just got a question," he whispered loudly. "I'll pay for it." He took out his fifty and waved it straight, so she could see it. "You're gonna need something to take back to those guys." Nodding, she reluctantly walked toward him.

"Which truck is yours?" She sighed as she got close.

"I'm not a trucker, and I've got a feeling you wouldn't want to go with me if I was, am I right?"

"What are you then a cop?" She crossed her arms.

"They aren't high on your list either then?"

She tossed her head, her long, loose curls, flying behind her back. "What do you want?"

"Freedom. Same as you. Only my stories a whole lot more complicated."

"Wanna bet?"

"No," he whispered abruptly. "Look, I can get you out of here, if you can give me some information that'll help take your captives out. Do you know where they were holding you?"

She nodded slowly. "But you have no idea who you are dealing with. You have no idea how *many* of these people there are." Her voice broke with emotion.

"I've got a far idea."

"No, I mean like all over the country!"

"And Mexico." He flashed her a crooked smile.

"FBI?" Her face twisted with curiosity.

"No."

"CIA."

"No."

"DE..."

"No! I have nothing to do with the government." He raised his eyebrows, *I wish. I mean...* "I'm not working with them.

"Then what?"

Derrick tried not to get exasperated with all the time this was eating up. He would have looked pointedly at his watch if he was wearing one. "Just a guy that accidentally," sort of, "crossed their path just like you and now can't live in freedom until they are taken down. I would think you of all people could understand that!"

"I can." She relaxed her stance a little. "But you have to take my sister, too."

"Where's she at?" He hoped she was the other girl and not that she was hidden away somewhere difficult to...."

She thumbed over her shoulder. "Over a couple isles I think."

*Good.* "Okay. Let's go." He motioned for her to follow as he headed back behind the trucks. She followed.

A few minutes later, they located her sister, head hanging, talking nervously outside a bright orange semi cab to a fella standing in front of her who looked very interested. "Okay, go get her and bring her back," Derrick instructed as they peered out from behind the cab.

"Me! If word gets back that I pulled her away from an interested customer..."

"I hate to break this to you," Derrick whispered angrily. "but word is *gonna* get back to them that you are leaving! There's no getting around that," his voice trailed off as he peered out again, feeling a need to hurry before she got in the truck.

"Okay, alright, I know, I just.... What if he gets angry?"

"Then I'll help." He glanced back. "Just go! Hurry! Those guys watching are probably wondering what you're doing."

She nodded, knowingly. "They probably saw me go back with you, too." She started to go.

"Wait a minute!" He put his arm out in front of her to stop her as he still peered around the corner. "In that case," He

ducked back and looked at her. "Don't bring her back her, get her away, then walk slowly back to the cars with the guys watching, giving me time to get around behind them." He looked around the corner again.

"What?!" His heart unexpectedly jumped at her emphatic whisper. "I thought you were going to get us both to safety and call the police! You can't try to take on those guys alone! They are big, and they're mean, and they're armed! We'll all be killed... or at least you will." She shot him an accusatory glance. "We might not be so lucky!"

"Take it or leave it!" He whispered angrily, his heart thudding fearfully that she'd leave it. He tried unsuccessfully to soften his voice. "Look, I'm your chance to get out of here, but as much as I would like to see you go free, you are not the reason I came, and since you don't know where they were holding you...."

"Maybe I could figure it out," she squeaked softly, talking over him, eyes uncertain.

"... I need to get the information from them! So, go out there and do it this way, or I'll do it without you and leave you to them!" She nodded and reluctantly started to go. "I'll wait until you get her away from him, but walk slow after! I need time to get back to the woods and then to make a wide loop to get all the way around behind them without being seen!"

She nodded, stepped out, stopped abruptly, and stepped back. "What do I tell them when we get back there?!"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Get creative. Just keep them talking till I can jump them. Try and get them out of the cars. Tell 'em you quit and start to leave."

"What if they ask about you?" Her voice squeaked again.

He shrugged. "Tell 'em I told you to quit. I don't care. Just don't tell 'em I'm still around. Just go!"

"Alright." She went out.

He wished she was calmer. He wished *he* was. He prayed for her as he watched her walk up to them just as the trucker was taking the teenager's arm to pull her into the truck. The older sister walked up to them with the most confidence he's seen her display. He couldn't hear what she said, but he watched gratefully as the trucker released the girl's arm, threw his hands up and got back in his truck. He watched them whisper a moment and then start walking together, slowly, back toward the empty lot. Instantly, he took off running back the way he came, behind the trucks, into the woods, through the trees, over the fence, through the auto lot, across the street, across two yards, and behind the vacant lot.

Darting from behind the shed to behind a giant Oak on the edge of the lot, its roots cracking and breaking up the pavement, Derrick stopped, leaned against it, and looked around, watching as the girls were just crossing the road. He imagined the guys inside talking as they watched, too, and wondered what they were saying. "Please, help me win. Help, no one to get killed," He prayed as he watched them get closer.

Sensing the right moment, he darted from behind the tree just as one guy got out of his SUV and the girls approached. Staying low as he ran, he dropped to his knees behind the car and crawled underneath it. He could hear jumbled arguing in the distance, but he couldn't decipher it. Silently, he pulled out his pocket knife and quickly slashed both back tire with small incisions, willing them to deflate slowly and not bring the men down with a thud. He peeked out from under the car at the girls arguing with their captures as the car slowly sank. YIPE! He rolled out from under it, moments before getting pinned and rolled under the SUV seconds before a hefty man carrying a baton got out. His mind raced for options. *This is a great hiding spot that I can't use if I deflate the...* "Ahh!" His heart jumped at the soft scream of the younger sister. Seeing a random 'something' line above his head, he yanked it then scotched to the side as liquid drained out. Well, that ought to do something... hopefully not blow up the car.

Just then Derrick saw the feet of another attacker descend from the far passenger's side door. Rolling closer, he grabbed them with both hands and yanked. Splat! The man laid flat out on his stomach on the pavement with not as loud of thud as he had anticipated. Glancing quickly, he was surprised no one engaged in argument seemed to notice. Hoping he hadn't killed him, Derrick reeled him under the SUV, first with his pant leg then with his shirt. He checked his pulse. His mouth was bleeding and he, and there were a couple of teeth lying in blood on the pavement, but he was alive. He pulled him to the center of the SUV just beside the leaking fluid, untied the guy's shoelaces, yanked them out, and tied the man's hands and feet. He borrowed his gun, too. *Just to save time in loading.* He stuck it in his belt.

Seeing the feet of what he hoped was the last guy emerging from the car, Derrick rolled out from under the SUV hard into the man's legs, taking him down. Instantly, he swiped the man's, rolled behind the vehicles, and came up on one knee gun

drawn toward the two men opposite the girls. "Freeze!" His eyes darted between the captures and the two vehicles in case there were more inside. He had them at a disadvantage, since neither of them had their gun drawn. "Get your hands up!" He guessed it couldn't hurt to sound like a cop... or could it?

One man swiftly reached into pocket and pulled out a... BANG! Derrick fired, shooting the pistol, causing it to fly from the man's hand. The man yelled in pain and grabbed his injured hand. Good shot! Derrick said to himself in amazement, stunned he had just done that. Oh. He glanced up. Well, thank you. He was extremely grateful he didn't have to injure another person... even if I am dealing with the scum of the...

"Okay. Okay, man." The other man put his hands out and partway up.

"Keep 'em there." Derrick knee-crawled toward the writhing dazed man, knocked out in between the two vehicles. Keeping his gun aimed, he opened the back door to the car, glanced twice inside... clean. Then he opened the back door to the SUV and looked... clean. Swiftly, he pushed the groaning man down to his stomach, grabbed a convenient set of handcuffs from his belt and cuffed his hands behind him with one hand while keeping his revolver aimed. The cuffs were a little small for his thick wrists and anger rose in Derrick's belly when he thought of who they were ordinarily used for. Then, he walked toward the two still standing.

"I think you broke my wrist," the one guy groaned, holding it and practically dancing around.

"Like you aint done worse ta people." Derrick grabbed his arms roughly and yanked them behind them, causing him to yell. *You are right, though*, Derrick concluded, feeling his wrist when he cuffed him. He cuffed the last guy, searched them all, tied their feet, and one by one dumped them back in their own cars... all but one. They all looked hard as nails to Derrick... all but the middle-aged fat guy with the broken wrist. *Maybe he's worth trying to communicate with... if I can figure out his language.* "Not you." Derrick pulled back on the guy's handcuffs as he started to get in the SUV with the others, causing him to scream. *Sorry.* Derrick glanced back at the truck stop, wondering if any of the truckers were aware of this battle. "This way." He nodded toward the girls on his way past with the gunman, and they all headed back toward his truck.

About halfway to the truck, the gunman fell to his knees. "I can't go. My wrist.... I...."

"Fine." Derrick uncuffed his bad arm and then yanked him back to his feet with his good one.

"What do you want with me? Why take me and leave the others? Why...?"

"I'll let you know," Derrick growled, pulling him along with his good arm, trying to decide the best thing to say... the best way to act to get the guy's cooperation.

When they got to the truck, Derrick opened the back door for the girls. They climbed in across the seat, curling their legs up next to them since all Derrick's stuff was on the floor. Then Derrick pushed the gunman into the front passenger's seat and slammed the door. He went around, got in the driver's seat, and yanked his seatbelt down, acting rough for the gunman's benefit. "Look, \*expletive\*, I don't know you from...."

"You want to know what I want?" Derrick turned toward him angrily. "I'll tell you what I want. I want a location," he spoke roughly. "I want to recover one small baby boy, and I really don't care how hard I have to go over top you to get it, but I can promise you this...." He stared the man down. "You aren't going anywhere until I find him."

"But there weren't any babies where we were at?" the youngest girl whimpered from the backseat.

"What's your names?" Derrick's voice was still gruff, and he didn't look at them.

"I'm Niki," the oldest answered. "and this is my sister, Ashley. What are you going to do with us? You said if I helped you...."

"I'll drop you off somewhere in town, and you can call the police to...."

"No, you said...!"

Derrick nodded. "If you want to go with me it could be dangerous. In fact, it will be. But," His voice softened a little. "When I've done what I came to do. I will take you back to your homes, if you want."

"Yes." Niki answered.

“But first,” Derrick thrust the shifter in reverse and glared at the man, rubbing his wrist in pain. The gunman grimaced when Derrick hit a rut. “Tell me where I’m going.” Derrick glanced at the man as he put the truck in drive and bounced the truck over a dip and onto the road. The man gasped in pain.

“I don’t know man. You want some random baby boy that...”

“The woman’s name is Trenda.”

The man nodded slowly. “I’ll tell you where they keep the babies, but then you have to promise me you will drop me off at a hospital.”

“After I get the baby.”

The man scoffed under his breath. “You’ll never get Trenda.”

“Tell me where to turn.” Derrick slowed to a stop at a red light.

“It’s about forty-five minutes south of Lincoln in an old orphanage. I can’t make it that far.” Derrick accelerated on green. “Did you hear me?”

“If you don’t make it, I’ll bury you. Know any shortcuts let me.”

Ashely smiled as the gunman yelped in pain as the truck bounced over a rut. “Serves you right.”

The gunman turned around in rage toward the girl. “Look, \*expletive\*, you...”

Derrick reacted by shoving the gunman sideways into the door. “Shut up, and just think about those directions.”

Groaning, held his wrist tight, trying to hold the bones together, breathing hard. “Look, it’s an old brick house, out in the country, on a gravel road. It’s kind of overgrown. I’ll give you the address,” he suggested, breathlessly. “You... don’t... need... me...”

“Write it down,” Derrick suggested casually, but the gunman could tell by his voice it would be a one-sided exchange. Derrick handed him a pen and a receipt to write on.

“Then you’ll take me to a hospital?”

Derrick stared straight ahead and didn’t react. Anger rising in the gunman’s stomach, he through the pen and paper hard into the side of Derrick’s head. Derrick gave a slight smile of acknowledgement but otherwise didn’t react.

After a few minutes as he merged onto the highway, Derrick said to the girls. “Hey, one of you look in the black gym bag over by the door. Get me my cellphone and the battery by it. Should be in the inside pocket.”

Ashely quickly unzipped the bag and found the phone and battery. “Who are you gonna call?” She handed it to him.

“A friend.” *At least I hope he still is.* He put the battery back in with one hand and then dialed Trent’s number, praying that he didn’t track his location and send the cops after him. “How long did it take you guys to get to the truck stop from where you started?”

“I don’t know,” Niki muttered. The two girls looked at each other. “Not very long.”

“Ten minutes?” Ashely suggested.

“Maybe. Maybe more like five,” Niki said.

“In town then you think?” Glancing in the rearview mirror, Derrick tried to see them. They looked at each other and nodded. “Okay.” Derrick pressed send.

“Hello?” Derrick could tell by Trent’s voice he must have woken him up.

“Hey, just wanted to let you know about some girls that are being... uh...” He glanced in the rearview mirror again. “Held against their will in Omaha about five or ten minutes from the truck stop off I-...”

*Omaha? Man, he gets around.* “Derrick? Is that you?” He knew it was.

“There’s a couple more girls working the truck stop and some guys tied up in their vehicle across the street in a vacant lot.” He paused. “Your guys around here somewhere?”

“Last I heard they’d tracked you to an operation in New Hampshire. They’re supposed to be taking it down tonight, I think.”

*New Hampshire?* “Yeah well, let’s not correct that false impression for a while.”

“Did you hear that Mark’s death was ruled a suicide?”

“Yeah. Heard that.”

“You know the nice thing about professionals taking care of their own jobs... they know how to get things done without people getting killed.”

“Hmm.” Derrick glanced at the gunman. “Well, in case you are interested, just thought I’d let you know.”

“I’m sure that the local police will be interested. I’ll let them know.”

“Good. I got to go.”

Trent sighed. “Well... be careful, buddy.”

A little surprise at the reference toward friendship, Derrick wasn’t sure how to respond. “Yeah. Sure. Okay.”

“Talk to ya later.”

“Yeah.” Derrick hung up, took the battery out of the phone, and accelerated his truck around a semi.

“Are you a cop?” Ashely asked, curiously. Derrick didn’t answer.

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Gasping, Mellissa woke up with a start. “Wade? Wade!” She shoved him awake.

Wade grabbed onto the side of the bed as he woke up to keep from going over the side. “What?” He rolled onto his stomach and propped himself up on his forearms, blinking his eyes open sleepily. “What’s the matter?”

“Something’s happening.”

He glanced around. “Where?”

“Not here. Pray with me for our baby.”

Wade sat up. “What are you going into labor. Do you want me to call...?”

“Not that one. Davy. Somethings wrong.”

He looked at her, skeptically. “How can you tell?”

“I’m his mother. I know!” Wade rubbed his face, nodding. “Don’t look at me that way. You were never a mother!”

“True.” Wade tried to correct his expression. “Alright.” Wade accidently yawned. Leaning back against the backboard, he forced his eyes open a little wider. “You start.”

## So Close

“Turn here.”

Derrick tentatively his truck onto the dark gravel road. “You know if you lead me into a trap, there is no guaranteeing you’ll make it out of this truck alive.”

“Figured that,” the man mumbled.

Derrick gripped the wheel tighter, adrenaline starting to course through his veins. He drove slowly, carefully, glancing all around, trying to see through the shadows.

“That’s it,” the man grunted. “That light up there.” He nodded toward some lights in the distance.

Derrick turned off onto a land bridge that went from the road to the field and killed the headlights. Niki woke up. “Are we here?” She looked out into the darkness.

“Yeah, and I want you to stay here. I’m gonna take him and cuff him to that tree over there. Just don’t follow me.”

“We don’t want to stay here alone! What is you get caught, and we don’t know it? We will just be sitting here waiting for them?”

“I’m not going to get caught. I’m just going to sneak in, get the baby, and sneak out. Stay here.” He opened the door.

Ashley woke up. “What’s going on?” Niki got out after Derrick. Ashley scrambled across the seat and jumped out after her. They followed him as he got the gunman out, hauled him over to the tree, gagged him, and tied him up.

Between the gunman and the girls, Derrick couldn’t understand either argument until he got the gunman gagged, and even then, he couldn’t understand much with them both talking at once, so he just waited for them to run out of stream and then asked. “Are you finished?”

They both stared at him, arms crossed. Then Ashley’s surprisingly innocent-looking eyes widened. “I think he’s gonna tie us up.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“Come on, we just want to help.”

“Help who? I’m you wanted to help me, you’d stay here!”

“Well, us then. We don’t want to get killed any more than you do.” Derrick nodded to himself, knowingly.

“We’ll be real quite.” Ashley’s eyes pleaded. “We’ll just stand behind a tree and watch. Promise.” She raised her right hand then so did Niki in agreement.

“Fine,” Derrick relented, wondering if this was the decision that was finally going to get him killed. “It’s probably about a mile to the house.”

“That’s fine.” They joined hands and followed him down the road. They all walked in silence until they got to the old brick house that looked big enough to be a school. He could see Niki, shivering against the cold, but he had no solution for it, except to tell her to go back to his truck and cover up with a blanket.

When they got halfway up the long, circle driveway, the girls darted together over behind a giant oak tree and waved to Derrick to say, bye. Derrick instinctively frowned at the tracks they made in the snow and glanced at the large light on a nearby pole, knowing it would illuminate them if they didn’t stay down behind the oak’s massive trunk before it split in half up higher. Continuing on, he guessed it didn’t matter since the object was not to wake anyone up.

The place was deathly still, which he guessed was good. He was half afraid a dog was going to jump out from somewhere and start barking. Unavoidably leaving his own tracks, Derrick walked around the house, looking for the best way in. The front and back door both had deadbolts. There was a cellar by the back door. The side door and all the ground floor windows had bars on them. Only some of the second story widows appeared to have bars, and he didn’t see any on the third story windows.

As he came back to the front of the house, he stopped and stared at it, sizing up the situation. Some snow blew into his

face from the roof and then he heard a baby cry. Listening harder, he tried to determine where it was coming from. *Third story? Second story, I think. Will soon found out.* He walked toward the gardener's shed to get an old, half snow-covered wood trellis that was laying up against it. Picking up the old, paint-chipped trellis, he had to pray as he carried it back toward the house because common sense told him that was the only way that thing could possibly hold his weight.

Leaning the trellis against the house next to its only balcony, Derrick tugged on the bottom piece to test its stability. Yeah. Shaking his head, he smiled to himself, remembering his sister's comment last year. "You don't need anyone to tell you you're crazy. You already know it..., and you don't care!" He kicked into the inch of snow on the ground. *Not even deep enough to save my life if I fall.* Shaking his head and grabbing onto the sides of the trellis, he started to climb. Near the top, he held his breath as he and the trellis started to fall backwards. He watched as the trellis seemed to separate from the brick in slow motion, and he started to fall. All at once, he thrust himself forward hard, reached, and grabbed the nearby window sill to pull him in, sighing with relief as they landed back against the brick with a thud, but then suddenly wondered how loud the thud had been. He shrugged. *Too late now anyway.* Climbing a little higher, he grabbed both sides of the window frame and hopped over to the sill just as the trellis wood started to crack under his feet. His heart jumped as he heard snoring from the occupant inside. Of all the windows to choose.... Grabbing the top of the frame, he inched across the sill until he was close enough to grabbed the cold, paint-chipped, black, metal railing around the balcony. Clutching the wrought-iron, he carefully reached his right leg over the railing and then swung the left leg over behind it.

He walked over in front of the glass patio door and stared at it. Through the moonbeams, he could see a crib inside. He ran his hand down the frozen door handle and gave it a gentle tug. *Locked... of course... and loose.* He tugged it again and watched as the front end lifted off the track. Huh. Clutching the back of the door with his bruised hand that was now cracking from the cold, he lifted up. *Nothing.* He tried pulling it out. I screeched as the track started to bend. He searched his mind for a better option but came up empty. Lifting up and yanking out, he pulled the door off the track with one short but loud screech. Two babies started to cry. As he stood there, holding the door, staring inside, he felt like turning, jumping over the railing down to the ground and running for his life. Instead, he just stood there holding the door, wondering if they would serve him a last supper before executing him. As he stood there, to his amazement, the babies stopped crying and the person in the adjacent room kept snoring. He glanced up. *Does that mean you want me to go in?* Nodding to himself, he leaned the patio door up against the wall and stepped inside. One crib. Two cribs. Three cribs. Four cribs. He stopped and gazed around. And many more. *Of course.* He turned his flashlight on and started walking up and down the aisles of cribs, trying not to wake anyone. *If you told me last year, I'd walking up and down rows of babies in an old orphanage, trying to find one that looked like Wade....* Most of them look too young. He stopped at one with thick black hair and a reddish tint to its skin and wished he had a picture. He racked his memory. It looked too young and hefty to be Wade's. He walked through the rows again looking for one that looked older. He couldn't imagine they had more than these, or did they? He walked to the door. It was locked from the other side. Why in the world would...? Yipe! He heard footsteps approaching. Spinning around, he raced for the balcony, through closed the curtain, propped up the door back over the opening to block the wind, and jumped... over the railing and fell down... down... until he hit the icy ground on all fours, the palms of his hands stinging from the impact. Looking back at the house, he wondered if anyone went in there or just went past. No light came on. Still, he felt an urgency to hurry.

Plan B. He ran around to the back of the house to the cellar. He needed a room with older babies, and if he was going to have to go through every room looking for it, he was going to need some keys. Kneeling with one knee on the on the double cellar doors he picked up the chain and padlock. Shivering against a cold gust of breeze, he glanced back toward the old gardener's shed, wondering if there were some clippers he could use to cut the chain. First, he took out the toothpick included in his multipurpose pocket knife and tried to pick the lock. It worked. He yanked the chain out, pulled open the large wooden doors and hurried down the dirty wooden stairs.

He ran his hand along the cobwebby, wooden railing momentarily before touching a spider and jerking it away. He shook his hand off as he stumbled down the last two steps in the darkness and landed down on one knee at the bottom. He pushed himself up from the wood-planked floor that almost felt soft from all the dirt and cobwebs gathered on it. Taking out his flashlight he searched for a trapdoor leading into the house. Finding it, he climbed the old ladder, unlatched the door, and pushed it up, willing it not to squeak. It didn't squeak, but small items that were sitting on it fell off as it opened. He had expected it to open to a kitchen. Instead, he immersed into a child's closet and the items that had fallen off had been shows. Slowly, he pulled open the closet door, but he couldn't will that one not to squeak. Emerging into the room of sleeping boys, he quickly flipped off his flashlight at the same moment as he heard a whispered voice next to him. "Hey, Mister." He looked down at the blonde eight-year-old boy, illuminated by a moonbeam, lying on his side, propped up on his elbow, staring at him. For a minute he just stared at him, wondering what they were doing or going to do with a room full of young boys, girls he could

understand, babies he could understand.

“Who are you?” A boy from the bed next to the blonde boy sat up.

“Shhh.” Derrick put his finger to his mouth while glancing around, hoping no one else woke up.

“Who?” The blonde boy whispered.

“A baby,” Derrick replied. “His name’s Davy.”

“The babies are all upstairs in a room with the balcony,” the second boy answered.

“He’d be older than them, over a year, but not quite two.”

“There’s that special baby.” The blonde boy rolled over to look at his friend.

“Yeah,” the other boy confirmed. “He stays with Trenda.

“Where’s that?” Derrick whispered.

“I’ll show you.” The little blonde boy pushed back his covers and got out of bed.

“Maybe you better just tell me. I don’t want you to get into trouble.

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” The boy grabbed his jeans from the footboard and pulled them on over his shorts. Then grabbed his shirt. “If I help you find this baby, you are going to take me with you.”

“He’s got family.” The second boy put his hand to the side of his mouth and whispered loudly.

“Don’t you?” Derrick inquired. The boy shook his head. The blonde boy buttoned his last two buttons.

“Okay. Let’s go then.” Derrick guided the blonde boy toward the door.

“Wait! My shoes!” The boy whispered loudly then ran back to put them on.

Derrick scanned his eyes across the other beds, grateful that everyone else still seemed to be asleep. He waited for the boy by the door then quietly opened it for them when he arrived. “What’s your name?”

“Ethan,” the boy whispered, looking up at him. Together, they snuck down the dark hallway then turned and snuck down another. “The stairs are right over....”

“They’re awake!” Niki emerged from the kitchen. Derrick just stared a moment, wondering how she got in. “First, that light from the room you were in upstairs then a whole bunch of lights upstairs. They all looked toward the stairs and then pushed their way into the kitchen as they heard someone stomping down. “Stay with that baby, Diego!” a woman yelled. “Chuck, check the game room!” Driskel, Finch, wake up!” she screamed as she stormed past the kitchen in the direction they came. “Why isn’t this door locked,” she yelled. “Boys! Boys! Wake up! Did any of you see a man in here? Where’s Ethan? Whoever tells me gets five hours extra video game time, if you don’t, you’ll all walk for ten hours tomorrow!”

“He went with the man.”

Ethan grabbed onto Derrick’s pant leg when he heard that. “Please, get me out of here,” he whispered.

“What’d he look like? Was he tall, dark-haired, muscular?” There was a pause then, “Derrick! Derrick’s here! Driskel, Finch, wake up! Derrick’s here! Get your guns!”

“How’d you get in here?” Derrick whispered to Niki.

“The cellar.” Niki headed toward the trapdoor. Derrick followed, grabbing Ethan’s hand to tow the scared, not following boy along. Trapdoor still open, Niki hopped down the cellar stairs, darted across toward the moonlight shining on the other set of stairs leading outside, jumped up those stairs, and ran out into the snow darkness. Carrying Ethan, Derrick followed.

“Where’s Ashley?” Derrick inquired as they headed for the trees.

“Still behind the oak.” Niki glanced back at him as they entered the cover of trees.

“Okay. So, we have to go back that way.” Derrick turned back to look at the house when they stopped running. It was all lit up. Two men with long guns emerged from the front door and started searching the yard. “And that’s not gonna be easy,” he muttered.

“We’d better hurry,” Niki pushed him a little.

“Right.” They all started jogging down the tree line toward the driveway. Almost there, Derrick stopped and reached out to stop Niki as he stared back toward the house as a tall, gangly woman stormed out the front door with a baby in her arms and charged into a small white car. Derrick set down Ethan as the car started speeding down the drive.

“What are you going to do?” Niki asked.

Derrick’s mind raced. He thought about shooting at the tires, but knew he couldn’t cause a car wreck with Derrick inside, but there it was. His chance at returning to normal life, racing away again. No other options, he ran toward the car, barely reaching it. Just before he got his hand on the luggage rack, she swerved the car out of the way and spurted the rest of the way out onto the gravel road. Ashely ran toward him from the right. Niki and Ethan from the left. “Let’s go!” Derrick flung Ethan into his arms, and they all ran for the truck. One gunman pursued them on foot. The other gunman ran for his SUV. One mile. Piece of cake for Derrick, but he didn’t think the girls could make it. Amazingly enough they did. Derrick stopped running, through open the driver’s side door, and tossed Ethan into the passenger’s seat all in the same motion while the girls breathless stumbled into the back, moments before Derrick, spinning the tires, sped off. The gunman, several yards behind, stopped and bailed into the SUV as it sped past, only pausing for an instant to grab him.

Derrick barreled his truck down the road, disregarding the ruts, disregarding his speed. Ashley wanted to scream like she usually did on roller coasters, but she didn’t dare antagonize her rescuer. She only hoped her rescuer didn’t get her killed. Derrick could barely see the red taillights of the white car in the distance. Seventy-five miles-per hour... eighty... eighty-five.... Gravel spirted up. Niki couldn’t control the scream that escaped as they flew airborne over a dip in the road. “It’s too dark!” Ashely whined as the truck tilted as they sped around a curve last minute. Derrick glanced at her terrified face as she leaned slightly forward in between the two front seats. He basically stopped caring about his own life months ago, but there were others in the car with him. He stared longingly at the taillights ahead and slowed a little. Even at full speed, she kept pulling further and further away. His heart sank as he slowed. He glanced in the rearview mirror. The SUV was so far back, he could barely catch a glimmer of their headlights. Sighing, he turned at the next road and headed for town.

After several minutes, Niki broke the melancholy silence. “Where are we going?”

“I’m going to drop you off in town. Take my cellphone. Give me twenty minutes then call 911. Tell them about the house and the kids,” Derrick stated matter-a-factly.

“But you said....” Ashely started.

“That’s fine.” Niki interrupted, unsure if they would even survive a trip all the way back to their home town in Kentucky with this crazy guy.

“If you have to tell them who I am, whatever, but it would be nice if you didn’t.”

“Who are you?” Ashely asked, tentatively as they turned off the gravel road onto a main one. Derrick didn’t answer.

“The woman said your name was Derrick, is that true?” Niki inquired.

Derrick glanced sternly in the rearview mirror as they passed under a streetlight. “It’s better for you and for me if you stay out of my business,” he answered gruffly, but then softened a little. “Believe me. You don’t want to get involved in this.”

“What about me?” Ethan asked as they slowed and turned into a hotel parking lot.

“You go with them.” Ashely snapped the battery into the cellphone. “Give me at least twenty minutes,” Derrick reminded her. She nodded as he parked.

“No!” Ethan protested. “Not here! They will get me again!”

“Not if you are with the police.”

“Yes, they will. They will just wait and see what foster home I’m sent to then come and get me. It’s happened before. I

have to find my dad!”

“The police can find your dad.”

“No, they can’t! Please, don’t leave me here! I won’t wait for the police. I won’t. I’ll go off and my own and probably starve to death. Then how will you feel!” His bright, wide eyes pleaded in the light as Niki opened the door.

Derrick just gave the little boy a look. “It’s dangerous for you to stay with me.”

“It’s dangerous for me to be alone or at a foster home, and it’s dangerous for them, too! They told me last time that if I didn’t go with them or if my foster parents heard that they would kill them.”

Ashely got out after her sister, and they both stood by the door. “Oh, just go, I guess,” Derrick called to the girls. “I’ll have to figure out what to do about him.”

Niki nodded and closed the door. “Thanks for everything,” Ashely called back and waved as they both walked away.

Derrick put his truck in drive and headed back through the parking lot. “So, why can’t the police find your father?”

“Because he’s a fugitive just like you.”

Derrick glanced at him. “What makes you think I’m a fugitive?”

“Well, you didn’t call the police yourself. You aren’t staying in town. You won’t tell anyone who you are..., Trena knew who you were.”

“I’m not with them!” Derrick stated defensively as a reflex action but then wondered why.

“Obviously,” Ethan muttered. “You know,” Ethan looked over at him with bright eyes as the truck bounced over the dip at the end of the parking lot and back onto the road. “I could be a big help to you. People never suspect a kid. I could steal food for you, money, too. Sometimes people just give it to me if I ask right.”

Derrick glanced at him disapprovingly. “I’m not that kind of fugitive. I don’t steal,” he stated firmly.

Ethan’s mouth dropped. “Then how do you live? Where did you get all that food and stuff?” He glanced in the back.

“Bought most of it. Some was from a friend. Some of the meat back there is from a deer I killed a while back. If I have to take something to survive, I leave the money, or when I was younger, I would do a chore for it. Like if I saw a bag of potatoes or apples in someone’s cellar that I could swipe at night, I would weed their vegetable garden or sweep out their barn or clean their stalls before I left. That’s how my dad raised me to be, not to take something for nothing.

Ethan nodded, thoughtfully. “My dad was an honest guy. He would say to ask first.” Ethan gave Derrick a look. Derrick returned a relenting nod, not wanting to point out that wasn’t always possible. “He always had a job until...”

“Until what?” Derrick glanced at him. Ethan just shook his head and stared out the window.

Derrick was thinking of another way to ask when suddenly he saw two vehicles parked diagonal toward each other each blocking a lane of the road. He slammed on the brakes. “That’s them!” Ethan squealed, catching himself on the dash.

“Get in the back and buckle up!” Derrick ordered, spinning his truck around.

“How’d they find us?” Ethan crawled into the back seat as shots rang out, bouncing off the metal strip above the back window.

“Stay down!”

Ethan ducked. “Can you out run them?” he asked, grabbing onto the seatbelt to keep from flying back to the front as Derrick slammed on the brakes. “Oh no!” He looked over his shoulder to see headlights racing toward them at speeds too fast to be a friend.

Derrick swerved the truck off the road onto a land bridge and into a bumpy, frozen field. The car behind him and the van in front of him both went past. The SUV followed him into the field. Ethan peered over the back seat. “He’s coming!”

"I see that! Stay down!" Derrick swerved around a mound of cornstalks just as another shot rang out. "He missed!"

"Yeah," Derrick mumbled, looking all around for a way to lose the SUV. He stomped the gas harder as the SUV approached, going airborne over a dip in the field. When the wheels touched down, Derrick glanced back, hopeful that the SUV had gotten stuck. It hadn't. It was only gaining on them. He headed the truck further from the road and flipped on the brights. He kept the truck swerving as much as possible to make it a harder shot. He kept looking for something he could use to get his pursuers stuck, but it wasn't any easy proposition with only frozen tundra. *Then again*, he thought as he noticed the moonlight glistening on something shiny. Maybe frozen is what I need. He barreled toward the glistening pond full force, wondering how thick the ice was.

"What are we doing?" Ethan asked, getting the feeling something was about to happen.

"Hang on!"

"Why?" He squeaked, buckling his seatbelt and grabbing the door handle just as truck turned ninety degrees, tilting and sliding sideways on two wheels. "Ohhh!" Ethan held his breath afraid they were gonna flip. They didn't. As soon as the other two wheels hit the ground, Derrick turned back to see the SUV charging over the brink onto the icy pond. Derrick held his breath, waiting to see if it would break through and plunge to the icy depth below. It didn't. It spun full-circle several times and then slid sideways into the snowy bank. Half on the ice half off, the weight of the vehicle finally caused the ice to crack. Derrick and Ethan both stared out the window at the scene as the two frantic men and one young woman piled out tripping and scampering up the bank just before the SUV's back wheels broke through the ice and the vehicle plunged backwards and disappeared below the surface.

"Works for me," Derrick muttered, putting the truck in drive and heading off again.

"Boy, where they lucky," Ethan remarked, continuing to stare toward them out the back window until they were out of sight. Then he hopped back into the front seat. "Where are we headed?" he asked, pulling his seatbelt down.

"I'm heading home... to do the unavoidable." His voice trailed off in thought.

"What's that?"

Derrick glanced over at him. "And I guess when I get there, I'll have to figure out what to do with you because you can't tag along then."

"You gonna turn yourself in?" Ethan grabbed the door as they bounced over a bump.

"No." He gave him a look. "What do you think I should do with you? Where'd you start out from anyway... what state?"

"Iowa. My dad was a lawyer."

"Yeah. What happened?"

"This guy told him to defend him. He said, 'no.' They said he'd be sorry. They said the world would know what happens to people that double cross him." His voice broke, and he stared out the window, tears coming to his eyes.

"Yeah.... So, what happened?" Derrick glanced at him as he brought the truck out of the field onto a gravel road on the opposite side of the field from where they started.

"They came to our house late one night. Dad wasn't home. They killed my mom and sister and took me. Ever since, they've been trying to use me to get my dad to come to them. They figure out his phone number somehow and send him video of me then tell him to come to an exchange."

Derrick half grunted half groaned an acknowledgement. *Why does that sound familiar?* "Do you know if he's ever met them?"

Ethan shook his head, still staring out the side window. "They never take me."

*Now, that's encouraging.* "And the police can't locate him... your dad? You said...."

Ethan shook his head. "No. They figure he's dead." He looked from the window to Derrick with pleading, tear-stained

eyes. "But I know he's not."

"How do you know?" Derrick tried to keep his voice gentle.

"They keep trying to find him. Heard them talking about him just last week. Trena hates him." Ethan smiled. Derrick smiled back. "They keep trying to get him, but they just can't take him down."

## Coming Home... Not Won but Not Done

"Morning Pastor!" Jim reached out and shook his hand as he and Jess walked through the door from the frosty parking lot into the nice warm church.

"Brrr-r...." Jess shivered from the breeze as she took her coat off at the coat rack.

"Brrr? This is a heat wave!" Pastor glanced back toward her as he shook hands with an older couple, a farmer and his wife, as they came in the door.

"The cows are enjoying it. That's for sure." The older gentleman took off his hat and hit it against his leg to shake the snow off before putting it on top the coat rack. "After a week of working in below zero temperatures, I couldn't hardly believe my eyes when I went out to feed them at five this morning, and I saw it was a balmy fifteen degrees." He took his wife's coat from her and hung it up.

"I know I think it's creeping up to thirty, now." Pastor leaned out the front door, squinting to see the church's praying hands thermometer.

"Our car said twenty-three," Jess remarked as she pushed her coat further down the rack and picked her purse up from the floor. "In my book that hardly constitutes a heat wave."

"Hey, guy, come on in." Pastor opened the door for Wade and Mellissa. Mellissa managed to force a smile at the pastor and then at Jess as she hung up her coat. Wade was apparently too deep in his own thoughts to notice any of them, and he didn't where a coat.

Wade jumped in response to Jim walking up behind him and slapping him on the back. "So, how's it going?"

Wade let out a deep breath as he turned around. "Oh, hi, it's not." He shook his head.

Knowing what he meant, Jim grabbed his Bible from where he'd set it on top the coat rack and headed downstairs toward the teen room. Jess followed them tote bag full of Sunday School stuff in tow. "Coming up short?"

"Way short. I've mortgaged the van and borrowed from everyone I know, parents, friends, neighbors. The pastor even contributed some."

Jim stopped at the bottom of the stairs and gave a slight laugh at that. "Well, maybe the criminals will be more generous if they know even the pastor is contributing to you getting' your baby back."

Wade just glared at him. "Not funny, man."

"I know it's not." Jim resumed walking. "Have you asked your boss?"

"I've asked ev-ery-one." They stopped in front of the Sunday School room door. Jim opened it for Jess, and she walked past them. "And I hope Derrick makes it back soon. We got to go out there in a few days, and I haven't heard from him." They both followed Jess as she went to the desk and started getting out the lesson materials.

"They aren't going to count it are they?" Jess looked up after getting out the lesson book, pictures, cookies, punch, and memory verse and setting them on the desk.

“Huh?” Wade looked at her as if interrupted mid-thought.

“I said, ‘they aren’t going to count it.’ Just get a bunch of ones and put the hundreds on the outside where they can see them.” She arranged the pictures in order and took the wrapping off the cookies.

Wade smiled at that suggestion. “That’s not a bad idea.” Then he frowned. “What if they do?”

Jess shrugged as she walked past him with the pictures and book toward the podium. Jim handed her his Bible, and she put that out on the podium as well as the other things and laid out his notes. “Use some of that money for extra ammunition.”

“Thanks a lot,” Wade muttered.

“If they are really interested in the money, they’ll probably take what you got.” Jim’s voice was hesitant.

“But you don’t think they are.” Jim shook his head. “You just think they want to kill me.”

“Well, they sure are wanting to meet in the middle of nowhere... mostly Derrick but yeah, probably you, too.”

“You sure know how to make a guy’s day.”

“Just callin’ it how I see it.”

“Yeah.” Wade nodded, crossing his arms and staring down toward the floor. “Unfortunately, you are probably right.” His voice trailed off. He lifted his head and forced a smile toward the Sunday School kids as they all started to file in.

“Morning. Good, morning,” Jess greeted them with a smile. “Come on in. We have cookies and punch on the desk. Morning.”

Wade gave a parting nod to Jim. “Guess I better get to my own class.”

“See ya.” Jim nodded back. “Let me know when he shows up.” Wade nodded in agreement as he left.

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“Hey,” Derrick shook Ethan lightly to wake him up.

Ethan jerked awake with a start and then looked around, remembering where he was. “Yeah?” he yawned rubbing his eyes.

“We just crossed into Iowa. You remember your address?”

“Of course.” He sat up straighter, yawning.

“Well, tell me what it is. We’ll swing by there and see if there is any sign that your father’s been around.” Ethan shook his head. “We can try it at least. What town was it?”

“Waterloo,” Ethan yawned, “But he...”

“Great. We can swing by and check anyway.”

“What if someone recognizes me?” His eyes spelled fear.

“Stay down in the back.” Derrick shrugged.

“You are gonna turn me in, aren’t you?”

Derrick had to smile over at the pint-sized fugitive even though his eyes were very earnest. “No, if we don’t see any sign of him, I’ll take you back with me. I have a friend, who is a cop, and I know he’ll treat you right until I get done with what I have to do. Then I will see what I can do about finding your father.”

“Promise?”

“If I make it back,” Derrick merged the truck onto the Waterloo exit.

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"Hey, Matt, wait up!" Wade ran through the double-glass church doors after Matt and Taylor. They stopped and turned back toward him just as they were reaching the back of his car. Taylor impatiently started to bounce Ricky as he started to cry only causing him to cry louder.

Matt gave his daughter a look and held out his arms. "Give him to me." She practically plopped him in his arms. Matt shot her another look. "He's probably hungry. Get his bottle, will ya?"

Rolling her eyes, she trudged over to the car as Matt unlocked it. "What can I do for you?" Matt addressed Wade as he rested Ricky on his shoulder and started rubbing his back.

"No, actually, it's what can I do for you!" Wade tried to sell his point.

Want to adopt my daughter? He glanced at Taylor rummaging through the car trying to locate the diaper bag. Soon, he promised himself, she would be mature enough to remember to bring it in with the baby at the beginning of church. "So, what's..."

"Want to make a little extra cash?" Wade continued in his best salesman voice.

Matt's long work schedule next week flashed through his mind. "Not really," he mumbled, staring off.

Wade's face fell a little, but he continued on. "I have the perfect investment for you. You can make interest without lifting a finger by loaning a small amount to a very reliable party who will..."

"Wade, I make more in a week than you make in a month. Don't try to sell me a bill of goods." He brought the baby down from his shoulder and cradled him in his arms as he accepted the bottle from Taylor. "How much do you need?"

"Um..." Wade tried to figure out how to put this diplomatically. "Ten thousand, two-hundred and..." His voice trailed off as he tried to read Matt's expression. Matt just stared. "Actually, any amount will help."

Matt looked down at Ricky eating, emotionless. "I take it this has something to do with your kid?" Wade nodded slowly. "I'll have to see what I can do. The banks not open today, of course."

Wade let hope rise in his chest. He expected Matt just to slip him a fifty with a terse reply that that was all he had on him. He wanted to believe that if he had all the money that the kidnapers would just accept it and leave. "That's great! It's gotta be soon, though. Sorry for the last minute notice... tomorrow or the next day maybe?"

Matt nodded. "I'll try to contact you about it tomorrow." Glancing up he tried to mentally schedule a time to figure it out.

"Hey, Wade!" Trent called, coming out the front door.

"Well, talk to later." Matt headed to his driver's side door with Taylor heading to the other side.

"Sure. Hey, thanks again." With a wave to Matt, Wade jogged to Trent standing by the front door.

"You forget your coat?" Trent's breath steamed as he blew into his hands and then rubbed them together.

"Yeah, guess so." Wade was too preoccupied to be cold. "You got any news?"

"Yeah. Derrick's still around. He took down a trafficking ring in Nebraska. Sounds like he nearly got your baby back too."

"Nearly?" Wade looked a little disappointed.

"Sounded like he was really close."

"No hope that he actually...?" Wade looked down then back up.

Trent shrugged. "We can pray."

Wade nodded. "Been doing that."

Trent nodded. "Me too." He looked away toward the frosty trees then back. "At least, we know Davy's still alive and here in the states." His voice was optimistic.

"Guess that's something." He paused. "Your people couldn't um...."

Wade nodded. "Well, thanks for letting me know. We'll keep praying." He smiled. Though we're running out of time.

## Busted?

"Don't leave this truck while I'm gone." Derrick looked Ethan in the eye. "And stay hidden. I don't want to attract any attention.

"Whose gonna see me in this dark ally."

"Make sure it's nobody and that you don't follow me."

Ethan raised his right hand. "Scouts honor." Derrick nodded and started to get out. "Aren't you gonna tell me not to take the truck?"

Derrick ducked back in and replied in a loud whisper. "I have to tell you that? You're not even old enough to drive." Ethan grinned in reply. Derrick swiped the keys from the ignition. "Use a blanket to stay warm.

"Heyyy." Ethan frowned.

"There are several in the backseat." Derrick got out, shut the door, and locked it, looking back over his shoulder, hoping that picking up that kid wasn't signing his death warrant. Then he walked quietly out of the snow-covered ally, staying close to the building so that his footprints weren't as noticeable.

*Four blocks to Wade's house.* He debated if it was better to cut through yards or casually walk down the sidewalk. Cutting through yards would leave footprints and possibly get picked up on a doorbell camera. Strolling down the sidewalk would be in plain view of everything else. Pulling his baseball hat down and his coat collar up, he strolled casually down the sidewalk. Glancing at an approaching traffic camera, he kept his head down and kicked a clod of snow. He turned right. Seeing Wade's house in the distance he slowed a little, wondering how many people in his home town new he was wanted for questioning... *not a crime...* he would be happy to point out if anyone asked, but he knew they wouldn't. *Lights are still on,* he noted approaching Wade's place. He wondered how ready his ex-partner was to make this perilous journey. He wondered how ready he was.

Feeling someone staring at him, Wade jerked his head to the right to see a man standing in his front yard, holding his dog on a long leash. The man stared at Derrick for several moments then looked away. Derrick turned, glanced up at the street light, frowning, then walked the remaining yards to Wade's house. He wondered if the man recognized him. *Questioning nothing. They probably got fifty-two charges already laid out just waiting for....* Still glancing over his shoulder, he walked confidently up Wade's sidewalk. He guessed sneaking in the back was definitely out with the nosey neighbor watching. *Should of cut through yards,* he concluded as he rang the doorbell. Kicking another clod of snow impatiently, he rang it again, all while wishing he was somewhere else, *say the Alaskan Wilderness, the mountains of Peru, or maybe a remote island somewhere.* Somewhere where no one knew who he was where he could live in peace and solitude without people....

"Derrick!" Wade's eyes bugged out a mile when he saw him. Grabbing his arm, he yanked him in.

Derrick rolled his eyes, wondering what the man with the dog thought about that. "Don't you know how to be casual.

"Casual?!" Wade looked outraged. "You think walking right up to my front door is casual? You know you've been on the news?" Wade pointed toward the door. "What'd you do walk right down main street?"

Wade mentally nodded to himself, wondering if he should have come up with a better plan, but he shot Wade a look. "We can leave tonight or early tomorrow morning. I prefer to travel at night." He nodded roughly toward Mellissa as she

entered the room.

“Tonight?” Wade walked over to Mellissa, thoughtfully. “I don’t have all the money, yet.” He stopped and put his arm around her waist.

A tinge of jealousy shot through Derrick’s veins at Wade’s nice comfy home and adoring wife. An image of Monica drifted through his mind, then the image of their dream home, then an image of the home they had... for less than a year. “We’ll have to go with what you have. Hopefully, we’ll get the kid back before they start counting cash.”

“Heard you were real close.” Wade spoke tentatively, not wanting to criticize Derrick’s efforts.

“Not close enough.”

Wade nodded. “I’m sorry. It would have saved us both a lot of trouble.” Derrick nodded in agreement. “No hope of tracking them down again without having to go to the meet.”

Derrick shook his head. “No.”

“Well,” Wade rubbed one hand over his face. “I still have a possibility of a loan from Dr. Fredricks and my boss, but not till tomorrow sometime.”

Derrick shook his head. “It’s more important that we get there early and dig in before they arrive.”

“You sure you know where it is then?”

“I know.”

Wade nodded. “Well we went all over exchanging tens and twenties for one dollar bills today, so at least maybe it will look like we have enough if they don’t count it.”

Derrick nodded. “Good idea.” He stared absentmindedly toward the curtains as red and blue light started seeping around the edges. “But we might not have to worry about it.”

“Oh, no,” Mellissa gasped, looking toward the curtain.

“Courtesy of your nosey neighbor, no doubt.”

Wade shot Derrick an accusatory look. “We have a lot of nosey neighbors.”

“You got to hide!” Mellissa stepped away from Wade and started looking around frantically. “Our closet, maybe?”

Derrick shook his head. “An attic, a cellar, an old well, a crawlspace.”

“We have city water!” Mellissa blurted out. They both looked toward the back window as red lights started flashing against its curtain. “Ohhh...” Mellissa squealed.

“Come on, we got an attic.” Wade hurried toward the bedroom. “Give us a few minutes, calm down, and let them in.

“Nooo!” Mellissa ran to catch up. “I’ll show him the attic. You answer the door!”

“Alright.” They traded places.

Derrick followed Mellissa, mentally trying to plan his escape, knowing sooner or later they would check the attic if they.... “Make sure they have a warrant before you let them in,” Derrick called back to Wade in a loud whisper.

“Warrant? That will make us look guilty!”

“It will also buy us time. There is no way they got one already.”

“Alright,” he called back as the doorbell rang.

“Up here.” Mellissa grabbed a chair and pulled it under the trapped door in the ceiling.

Derrick rolled his eyes. Right in the middle of the room. Couldn’t put it in a closet or anything. “Thanks.” Derrick stood on the chair, pushed the panel to the side, grabbed the rafter and hefted himself up. Before he even had the panel replaced, she

had the chair back, the lights out, and was heading out the door.

Derrick stood up, flipped on the attic light, and looked around... boxes... ceiling beams... four walls. "God, I need some way out of here," he muttered, starting to walk around.

When Mellissa got to the door, Trent was just coming up the walk. Wade instantly ignored the officer who was talking to him and stared at Trent, trying to look stern. "What's going on here?" Wade asked in his best annoyed voice, though his heart was thumping out of his chest.

Trent couldn't help being a little surprised at Wade's tone even though he knew the reason. "Is Derrick here?" Trent had to ask.

Wade crossed his arms and leaned back a little, not wanting to lie but sure not willing to tell the whole truth. "Why would Derrick be here?"

Trent mentally rolled his eyes. *Do you really want me to answer that?* His face was firm. "Can we look inside?"

"Sure," Wade cracked his neck. "as soon as you get a warrant." He halfway expected to be thrown to the ground and handcuffed.

Trent nodded absentmindedly as he looked around. "Well, it's on its way."

Wade nodded back, trying to maintain his confident demeanor. "Good." Hur-ry, Derrick, hur-ry."

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Derrick pulled out another stack of boxes, looking for spot in any wall that he could go through, *a vent, a fan, a window, a I don't know... anything.* He plopped down on a box and wondered if there was any possibility that they wouldn't look in the old wooden toy box in the opposite corner. Groaning, he looked up and then stared a moment at the unassuming, round skylight that he was sure he was too big to go through... but it was the only weak spot in the whole attic. That wooden frame around it would give me at least three more inches on every side... maybe four.

Silently, he lifted an old coffee table over and set it beneath the skylight. Then he got out his multitool pocket knife and carefully but quickly unscrewed the wood frame, expecting the glass to come out with it. It didn't. The glass was under it. Frowning, he stepped back down and looked around. Finding a brick and a blanket, he stepped back on the table, held the blanket against the glass, wrapped the brick in the blanket and thrust it into the glass, breaking it. Then after carefully removing the blanket so all the glass didn't fall to the floor, he carefully started pulling out the remaining shards that were stuck around the edges.

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Wade swallowed hard as he saw the young officer walking up his sidewalk, paper in hand. *Zero hour.* "Here it comes," Trent pointed out. He handed the paper to Wade when it arrived.

"Um," Wade cleared his throat, slowly looking down at the paper. "mind if I read it?" He just stared at it a few moments, not reading, trying to kill time.

"Yes." The impatient no-nonsense officer, who had arrived before Trent pushed his way past Wade into the house.

"Hey, what a minute!" Wade spoke loudly, trying to alert Derrick as he followed the man down the hall and into the guest room. He glanced back over his shoulder as more policemen came in and fanned out.

*Uh, oh.* Derrick made a fist and punched out the rest of the glass, cutting his hand some. He dumped the broken glass and frame in a box. Then he covered that box with two others and flipped off the light. He flung the blanket over his shoulder, grabbed the roof, and hoisted himself up, cutting the palm of his hand on a piece of glass that had been sticking up outside that he hadn't seen. *Ouch!* Ignoring the pain, hearing a jumble of voices below him, he hoisted himself through onto the snowy roof. Drops of red blood dripped from his hand and glistened against the white snow in the moonlight. Grabbing the blanket from his shoulder, he stuffed it back in the hole and prayed Wade would find some way to explain it. Gazing toward all the flashing red and blue lights rising from below, he crawled around on the roof until he came to a dark spot on the one side. He crawled over to the edge and peered down below at a police car, no lights, and a policeman leaning against it. A few feet away there was a

dumpster with the lid closed he could lower himself down on if it wasn't for....

"Hey, Frank!"

"What?" The officer stood away from his car. "I think I see something. Come here."

The officer walked to the edge of the ally and took one step to the side behind the house. That was all Derrick needed. He grabbed the icy edge of the roof and lowered himself until his feet touched the rim of the open dumpster. Balancing on the rim, he tried not to fall in as he squatted down, grabbed the dumpster with his hand, and jumped to the ground. Then instantly as he heard voices nearing, he fell to the ground and rolled under the neighbor's deck.

"Did you hear that?" Frank asked, drawing his gun and coming to the ally.

"What?"

"I think he's here."

"Where?" the second officer joined him and drew his gun, looking around. "I don't see anything. I think he's over there." He pointed across the street. "Come with me and check." He grabbed Frank's arm, but Frank shook free.

"Just a minute," he headed down the ally, gun drawn.

Right up next to the house, Derrick quickly crawled all the way around to the other side where the deck ended. Then he rolled out and took off running across yards until he made it to an open field. Pausing a second, he took his coat off, wrapped it around his bleeding hand and then took off running again.

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"What's up there?" the impatient officer asked Wade as he stared up at the door in the ceiling.

"The attic," Wade replied, nonchalantly, hands in his pockets.

"Bill, Ryan, come cover me!" he yelled.

As soon as the others were there to cover him, guns drawn, the officer grabbed a chair, positioned it under the attic, removed the panel, yelled a warning, and then hoisted himself up. Wade held his breath as he watched but tried not to show it. "Be careful up there." He had no idea why he said it other than to break the tense silence.

"Why?" The officer turned the light on. Wade listened as he heard heavy items dragged across the floor.

"Just want you to be safe is all," Wade muttered.

"Hey! Why do you have a blanket stuffed in the roof?"

*Do I?* "To keep the snow out!" Wade yelled back up. "If you pull it down, you have to put it back up, and that's not real easy to do!"

"Radio the men out front to shine their spotlights on the roof!" The officer called down.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, he wouldn't go on the roof," Wade scoffed. "He'd be trapped." He silently prayed that if Derrick was on the roof, he'd find a way to hide.

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Breathless, Derrick slowed to a stop near a group of trees in the middle of the field. Tired, he plopped down into the snow, not even caring if he got wet, somewhat enjoying the coolness. Decision time. *Go back to town and my truck, or keep going this way toward Jim's?* He groaned inwardly, knowing it would be miles before he reached Jim's, but also knowing he had little chance of making it to his truck in town without getting caught. He wondered if the police had Jim's place staked out. He hated decisions like this. Town would be a lot easier, but a lot riskier. Jim's place was so far, he didn't know if he could make it, and if it was staked out that was it. There was no way he would make it back. He looked up at the clear night sky, dotted with thousands of stars that looked mystical through the steam from his breath. He looked up at them, nearly begging for answers

but got none. Sighing, he laid down in the snow, put his hands behind his head, and stared longer, wondering if life would go on if he just went to sleep here.

Getting cold, he got back up and resumed walking. He decided to go to Jim's if for no better reason than that was the direction he was currently walking. He pulled off his outer shirt wrapped it around his hand, and put his coat back on.

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Wade standing next to Mellissa against the living room wall cleared his throat as the impatient officer walked in and plopped down their suitcase full of money on the table. "What's this?"

Wade cleared his throat again. "Money."

"I can see that. Why do you have it?"

Wade cleared his throat a third time, putting his arm around Mellissa and drawing her closer to him. "To spend."

The officer gave them a look. "You must have over a thousand one-dollar bills in there."

*Five thousand two hundred and twenty-five.* Mellissa cleared her throat as well. "My husband likes to go down to that gas station on the corner and get their dollar value pop." Her voice squeaked at the end as she glanced at Wade for confirmation.

"Best pop in the world, just one buck, including tax." His voice accidently broke.

Muttering something undiscernible and shaking his head back and forth repeatedly, the officer turned and walked back to the bedroom.

Wade and Mellissa exchanged glances and fell back against the wall, wondering if they would get arrested on their neighbor's say so if the police didn't find anything.

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Feeling lightheaded, Derrick twisted his shirt tighter around his wounded hand and then checked his pulse, wondering if the dizziness was from blood loss or from the sheer stress of the day. Encouraged that his pulse was still strong and steady, he simply stopped a moment and leaned forward on his knees. Breathing, he tried to regain his stamina. The day hadn't been too bad, but it had been some night. *Actually, none of my nights lately have been anything to brag about.* With a shiver, he plopped down in the snow, wishing he could get his body temperature back up, hoping he'd make it. He figured he still had a few miles to go, maybe two, maybe three. Ordinarily, that would be a cakewalk for him. Tonight, it felt like an impossible task. *Should of eaten more earlier.* It was typical though, the more involved he got in a mission the more he forgot to eat.

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Nervous, Ethan drove the big truck slowly off the road into the gravel road into the long driveway, staring at the numbers on the mailbox, double, triple checking that this was the house from Derrick's address on his letter... on his will. Taking his foot from the gas, he stood a little to see better over the wheel as the truck rolled down the drive. He looked from the dark barn to the dark house and wondered what to do next. He sat back down, pressed on the brake, and put it in park at the beginning of the circle. *Right to the house. Left to the barn.* He wondered if he dare go park by the house, walk up to the door, and say, "Hi, I'm a friend of Derrick's. I see from a letter he wrote you that you are a friend of his, too. Did you know he's kind of in some trouble right now?" or should I just go to the barn and wait to see who comes out? *I hope he doesn't try and make his way back to his to his truck since I'm not there.* Ethan replayed the events in his mind as he had snuck from his spot in the ally to see what all the commotion with police cars and lights were about. Then he had waited across the street, hiding in a doghouse, until he saw Derrick jump down off the roof. Then he'd followed from a distance until he saw him take off running in the field, going the opposite direction of town. *Of course, that doesn't mean he couldn't have doubled back. It was so long though... two hours and he hadn't yet.* Ethan's attention jerked toward the house as a light came on upstairs and then another one downstairs. He watched the house, wondering if someone knew he was there.

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After staring at the ground for the last hour, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other, Derrick lifted his eyes to the light in the distance. *Jim's barn. Almost there.* He hoped he could make it. All he wanted to do was collapse on the

ground and sleep... collapse in the snow and freeze. Groaning inwardly, he circled his neck and forced his posture straighter. *Wake up... almost there.*

Light haloed around the barn in the misty distance. He tripped over a cornstalk falling to his knees as his vision blurred. *Come on, Derrick.* He shook his head as he stood back up. *You can do it.* He lifted his feet higher as he resumed walking, trying not to trip again. He kept his head down, staring at the ground and walking robotically.

The next time he looked up, he was nearly at the fence, a few more steps and he fell into the wire fence with wood planking on the top. Leaning against the planking, he craned his neck, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Hanging his head, he heard a familiar nicker next to him and then felt a soft warm breath on his neck. Allowing a smile, he opened his eyes as Maverick nudged his neck with his nose. "Hey, Maverick," Derrick mumbled hoarsely looking up at him. Maverick nickered back. Arm starting to shake as he leaned against the fence, he closed his eyes again. Breathing too deeply, he started to drift off. Nickering again, Maverick shoved him hard with his nose, almost causing him to lose his balance. He stepped sideways. "Okay. Okay." Rubbing his face and yawning, he widened his stance for stability and looked at the barn. It blurred in and out then came in focus again. "Want to give a guy a lift?" Derrick yawned, shaking his head. Nickering, Maverick walked closer into to fence, leaning his neck over it. "Okay. Just a minute."

Derrick yawned, clomped back to the fence, put his hand on the planking, and hoisting himself up, vaulted off the planking onto Maverick's back. "Okay," Derrick yawned. Maverick looked back at him. Derrick leaned forward, lying his chest on Maverick's shoulders, resting his head on the back of his neck. For a few minutes, Maverick just stood there and Derrick started to drift off again. Then the black stallion slowly started to walk. When Derrick woke back up, they were standing by the gate and Maverick was looking back at him then nudged his knee. "Okay." Derrick yawned again as he sat up. "Okay. I'm going." Glancing at the lit-up barn, he wondered who was in there as he slid off, nearly losing his balance as he landed. Without pausing, he stumbled into the gate, opened it and headed for the barn after a final nod of thanks toward Maverick.

Shaking his head again, he tried to revive his senses and walk quietly, so he didn't walk into a trap. Meandering to the side, he looked around, trying to stay out of the light as he reached the barn opening. He glanced toward the pasture as he heard Maverick whinny and then Danny whiny back then glanced back to the barn as a tall and a short figure appeared in the entry way and looked over at him. His heart jumped before he recognized them.... *Ethan and Jim.* He leaned his shoulder sideways against the barn and relaxed.

"Thought you might show up here," Jim stated, hands in his pockets, looking a little chilled despite his heavy coat. Ethan wore Jim's extra coat, which came down practically to his knees. "Took you long enough."

"How'd you know to come here?" Derrick stared at Ethan.

Ethan smiled. "I have my ways." Derrick continued to stare, really wanting to know. "You had his name and address on a letter in your things," Ethan spoke softly. "I gathered from the letter...."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Derrick interrupted, not wanting him to blurt out what was in that letter in front of Jim. "OK." Rubbing his face, Derrick stood away from the barn and started to amble in.

"What happened to your hand?" Jim asked as he went past. Derrick glanced down at it, just then realizing he had lost the bloody shirt he'd had wrapped around it. He stopped walking and searched his memory, trying to remember where. "Derrick?" Jim interrupted his thoughts.

Derrick glanced at him then resumed walking. "It got cut on some glass." Derrick focused on getting to the arena room where he could sit down. As he rounded the corner, he started to lose his balance, and his vision briefly blurred. He reached out for the wall to catch himself.

Instead, Jim caught him from the other side. Pulling Derrick's arm over his own shoulders, he supported him. "You look a little done in." They walked together to the arena room. Ethan opened the door for them, and Jim helped Derrick over to the couch, lowering him down when they got there.

Jim pulled a chair over and sat next to him, lifting his hand to look at it. "Getting infected." Eyes closed, Derrick nodded absentmindedly. "What glass?" Jim flipped his hand over to gage the redness on the other side.

"It's a long story." Grimacing, Derrick covered his face with his other arm to hide it.

Ethan hopped over and plopped down on the floor next to them, sitting Indian style. "Judging from all the lights and

sirens, I'd say they had the police, national guard, army, FBI, and everyone over there!"

Derrick let his arm fall and gave Ethan a look. "There weren't that many."

Ethan just nodded in disagreement, eyes wide. "There were a lot!"

Derrick frowned and recovered his face, too weak to argue. Jim smiled at both of their responses then got up and went over to the cabinet above the sink. "That's a pretty deep cut," he stated, pulling down some disinfectant and gauze. Derrick grunted. "Maybe we should call Matt and ask him to come over and take a look at it." Jim headed back with the supplies.

Derrick rolled onto his side and shot Jim a look. "You want to put a noose around my neck... Matt of all people!"

"He knows the truth about his son." Jim sat down and put the supplies on the couch beside him.

Derrick rolled back on his back and recovered his face. "He's not the type to forgive that easily."

"There's nothing to forgive. You didn't do anything," Jim reminded him, as he picked up his hand again.

Oh, yeah. "That doesn't make any difference," Derrick mumbled. He'll still need someone to blame.

"I think it does." Jim began washing out the wound. "I don't see any hatred in his eyes when I mention you."

"How 'bout anger?" Jim didn't answer, which was all the answer Derrick needed.

Jim widened the wound open to clean out the still forming puss. "I don't like this bump forming over here." He touched the warm bump next to the wound. "Might need lanced."

*Peachy keen.* He jerked his hand in reflex to the pain.

"Just gonna keep getting infected if you don't get it stitched up."

"You can pack it and...."

"And you're for sure gonna need antibiotics." He reached up to touch Derrick's forehead, but Derrick hit his hand away with his other arm.

Smiling, Jim went back to cleaning the wound. *Grouch.*

Derrick's mind went back to the last time, he'd gotten injured. It seemed like ages ago... when they were all still friends, fighting together at the cave to take down a common enemy. He remembered the moment Matt lost his hearing. He remembered Matt cleaning out the wound in his arm when he slept at his house. He smiled when he remembered the first time he saw Matt fight. Professional country Doc yet just as adequate of a street fighter. He remembered all the hours they spent together looking for Matt's daughter... all the work... all the danger. He mentally frowned. He was honestly glad that they got the girl back and that she was fine. It was just that life seemed so unfair. Matt hates me. Wade just wants to use me. Trent's chasing me. Just trying to help in something that wasn't even my responsibility, and wind up becoming a fugitive, generating a huge police response just by coming.... "So, what was all that police response about if I'm not wanted for...." Interrupting his own thoughts, Derrick thrust his arm from his face and stared at Jim.

Jim shrugged. "I don't know." He glanced from Derrick's hand to his face. "You have to admit a lot has happened since then. Just from the infrequent updates I get from Trent and Wade... and Kara Lee," He smiled as he thought of Kara Lee and her unrelenting search for the truth. "sounds like you've been very busy."

"Yeah." Derrick recovered his face. "Don't you watch the news? Wade's neighbor apparently knew."

Jim shrugged. "Not constantly. The last thing I saw on the news, the FBI wanted you for questioning involving a national organized crime ring, and they were offering a reward for information leading to your arrest or detainment or whereabouts or something like that. Not sure exactly how they put it."

He moved his arm above his head. "Did it sound like I was for or against them... the crime ring?" Jim stared off a moment, thinking then shrugged. "Gre-eat," Derrick groaned, covering his face again. "I risk my life fighting evil and what do I get...." He spoke muffled under his sleeve.

"A reward in heaven," Jim answered as he started wrapping Derrick's hand with the gauze.

"Wonderful," Derrick muttered and then felt guilty.

"Oh, ye, of little faith."

"Yeah, well, born losers tend to have a little more of a problem with that than those people living in a nice cozy ranch house, surrounded by acres of lush fields and nice horses, working a steady job, with a nice wife and kid, getting everything handed to them on a silver platter." His mind flashed back to the times they had both almost gotten killed, but he ignored them.

Jim just wacked him on the top of the head in response. "Oh, quit feeling sorry for yourself. You could be sitting in jail right now... and maybe that would be better for you. I don't know, and I'm not going to try tell you what to do, but I do know no one asked you to make war with the entire Sandervauh regime."

Derrick dropped his arm in outrage and sat up straight. "They made war on me!" Jim glanced at Ethan, who was watching them both in great interest. Derrick glanced at Ethan and plopped back down. "That little... *gir-rl*... probably doesn't. Even. Appreciate. it." He referred to Taylor.

"Oh, she probably does." Jim finished tying the gauze. "I know Matt does."

"Ha." Closing his eyes, Derrick started drifting to sleep.

Jim got up and collected the remaining supplies to take back. "Want some food?" He glanced over his shoulder as he walked to the sink. Asleep, Derrick didn't answer.

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"What are they doing?" Mellissa, sitting on the couch, whispered to Wade who was next to her.

"I don't know." Wade walked to the door, pulling the curtain back slightly, watching Trent talk to an officer on the sidewalk. Other policemen sat in their cars or leaned against them, their breaths steaming in the cold. "Talking." He let the curtain fall back and walked back to her.

"What do you think happened to him?" she whispered as Wade sat down beside her.

Wade shook his head. "I don't know."

"How are we gonna find him again?"

"I bet he went over to Jim's," Wade whispered back. "I wish I could go see." He stared toward the door.

"That's over ten miles away! It's near zero outside!" She tried to keep the loud whisper soft.

"He must have had his truck parked around here somewhere. We'll find him, or he'll contact us again. Don't worry."

"Oh, Wade." She grabbed his arm, staring at the red and blue lights flashing through her white curtains. "I'm scared. Maybe we should tell them," she whispered, her eyes pleading for a fix to this problem.

Wade could only shrug. "If we do, they will probably find out and call off the trade."

She looked down at the carpet, remembering all those months going nearly daily to the police department without getting any answers... all those nights she had prayed instead of sleeping for some word of their baby. Now, they had it. They knew he was alive. They had an opportunity to get him back. *Why does it all seem so wrong... so mixed up and backwards.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Nodding off in the corner recliner, Jim raised his head again and looked over at Derrick, sleeping. He smiled at Ethan crammed next to him, partially on top of him, sleeping with his head on Derrick's chest. *For a guy that feels like he has no friends, he sure makes them easily.* Stretching, he got up and looked at the clock. *Three am. He's been asleep about three hours. Be light in a little over four hours.* He didn't know if and when he should wake him up or not. He didn't know what his plans were, or when the police would decide to start looking for him. He picked up his cellphone and brought up his security camera to make sure there wasn't anyone in his driveway. There wasn't, yet.

Walking closer to Derrick, he noticed he was sweating and contemplated reaching down to feel his forehead. Then suddenly, Derrick woke up. "Where's my truck?" A little surprised at the sudden question, Jim didn't answer. "Did he drive it here?" He glanced at Ethan, still sound asleep. "Did he call you?"

"He drove it here. It's locked out in the shed." Derrick relaxed again, shivering at the same time as he wiped sweat from his forehead. "Sick?" Derrick looked away. "Want me to call Matt?" He didn't respond. "Look, I'll just ask him to stop over an hour or so before work to have breakfast with me because I want to ask him something. He won't know why he's coming, and he wouldn't turn you in anyway."

Derrick ran his aching hand through his sweaty hair because his good one was under Ethan. "Fine." *Guess, I don't have a choice.* He looked up. *I'm trying to do the right thing. I hope I don't get hung for it.* He felt peace and frowned at it, knowing Christians feel peace when they die, too. *I wonder what's happen with Wade?"* He glanced over at Jim who was dialing.

"I don't know." Jim pressed send and then talked, surprised at how quick Matt answered.

Derrick waited until he hung up then he asked. "What'd he say?"

"He said he just got up to feed the baby, and he would rather come, now."

"Works for me." Derrick stared up at the ceiling. "What do you think? Any chance we keep playing this as planned."

"I general find most plans are subject to change."

"Ridiculous to even make plans isn't it?"

Jim returned a knowing smile as he went back to his recliner. "Why don't you get some more sleep till Matt gets here?" Derrick grunted and looked away. Jim checked his security camera once more before settling down for a short nap. *No, friends.* Jim yawned as he closed if eyes. *If you have no friends, why am I sitting up in a barn with visions of twenty cops storming by home and arresting me for adding and abetting a fugitive?*

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Pacing impatiently back and for impatiently near Mellissa in the living room, Wade looked at his cellphone for the time. "He's not going to wait for me forever," he mumbled as he went past Mellissa, sitting on the couch. Mellissa nodded. "He'll probably end up leaving by himself and expect me to catch up later... if I can." He stopped, arms crossed, and stared at the door. Mellissa stared at him with tired eyes. "There has to be a way to leave."

"Not without going right in front of them," she muttered, softly.

"Then that's just the way it will have to be." He advanced toward the door.

"Wade?" He turned back toward her. "Be careful." He nodded toward her and then went out and then charged toward Trent who was leaning against the top of a squad car, talking to the officer inside. "If you don't see any sign of him by time you get to Maple and 5<sup>th</sup>, head over and join unit ten at the park. Use the spotlight. Look in the trees, under the bridge, on the walking trail, around the ducks, anywhere you think someone could hide." The officer said something back that Wade couldn't hear. Trent nodded in response and stood away from the car as it pulled away. "What is it Wade?" Trent didn't look at him as he rubbed his gloved hands together and stared toward two other officers talking next to their car a ways away. His breath steamed under the light of the street lamp.

Wade shot him an accusatory glance anyway. "Having fun hunting down the man that saved your life?"

Trent huffed a laugh but spoke quietly. "Yeah, because we both think he's hiding under a park bench at the city park."

Wade tried not to sound as exasperated as he felt as he returned a loud whisper, staring hard in Trent's face. "Then what *are you doing* here... besides keeping me from being able to leave?"

*Trying to help and friend and keep from getting thrown into jail for aiding a fugitive at the same time.* Trent glanced at Wade. "You need to go somewhere?"

"Yes!" Wade mentally threw his hand up.

Trent nodded. "You sure about that?" Trent spoke loudly. Wade nodded tentatively. "Mack!" Trent called loudly. One of

the two officers talking next to their car, stood away from it and looked at him. "Take over for me! I've got a lead!" The officer nodded. "Come on," Trent mumbled as he turned toward his car. Wade quickly followed, hurrying toward the passenger's side. "Get in," Trent ordered for effect, even though it wasn't necessary.

They drove in silence for several moments before Wade remembered he hadn't told Trent where they were going. Wade glanced around Trent's car, trying to remember if it was his or an unmarked police car. He wondering if it was bugged or if it had a tracking device on it. "You know where we're going?"

"Jim's?" Wade nodded.

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Yawning, Jim glanced down at his phone. Seeing headlights coming down the road, he stared at it a minute longer, figuring it was Matt, but wondering if he could have fed the baby, got changed and over here that quick. When the car turned into the driveway, he recognized that it wasn't Matt's. "Derrick?" He stood to his feet. Derrick woke up and looked at him. "Someone's coming."

Derrick immediately sat up. Tumbling off of him onto the couch, Ethan woke up. "What's going on?" the little boy mumbled, groggily.

"Mat?" Derrick asked though he knew it wasn't from Jim's face.

"No."

Derrick got up and headed out of the arena room. Jim followed him toward the arena and through it. "Where are going?"

"To the woods. You better get busy doing something, so it doesn't look odd that you are out here this early."

"Yeah." Jim quickly turned back. *What about Ethan?* His mind raced for a place to hide Ethan and for the location of a feed bucket to start feeding the horse and something to put in the trashcan to cover the bloody....

"Hide Ethan somewhere," Derrick called back.

"Yeah." Jim nodded toward him. "Be careful... and come back." Jim glanced at his phone as he went through the arena gate and pulled it shut. The car was coming to a stop in front of the barn. There was no time for anything, but to keep them from coming in. He met Ethan standing sleepily outside of the arena room. "Do something with the trash in there and hide!" Jim ordered as he turned, and walking through the tool room, went outside. His breath steamed in front of his face as he flipped on the outside light and opened his mouth to speak just as Trent and Wade got out of the car. Before he could speak, Wade took off running toward the woods. "Wade, wait!" Jim called after him, but he didn't stop. "Where's he going?" he turned toward Trent, who was just closing his car door.

Trent shrugged and came over. "He said, 'Derrick,' when we stopped, is he here?"

"You thought you saw Derrick?" Jim tried to evade the question.

"He did." He nodded toward the direction he thought Wade had gone. "I didn't see him, but I know he's here." Trent walked past him into the barn.

Jim's mind raced for a way to get out of this without getting five to ten years. He followed Trent into the barn, praying Ethan was hidden. He wasn't. "Hi," Trent addressed the child, standing by the arena room door, holding a trashcan full of bloody bandages. "Who are you?"

"A friend to all and an enemy to no man," Ethan repeated what he'd always heard his father say.

Trent just nodded lethargically, turned, took his handcuffs out as he headed for the steps to the loft and held them up for emphasis. "When Derrick gets back, tell him to come up and slug and handcuff me to something, so I can say that he did it. You can come up and discover me after he leaves. He headed up the steps to the loft with Jim and Ethan just standing there staring.

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Legs burning, sweat-dripping, ears-ringing, vision-clouded, Derrick panted, feet slipping in the snow as he ran up the steep, wooded hill, weaving back and forth in the trees. Wade asked for more out of his legs to keep Derrick in view. He squinted to see in the darkness, thankful for the full moon that shone through the barren branches. He couldn't believe with all running he did faithfully that Derrick, who was just a casual exerciser, was staying so far ahead of him. *I guess Derrick thinks he has quite the incentive... his freedom, but so do I! How many men in this world leave their nice cozy home in the middle of the night just to chase a massively insecure, yet crazy good fighter, who manages to always stay one step ahead of death for no other reason than the fact he colossal chicken! Ouff.* Slipping in the snow, Wade fell onto his chest. Doing a pushup to his feet, he resumed running without missing too many strides. *This is why.* Wade huffed as he started to climb the steep part of the hill. *If we, he huffed, if we were racing on level pavement, that guy'd be toast.* Reaching the top, he wanted to stop for a breather, but he kept going.

Derrick slid the rest of the way down the snowy hillside into the snow-drifted creek bed below. He sunk into the snow over his knees as he stood up. Breathing deeply, he waded through the drifted creek bed trying to catch his breath before climbing up the other side of the hill. Reaching the other side, he took a final deep breath and started to climb, but getting dizzy, he fell backwards into the snow. He pushed himself back up with his good hand. Snow melted under his hand from the heat. He tried again. Looking up, he felt dizzy again. Looking back down, he leaned forward on his good hand against the side of the hill. His arm began to shake. A single shiver shook his sweating body before the heat returned. *Help,* he prayed and tried again, but the outcome was the same. To keep from falling backwards, he took several steps backwards till he was nearly in the center of the creek bed. Hearing sounds, he turned back to see a figure running and jumping down the hillside. Vision blurry, he couldn't make out who the person was. He continued to stare almost in a trance.

Wade ran faster and faster pushed by the momentum of going down the steep hill. He saw Derrick standing in nearly waste deep snow, staring up at him. His heart leaped with gratitude that he almost had him. Then his body followed suit. Skipping the last few feet, he leapt down and out right over top of Derrick. Instinctively, Derrick reached up, caught Wade's arm then his shirt just as he was overhead and flipped him over top of him. *Ouch.* Wade landed with a thud on his back and sunk deep into the snow, shaking his head the whole way down. "Derrick!" He yelled, getting to his feet and grabbing Derrick's shoulders as he attempted to get away. Derrick fought back elbowing Wade in the throat before he could get another word out. Refusing to let go, Wade pulled Derrick with him and they both fell backwards into the snow, Derrick on top of Wade. One arm around Derrick's chest the other holding his arm, Wade tried to finish the statement but couldn't with all the weight on top of him. "Derr... I...a," Oh, brother. He rolled his eyes as they sank deeper into the snow. Snow fell in his face, but he refused to let go. He tried to flip them both over on their sides, but he couldn't between Derrick's weight and the packed snow. "I... a..." He gasped for air as Derrick got heavier on his chest and then elbowed him again in the side. "Peace!" He squeaked out. "Wade... it's... Wa..." He felt Derrick relax so he let go, relieved when he got off. Breathless, Wade stood up facing him, only concentrating on breathing for the moment.

Derrick scowled at him. "What are you doing here?"

"You, you said, you wanted to leave this morning," Wade squeaked out.

Suspicion didn't die in Derrick's face. "That wasn't your van."

"Trent." Wade sucked in another deep breath. "Trent brought me. That was the only way I could get out of there. He's," He sucked in another deep breath. "He's alright. He's for us."

"I find that a little hard to believe." Derrick's voice betrayed skepticism.

"I don't know why..." He paused to breathe. "after all we've been through together."

Derrick nodded. "So, you just brought you here and left?" the suspicious tone lingered on.

Wade put his hands up in an animated shrug. "I didn't get a chance to stick around long enough to find out." Derrick nodded, relenting to that. "Can we go back, now?" Wade motioned back in that direction. Derrick didn't respond, thinking. "Trust me," Wade said. Derrick looked unsure. "Look if we are going all the way out west together to face off a killer against all odds and you don't trust me...."

Derrick nodded and started walking. He made it a point not to completely trust anyone, but he had to concede that at least an element needed to be there for this to be there for their journey to go well. At this point, he felt so sick, he was beginning not to care what happened anyway. Side by side, they climbed back up the hill in silence. When they reached the top,

Wade started to talk, so fast Derrick was having a little trouble comprehending. Wade didn't seem to care. On the way back, Wade recounted all the events of the night to Derrick with little need for acknowledgement.

Jim met them at the door when they got back to the barn. "Hey," he said, thinking of a thousand questions he could ask but not knowing if any were tactful. He could see they both survive whatever had just happened even if Wade was snow-covered and Derrick was soaking wet. He wondered how much of that was snow and how much was sweat. There was another question he could ask. *Hey, Derrick, your fever melt all the snow off you?*

"Hey," Derrick mumbled, and they both walked past him into the barn. Jim just shrugged and followed. "Didn't want to hear the story, anyway." "Where's Trent?" Derrick asked after going through the tool room.

Jim pointed to the loft stairs. "He said when you got here to go up and slug him and then handcuff him to something. Later, I'm supposed to go up and find him, you know like, 'hey, Trent, what happened to you!'"

Derrick nodded. Looking up the stairs, he wished some else could do it. Swallowing back the nausea in his stomach, he headed up, unable to bring himself to suggest he couldn't make it.

Jim watched Derrick go up a ways then turned to Wade. "What happened?"

Wade motioned for Jim to follow and opened the door to the arena room. "Come in, and I'll tell you."

Derrick paused at the top of the stairs to let a dizzy spell pass then he finished going up. Trent, who had been lying on the bed, thinking, sat up when he came in. "I see Wade caught up to you." Derrick nodded. "I take it you two have something planned." Derrick nodded again. "You know after all I've done for you, you would think I'd get a better reception. You think that you are so good, that you can do anything without getting caught. Maybe you've had a little help you don't know about."

Derrick just stared. "Thank you," he replied, bluntly.

"Your welcome." Trent's reply was equally monotone. He walked toward him. "Okay. Go ahead and slug me. Make sure it shows. You can handcuff me to that water pipe over there." Derrick just stared. Actually, he had punched him once before, but that was before he knew him, and it certainly wasn't on request. "Go ahead," Trent reiterated. "I can't really punch myself. Besides I want to be able to say you did it if I'm asked, not like I'm going to press charges or anything. I just have to come up with a story that will float for a while." Derrick just stared. "Come on, what's with you? Wake up." Trent grabbed his wrist, feeling the heat and sweat dripping from the protruding veins on his muscular arm. "Man, you're sick. Whatever, you got planned, you're not doing it. You'll never make it in that condition."

"We'll make it," Derrick mumbled.

"No, you won't." Trent grabbed Derrick's other wrist and lifted his swollen red, hot hand. He noticed a red streak spreading up the vein in his wrist and swallowed hard, sending a prayer up that he wouldn't lose the hand. "You're getting blood poisoning."

"I've had it before." Derrick's response was emotionless.

Trent shook his head and took out his handcuffs. "No, you need to be in a hospital. I'm not going to let you kill yourself. We'll figure out what to do about Wade's baby. I'm taking you in." He reached for Derrick's good wrist. Derrick pulled it away, raised it, and slammed it into Trent's face in one motion, so fast he couldn't react. Instantly unconscious, Trent fell backwards. Derrick caught him, pulled him over to the water pipe, cuffed him to it, gagged him, and headed back downstairs, wondering if he had just done the right thing.

Both Wade and Jim looked up at Derrick as he came into the arena room. "Tie him up?" Jim asked. Derrick nodded.

"Slug him?" Wade asked as Derrick sat down across from them. Derrick nodded again. "He okay?"

Derrick nodded again, rubbing his face, then said. "They'll be looking for him soon. Where'd he say he was going?"

"He didn't say," Wade answered.

"He'll be trouble for that," Derrick mumbled.

"Here comes Matt," Jim said, standing as he looked at his phone. "I'll go get him."

Wade nodded, staring at Derrick, afraid of how he looked. "Man, you looked fine at my house a few hours ago. What happened to you?"

"A lot." Elbows on the table, Derrick rested his face in his hands, not even caring about the pain from the bad one.

"Let me see that." Wade moved closer, took his hand, and began unwrapping it. He noticed the small red streak starting up his wrist. "Did you guys clean this?" Wade asked as he unwrapped it. Derrick nodded. Wade wiped away the puss from the wound with the bandage and pulled it open. Grimacing, Derrick turned his head, trying to hide it. Wade turned the hand and pulled the wound open farther then he turned it and did it again. "Yeah, you still got glass in there. It's deep. You can hardly see it."

"Think Matt can get it?"

"I don't know." Wade glanced at him then turned the hand again, trying to get the best angle and the lightest. "Man, that's deep. How'd you manage that?"

"Your skylight."

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry. That was brilliant, though. They would have had you otherwise." Wade sighed, his heart sinking as he put Derrick's hand down and stood up. "They might anyway." He went over to the couch, unplugged the lamp, and brought it over to the table, sitting it next to the one that was already there. Derrick glanced at him. "I think you're gonna end up in the hospital this time." He headed for the door. "Gonna find another lamp for Matt. You got one upstairs?"

"Yeah." Derrick nodded, rubbing his face again.

Wade nodded toward Matt as they passed in the doorway. Matt came in with his bag of medical supplies and put them down on the table. "Came prepared?" Derrick gave him an uncertain smile.

"For you? Always," Matt replied, getting out his stethoscope. "Nice." He moved Derrick's hand to get a better look.

"You knew I was here?"

"No. Just figured. Sit up," he said, coming close, then unbuttoned the top of his shirt when he did. "Nobody calls me at three in the morning unless they have an emergency, and I just figured the only emergency Jim wouldn't tell me about had to be you." He listened to Derrick's heart.

"Hmm," Derrick grunted.

"Shhh."

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Creeping down the snowy trail, Kara Lee's interest peeked when she saw the fresh human tracks in the snow. "Knew I heard someone," she said to herself as she knelt down to inspect the tracks. "Two sets." She stood back up, wondering if one of them was Derrick's. She hoped they hadn't got him... either sides. It had been a long time since she had a story that kept her stomach tied in knots. This one's sure fitting the bill. Every time she got somewhere and heard what had just happened before she arrived, she couldn't imagine that he could still be alive, but he always was... so far. One step behind the whole time. I just can't figure out how to anticipate him. She kicked a clod of snow. Always a day late. She felt like her trusty camera had nothing but yellow-taped crime signs on it. *Followed him to Kentucky, Georgia, Missouri, Texas, Mexico, back to Texas, Arizona, Nebraska, and back to Illinois. Boy, if that guy could get a gas card with frequent flyer miles on it.* She laughed to herself. *And he didn't neglect to stir things majorly everywhere he went. She shook her head. Crazy guy, crazy, invisible guy, don't get killed and burst my bubble.*

Coming to the end of the trail, she stopped and looked around. *Lights on in the barn. Hmm. No, cop cars around. In-ter-esting.* She ventured out into the open and snuck toward the barn's arena. Holding her breath, she climbed over the green metal gate, stretched across the opening to the barn, very carefully, willing it not to clang. Then she jogged across the sand toward the viewing room, staying close to the wall out of sight of the viewing room's window. Coming near the small green, metal gate that closed off the arena from the hallway that lead to the arena room and the stalls, she stopped when she heard voices.

"I think I got it. Hold it steady," Matt instructed Wade who was holding Derrick's halfway numbed hand and wrist as he got hold

of the deep shard of glass.

"I can't feel it," Derrick pointed out.

*Oh, you'll feel this.* "Good." Matt glanced at Wade who held down hard then getting a good hold on the glass, he yanked it out. Derrick threw his whole body back against the chair all except his hand that Wade kept steady. *Thought you'd feel it.* "Well, that should help." Matt glanced at the large, bloody shard that was still stained with dirt then started pouring diluted anesthetic. Staring at the wound, Matt still noticed Derrick's fast rise and fall of his chest and wondered if he was going to breakdown and yell. He didn't.

"What do you think?" Wade couldn't wait to ask.

Matt glanced at him then back at the wound, turning it and examining it again. "It doesn't look too bad."

"You think we can go?" Wade didn't want to pressure them, but he wanted to know. Just lancing the wound and giving Derrick a dose of intravenous antibiotic had made him look greatly improved. He'd even stopped sweating.

"Maybe." He kept rinsing the wound.

Wade, letting go of Derrick's wrist, picked up the temporal thermometer and took his temperature, "101.2. That's down over two degrees already."

Matt nodded. "Obviously, it would be best not to, but if you do go, you'd have to have to monitor him carefully, use the antibiotics I give you... both oral and intravenously for the next two days, eat well, and most importantly keep the wound clean that isn't going to be easy if you're going to the mountains, and I wouldn't push him to walk any distance."

Wade nodded. "Well, we can do that. We just have to take everything we need," Wade suggested.

Matt looked skeptical then glanced at Derrick. "Yeah, but can you get over that stubborn streak in you and go to a local hospital if things go downhill?" Derrick looked away, showing no emotion. "I think you should wait a couple days."

Derrick finally responded, again with very little emotion. "We can wait there as well as here."

"Not quite as well as here," Matt protested.

Derrick glanced at him, touched by the concern in his eyes. His mind raced back and forth at all the circumstances that had brought them to this point... all the options they had to respond to this situation... all the questions... the absence of definite answers. "Let's just play it by ear." He looked at Wade, who nodded. "If you want to pack the supplies, then it will be ready for whatever."

Wade nodded, let go of Derrick's hand. and got a pen and paper. "Let's make a list of what we need." He came back, put his foot on a chair, and put the pen to the paper. "What about the money? It's still back at the house."

"There's no way we're going back for it," Derrick responded.

"I could bring it if you want me to," Jim suggested, hardly able to believe he was... hardly able to believe he really didn't want to miss out. "Closer to the day, maybe."

Wade nodded. "That'd be great." He paused. "We gonna need horses, or...."

Derrick nodded. "It's not close to the road." He glanced at Jim for permission.

Jim nodded. "You guys make the list. I'll start loading the trailer.

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Kara Lee's eyes widened and her heart jumped as she heard someone walk through the door into the hallway. She looked around desperately for a place to hide. She glanced up. The loft. Grabbing the top bar of the green pen up against the side of the arena, she pulled herself up until she was standing on it. Then she stretched until her finger tips touched the edge of the loft floor. Stretching a little more, she got a good grip and pulled herself the rest of the way. She made a face as the metal clanged a little as her feet left it. She quickly moved on, got her knee up, and then crawled the rest of the way up onto the hay-strewn plywood floor. Wondering if anyone heard, she crawled over to the loft stairs, looked down toward the arena room, and

listened. Satisfied no one had, she sighed, rolled onto her back, rested her arm on her stomach, stared up at the beams on the ceiling and tried to devise her next step.

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Glancing at Matt who was just getting done packing Derrick's hand, Wade tore off the list he had finished and set the pad and pen on the table. He looked at Derrick. "If you think of anything else, you can write it down." Derrick nodded and Wade left, heading toward the loft.

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Hearing the door open, Kara Lee rolled onto her side, looked down the stairs, and then sat up when she saw Wade come from the arena room and turn toward the loft. Jumping to her feet, she looked for a place to hide, shocked to see a body lying in the corner facing the wall. Instantly grabbing her mini camera from her pocket, she snapped a picture and jumped out of the loft and down into the sand below, initially hitting with her feet and then dropping to roll in the sand... two rolls before getting to her feet and running out, only pausing long enough to be able to crawl over the arena gate silently. When she got outside, she noticed a light on inside the parked horse trailer and saw the back doors open. It didn't take her long to put two and two together to conclude they would be taking the horses wherever they were going. She darted over and hid in front of the trailer. Feeling the trailer move, she peeked around the corner to see that Jim had gotten out of the side door and was heading back to the barn. Kneeling down in the cold snow, she sacrificed again for her job as she slid under the trailer, thankful that there wasn't as much snow underneath it. There, she concluded, she would wait until they were all loaded up then she would sneak through the side door into the trailer's tack room and find a place to hide until they got to where they were going. She couldn't help but wonder how far that would be. *With Derrick there's really no tellin.'*

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Stepping into the loft and seeing Trent's body lying on the floor, Wade instantly thought the worse and hurried over. "Trent!"

Trent rolled over to look at him as he got close. *Ahh!* Wade jumped back from surprise. "Think I was dead?" Trent asked, arm behind his neck, looking up at Wade.

"Ohh-h," Wade groaned, rubbing his face. "You sure looked like it."

Trent nodded. "Sorry, to disappoint you. Actually, it's a lot easier to explain a live cop than a dead one," he stated dryly.

Wade waved him away and turned around. "Oh, knock it off," he mumbled, heading to Derrick's homemade wood closet. Bending down he started searching the back corner for Derrick's old gym bags.

"I heard Matt down there."

"Yeah." Wade pulled out the bags. "He came to look at Derrick's hand."

"I saw Derrick's hand. It looked pretty rough."

"Yeah, it's getting fixed up." Wade stood up with the bags, put two flashlights, and two blankets from the top closet shelf in one then headed back toward the stairs.

"You're still heading out then?"

Wade paused at the top of the stairs. "Maybe." He started down.

"He maybe a rough guy, but there will be a lot of people upset if he ends up dying over this."

Partway down the stairs, half understand Trent's words, half angry, Wade grabbed the floor and turned sideways to face Trent. "What about Davy? Is he any less of a human being just because he's younger?"

Trent thought a moment. "No." Wade went the rest of the way downstairs.

When Wade got to the bottom of the stairs, he practically ran into Jim, who was coming through the tool room. They both stopped and said nothing for a moment then Jim spoke. "Are you sure? I mean, are you really sure this is the best way to

handle this?"

Sighing, Wade leaned back against the side of the staircase, wishing for anyone that was sure of that. Derrick's been hunting these guys for months. He knows more about them than anyone else. If he thinks we are making a mistake, let him say it."

"What about you? What do you think?"

"I think I'm tired of being a coward and a loser. I'm not afraid to die. I owe it to my son. I owe it to my father to try. When I was seven, I was out hunting with my dad on the reservation, just us, just bows and arrows. Got a deer the day before, but that day we had been searching for hours without seeing anything more than a couple of squirrels. Mom wanted a turkey for the holiday, not deer meat. We were walking past some trees when suddenly we heard a rustle then a roar then the biggest bear I'd ever hope to see, standing on his hind legs, taller than Dad emerged from the bushes and came right at us. I ran. Dad aimed his bow, but before he could get a shot out, the bear knocked the bow from his hands, breaking it. Dad just barely ducked out of the way of the bear's massive paw. Then the bear started chasing me. I was running as hard as I could, but it caught me by the arm." Wade rolled up his sleeve to show the scar. "It drug me around in a circle, shaking me." Just a log for a weapon, Dad came back like a wild man, attacking the bear with the wood. He got a good whack across the bears head, and he dropped me. Then he turned on dad. They fought a long time. Finally, the bear fell to the side and wounded, crawled away, bellowing. Dad," his voice broke. "He was so torn up, he didn't even look.... I just stood there, waiting for him to die. He just laid there, motionless, breathing, covered in his own blood, hand sticking up, grasping a long knife that was covered in the bear's blood. After a seemed like an eternity but was only a few moments, Dad, breathlessly breathed the words out. 'Get help.' I ran as fast as I could, three miles to the closest house, the missionaries house. He went back with me and carried my dad out to the doctor. Eventually, he recovered. He never looked the same. Even today, his neck and arms, the side of his face, his whole body is scarred from that bear. If he would have let the bear have me, he could have gotten away. I knew a girl that got drug off by a cougar and killed while her father just stood there at a safe distance, yelling and throwing rocks. How can I do less for my son than what my father did for me?" He paused, studying Jim's face. "We've decided for now that this is the best plan. We are going to go and see the place. If we feel we'd all have a better chance by calling the authorities, we might do that, but first we have to go see it."

Nodding, Jim glanced through the window toward Derrick and Matt, wondering if Derrick would even concede to letting Wade call the authorities if Wade thought it was best. "He wants Satoro." Jim said it half to himself half to Wade.

"Whose Satoro?" Wade followed Jim's gaze to Derrick.

"The head of the crime family, now."

Wade nodded. The old dislike and rivalry he felt for Derrick was ever-fading with time. "He won't sacrifice one life to take out another." His voice betrayed he was only seventy-five percent sure of that.

"You're right. He won't." Jim went to the tack room and collected four halters and lead ropes.

"Why Four?" Wade asked following him. "Maverick for him. Windwalker for you. Packhorse. And Danny for me when I get there. I'm just going to bring them in here for now, give 'em a chance to calm down before you take them. Then I'll pack the hay. Already got the saddles, the packhorse harness, and the water bucket out there."

"You got big bottles we can take water in?"

Jim nodded. They are in the arena room's bathroom, in the corner. You can fill them with the hose." He pointed to it.

Wade nodded and headed back to the arena room. He went past Matt and Derrick at the table to the cupboard and started dumping all the resupplied boxes and cans of food into their bag. "How's he doin', doc?"

Matt glanced up from the bandage he was tying. "At least, he mends quick. His fever's down to ninety-nine," he nearly mumbled.

"Good," Wade chirped.

"I wouldn't take advantage of it, though. Either of you." He looked from Wade to Derrick. "Things can go back just as quick the other way."

Derrick nodded, remembering it'd been a long time since he ate. "Hey, toss me an energy bar, will ya?" Wade tossed him a bar. Derrick caught it with his good hand. Wade tossed a second one, and Derrick caught that, too.

Matt stood up and started putting his stuff back in his bag. "You might as well just take this as your emergency kit. It's got everything you need and everything you might need." He glanced at Derrick.

Derrick nodded. "Thanks."

"You gonna fill a prescription if I give it to you?"

"How long's the sample pills gonna last?"

"Three days."

"How 'bout the injections?"

"Five."

"But I only need three."

Matt nodded, slowly, taking that as a, no. He was already trying to figure out how he could use the injections instead of the pills. "I'll get some more and send them with Jim," he stated, dryly, giving Derrick an unimpressed look.

"You're a pal." *Wasn't expecting it.* Derrick half-groaned as he got up, made his way over to the couch, and laid down. "Wake me up when you're ready to go." He put his arm over his eyes and drifted to sleep.

Wade opened the bathroom door just to be greeted by a pint-sized blond boy running out. He turned to watch him run over and jump on top of Derrick, waking him. "Wait, don't tell me you've got a kid?" Wade blurted out even though the boy looked nothing like Derrick.

Derrick just replied, "No," and went back to sleep. Shrugging, Wade continued on to get the water jugs.

For the next half an hour, Wade and Jim packed everything they figured they could possibly need. From sleeping bags and flashlights to rifles and ammunition to food and blankets to ropes and carabineers to hay and grain for the horses.

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Shivering lightly, Kara Lee crunched up a little tighter as she watched two sets of feet coming from the barn to the side door again. She ducked lower as the trailer bounced when they tossed their hay inside. "That better be it," she heard Jim say. "With four horses, we don't want too much weight in here. We can put the last three in the truck bed."

"Okay." She watched as Wade's feet went over to the truck bed, and she heard him toss a bale into the bed. Then she watched them both go back. "I can get the last two. You can start on the horses."

"You sure Derrick's gonna go?"

"I'm sure, but I can go ask him."

Yawning, Jim shook his head. "Don't wake him up. It's just as easy to take four horses out as put them in." Jim stated, but concluded that they could just stay in there until Jess got up to do it.

Seeing her chance when the guy's went in, Kara Lee crawled out from under the trailer and looking around, quickly opened the door and hopped in, standing in the only spot that wasn't covered in stuff, which was about six inches in diameter. Getting out her flashlight, she shone it around, looking for a place to hide. There was a small space under the saddle racks behind the hay. *Perfect.* She scooped the top bales over, climbed behind them, scooped them back and laid down in here little cubby-hole. *Perfectly cramped.* The hay shook as she turned from her side to her back. Nice and warm. She blew a piece of hay from her nose and then coughed on the hay dust. *What I do for my work. What a dedicated...* She coughed again. *work-er.*

# Headin' Out West

After tossing the bales in the back of Derrick's truck that he had just hooked up to the trailer, Wade walked back, meeting Jim at the back of the trailer just as he was loading the last horse. "That gonna be the packhorse?" Wade asked Jim as he led the horse up the ramp into the trailer, angled it sideways, and tied it to the wall in the last spot.

"Yep." Jim clipped the rope to his halter and then walked back down the ramp. "I think we are pretty much set here. How are you coming?"

"All set, I think. He had some trash in his truck, wrappers and stuff, that I put in your trash."

Jim nodded. "Next to the bloody gauze and bandages?" He smiled. "I'm not going to try and hide it. If someone comes searching through my trash, I'm busted."

Wade gave him a look. "You have to make it out there with the money in a few days."

Jim nodded complacently. "If you want to bury the stuff, you are more than welcome. I just don't know what you are going to do about hiding Ethan."

Wade stared off into the frosty distance. "Forgot about him." He turned back to Jim. "What are you going to do about him?"

Jim shrugged as he lifted the ramp up and latched it. "Let Trent take care of it, I guess."

"Yeah, Trent, there's no way the whole world doesn't find out that Derrick was here, and that I likely left with him, is there."

Jim shrugged. "Kinda doubt it." Jim closed the double doors to the top of the trailer. Then turned back toward Wade who, deep in thought, looked worried.

"Don't worry." Jim hit him softly on the side of the arm with his fist. "Maybe it will all work out." He started toward the barn.

Wade followed. "Maybe. ... Hopefully." They went through the tool room. "What time is it?"

"'bout four-thirty."

Wade nodded as they went inside. "Better wake him up. You want to while I check over the list one more time?"

"No-o-o." Jim held the door to the arena room open for him.

"Fine. Be that way." Wade walked past him on a mission. "Hey, Matt," he addressed Matt who was sitting at the table, half thinking, half arranging the matches in front of him absentmindedly. "How's he doing?" He went and stood over Wade.

"Seems to be picking up," Matt stated. "Last I checked."

"Good. Then he should be fine with some rest, and it will be a long drive out there."

Matt shrugged. "They have hospitals out there too. Keep an eye on him. Keep the wound clean. Keep...."

"I know. I was a medic, remember?"

"Just so you do," he mumbled.

At that point, Derrick woke up. "Time to leave?" he asked rubbing his face as he woke up.

"Yep. I was just going to check the list one more time." Wade went over to the table and picked up the paper, scanning over it with his eyes.

Feeling a little shaky, Derrick sat up, moving Ethan off him and back down to the couch without waking him. Sitting on the side of the couch, he put his forearms down on his knees and tried to overcome the slight dizziness he felt.

"Oh, Tarps. Where would they be at?" Wade looked up from the list.

"I've got a couple old ones out in the shed," Jim suggested. Wade nodded.

"I've got a couple new ones upstairs," Derrick added.

"Okay. I'll go get them." Wade folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "Then we should be all set."

Swaying a little, Derrick got to his feet. "You go to the shed. I'll get the ones upstairs," he stated, wanting to make sure he could walk alright before they left.

"Sure." Wade hurried out the door.

Derrick ambled over, feeling like everyone was watching him, which they were. When he got to the stairs his right knee began to shake a little, but he stiffened himself against it. Grabbing the railing, he made started to climb, forcing his knee not to give way. The further he went the easier it became. He was stiff all over, but his fever felt better. *Hand doesn't ache as much*, he noticed. Coming to the top, he stepped up on the plywood floor. He glanced over at Trent, who appeared to be asleep on the floor. Then he went over to his bed, remembering the new tarps were underneath it. Reaching the nightstand, he picked up Monica's picture and stared at it, a tear coming to his eye. *What's heaven like? Are you enjoying it up there? Are there cabins and woods? Do you have one... like the one we built together? Do you miss me as much as I miss you? Want to see me soon? Can we share your cabin if I come to you shortly?* He stiffened his knee after it gave out. *What's it like to live in a perfect place? No evil people trying to kill you... no one lying about you... or misunderstanding your intentions. Are there horses and mountains? Do you ever get hungry? ... Will you remember me? Do remember me? Have you ever met my parents? Is Dad up there? How are yours? Do you want to see me again? I want to see you.* He gently set the picture down and looked around the loft, wondering if he'd ever see it again. Kneeling down, he reached under the bed and pulled out the two packaged tarps he had to use around the farm back when life was simpler.

"Derrick! Derrick!" Ethan came running up the stairs to the loft and then stopping in front of him. "They say you are leaving."

Derrick nodded, sitting down on the bed. "I have to finish what I started."

"I'll come with you!" Ethan's little face was urgent.

Derrick shook his head. "It's not safe." He was still too tired to be anything but blunt. "I'll be back... Lord willing." He mumbled the last part.

Ethan's face fell. "That's what my dad said."

"So, don't give up on him. We'll find him," Derrick stated confidently. "soon as I'm back." He lifted his eyes to see Trent sitting up watching their conversation. "In the meantime, Trent will find you a nice place to stay," Derrick nodded toward him. Ethan turned around. "We're friends. He'll make sure that you have a nice place to stay until I get back."

"What's your name, sport?" Trent smiled toward him, trying to make friends best he could hand-cuffed to a pipe.

"Ethan," he mumbled, shyly.

Derrick shoved him forward. "Go meet him." If he'd had more energy, he would have gotten up, too. Ethan went over and Derrick watched as the two of them talked. When it seemed like they were hitting it off, he got up, and headed downstairs. "I'll say, 'goodbye,' before I leave," he informed Ethan when he looked at him. Then he went downstairs with the tarps. At the bottom of the stairs, he met Jim and Matt talking. They followed him as he took the tarp out to the truck. After closing the truck door, he turned toward Jim and took a paper out of his pocket. "Here's the directions to where we are going. You will need it to meet us there."

Jim nodded, glanced at the directions, and put them in his pocket. Then he glanced at Wade approaching with the other tarps. "Let's all pray before you go." Derrick nodded.

"Good idea," Wade said as he as he threw the tarps in the back of the truck then came back over. They formed a circle next to the truck.

"Who wants to start?" Jim asked. They looked at each other.

“Go ahead,” Matt nodded toward Jim.

Jim nodded and bowed his head. “Lord, please be with Wade and Derrick as they go know to fight against their enemies and yours. You know they are trying to follow you and believe this is what you’d have for them to do. If it’s not or if any part of it’s not, please guide them at every step, please keep them safe, and show them the way to go, what to do, and how to do it. Please, keep Davy safe and reunite him with his family. And please take this organization down along with the evil they intend and perform toward innocent people. Please avenge the lives of their victims, past and present and set those under their power free. Please, lead me and keep me safe as I intend to go meet them in a few days. Keep Jess and Mellissa safe here at home... and Ethan. Keep him safe, and even reunite him with his father if it be your will. Give Trent wisdom, too, to know what to say and how to handle this situation. In Jesus name, Amen.”

“Heavenly Father,” Matt began. “You know what’s going on a lot better than we do. You know what Satoro and his men are planning right now. Please, give Wade and Derrick wisdom how to react to them. Give them wisdom if they should get the police involved or keep going at it alone. Please, keep them safe as well as the people here and help them to get through this unharmed and to returned complete with Wade’s child. Help Derrick to be able to clear his name and be able to live a normal life again. Thank you for the help he was to me and my daughter when we needed him. I know he didn’t have to help us. Help him to know how much we appreciate it, and please give him the strength and health he needs for this journey. Please, keep everyone healthy and safe. Please keep us protected from misunderstandings especially with the authorities. You know that are intentions are of high moral purpose and not to harm anyone. Please, go with them now as they go and with us as we stay. In Jesus name, amen.”

“Dear Lord,” Wade started, shivering briefly against the cold. “you know we didn’t start this war. It’s are desire to live in peace, but it has come to us anyway. Now, we need strength, wisdom, and courage to win. Any help from you would be greatly appreciated. You know we are outnumbered, and as the others said, generally misunderstood, but we don’t need the help of armies, we only need you to tell us how to get Davy free. It’s our desire that it could be done easily and without bloodshed. We pray that we would all make it back safely and alive, that you would even take care of this battle for us. That we wouldn’t have to fight. You know, I am willing to leave this earth and come to you just please don’t let it be for nothing, see that Davy makes it back to his mother, and that they are taken care of.” His voice broke. “And... and if it’s your will, bring us all back safe that we may serve you again in joy and peace. Amen.”

“Father, thank you that when we are weak then You are strong. We need your strength as we go now. We need your wisdom. We need a plan from you because we don’t really have one. None of us are great military geniuses, and I have a feeling out enemies are, but neither was David when you called him to fight Goliath, neither was Gideon when you called him to fight the Midianites, neither was Moses when you called him to lead your people out of Egypt. We know that in the grand scheme of things our battle might be small, but you also know that it is important. Please, take this evil out of our country. Please, make this land safe for the innocent, and set their captives free. We go now in your power and ask that you to destroy this stronghold of Satan before us. In Jesus name, amen.”

“Dear Lord,” Ethan, who had just joined them began. Everyone who was starting to look up bowed their heads again. “Please keep my new friend, Derrick, safe as he goes to fight these people. Help him to win. Please, take them out. Help me find my dad again. Please, keep him safe. In Jesus name, amen.”

“Amen,” Jim repeated as they all looked up. They all looked around at each other a moment. “All set?” Jim asked.

“Guess so.” Wade headed for the driver’s seat and got in.

Derrick looked down at Ethan, who was gazing up at him with worried eyes. “I’ll be back. Lord willing, I’ll be back shortly, and we’ll find your dad together.” Ethan nodded, slowly. Derrick gave him a soft smile. “Don’t worry. I’m bettin’ it’ll all work out.”

“I hope so.” His voice squeaked.

“It will.” Derrick ducked under the gooseneck of the trailer, went over to the passenger’s side, and got in. Ethan went over and stood next to Jim. Wade started the truck up and pulled out. Ethan, Jim, and Matt all waved to them as they left.

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Four o’ clock pm. Wade slowly drove the truck and trailer down the steep, narrow drive toward the old, one-horse gas station that Derrick finally felt safe stopping at. Wade glanced at the gas-gauge needle, just a hair above E and shook his head to

himself. Sometimes you have to you just have to compromise with people to get along, even if it means giving up long-held safety notions about never letting your car get below a quarter of a tank. Gravel crunched under his tires as he turned the truck into the outer lot and parked near the grass. “Far enough away for ya?”

Reclining in the passenger’s seat, Derrick sat up and looked out into the frosty dusk, first toward the frozen, brown grassy field in front of them and then over toward the small, two-pump South Dakota gas station just as it turned its outside lights on. He nodded. “Yeah.”

Wade nodded back. “I’ll unhook the truck and fill it up.” Wade got out, went back and started unhooking the trailer. Yawning and rubbing his face, Derrick reached into the back, grabbed his coat, and put it on. He got out, went to the back, and opened the trailer. The first horse, the pack horse, turned to look at him. Maverick craned his neck to look over the two horses in front of him and whinnied, impatient to get out. “Ready for some exercise?” Derrick yawned again as he stepped in the trailer, unhooked the pack horse, and led him out. The horse clomped down the ramp and into the snow-dusted gravel. Derrick attacked the long lunging line to his halter, gave him plenty of rope, and then swung the other end toward him to get him to walk in a circle.

Wade drove the truck over after unhooking it and filled it with gas. Then he went inside to use the restroom and buy some snacks. After coming back and hooking the truck up, he went to the side door of the trailer and got the water and couple buckets out. He filled two up and put one in front of the packhorse, Tex, who was tied to the side of the trailer then put the other bucket near where the next horse, his pinto, Windwalker, would be tied when Derrick got done lunging him. Soon as Derrick set the bucket down, Derrick stopped lunging Windwalker, brought the paint over, and tied him up. “How’d you figure out where Red Rim Castle Rock is, anyway?” Wade asked Derrick as he tied the paint.

“Found out when I was down in Mexico.”

“You see Carlos?”

“Briefly.” Derrick headed back to the ramp. Wade followed.

“Has he changed?”

“Not too much.” Derrick went in, untied Maverick, and led the prancing Stallion out. It took some muscle to hold the eager horse down as he snorted, bobbed his head, and pawed the ground until Derrick got the lunge line on him.

“Did you see the main guy, Satoro?”

“From a distance. He didn’t see me.” Derrick gave the horse slack. Instantly, Maverick ran out as far as the rope would allow, initially bucking and kicking. Then he took off in a dead run around in a circle as fast as he could go, sure-footed and fast only slipping once in the snow but barely breaking stride. Derrick had to spin fast to keep up with him, nearly getting dizzy staring at the powerful horse... spinning, charging, galloping around him.

Wade sat down on the trailer, watching Maverick in amazement as he raced full speed around Derrick – the powerful pounding of his hooves chopping up the ice beneath them, the cadenced breath that sounded like a freight train and looked like smoke, the intermitted snort of power and buck of dominance. *That is some horse.* He didn’t even consider himself a real horsey person, yet he was impressed.

Finally tiring, Maverick slowed to a high-stepping prance, snorting loudly three times. Derrick directed him to a trot and then back up to an even canter to cool down before bringing him back to a trot then to a walk.

Wade stepped into the dark trailer and found Danny’s halter as Danny nuzzled him when he got close. “Hey, boy.” He unclipped him and led out the professionally composed gentleman. Wade stopped to wait. Danny stood tall next to him, head high, ears perked. They both watched as Maverick, growing tired of walking, shook his massive neck and mane and pawed the ground, sending ice chips flying. Derrick directed him back to a trot and then a gallop. Soon Maverick was flying around him again at break neck speeds. Wade wondered if they should wait for that spot or go out into the snowy field to find a place of their own. Still, it was a sight to see. Wade stared for several for moments until Maverick finally tired, slowing down, yet snorting and including an occasional buck. Wade glanced from the sweating, snorting outlaw to Jim’s calm and composed yet muscle-bound warhorse standing next to him. He wondered which would win in mortal combat. He glanced from one to the other again. Good thing they’re friends. They’d probably kill each other.

Wade watched as Derrick came over, tied Maverick to the trailer, and then held out his hand for Danny’s lead rope.

“Want me to lunge him?” Wade hesitated a moment. “You can get their water out.”

“No.” Wade tossed his head slightly. “I’ve got this.” He led Danny over to the spot and stood in the middle in Derrick’s footprints. *After all, I’m sure he knows what he is doing.* In fact, he was not only confident that Danny knew what he was doing, but also that he could make him look good as well. *That horse can make anyone look good.* Not that Derrick would care, but he felt a need to increase his cowboy image a little and decrease the city persona if at all possible.

Derrick watched a moment as Wade, following Derrick’s example, cued Danny to walk. Danny circled calmly around in perfect show-horse posture. When he cued him to trot, Danny instantly found his stride, head high, tail high, trotting at a controlled speed. Lastly when cued, he jumped into a gallop at break neck speeds to rival Maverick. “At least, you broke up all the ice for him so he won’t slip,” he told Maverick as he went past to get the water.

Glancing at the powerful, pounding buckskin on his way past, he put the bucket down next to Maverick, loosed the lid on the five-gallon jug and dumped it in. Loosening Maverick’s rope, he let him drink. Holding the rope in one hand and lifting his coat collar higher with the other, he leaned back against the trailer and watched Danny run. Maverick took a long drink and then looked up to watch as well, ears perked. Derrick figured Danny had already run as long in one sitting as Maverick had run in two when Wade finally slowed him back to a canter and then to a trot and a walk. He wasn’t hardly winded as he walked back over calmly and perfectly composed. Derrick felt like wagging his head as Wade and Danny approached them. *Well, aren’t you something? Like man like horse, huh?* He choked up on Maverick’s rope and pulled him right in front of Danny, causing Danny to stop. “What are you doing?” Wade asked, watching Derrick lead the c-necked, prancing, snorting, breath-steaming, horse toward the field.

Yeah well, there’s nothing wrong with being an outlaw. He tossed the lead rope over Maverick’s neck, tied it to the other side of his halter, and then swung up onto him, bareback. “He needs a little more exercise. We’ll be back.” Soon as he nudged him, Maverick took off at a gallop across the field and they soon disappeared into the darkness.

Danny nickered and looked at Wade. “Don’t look at me. We’re staying right here.” He loosened his rope. “Drink your water.” Danny nickered again in protest but then reached down and drank the water.

Derrick felt like it was practically day time with the light from the full moon as they ran through the drifted field, sometimes on bare dirt and then suddenly through a cloud of snow as it kicked up under Maverick’s hooves. He ran in perfect rhythm, covering miles instead of feet. Derrick sucked in the wind they created, loving it. He hadn’t felt this free in months. Seeing the moonlight glistening off an approaching barbed wire fence, he turned Maverick, and they ran up a hill. Maverick slowed a little. Derrick remembering Wade reluctantly turned him back, though he wished they could go like this for hours. He brought him down to a canter to let him catch his breath, but Maverick was soon galloping again, loving the freedom himself.

Derrick slowed him to a walk about a half mile from the truck letting him cool off. He noticed Wade coming from the station with a sack as he approached drive again. He couldn’t help another tinge of jealousy tugging at his heart. He wished he could have the freedom to go in a store without having to worry about stupid security cameras. He tossed his head. *Who needs them?*

Reaching the trailer about the same time as Wade, he dismounted, trying not to be annoyed with Wade simply because *he* had the freedom to go in the store. “I got us some supper.” Wade cheerfully held up the bag.

“Hmm,” Derrick grunted, knowing he should say, “Thank you,” instead. He led his sweaty but much calmer stallion into the trailer next to Danny, got out, put up the ramp, and latched it shut.

Looking into the bag, Wade tried again for a better response. “I got us sandwiches, chips, some orange juice, even a bunch of bananas. For been such a small, out-of-the way...”

“That’s great, Wade. Thank you.” He spoke abruptly as he went past him to the driver’s side of the trailer. “I’ll drive.” He practically charged toward the truck.

“You’re welcome.” Wade shrugged as he turned and went toward the passenger’s side door.

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The night was cold and clear. The moon still shone brightly, glistening off the snow as they turned onto a narrow mountain road. A frosty mist covered the pavement and glistened on the yellow line. The higher they went into the mountains

the mistier it got.

Suddenly the moon became shrouded with clouds. Derrick slowed the truck as the night darkened and frost began to form on the mirrors. He edged close to the center line, eyeing the steep drop-off in the passenger's side. In the darkness, the drop-off seemed bottomless. He sent up a prayer as the truck slid a little on the increasingly slick road. He slowed even further as giant fluffy flakes became to fall and melt on his windshield.

Feeling the slide, Wade woke up and glanced out. Stretching, he yawned, "Where are we?"

Derrick glanced at him briefly and the back to the road. "The end of the line. When the road ends, we're getting out."

"Ends!" Wade sat up straighter and looked down at the mist-shrouded drop-off.

Derrick nodded toward a snowy lane to the side that winded into an unknown destination tucked secretly in the snow-weighted pines. "That's the last house. We should be hitting the barricade anytime now.

Wade stared down into the darkness, memorized by the bottomless cliff. "I'd really rather that you didn't hit it," he spoke absentmindedly, yet expecting at least a slight laugh. He didn't get it. After a moment of silence, he tried something else. "So, we're just going to park on the road?"

"That depends." Derrick twisted his white-knuckle grip around the wheel. "I'd like to go further. Depends on what the road looks like on the other side."

"Hmm." Wade forced himself to stop looking down by sitting up and pressing himself back against the seat. "How much time would that save." Derrick glanced at him, questioningly. "I mean, we're risking getting stuck."

Derrick shrugged in agreement. "Yeah. Quite a few miles, fifteen, twenty, maybe, depending on how far we can get. Then we'll have to park and go off road to the drop."

"How far?"

"Quite a ways," Derrick sighed the response as if Wade should have known that.

Wade nodded. "Just curious. I like specifics." *Even if I can't get any.* He glanced back down. "Let's hope it's clear enough to...." He looked back up as the truck came to a stop. "Or not." They both stared at the eight-foot pile of plowed up snow, directly behind the barricade.

Derrick finally broke the silence. "I guess they had to put it somewhere." He relaxed his white-knuckled grip and let his hands slide down the wheel. The charge had ended, at least for a while anyway."

"Why there?" Wade tried not to whine, though he felt overwhelmed.

"Maybe because no one's supposed to be going through there."

"Well, when they close a road, they really close it. You'd think it'd take all summer to melt," he mumbled, annoyed.

"Yeah. Maybe they push it off the edge come spring," he mumbled back.

"Maybe." They both just stare at it for several moments. Wade finally broke the silence, yawning and stretching. "Well, Mountain Man, ready for a twenty-mile ride?"

"More like thirty-five or forty till we actually get there." He kept staring.

"Wonderful, and we don't even know if we're going in the right direction."

"Yeah, we do, but we shouldn't start tonight." He zipped up his coat. "We shouldn't take those horses on this road in the dark." He put on his gloves. "We shouldn't take the horses on this road at all if we can help, one spooks close to that edge...."

"Yeah." Wade looked down again. "You want to lead 'em that whole way?"

"Nope." Thrusting the door open, Derrick got out and walked toward the drift.

*Why aint I gonna like what you're thinking?* Wade started to get out, but when his door got pushed back by the cold

wind, his desire for warmth coaxed him to wait a little longer. *No need to rush things.* He watched Derrick, illuminated by the headlights, walk up to the clumpy, snow-packed drift and then go off road and squeeze behind it, and then reemerge on the other side, walking very carefully around it trying not to get any closer than he already was to the edge. Brushing the snow off his jeans, he came back to the truck and got in. "Well?" Derrick asked.

"Well, get your gloves on and let's start moving snow."

"You've got to be kidding?" Wade answered in disbelief.

"Nope." Derrick shook his head. "The snow's only a couple inches deep on the other side. We can easily drive through it."

"Do you know how long it's going to take to shovel a path wide enough for this truck and trailer through that mound?"

"One night." Wade answered, matter-a-factly.

"Would it be longer to walk the horse's twenty miles?"

Derrick shrugged. "There's also the return trip, and this way the horses will be fresh."

"Yeah, but we won't."

"We're ridin'. Come on," He slapped Wade across the chest with his forearm. "Get your coat. I'll get the shovels." He got out.

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Still as a statue, Kara Lee held her breath as she heard the tack room door squeak open and saw a glimmer from a flashlight wafting around. She saw portions of a dark shadow lean in, heard shovels scraping against the floor, heard the door squeak shut, and then indiscernible voices outside. She wondered if they were there... wherever there was. She sneezed on the dust the wind from outside had kicked up then her eyes widened as she wondered if anyone had heard. *They wouldn't have the nerve to kick me out anyway this far from home.* She hoped.

Putting her hands on the bale of hay concealing her, she pushed herself up to her knees and climbed though between the bales on the ground and the saddles up above her. It was a tight squeeze, but she made it through and climbed over the subsequent bales to the door, accidentally sneezing again before she opened it.

Peering out, she looked around, squinting to see in the dim moonlight. She looked down at the road then at the glistening guard rail. She tried to see how far down but couldn't tell. She glanced toward the truck... at the steaming exhaust. *Still on? Maybe they aren't stopping here.* She looked around, wondering where they were at. She didn't want to sneak too far away. She had visions of them driving off without her and then visions of herself freezing on top of Mt. Everest. Deciding to chance it, she carefully closed the door, trying to avoid the squeak and snuck up even with the truck. Peering into the headlights, she watched them hacking away with shovels at a mound of snow that looked practically twice as tall as they were. *They've got to be kidding.* She watched a while longer. *Gotta give 'em credit though. As Gramps would say, "They got Moxy."* Turning, she headed back toward her chilly cubby-hole shelter to cuddle up under the horse blankets tucked in her spot behind the hay. *Might as well take a nap. Looks like we're gonna be here a while.*

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Hours later, Kara Lee shivered awake, momentarily forgetting where she was in the darkness and then quickly remembering when she sneezed on some hay. Back aching from her crunched position, she twisted around, whacking her head on the saddle rack as she straightened out. "Ouch," she mumbled, more annoyed than hurt. Rubbing her head, she stared up into the darkness, wondering what time it was but not sure if she wanted to go to the trouble to find out. Sighing, she contorted herself again, slowly squeezing her hand into her squished pocket until she was able to get a hold of the edge of her phone and pull it out – 5am. She wondered how close the guys were to breaking through the mountain of snow. Her stomach rumbled. She wondered how brave she was to try and sneak into their truck to swipe some food. She wondered what they would do if they spotted her. She wagged her head. *Derrick'd probably tie me up somewhere in a tree to freeze. Wade would probably... go along with whatever Derrick wanted.* She sighed, trying to ignore the stomach pains for a while longer... at least until she could come up with a plan.

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"I need a breather." Puffing out steam, Wade stuck his shovel in the wall of snow beside him, climbed up on the clumpy, iced-over snow, and sat down.

Derrick nodded, standing up straight, leaning on his shovel, and letting his breath out slowly. "Almost there."

"Yeah." Wade stared down at their two-man tunnel through the massive drift and tried to calculate how long it would take to widen it enough for a truck. He let out a deep breath of steam and stared into the distance toward the fading stars and the sky just beginning to lighten to dawn. He glanced back as Derrick resumed throwing snow and smiled. "You sure got a lot of manpower. I'm sorry for anything I ever said about you," he joked.

Derrick huffed a laugh as he glanced back up. "All bad things?"

Wade smiled as he slid back down the snow. "Not always." Groaning softly as he bent over, he grabbed his shovel once again and thrust it into the icy mound without enough force, causing it to bounce right back at him. He glanced back at Derrick who was chopping and tossing shovel after shovel in almost a mechanical rhythmic motion. "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Why don't you go to the truck and get us some energy bars? Maybe that'll pick us up."

*Like you need a pick-me-up.* He remembered the ones he had put in his coat pocket earlier. "Here." He tossed one to Derrick. Derrick caught it.

"Thanks." Derrick stuck his shovel in the snow, unwrapped the bar and began eating it. Wade followed suit even though he wasn't the least bit hungry. He had too many other things on his mind. Without thinking it through, he spoke his mind. "Seriously though, do you really care about getting Davy back or is your main priority taking down Satoro?"

"Both." He leaned his arm on his shovel handle as he ate. Staring at Wade a moment, solemnly, he added, "Why do you think I'm a cold-hearted villain that doesn't regard human life?"

Whoops. You offend him and this whole mission could go...."I don't!" he quickly, replied. "I was just wondering which one was more important to you."

"They are equally important." Derrick looked at little offended. "It's not like I have a grudge fight with him. Satoro and his organization have negatively impacted a lot of lives not just yours. He needs to be stopped. I gather you'd prefer to just run in grab your baby and run out, hoping that you'd be done with him and both of you could go back to doing your thing."

"The rest isn't any of our business."

"Just ignore what he is?" Derrick's voice held passion and anger.

Wade sighed. "Sometimes I think you'd make a better a better cop than a paramedic, except for the fact you don't like rules." He initiated eye contact. "You're not one."

Derrick cracked his to the side. "Sandervauh and Satoro dealt me into this hand. It wasn't my idea."

"Sure, it was," Wade answered, softly. "You didn't have to help Matt."

Derrick huffed. "No-o-o, I could have just let them...."

"I don't get you. You've always worked as a paramedic, yet you never seemed to care about people at all. Remember that boy that fell out of the tree? Wade deepened his voice. "Any lunkhead should know that a one inch round dead branch isn't going to support one hundred pounds or weight. The cat had more sense. What makes you think you could go where a ten-pound cat couldn't? ...and his mother...." He raised his voice pitch. "You can't talk to my baby like that! Did you hear what he called my son? I want to talk to the man in charge here! With your manners I don't know how you paced grade school! I need a competent EMT to look at my child! Could I get some help over here, please! Just look at my boy! He's bleeding to death! ...and everyone's just like, 'where?'"

Derrick laughed at Wade's reenactment. "It wasn't that bad."

"Oh, yes, it was."

Derrick nodded. "Cap was pretty...."

"Yeah well, she did call somebody. Who'd she call?"

Derrick shook his head. "I don't remember."

"But like Matt," Wade continued. "You go way out on a limb to find him and rescue him and then you keep them against their will for a...."

"A higher cause," Derrick interrupted. "Otherwise, he'd just keep going hurting more and more people."

"Yeah, but they aren't your responsibility! ... If you'd gone through proper channels...."

Derrick yanked his shovel from the snow. "Yeah well, neither are you!"

Wade clamped his mouth shut. "Sorry." He grabbed his shovel and resumed working, trying to think of a way to change the subject, afraid Derrick might rethink his decision to help him. Still, he wanted Derrick's priority to be on Davy's safety not Satoro's capture. "You know, even if you do take out Satoro, somebody will probably just take over for him like he did for Sandervauh."

Derrick gritted his teeth, throwing snow like a high-powered machine. "Then I'll take them, too! ... with God's help," he mumbled the last part.

Wade huffed a laugh, pausing to watch him. "I believe you could."

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Pulling the covers higher, Jim rolled over in his firehouse bunk again. He figured he might as well just get up at this point. All night he'd been trying to turn his mind off and go to sleep. All night he'd failed. They had had one call around midnight, a minor car crash, but even there his mind wandered to killers and kidnapers. Two days off a vacation day and two more days... the time would start in a few short hours. He couldn't stop wondering what those five days would bring. Would he be back lying on this cot again on day six... or not? Was he painting a target on himself and his family by showing up to battle with Derrick and Wade? Was there truly a way to help and yet go unnoticed? He hoped so. He tossed himself over. Then again, we probably are already potential targets of the Sandervauh regime. Maybe taking them out, is the only way to have peace. He yanked up the covers and tossed over again. *Take them out.... I'm supposed to save lives. How'd I manage to get myself involved with....* Yanking the covers free too hard, he tumbled off the bed. Laying on the floor he stared up at Dan who sat up sideways, propping himself up with his forearm and stared down at him. "Why don't you go not sleep in the other room, so the rest of us can."

"Might as well." Jim stood up, yanked his blanket free, and walked out.

## Snow Mountain

"That. Should. Be. Just about. Good." Finally tired out, Derrick threw his last shovel full, stuck the shovel in the snow, and cracked his back as he stood up. Wade threw a couple more shovel loads from his side just to be sure. Derrick stared off at the glowing orange dome just beginning to ascend over the distant mountain peak. "We should get going before someone sees us." He glanced toward distant house lane they had passed last night.

"Oh, there's no one out here." Wade threw one last shovel. "Don't you ever rest?"

"Come on. Let's go." Derrick picked up his shovel and headed back for the truck.

"Alright." Wade followed him. "Maybe I should drive."

"Why?" He thrust open the tack door and tossed his shovel in.

Wade set his shovel next to Derrick's. "Because you haven't slept since..."

"Have you ever drove on a snow-covered road in the mountains?" Derrick asked roughly.

"No." Wade shook his head. "Have you?"

Derrick simply slammed the door and got the key from his pocket as he charged toward the driver's side truck door. "Let's go."

"Okay." Shrugging, Wade got in the passenger's side. His one conciliation was that he didn't believe Derrick ever allow himself to get killed, so he figured it was safe to go with him. They pulled down their seatbelts simultaneously. Derrick flipped on four-wheel drive, took the truck from the shoulder a little faster than he had wanted, causing a little slide. He went slowly through the barricade, and very slowly through the walled-up snow, brushing it with the right side of his truck, dusting some snow off but thankfully not causing it to fall. Wade held his breath until their complete truck and trailer were through. Then he let out an audible sigh of relief. Derrick smiled at Wade's response, but didn't glance at him staying totally focused on keeping a steady amount of pressure on the gas, not too much so they slip, not too little so they get stuck especially in one of the deeper drifts. Staring out at the completely white, deeply snow-covered road, Derrick stayed close to the left, using the mountain side as his guide since he couldn't see where the road ended on the drop-off side.

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Kara Lee pushed herself off the bale of hay she had flopped into when they took off. She had a feeling she should be worried. She could feel the peril by their extremely slow speed. She couldn't believe he had slid going this slow. She could feel the pull of the trailer plowing through the deep snow. She had visions of the trailer sliding to the side and over the edge or pushing the truck wildly down an icy hill. She swallowed hard, kind of wishing she wasn't in here as the trailer swerved again, right, left, right, and back to middle. Visions of the trailer breaking free from the truck hitch made her stomach tight. She started to question her impetuous attitude. *Maybe sneaking into this trailer wasn't such a good idea after all..., but if you didn't, you'd never know the end of the story. ... If I get stranded in the snow on top a subzero mountain top in a no cellphone reception zone, I'm changing careers! I'll go work in a grocery store! I'll flip burgers at...! Ahh!* She buried her head in the hay as the trailer weaved again.

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"Be careful!" Wade thrust his hand on the dash as they started to slide toward the drop-off side from the left-hand lane, across the right, and stopped inches from the guard rail. Derrick tried to gun it several times, but the tires just spun and they kept sliding.

Derrick shook his head as soon as they stopped. "The trailer's not liking the deep snow, probably the tires. I think this is ice, though. We don't have anything that will work for chains, do we?"

Wade shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Yeah." Truck and trailer in a V, truck pointed toward the road, trailer pointed toward the edge, Derrick applied the gas very slightly. The trailer stayed put, but the truck slid sideways closer to the edge. The corner of the back bumper scraped the guardrail. Derrick was grateful for the guardrail, anyway.

"It's going the wrong way!" Wade stated the obvious.

"Yeah." Derrick threw open his door and got out.

Wade pushed his open as far as it would go against the guardrail and squeezed out, getting slightly dizzy when he looked over the edge. He went around the front of the truck and followed Derrick back around to the trailer's side door.

Kara Lee held her breath and scrunched down lower when she heard the door open and saw light flood in. She listened as they rummaged through the supplies, hoping they wouldn't want her horse blanket. She felt them slide, she wondered what they were going to do. She wondered if she should get out. She decided against it. She didn't figure they would let anything happen to the truck or else they would be stranded and freeze to death. She pulled her horse blanket closer. Maybe she's sneak a peek at their situation a little later.

Wade followed Derrick to the back of the trailer. "What are you going to do with those ropes and towels?"

"Gonna see if those saddle horses can pull." He tossed Wade a spool of rope. "Ever make a harness?"

"No." Wade looked at the rope. "Have you?"

Derrick yanked open the back trailer doors and pulled down the ramp. "There's a first time for everything."

"Yeah." Wade skated around on the ice. "I hope they don't break a leg."

"Will use the pack horse and Wind Walker," Derrick stated, not hearing Wade. Untying them, he led them out.

"Thanks a lot," Wade muttered as 'his' mount was chosen. "They're the most expendable, eh?"

Derrick glanced from Wind Walker to Wade. "You can ride Danny if anything happens to him." He tied each horse to one side of the trailer then he untied the spool of rope and scattered it. "Besides they'll be okay. They are the most calm."

"I know," Wade muttered again. *That's why he's nice to ride.*

"Make him a nice harness," Derrick suggested as he wrapped a towel around the center of his rope and tossed it over the horse's shoulders.

Shrugging, Wade unwound his rope and started copying Derrick's procedure. Halfway through, he couldn't help being a little annoyed when Derrick's plan didn't work and they both had to untie all their knots and start over. About forty-five minutes later, they had the harnesses functional, the horse's in front of the truck, and the ropes tied to the axle. "You want to drive the truck or lead the horses?"

Wade glanced from the truck leaning toward the edge propped up by the guard rail to the two horses held by Derrick trying to go in opposite directions, sliding on the ice. *Aint there a third option?* "You choose."

"I'll guide the horse's then."

"Alright." Wade nodded as he headed for the truck. Touching the handle, he looked up and sent up a passionate prayer for safety before getting in. He opted not to buckle or shut the door in case he wanted to jump out. He turned it on, put it in neutral, and cranked the wheel all the way to the left. "Okay! Go ahead!"

"Come on, guys." He led the horses. They took a few steps forward then Wind Walker stopped and the pack horse slid backwards. Derrick coaxed the packhorse forward. They got together, all took a commanding step, and all slid backwards. Derrick rubbed his cowboy hat back and forth on his head.

Wade put it in park, got back out, and walked over to him. "It's just this one patch of ice." Derrick looked back and forth at the massive twenty-foot patch of ice and nodded lethargically. "I mean, maybe we could shovel some of that snow over here for more traction." Groaning inwardly at that thought, Derrick closed his eyes and rubbed his cowboy hat back and forth again, trying to wake himself up. "Or..." Derrick glanced at him, hopefully. "Wait just a minute." Wade hurried back to the trailer as fast as he could without slipping. Sighing, Derrick took off his hat and leaned forward, resting his forehead on Wind Walker's, letting the horse hold him up. "This 'ill work!" Derrick stood back up to see Wade toting a half bale of hay. He put some around each of the tires, a small path in front of the truck and then came over and scattered a thick path of in front of the horses.

Wind Walker reached down for a snack, but Derrick pulled him back up. "You can eat later."

Wade hurried back for the truck. "Let's try this again!" Derrick nodded in response. "Okay! All set!" Derrick led the horses forward. This time they had traction and so did the truck. It took a few hard tugs from the horses to get it started, but once it did, the truck and trailer easily slid back over to the other side of the road. However, when Derrick released the pressure from the horse's it began to slide right back down to where it was. "Hey, wait!" Wade yelled as it started to slide.

"Sorry!" Derrick reengaged the horses and led them forward, pulling it the remaining ten feet to the snow. They strained to get the heavy equipment across the ice and were stopped as soon as the front tires hit the snow. "Let's hope it stays!" Derrick yelled. He backed the horse's up to release the pressure. It slid just a smidgen. He reengaged the horses.

Wade jumped out. "There's no guard rail here!"

"I know." They all just stood there and thought a moment. "Why don't you put it in drive. Just give it a tiny bit of gas. Go real slow!"

Wade nodded and jumped back in. Wade glanced from side to side of the narrow road. If he gave it too much gas, there wasn't really anywhere to get out of the way. Thankfully, he didn't. He led the horses forward as Wade touched the gas. They soon had all ten wheels in the snow and the horses loaded back in the trailer.

"I'll drive," Wade stated as they closed the trailer up.

Derrick's brow furrowed, but he was just too weary to argue, so he nodded. Wade hurried to the driver's seat, jumped in, and buckled up. Derrick trudged to the passenger's seat, staring down the mountain side as he walked past. Getting in, he reclined the seat and put his cowboy hat over his face. Wade shrugged as he put it in drive, surprised Derrick was calm enough to sleep. He wondered if Derrick was really that confident in his driving abilities, or if he was just reconciled to death at this point and didn't care.

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"You just get home?" Yawning, Jess glanced at the clock as she walked into the kitchen.

"Yeah, a couple of minutes ago." Jim stirred his cereal before taking another bite.

"I wish you didn't have to go." Pulling the knot on her robe tighter, she sat down at the table across from him. "I mean it's not like I have a real bad feeling about it or anything." She pulled a cluster of grapes from the fruit bowl and set it down in front of her. "It's just when I think about it logically that..."

Jim nodded as he took another bite. "Yeah, I know."

She reached across the table and took his free hand, clutching it tightly. "Just make sure you come home."

"Yeah." He raised his eyebrows as he swallowed. "I intend to."

"I'll be praying for you... every minute." Forcing a smile, she played with his hand a few moments, flopping it around before letting it go.

Jim nodded. "Thanks. I did that." He looked her in the eye. "I promise you that I won't get any closer than I have to. I only said that I'd go to look after the horses... and bring back any bad news," He raised his eyebrows again. "Should things not work out?"

Jess's brow furrowed then she nodded. "Both me and Mellissa will be praying that it does... work out... good." She slowly ate a grape.

"We all will be." Jim tipped his bowl to drink the rest of the milk. "I should be going." He stood up and took his bowl toward the counter, stopping momentarily to kiss Jess. "I'll be careful. Not worry." He whispered in her ear. "Make sure you are to... especially going to the barn alone."

She nodded. "I will. I always am, and there hasn't been anyone around here." She kissed him back, and then got up to turn toward him.

"I hope that doesn't change," he mumbled as he put the bowl in the sink.

Turning back, he gazed a moment at his beautiful wife, feeling grateful for how lucky he was. Walking toward her, he stopped and put his hands around her waist. Smiling, she draped her arms over his shoulders and stood on her toes to reach him as they kissed. A charge raced up her spine and through her neck, down, and then back up as one long kiss turned into two and then three. Needing air, she finally broke it off, looking down and laughing lightly. "Think that will hold you for a couple of days?" She looked back up, her eyes dancing.

"I'm not sure." His eyes pleaded playfully. "Maybe we should try that again... just to be sure."

"Hmm.... Well, maybe, just to be on the safe side...." Worried look, he nodded and then smiled as she rose to her toes again.

They embraced and started to kiss again just as they heard someone bounding down the stairs and then jump to the landing. "Has he left, yet?!"

Jim pulled away. Jess cleared her throat and turned around to face the door. Jim draped his arms down in front of her.

Jess smiled at Ethan as he came running into the room. "Not yet." She stepped away from him toward the table.

"Please, won't you take me with you?" He ran to Jim and looked up at him.

Jim shook his head. "It's going to be a long hard journey."

"I can handle it." His eyes were eager.

"No reason why you should." Jim's eyes were firm but compassionate. "You'll be a lot safer and happier here. Just trust me on that." He turned back toward the sink to get his water bottle and five-gallon water jug from the counter. Ethan's face fell a little, but he also looked like he understood and agreed.

"You gonna leave right, now? Don't you want to sleep a little first?"

Jim shook his head as he pulled the jug from the counter. "I got plenty of sleep at the station last night. No calls at all."

"That's good." She nodded. Jim stopped next to her for one more quick kiss on his way past. "Just be careful," she whispered after kissing him.

He nodded. "I will. See you in a couple of days." He headed out. Jess followed. Ethan ran after them. "Take 'em down! Take 'em out!" He moved his hands like an action figure. "Make 'em pay! May the force...."

Jim stopped and looked back at him a little disapprovingly. "That's not why I'm going. First of all, I don't even plan to be involved if there is any fighting which we hope there isn't. Secondly, I'm not going for revenge. I'm simply going to help a friend get back something he has lost, okay?"

Ethan looked down, not impressed, then back up, eyes fiery. "They deserve to die."

Jim nodded. "Maybe so, but not from me."

"Then someone else should go." He gritted his small teeth.

Jim glanced at Jess. Jess nodded, knowingly. "We'll be fine. Be safe."

Putting on his cowboy hat, he kissed her once more going out. "While I'm gone...." He looked over at Ethan and spoke loudly. "you can tell certain people why the Lord teaches us that some things should be left to the law." He looked into the boy's stubborn, angry face then back at Jess. "Maybe I'll feed the horses before I go. Want to help me?" He glanced back at Ethan. Ethan's face brightened a little as he nodded, but kept his arms crossed. "Well, get your coat and come out then." He went out.

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"Careful." Derrick removed his cowboy hat from his face and looked out as they plowed through another snow drift and slid to the side.

"I am." Wade glanced toward him. "If I slow down, we're gonna get stuck."

"Better stuck than dead," Derrick mumbled, still reclining.

"I know how to drive."

"I know you do. Just be careful. We've got plenty of time."

Wade slowed a little and then a little more, causing the wheels to start to lag and the engine to labor. He sped up a little more, trying to find a good speed, just as he did, they hit a little ice and the truck swerved.

Gripping the saddle rack, Kara Lee took a deep breath as the when they finally stopped sliding. There had been so many times on this trip that she figured she was on her final act of her last rodeo and yet wasn't, she had to conclude that lady luck was smiling her way. Closing her eyes, she released the saddle rack and plopped her head back down on the blanket.

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Stopping in the isle after coming back inside next to his next stall, Jim glanced over to see Ethan half way down the ladder, leaning back into it, holding up a bale of hay nearly as big as him in front of him. Smiling to himself, Jim walked over,

stepped up on the bottom step and grabbed the bale with one hand and put his other hand on the boy to steady him. "Here, let me get it." Ethan nodded, released the bale, stepped around it, and climbed down. Moving his hand to the center of the bale and grasping both loops of twine, Jim let the bale fall to his side and then climbed down, lugging it with one hand. Still out of breath, Ethan brushed the hay off his shirt as he followed Jim over to the stall where he dropped the bale of hay. "Well, I almost got it."

"That you did." Jim reached in his pocket for his knife.

"I can get it for you." Ethan pulled a folded knife from his pocket and opened it. Kneeling down, he sawed through the first twine and then the second one.

"Where'd you get that?" Jim grabbed two slabs, pulled open the stall door, and put them in the feeder.

"My dad gave it to me... for my last birthday. *They* never got it from me," he stated, proudly, puffing his chest out as he closed it and returned it to his pocket."

"You're pretty good with that thing. You must know the two most important rules of owning a knife.

Ethan looked at him questioningly as Jim bent down and grabbed and grabbed four more slabs for the mare and foal. "Of course, I do."

Jim nodded as he walked to the stall. "What is it?"

Ethan grabbed a handful of hay and followed him. "Don't lose it?"

"Nope." Jim pulled open the stall door, smiled at the foal, went over to the feeder, and dumped in the hay. "Here, put that with this." He motioned for Ethan to come over." Ethan looked at the big horse and then tentatively walked past to the feeder. "There you go." Jim patted the boy on the back as he put the hay in on top of Jim.

"Be careful. Don't hurt yourself?" Ethan guessed as he followed him out.

Jim closed the stall door behind him. "That's one of them," he answered as they headed back to the hay. "What's the other one?" He picked up the other half of bale and toted it toward the arena.

"Um... a... I don't kn..."

"What about the people around you?"

"Don't hurt anyone else?"

"That's right." Jim unhooked the chain and went in the arena. "Not unless you are *very* sure they are trying to kill you." He followed Jim into the arena. "That's a big responsibility." He pointed toward Ethan's pocket. Ethan looked down toward it. "You're awful young for such a big responsibility." Ethan stiffened, afraid he shouldn't have told him, afraid he would try to take the last thing of his father's away. "Make sure you take it seriously. Remember it's not a toy." He looked him in the eye. "Human life is sacred. Courts and laws are made for criminals and for settling revenge. The only good reason to ever kill is for self-defense or for defense of one we love." Clutching the knife in his pocket, Ethan nodded.

## Ride to Red Rim Castle Rock

The truck increasingly labored as the snow deepened until the wheels could do nothing but spin. Derrick put it in reverse and then drive, trying to rock the truck back and forth. Wade grabbed the door as truck started to slide toward the ditch. Derrick let it slide to a stop then he put it in park. "I guess this is as good of place to stop as any."

Wade stared out toward the snowy rolling hill with cliffs and peaks scattered around, purple mountains in the distance. "Yeah. Good idea... since we don't have a choice anyway. How far is it from where you wanted to stop, anyway?"

“Can’t be that far.” Derrick yanked the zipper up on his coat. “Ready to saddle ‘em up?”

“Yeah, but you’re not.” Wade reached in the back and grabbed Matt’s medical supply bag and put it in Derrick’s lap. “Want me to do it, or you want to clean it yourself?”

“I can do it.” His voice said yes, but his face said, no.

“Oh, here, let me do it.” Wade turned sideways, opening the bag and putting it on the floor at the same time. He put a towel under his hand and unwrapped the gauze. At least with Derrick, he knew he could go fast regardless of the pain it caused, and that was better for both of them. Holding his wrist firm, he pulled the dressing out, cleaned out the residual puss, dumped antiseptic in the wound, repacked it, spread the cream around the outside, and started rewrapping it, almost in one motion. He glanced up at Derrick just to see if his eyes were watering or anything. There weren’t. Man, if all my patients had been like you, I could have stayed a paramedic. He tied it off, got out the bottle of antibiotic and the syringe, and pierced the syringe through the rubber lid on the antibiotic while Derrick rolled up his sleeve and disinfected his arm almost unable to keep up with Wade. Then he pierced the needle into Derrick’s arm at the same time as he grabbed the sample bottle of meds from the bag and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” Derrick said, accepting it but quickly setting it down as Wade handed him a bottle of water and an energy bar. He pressed down and unscrewed the lid to the meds as he watched Wade throw the trash in the trash bag and the medical supplies in their bag and then grab two energy bars, zipped his coat, opened his car door, and jumped out. “I’ll get the horses out, all except Danny.”

Derrick just nodded, getting the message loud and clear. This aint gonna be no stroll up to the top of the mountain. He popped the pill in his mouth and swallowed the entire bottle of water. Wade was in fire drill mode, and he knew from experience that Wade’s fire drill mode could easily last the entire day. He rolled his sleeve back down, buttoned the cuff, put his coat on, tore the wrapper on his energy bar, and slowly got out, eating the bar as he walked to the trailer. Wade already had all three horses out and was loading the packhorse. He wondered how it would be if he just leaned against the trailer and waited for Wade to do the work. He leaned his shoulder against it to test the theory out. He watched Wade run back and forth from truck and trailer until the pack horse was all loaded, so much so, you could barely see the horse, but he didn’t seem to be struggling any under the weight, Derrick noticed. “Go back and take a nap, if you want,” Wade addressed him. “I take it, we got a long ride to go?” Derrick nodded, slowly. “Seriously then. Rest now, while I get everything ready to go.”

Derrick shrugged and headed back to the truck. *Whatever you say.*

Wade continued on at break-neck speeds until all the horses were saddled. Then he filled the hay bag for Danny, loosened his rope, put a water bucket next to him, and closed up the trailer. Then he walked to the truck to get Derrick. Stopping by the window, he saw he was sleeping and momentarily wondered if he should wait. Looking up toward the sun, he suddenly feared the day was going too fast and pulled open the door. “Hey,” He shoved his arm. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” Rolling from his side to his back, Derrick sat up. “Do we have everything?”

“Yep.”

“Plenty of food, hay....”

“Yes.”

“The medicine bag, the tarps, the rifles....”

“Yes, yes. Everything on the list.”

“Okay.” Derrick rubbed his face and then stood out of the truck. “Let’s go then.” He headed back toward the horses. Wade looked at his phone on the way back. “Something wrong?”

“Don’t have any service. They are supposed to message me sometime about Davy with the final directions.”

Derrick nodded. “Wait until we get up a little higher. It’ll come back.” Derrick untied Maverick and walked him away from the trailer.

“I just hope it goes through if he,” He untied the Windwalker and the pack horse. “sends it when we are out of service.”

He mounted Windwalker, looped the pack horse's rope over Windwalker's saddle, and headed him toward the open range."

Derrick circled Maverick, trying to get him to calm down. Then he jumped. Getting one foot in the stirrup, he swung his leg over at the same time then circled the horse again, but as soon as he was straight again, Maverick took off, prancing after Windwalker, and then passed him and trotted across the range.

Surprised, Wade nudged Windwalker faster, glad they were hurrying, but surprised Derrick wanted, too. Noticing Wade catch up, Derrick loosened his hold on the reins and let Maverick go into a gallop. After all, it was smoother than a trot, and he really didn't feel like pulling him holding him back for hours. It took some doing, but Wade got both of his horses to gallop together, not fast enough to keep up with Derrick but fast enough to keep him in sight. After about ten minutes, Maverick slowed to a stop. Wade caught up with them and slowed to a stop as well. "You know," Wade began, a little breathless, lungs aching from the cold. "you ever stop to think how much trust I'm putting in you? I mean, I don't even know where we are going."

"Red rim castle rock." Derrick looked straight ahead at the snowy terrain.

"You know what I mean."

"You want to go back all you have to do is follow the tracks." Derrick glanced behind them at their tracks in the snow.

"Yeah. Talk about burning your bridges behind you. How do you expect me to get the truck and trailer out?"

"It may take some shoveling."

"Yeah. Some." Windwalker trudged through the knee-deep snow. Maverick start trotting again, tail held high yet still dragging in the snow. Wade nudged Windwalker faster. He started to trot, and the packhorse tripped, falling to his knees, chin touching the snow before he got up again. "Hey! The snow's too deep for that!" Wade called out as Derrick pulled farther away.

Derrick pulled Maverick to a stop, circling him a few times to get him to wait. Maverick jumped all four feet out of the snow, not liking being so deep in it. *Sorry, boy, but you have to suffer through inconveniences when you have other folks tagging along.* Derrick let him trot in a circle so he didn't feel like he was sinking in the snow.

Wade gazed over the terrain as he caught up to Derrick, miles and miles of empty snow, no houses in view in any direction. "I hate to bring this up," Wade began as they started walking side-by side, Windwalker trudging, Maverick prancing, "but what if he's onto you? What if when he messages me, he tells us to go somewhere else?"

"Then," Derrick worked to hold Maverick back. "Then we've got a problem." Wade mentally rolled his eyes. His mind raced to try and think of a way to solve that problem. "I don't think he will. I think he's been planning this for a long time. I think Savdevauh, the younger one that's in jail, has some sort of mental attachment to this place. I couldn't figure out what, but I think something went down here were a lot of people got killed."

"Then why would he want to come back here?!" Wade exclaimed.

"I don't know." Derrick shook his head, thoughtfully. "Haven't figured that out, yet."

Wade's heart rate sped up. "Derrick, are you sure you know what you are doing?"

Derrick yanked Maverick to a stop and stared into Wade's eyes. "I did not ask you to come with me. I'm going after Satoro, and I found my own trail! You want to do something different in regards to your son... go... ahead." They both stared each other down for several minutes, Derrick in an attempt to maintain dominance, Wade in an attempt to read into Derrick's mind, soul, and intentions. Wade's mind went back to the days when they had worked together. He'd learned then that Derrick could do risky things to get out of almost any situation, but he never asked anyone to go with him. He recalled a time when they were trapped in an old warehouse with fire all around and the roof about to go. There were five of them, the guy with the hose and two from a rescue squad across town. Fire was going through a gas line, creating a wall of fire that cut off a quarter of the building and engulfed the walls, melting most the doors to the point they wouldn't open. There were only two ways out... only one way as the other three saw it. They maintained the only way was to go all the way to the other side of the warehouse, where the fire was less, where they had come in. Derrick disagreed. He said it would take too long, the roof was about to go. He wanted to run through the wall of fire at its thinnest point and run a much shorter distance to the wall and break through a window to get out. The other three had called him crazy and said they were going to report him for making such a suggestion. Wade recalled it just as it had been yesterday. The three left, yelling for him to come, spraying down the flames as they went.

Derrick headed toward the wall of fire in the other direction. He stood there, trying to decide, then suddenly took off after Derrick. Together they ran through the flames, the heat so unbearable that their fireproof coats caught fire, so hot that he had started to black out. He remembered starting to fall and Derrick reaching back to yank him through. He remembered, almost in a daze, running to the window and jumping through. He remembered falling and blacking out as he hit the ground. He remembered waking up in the hospital a day later with severe burns and a broken arm and cracked hip. He remembered the moment when he had learned that the other three never made it out of the building. "No." Wade spoke softly. "I'll go with you."

Nodding, sitting tall in the saddle, Derrick nudged Maverick to go. Maverick walked slowly, submissively feeling Derrick's anger when he got yanked to a stop. Wade and Windwalker followed, dragging the clomping, heavily loaded packhorse behind.

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After a half hour of silence, Kara Lee was reasonable sure the guys must have left, so she ventured out of her hiding place behind the hay, thankful they took the hay from the back of the truck and not hers. Thankful to finally be able to stand up straight, she stretched get the kinks out that had formed on the long journey. *I wonder if they left me any food?* She thought as she opened the trailer door and stepped out into the frosty morning. *Brrr...* She pulled her coat closer and then zipped it shivering briefly against the nipping wind. She looked all around, trying to figure out where they went. She walked to the back of the trailer and noticed the hoof prints heading out into the snow. She gazed down the trail and stared into the distance, trying to see them. She didn't. *Wow. I wonder where they are going. Wherever they're going that's where the story is.* She put her hand in her pocket and fingered her trusty camera, wondering how long it would take to catch up to them on foot.

Her mind started going over the things that were left in the trailer, trying to decide what she should take and how she should carry it. She walked to the truck, hoping it was unlocked. It wasn't. She gazed in the back window at the food Derrick left, her stomach rumbling. She racked her mind for a way to get in without hurting the truck but came up with nothing. She fingered the hunting knife on the side of her belt and wondered if this was going to be a time to dust off her survival skills. She looked up when she heard a nicker come from the trailer. "What'd they forget one?"

She walked back and opened the trailer door to see Danny standing there staring at her. "What are you doing here?" She walked in and started rubbing the beautiful, muscular buckskin. "Did they forget you? Why bring you? Is Jim coming later?" Danny snatched a mouth-full of hay from his hay bag. "You think he'd mind if I borrowed you?" Chewing, Danny looked back at her. "We could catch up with the others just in time for lunch." Danny kept staring at her. "Don't look at me that way. I'd be doing Jim a favor. Keeping him from getting himself killed. Keeping him alive for his wife and young child. Actually, when you think of it that way. It's practically my duty! He's got no business mixing in this mess, does he?" Danny looked away and snatched another mouthful of hay. "Well, I'm glad we agree." She unclipped the hanging lead rope, clipped it to Danny's halter, and unclipped Danny from the wall. "I just hope I can convince the other two of that," she mumbled, leading Danny out of the trailer and tying him to the outside. "Wait, right here," she instructed him, closing up the trailer. "I'll just go get your saddle and bridle, and be right with you."

In a few minutes, she came back. She tossed the blanket on his back, then hefted the saddle up. "Boy, never realized you were so tall. Should have tried to sneak Muchacho in her somehow." She tied the saddle girth and then put the bridle on, pulling his head down so she could reach. "We're going to get along just fine, aren't we?" she stated optimistically, staring up at him. He just stared down at her. "Yeah, well, I may be short, but I'm mean, so watch your step." She puffed out her chest as she walked confidently back to the trailer tack room, feeling Danny watching her the whole way.

In the tack room, she cut open a bale of hay and wrapped it in two halves on either side of a tarp. Then she rolled it up, tied both ends with the twine from the hay and tied the both sides toward the middle so it would lay like saddle bags. Then she took it back with the other piece of twine and tied it to the back of Danny's saddle. "Gotta make sure we take some extra fuel, so we don't run out of gas." She smiled a little nervously at the powerful animal, who was still watching her. He looked away.

Taking a deep breath, she untied Danny's lead rope, took the reins, and swung up on him... way up. Clearing her throat, she positioned herself and tied the lead rope around the saddle horn. She squeezed with her legs to get a better posture and Danny took off, full gallop. "Wait a minute!" She choked up on the reins. The more she held on with her legs the faster Danny ran until he was in a dead run. Heart racing, Kara Lee began to panic. She tried pulling back on the reins, but that only set him off balance causing him to jump sideways. Suddenly she remembered that Jim never kicked his horse. *I always kick Muchacho to get him going, but he...* She loosened the grip with her legs and slowly pulled back on the reins. Danny slowed to a stop. Shaking, she breathed deeply and laughed nervously, leaning forward on the saddle horn. "Boy, are you touchy!" Danny snorted

out steam and looked back at her. "Don't blame me! I didn't want you to go that fast! That was a complete misunderstanding!" He looked straight ahead again. She looked down and noticed they were standing right on the others tracks. "At least, you've got enough sense to go in the right direction." Danny grunted. Loosening her grip on the reins, she barely started to squeeze him with her legs and he started walking, then trotting on his own, and then walking again as they started to trudge through knee-deep snow.

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Matt thrust his pillow over his head as he rolled over as he rolled over. Girl, crying means that baby needs something. *Can't even get a good night's sleep on my day off.* He rolled onto his back and stared at the sunshine on the ceiling, coming through his curtains as the baby started to scream. He glanced over at the clock, *nine-thirty. Should get up anyway.* The alarm started to beep. He reached over and hit snooze, annoyed, but then suddenly remembered that not too long ago, he would have given anything to be able to hear that alarm clock... or a baby scream.

Feeling guilty, he sat up on the side of his bed and rubbed his face. "Alright, I'm coming." He looked up. *I know she's young, but aren't all females supposed to have some motherly instincts? I thought you created them that way.* He stood up, walked his door, took his robe off the back, putting it on. *How'd my daughter get skipped?* He tied his robe shut as he walked to Taylor's room. He knocked loudly on the door, convinced it was her turn to.... Not latched, the door opened. Seeing inside, he noticed, her bed was made, the lights were out, she wasn't around, and there was a note lying on her bed. *Not again.* He flipped on the light, went over to her bed, picked up the envelope, and took out the note.

~You're right. I'm no good at this mother thing. I can't do it alone. I love Jack. He told me I could come join him, and we can try it again. I'm going to find him. Don't look for me. I won't be close. I'll text you every once in a while to let you know I'm okay. You said you'd raise the baby if I didn't want it. Take good care of Richard. Maybe we'll be back for him together someday, and he'll have both a mother and a father.

~Taylor~

Matt groaned and looked over his shoulder toward the baby's room. His anger turned to fear and regret at the same time, fear for her safety, regret that he ever criticized how she took care of the baby, knowing she didn't want it in the first place. *Well, Grandpa, it's all on you now.* He shook his head as he put the paper back in the envelope. *I tried to be nice. I helped a lot. All I asked was that she display some degree of responsibility.* He dropped the note back to the bed and headed out of the room. A mental image of his daughter as an addict flashed through his mind, and he cringed. Walking back to his room to get changed, he tried to decide whether to track her down like before or just file a missing persons report and let her go. *Quit crying, please. I have to get changed.* Although he knew Richey wouldn't stop until he got his breakfast.

Matt quickly got changed and went into the baby's room. "Alright. Take it easy." He picked up the curled up, red-faced crying baby. Noticing, he needed his diaper changed first, he took him over to the changing table. "You know, you have some mother. If she doesn't want us, why should I bring her back and try to force her to stay." He threw the dirty diaper in the trash. "Just start over. Try again." He velcroed the new diaper. "Failed with my kids. Maybe I can do better with my grandkid." He picked up Richey, still crying, and put him up against his shoulder. "Alright. Let's go get breakfast."

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After checking his phone again, Wade trotted Windwalker to catch up with Derrick. "I still don't have a signal."

"We probably need to get a little higher." Derrick's voice was unsure.

"I should have left my phone with Jim. Come on." He tugged harder on the packhorse. "Then at least it would have gone through, and we could have called him to ask."

"I think it will come through when we get in a service area." Again, his voice was unsure.

"Yeah, but I should have...."

"Maybe, but you didn't," Derrick interrupted, shifting in his saddle and changing the reins to his other hand. "I can practically guarantee we will have reception when we get to the top of that hill." He pointed.

"I hope so. Here." He handed Derrick the rope to the packhorse. "I'm going to try and get there quicker." Derrick nodded. Wade put Windwalker into a canter and headed for the hill. Derrick wrapped the packhorse's lead rope around the

saddle horn and continued on as quick as the pack horse could manage.

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“Hey, Matt, what’s up? Melinda answered her phone as she poured herself some orange juice.

“Well,” Melinda could hear bacon sizzling and a baby crying in the background. “Taylor left... again.” He scraped under the bacon with his spatula and flipped just before it burned. “Her note said she was going to find Jack. I hoping to get a hold of his parents sometime to see if they are any more informed than I am.” He turned down the heat on the bacon burner and got the glass baby bottle out of heated water on the back burner, testing the temperature of the milk for routine, though he knew it was fine.

“Oh, Matt, I’m sorry.” Melinda set down the orange juice carton absentmindedly, trying to think what to say. “What about Taylor? You can’t get a hold of her?”

“I texted her a long-winded text practically begging her to come home. She texted back one sentence. ‘I’m fine. Don’t worry.’” He picked up Richey, cradled him in one arm, put the bottle in his mouth, and held it steady with the same arm, so he had the other one free for cooking.”

“Sorry, Matt.” She pulled her milk out of the fridge and her cereal out of the pantry and took them both to the table. “Ricky, sounds like he misses her already.”

“He’s just hungry.” Matt walked back to his bacon, noticing it smoking. “He’s been passed from pillar to post so much, I doubt he even knows who his real mother is.” He pulled it off the burner, scowling at it.

“He knows.” Melinda dumped her cereal in a bowl and then doused it in milk.

“I really don’t think I was cut out to be a parent.” He took the smoking bacon off the burner and put it in the sink.

“Little late to be deciding that, isn’t it, after your kids are practically already grown?”

“I had a jam-packed schedule at the hospital yesterday. Between this kid keeping me up half the night and something else that came up, actually, several things that came up, I ended having to call and ask Dr. Mathews to fill in for me. I was three hours late. Be lucky if they don’t fire me.”

“Oh, they owe you. You’ve filled in for more people then probably three times what’s on the staff with all the people that have gone and come since you’ve been there.”

“The whole day was a mess. Did you have a good day off?”

“Yes, it was very nice. I had to take my mom to an appointment. We spent the day together.” Matt grunted a response. “What are you going to do with Ricky while you work?” She heard loud popping and sizzling in the background.

Matt stepped back as the water he turned on popped and sizzled when it met the hot grease of the bacon pan. “As I see it, I’ve got four options I can alternate between.” He watched his breakfast float out of the pan and swirl down into the garbage disposal. “I can: one, take him to Mrs. Sanders across the street; two, take him to a daycare; three, dump him on the nurses in the neonatal unit while I work; or four, give him to you.”

Melinda chuckled. “How’d I get on the bottom of the list. I would love to watch him whenever I have a day off. I’d covet it actually. Remember, I’ve never had a baby.”

“Consider yourself plenty lucky.” He lugged Richey over to the fridge and stared inside, looking for a reasonable breakfast replacement.

“Oh-h-hh,” she mumbled in a low disapproving tone.

“No. Honestly, I love my kids. I just wish they had turned out better. Maybe the other two have. Who knows since I haven’t seen them in years. Mark was a bit of a disappointment.” He got out his grapefruit juice, set it down on the counter while kicking the fridge shut, got a glass with one hand, and then poured the juice with the same hand.

*Just a bit*, Melinda agreed, taking a bite of cereal.

"He probably feels more at more at Mrs. Sanders anyway. He already spends more time there than here." Starving, he gulped down the grapefruit juice.

"Oh, he does not. Maybe if you cut Taylor some more slack, she wouldn't feel under so much pressure all the time."

Gritting his teeth, Matt accidentally slammed down his glass on the counter. Richey's eyes widened, and he dropped the bottle he was helping to hold. Matt propped the bottle back up into Richey's mouth and calmed his voice before responding. "You know, I'm getting a little tired of shouldering all the blame for my children's irresponsibility. I worked hard to give them everything they need. I live a very structured life so that I can get everything I need to done for a mother and a father both."

"And you are so structured, they don't want it and rebel against it."

"That's not fair! I've never required them to do a tenth of what I do! All I ask is that they live like responsible human beings. She didn't even feed the baby before she left. According to the number of bottles in the fridge, he missed two feedings yesterday!"

"I know you work hard. I guess, I don't know what to tell you. I know you are responsible. Don't know why it didn't get passed down."

"Me either," Matt mumbled, taking the empty bottle from Richey and transferring him to his shoulder, burping him.

"Maybe Taylor and Jack will get married. They seem to love each other."

"Oh, joy. Now, that sounds like a match meant for Sing Sing."

"Maybe they'll get saved. He'll get a job, and they'll have a happy home."

"I guess stranger things have been known to happen."

"Oh, it could easily happen. I'll be praying for it."

"Well, I appreciate that." He opened the fridge again and stared wishing anything in there looked good to him. Half the stuff only served to remind him of Taylor. "How can I have a full refrigerator and nothing to eat," he mumbled mostly to himself.

"I don't have to be at work for a couple of hours. Why don't I stop at that deli you like and get us both a salad for brunch? I'd like to see you both, especially Ricky. After all, I haven't seen him since...."

"He began an orphan?"

"No," Melinda chuckled. "He's still got you, and you did say you would adopt him if she couldn't take care of him."

"I know. I wish everyone would quit reminding me of that. I will take care of him, but I said that to get her to stay not leave."

"I think she'll be back. All you've done for her will become pret-ty obvious when she had to start doing it herself. She might even learn some responsibility. They'll have to in order to survive."

"Not necessarily. They'll learn it, or they will sink very low."

"Yeah, I guess," she paused.

"I'll go get those salads and be right over... Hannah's Special with pepper jack cheese?"

"Sounds good."

"Alrighty. See ya in a bit."

"See ya." He hung up his phone, thoughtfully, glad she was coming over, feeling better after talking to her, wondering if he was falling in love with her, hoping he wasn't.

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"Get reception, yet?" Derrick asked riding up to Wade, who was staring down at his phone, concern marring his face.

"Yeah."

"Figured you did." Derrick stopped Maverick next to him and Windwalker. "What's it say?"

Wade glanced up at him then back down at the phone. "It says, 'Go to Ron's place in Sundance, WY. Tell the bartender your name. He'll give you a map. Follow it, and he'll give you the directions for the exchange. So, what do we do? Call the bartender?'"

"No, that wouldn't work. Besides, don't use your phone, they'll see where we're at. You don't have location turned on, do you?"

"No, in fact, I took it to a shop and got it fixed so the location software won't even work."

"Good." Derrick leaned his forearm forward on his saddle horn, relaxing a moment. "If we could contact Jim, we could ask him to stop on his way out, but I hate to do that for one thing because it's probably a trap. If it wasn't, they would just send the directions to your phone."

"What's the other thing?" Wade looped his knee over his saddle horn, trying to get a more comfortable position.

"I think the cops are hacked into my phone."

Wade stared ahead at the snowy mountains. "But what if we are going in the wrong direction?"

"Yeah, but I don't think we are, and Jim doesn't have a stake in this. It's wrong to ask him to risk his life. Besides we'd never get to anywhere else in time."

Wade gave him a look. "I could figure it out. Besides maybe the directions say that we have to do something before he comes."

"If he doesn't come, he'll have to set up the meet again."

"No, he doesn't!" Wade leaned forward on his bent leg and the saddle horn, exasperated. "He will just kill Davy!" He looked at the clock on his phone. "I should just ride back. It will just take me about three hours. Then I can ride to town."

"That will take you all of today and part of tomorrow."

"Well, maybe someone will give me a ride, or maybe I can unhook the truck and get it out of the snow."

Derrick sat up straight again, pushing himself off the saddle horn. "Well, if that's what you want to do, you can go back, and I will continue on, but first," Derrick dismounted. "We've both got to give these horses a break, or they won't make it. Give 'em some hay, and eat some lunch ourselves."

Wade frowned at that idea as he watched Derrick loosen Maverick's saddle. He was already upset at wasting all this time just to have to double back. He seems so sure we are going in the right direction, but we still need to read the instructions. You can't just walk into a life or death exchange blind, can you?

"Loosen your saddle. Give the guy a chance to breath," Derrick instructed as he led Maverick over to a tree and tied him to a branch.

Wade reluctantly dismounted and led Windwalker to the tree as Derrick unloaded a bundle of hay from the packhorse and spread it in front of Maverick. Both horses ate. Wade watched as Derrick completely unloaded the pack horse and brought him over to join the others. At this rate, we will be lucky to get there before the exchange is over.

Derrick slung the food bag over his shoulder and brought it to a rock under an evergreen. He dusted the snow off the rock, sat down, and opened the bag. Wade went over and joined him. Noticing, there wasn't any place for him to sit, he just stood. Derrick got out a pack of beef sticks and a can of peaches then shoved the bag toward Wade. Wade bent down and pulled out a can of chicken and a stack pack of crackers. He noticed the juice in the can of chicken had a thin layer of ice forming on top as he drained it. "Want some more bad news?"

"What?" Derrick asked with his mouth full as he looked up at him.

"I bet the intravenous antibiotic Matt gave you is freezing."

Putting his food down, Derrick got up and trudged through the snow over to their packs. Wade watched as he opened the medicine bag and the clothes bag and then started wrapping the medicine, first in a sock then in a shirt then in a sweatshirt. *Not a bad idea. Don't know if it will work, but maybe.* He scooped out the chicken with his crackers, appreciating the break even if he hadn't wanted to stop. Derrick came back and joined him. As they ate, the wind picked up. They both pulled their coat collars up and tilted their hats to block the wind. "Gre-at! This isn't good!" Wade yelled over the wind, hunched over toward Derrick, getting closer under the tree.

Derrick glanced up, eyes watering in the frigid breeze. "No, it isn't! We might have to make a shelter!"

Wade stepped even closer, getting in a spot where the branches were blocking the wind. "Maybe it will let up! It's not so bad if your facing that way!"

"That's the way to Castle rock! You'll never make it back to the road, riding into it! Both you and the horse will freeze!"

Wade sighed, eating his last cracker. "Why's life have to be so complicated?"

"You tell me!" Derrick looked up at him again and then hunched back over pulling his coat up high against his neck and burying most his face in it.

Wade gazed over the horses. They were all huddled next to each other behind the tree with their backs to the wind. He looked around as he crumpled the cracker wrapper in his gloved hand. He couldn't see the distant mountains anymore through the blowing snow. He could barely see the nearby rock formations and cliffs jutting up from the ground. He looked back in the direction they came just to see their tracks practically blown over and covered. His heart sank. So much for finding my way back alone. Noticing a dark shadow in the distance, he took a step forward and squinted to see. *No, there's nothing there. No, maybe there is.* "Hey, Derrick!" He wacked Derrick on the shoulder. Derrick brought his face out of his coat and looked up. "Do you see something out there?" He pointed.

Derrick stood up and looked for a long time. Then he walked over to the horses, untied Maverick, tightened his saddle, swung up on him, and took off full gallop toward the figure. "Wait a minute!" Wade yelled, stepping out into the pelting, icy blowing snow, but Derrick didn't stop. He quickly disappeared into the frosty haze of swirling ice-crystals. Jim waited a long time in the direction he left, just staring into the fog until suddenly he emerged again... with another rider beside him... Kara Lee Cummings. Shaking his head, Wade went back to the rock and sat down. Grabbing another stack pack of crackers, he munched and waited as Derrick tied up Maverick and Danny and then the two started over. Kara Lee walked arms crossed tight, hunched over and shivering. Derrick stopped by the pack, grabbed a heavy wool blanket and then draped it over her shoulders when he caught up with her. Wade stood up and stepped away so she could have the rock.

"Hi," she addressed him before plopping down in the rock, huddled up with her knees pulled up to her chin, completely covered by the blanket except for her head. Then she ducked her head in the blanket, so she was completely covered. Since she was lost somewhere inside that blanket, Wade walked over to Derrick for the story.

"Where'd she come from?" Wade asked, shocked.

"Apparently, she stowed away in the trailer."

"And then stole Jim's horse?" Wade asked accusingly as he crossed his arms in dissatisfaction. Derrick nodded. "Well, that's just great! All we needed was another problem!"

"Well, maybe."

"What do you mean by that?!" Wade asked, exasperated.

"I asked her if I could borrow her phone, and she said, 'yes.'" He took the pink phone out of his pocket.

Wade rolled his eyes at the color. "We could call Jim."

Derrick nodded. "We could ask him if he has any ideas, but I still don't think we should send him."

"Yeah. Maybe we can figure something else out." Wade took the phone and walked over to the trunk of the tree, standing behind it, completely blocked from the wind. Derrick tapped a pack of crackers on top of Kara Lee's blanket. Kara Lee

poked her head out, quickly snatched the crackers with one hand, uttered a muffled, “thank you,” and resubmerged under the blanket.

Wade prayed Jim would answer the phone as he dialed and pressed send. It rang four times and then Jim answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Jim, it’s Wade.”

“Wade? Your number came up as Kara Lee.”

“Yeah. I know. I’m using her phone.”

“Is she there with you?”

“Yeah. She borrowed your horse and followed us.”

“Then I might as well go home.”

“No, no, no! We need the money! Did you bring it?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

“Bout halfway across Iowa, I guess. Maybe a little more.”

“We’ll find some way to meet ya or bring you out. Hey, they contacted me about Davy.”

“Yeah. What’d they say?”

“They told me to go to Ron’s Place. It’s a bar in Sundance Wyoming. And tell them who I am. They are supposed to give me instructions for the meet.”

“And you want me to go. Won’t they know what you look like?”

“Maybe not. They said to give my name. Derrick doesn’t think you should go though. He thinks it’s a trap.”

“Probably is.”

“You think we don’t need them... the instructions?”

“I don’t know. You probably do. I’ll swing by there if I can and just feel it out. If it feels to dangerous, I probably won’t go in. Maybe I can figure out some other way to get them.”

“Okay. That’d be great. If we think of a plan, we’ll call you again. Just don’t get hurt. Like Derrick says this isn’t your fight, and you have your family to think about.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“Good. Reception’s kind of spotty out here, but try to call us when you get there or at least text us and then again when you leave.”

“Okay. We’ll do.”

“Drive safe. Talk to ya later. Bye.”

“Bye.” Wade walked back to Derrick and handed him the phone. “I think the wind’s dying down a little.” Wade shivered against a gust as he handed Derrick the phone.

“Yeah. We can probably head out pretty soon, as soon as Kara Lee thaws out!” He shouted the last part so that he could hear her under the blanket.

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Melinda looked at her phone. “Oomm.” She chewed faster. “I’d better hurry need to leave in about ten minutes. These

are good, though." She took another bite. "I'm glad you got me started on them."

"Yeah. She does her business well." Matt stood up and started collecting his trash. "You're sure you don't mind watching Richey on Friday?"

"No, not at all, I'm looking forward to it." She took one more bite and started collecting her trash. Gazing over at Ricky, her stomach churned with longing, almost wishing the perfect little guy belonged to her. She followed Matt into the kitchen and they both dumped their trash. "Maybe the next day we both have off together, we can take him to the park." Matt gave her a look. "Well, is he too young to swing in one of those closed in swings?" Matt nodded. "Well, we could take him for a stroll by the river to see the mallards." Suddenly, she realized she didn't know what people did with babies that age. Matt just stared. "Well, what do with nearly two-month-old babies?"

"Give it a bottle and watch it sleep," Matt replied, dryly.

"Oh, no! We can do better than that! He likes his rabbit and his teething ring and to watch the music box. You need to get him a baby swing, and a lamb that sings, Jesus Loves Me, and a rattle and one of those light-up lizards and...."

Matt just gazed into her bubbly face at her lively dancing eyes, wanting to kiss her to shut her up. He took a step forward but then quickly stepped back. "You want to go shopping for the baby."

"Well, I, a... I already got a few things for him at my house, but you could sure use some more things for him over here. No wonder Taylor cut out. Having a baby is supposed to be fun!" she chirped. "It needs some toys, a lot more toys!"

He stepped closer. "Okay, next time we both have a day off, we can go to town and go shopping for the baby."

Blushing at his closeness yet liking it at the same time, she laughed lightly, lingering before backing up. "Well, I'd better get going. Don't want to be late. I'm back in Pediatrics today!" She backed all the way into the living room, picked up her purse from the end table, and headed for the door.

Getting there first, Matt opened it for her. "Well, have a nice day in Pediatrics. I'll see you tomorrow back in Emergency."

She stopped in the doorway, her long blonde hair flying sideways in the frozen wind. "Yeah, see you tomorrow." He watched her head out to her car and then waved to her as she drove away. Then he turned back inside and closed the door. For a moment he just stood there getting the strangest feeling like the room just turned ten shades darker. It seemed so bright and cheery when she was here. It looked so dark and lonely now. Walking over to his brown leather couch, he stopped with his hands leaning on the top. He glanced over at the baby and wished she would come back. He suddenly got scared when he thought of all the harsh things he had said to her over the months at work. Suddenly, he was afraid he might offend her and she might not come back. He desperately wanted her to come back. He picked up his medical book, took it to the other side of the couch, and sat down. He flipped it open to his bookmarked page diagraming and mapping out the vascular system within the human liver and started to read, but he couldn't seem to get through a paragraph without the mind going back to Melinda, her smile, her laugh, her bubbly personalities, her quick humor that could take him out of any darkness and make him laugh, her caring thoughtfulness, her gentle eyes. Shaking his head, he stared back down at the book and started reading the paragraph again.

## Reporter on the Scent

Shivering slightly, Kara Lee forced her coat zipper up the last half inch and tucked her chin in her coat. "Forget to pack your extra heavy-duty mountain ware?" Derrick asked, glancing at her.

"No," Voice muffled, she stretched her mouth out from under her coat. "It's just this wind." She buried her hand holding the reins under Danny's mane and clutched her other hand tighter in her pocket.

"Actually, I was thinking it's died down quite a bit."

"So, has the sun." She gazed toward the darkening orange-tinted sky.

"Yeah. We should start looking for a place to set up camp for the night while we can still see."

"And start a fire." She buried her nose back in her coat.

"Come on, Mrs. Against All Odds Reporter, you'd better toughen up. It's only gonna get colder as the night goes on." He glanced from her to Wade cutting the trail ahead.

"Don't say that."

"Actually, we might be able to turn this into a nice warm spot for the night." He glanced around at the cliffs on either side of them as they headed into a small valley. "If we can get our eager leader to wind down." Derrick stopped Maverick on a circle of ground, cleared from snow that the wind had blown away. "Hey, Wade!"

Pulling Windwalker to a fast stop in a drift, snow spirted up in both of their faces. "What?" They turned around.

"This looks like a good spot to set up camp for the night!" He called to him.

Wade looked around. "Don't you think we still got about an hour of daylight?"

"Maybe, but it will take us that long to set up a good camp! We all need a good night's sleep to be strong for tomorrow! We need to make sure we are warm enough so we don't freeze to death, and this is a good spot!" He nodded toward the tall cliff on the left and the shorter cliff further away to the right. "The cliffs are blocking the wind!" He called back.

Wade reluctantly walked Windwalker back to the cleared place where Kara Lee and Derrick were. "How much farther is it?"

"Not too far. We should get there tomorrow morning." Wade nodded slowly. Standing up in his saddle, he pulled his cellphone from his pocket. He looked at it and frowned. "You should get reception when you get beyond these cliffs." Derrick guessed what he was thinking. "Ride out and see." Wade nodded again and rode out.

"Let's tie the horses up between those tree." Derrick nodded toward a group of trees next to the smaller cliff and started toward them. Kara Lee followed. Derrick hopped off, pulled the packhorse closer, pulled off a spool of rope from his pack, and tied his end to the tree closest to him. Kara Lee, on the other hand, slowly pulled out her half-frozen feet from the stirrups, and clutching the saddle horn, carefully slid off, holding onto Danny's saddle until she got her sea legs again.

"Here." Derrick threw her the other end of the rope. Kara Lee worked her fingers up and down, trying to get them unstuck from their near-permanent grasping position as she bent down to get the rope, dropping it a few times before she got it tied around her tree. Derrick already had both his horses tied, Maverick unsaddled, and the packhorse partially unloaded before she got Danny tied up.

Derrick looked over the packhorse's back as he pulled off the duffel bag of food off. "You could start gathering some wood for the fire." Rubbing her hands together, she looked around. "There's some over there." He pointed. Nodding, she went over to gather the broken limbs and twigs.

Wade rode over and dismounted next to Derrick, tying Windwalker next to Maverick. "Did you get reception?" Derrick asked, pulling the hay off the horse and scattering a portion in front of the horses.

"Yeah." Wade picked up two of the duffel bags. "You think the tent's going to stand in this wind?" He looked up at the blowing branches.

"No. I've got a plan. We can use the cliffs."

Wade looked over at the rocky, snow-mounded cliffs, not seeing what Derrick saw. "Hmm." Wade took the bags over to the cleared spot and set them down. Then, he drug a couple of logs over for them to sit on as Kara Lee stacked branches and twigs on the middle for the fire. Then he started helping her collect wood as Derrick brought the rest of the supplies over.

When they were done, they all stopped together in the circle. Derrick threw Kara Lee the box of matches. She knelt down and started repeatedly trying to light the fire before the breeze blew out the match. "I think we should build our shelter over there." Derrick pointed. "See the ledge?"

No. Wade stared at the cliff. He saw where it jutted out but there was snow beneath it all the way to the ground. He assumed it was land. *Maybe it's just a drift.* "That there?" He pointed.

"Yeah. If we clear out that spot directly below it, the ledge will make a nice roof, packed snow for the walls, and we can use a tarp to cover the opening."

Wade nodded slowly, still staring. "You sure there's not just land below that?"

Derrick stared a moment, too. "No, but it doesn't look like it to me."

Wade shrugged and grabbed a shovel from the pack. "Only one way to find out." He headed over to the cliff and started shoveling. Derrick found the tarp and the other shovel and followed him. Together, they hollowed out a nice cozy snow room, free of wind even without the tarp for the door. Heated from the work, Wade ended up unzipping his coat, and Derrick took his off completely. "Not bad," Derrick concluded, leaning against his shovel, standing outside the shelter.

"Yeah." Wade scraped out the remaining clods of snow from the ground, squinting to see them in the dim flickering light from the distant fire. "Should work out pretty good. There's just one problem." Wade stood inside the shelter away from the wind as he leaned on his shovel. "I'm a married man." He looked over at Kara Lee, or rather a pile of blankets that he figured Kara Lee must be inside somewhere, then he looked back at Derrick.

"I know." Derrick nodded. "Maybe we can divide it somehow with another tarp," he suggested. Wade looked up at the rocky roof then over at the snow sides and finally back at the rock and dirt back, raising the obvious question. *How?* Derrick nodded. "Let's think about it while we eat." He grabbed his coat and headed toward the fire. Wade followed.

Hearing them coming, Kara Lee poked her head out of the blankets. "All done?" She gazed toward the cliff, not seeing it well in the darkness.

"Almost." Derrick knelt down next to the food bag and began rummaging through it.

"Um." Kara Lee cleared her throat. "What about me?"

"Yeah!" Wade looked at Derrick, accusingly.

Feeling them both staring at him, Derrick rummaged through the bag a few moments longer and then said the first thing that came to his mind, "What about you?! You aren't even supposed to be here!" He glared at her then so did Wade.

"Well, um, it just so happens," She leaned her head forward, pulling her red ponytail back inside the blanket and then put the blanket on top her head, pulling it tight around her chin. "It just so happens I am here, and, and, you guys are Christians!"

They both just glared at her a moment longer, until Wade broke the silence. "So, what?!"

"So, it's against your religion to shack up." She stared at Wade, with the most innocent expression he'd ever seen from her. Wade turned back to look at Derrick. *Your turn.*

Derrick looked down at the food and then back at Wade. "Yeah, but is it against our religion to let her freeze to death? After all, she'd be the one that got herself into this mess! Miss self-reliant can dig her own shelter!" He snatched a can of chicken and some crackers and went to go sit down on the opposite log. Wade threw a couple more limbs on the fire.

Kara Lee stared into the waning fire, revived by the limbs and wondered if she'd be warm enough there all night. She looked around, trying to see if there was a spot in the cliff that she could dig out like the guys did, but when the wind whipped up, she only pulled her blanket tighter, not wanting to get up away from the fire to go dig through the snow in the darkness. Should have found a spot when it was still light out. It's not like she hadn't slept with guys a couple times before, but it was like she didn't want Derrick to know about it. She was still hoping for a fairy-tale marriage like Jim and Jess had or like her mom and dad had, two true-blue, ever-faithful people pledging their lives to only each other until death do them part. She saw her chance to have that with Derrick, and she didn't want to mess it up. She also didn't want to freeze to death... but... given enough blankets, she didn't think she would.

Derrick stared into the fire as he ate a cracker. Under normal circumstances, he would be pleased to go to the effort to make her a snow shelter just as nice as theirs, but these weren't normal circumstances. His bad hand ached and throbbed from the exertion of digging out one, and he was so tired he felt like collapsing right there. He was afraid the most he could offer was

to give her the shelter and sleep out here by the fire.

Wade, kneeling by the food bag, pulled out a fig newton and ate it absentmindedly as he stared at the fire. His mind raced from one thing to the next, the journey here, the exchange, Jim. He wondered if he should go beyond the cliffs and check his phone again. He sent up a prayer for Jim. He wondered about Mellissa at home and how Trent fared explaining what had happened the night they left. He ate another fig newton and glanced at Kara Lee cocooned in the blankets. He figured he'd have to dig her a shelter just to be able to get a hold of a blanket tonight. He glanced at Derrick. *He's not going to be able to help.* He sent up a prayer that Derrick would be fine in the morning. *So, many things to do, so little time. Clean Derrick's hand. Ride out to check the phone, maybe call Jim. Dig another shelter for out uninvited guest.* He shot her a dirty look but then remembered. *But I am thankful for your phone. Okay, first, go see if you can find a spot for her shelter.* He picked up a handful of fig bars and headed back toward the cliff.

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Taylor's eyes widened as she walked quickly through the airport. She looked up, her eyes scanning across every sign, looking for direction. She dodged numerous nameless people, her eyes going from face to face, wanting a smile, recognition, sympathy, or help! Her heart rate sped up along with her feet. What if I can't find him? What if I'm stranded here hundreds of miles from home with barely any money and no place to stay? What will I do then? What about tonight? Taking her phone from her purse, she fumbled through the contact list until she found Jack. Gasping, as a man knocked into her on his way past, she stepped to the side out of the way of foot traffic. Then desperately, she pressed send and put the phone to her ear. *Jack, where are you?*

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Wade backed out of the small snow-tunnel he had dug for Kara Lee. It was a lot shorter than theirs, only about three feet tall, but it was long enough to give her plenty of room to lay down and sleep. And it's the best we got. Wade brushed the snow off his pants as he stood up. And it will be nice and warm. He felt proud of his accomplishment as he walked back to the fire. He glanced from the pile of blankets, which he assumed was still Kara Lee over to Derrick, who was leaning forward, forearms on his knees toward the fire with his eyes closed. Grabbing a couple fig bars, Wade stood up and tossed a couple jagged logs on the dying fire. Derrick opened her eyes. "Must have found a spot for her."

Wade nodded, chewing. "It's not as big as ours, but it should work out pretty good for her." Derrick nodded, staring into the flames.

"Thank you," Kara Lee spoke, muffled through the blanket and then popped her head out into the frosty night air. "Not that I couldn't have figured out something myself, but I really do appreciate it. It was nice of you."

"That's okay." Wade rolled out a tarp on the ground and laid down on his side pulling the bag of food over to him. "So, what's good at the buffet?"

"I think I have a new favorite," Kara Lee chirped.

"What?" Wade asked, digging through the bag.

"Peanut butter and apple pie filling."

Wade looked up and then wagged his head back and forth, considering. "Could be good. We got apple pie filling in here?" He resumed digging.

"I think there's just cherry left," Derrick added.

"Hmm, cherries and peanut butter." Wade popped another fig newton in his mouth, and turning on his stomach held out the box for Derrick. "Want one?" Derrick shook his head. "How's the hand doing? I'll help you clean it before bed." He got out a can of beef stew and opened it. "I'm gonna walk out and call Jim. You think he's near Sundance, yet?"

"Where was he earlier?"

"I don't know. Somewhere in Iowa."

"It's about six-thirty now. I kind of doubt it."

Suddenly hungry, Kara Lee craned her neck to look down into the bag. "If you don't want the cherry pie filling, I'll eat it."

Swallowing his cold beef stew, Wade took out the can of cherry pie filling and a spoon and handed it to her. "Want the peanut butter, too?"

"No." She popped the lid.

## Map of Danger

Jim slowed his truck as he drove into the small, one-horse town of Sundance, WY. He didn't have to look far for Ron's Place. It was right on the main road, the only place lit up in the whole town at that time of night. It was a rustic, paint-chipped, old-fashioned-looking saloon. What he would have imagined a bar in Dodge City in the 1800's might have looked like, complete with short, wooden double doors. There were three cars and a motorcycle out front, no room for him. He turned and parked on the side street, glancing down at the clock radio as he put it in park, 11:45pm. He'd only been inside a bar twice before and that was just to ask directions. He wondered what Jess would think about him going in now, especially when he knew he was probably walking into a trap. He had an eerie feeling that caused the hair to stand up on the back of his neck. Grabbing his holstered revolver from the glove compartment, he pulled up his coat, clipped his holster to his belt, and then covered it again.

Here we go. He got out, slammed his door, and walked confidently toward the front door. He sucked in a deep breath of fresh air before walking in the hazy, smoke-filled building. Heading for the bar, he accidentally ran into a chair, not seeing well between the haze and the dim light. "Excuse me," he said, nearly running into a blonde waitress near the bar.

"Sure, honey," she blew out a puff of smoke from her cigarette and then continued with her empty tray of glasses toward the kitchen. He sat down at the bar and then turned to look around. There was a young couple, hugging and laughing in a booth. There was a middle-aged, hard-rock couple dressed in motor cycle garb at a center table. And there was a silly-looking drunk, entertaining himself in a corner booth.

"What'll ya have, Mack?" a hefty bar-tender with a thin but long ponytail and quite a variety of tattoos asked, removing the extra-wide cigar from his mouth briefly. Jim turned around. "Instructions from Satoro for Wade Thundercloud."

"You him?" the man asked cigar in his mouth. Jim didn't answer. "Because I have instructions to give it to him."

Jim got out a fifty-dollar bill and set it on the counter. "I never said that I wasn't." Nodding the man reached for the money. Quick as a flash, Jim slammed his fist down hard on the man's hand. "What about the instructions?"

The bartender didn't flinch. They held each other's gaze for several moments then the man gave a slight nod, and Jim removed his fist. The bartender put the fifty in his pocket and then walked down the bar to the backroom.

A few minutes later the bartender came back with two huge bouncers and a plastic baggy containing a paper. The bartender set down the baggy in front of Jim and turned to go. Jim looked at the bag without touching it. "Hey, what's the white powder? Hey!"

The man turned back around, annoyed. The two bouncers strolled from behind the bar to behind Jim. "Look you asked what they left for you, that's it." He started to turn again. Vaulting off his hand, Jim swung over the bar, grabbed the man's arm and locked it behind him then turned him to face the bouncers who were just about to swing over the bar. Jim pulled his knife from his pocket, flipped it open, and aimed it toward the bouncers, getting them to stop. Then he pulled the bartender's arm higher, causing him to groan. "Now, open it!" The bartender grimaced as Jim lifted higher and twisted his forearm backwards. The motorcycle couple watched in interest as they drank. Looking at the bouncers, the bartender slowly pulled the bag closer, and then fell to the side letting his dead weight do the work. Jim grabbed for him, but was unable to hold the hefty man. Soon as he fell, the bouncers jumped over the bar. Jim took off down the bar toward the backroom. The tall bouncer reached for him. Leaning forward, Jim threw his foot back, stomping his heavy boots into the man's chest, knocking him down. He kept running, but before, he reached the backroom, he could feel the stocky bouncer gaining on him. Spinning around moments before the man got his hands on him, Jim grabbed the man's shirt and belt and threw him over his head into the wall.

Jim ran back to the bartender who was lying on the ground and then stopped as he put his arm up, holding the baggy.

Jim snatched the bag. "How am I supposed to read it?"

"It's only dangerous if you breath it," the hefty man, croaked.

"Why should I believe that," Jim grumbled, trying to see the map through the baggy as the bouncers surrounded him.

"So, don't. I'm only getting paid to see that you get it."

Muttering to himself, Jim grabbed a handful of plastic food service gloves, turned, and walked out, shoving the bouncer on his way by just because he felt like it. The motorcycle pair clapped for him as he walked out.

Jim walked around to the side of the building where there was an old, rusty, circular tin tub filled with dirty water. He took out his phone, readied the camera, knelt beside the tub, snow melting under his knees, and put three gloves on one hand over each other. Then, burying his face in his coat, so only his eyes were showing, he leaned over the tub, submerged the baggy in the water with his gloved hand, got it opened, pulled the map and instructions out. Holding his breath, he brought it just under the surface of the water, snapped a picture of it with his other hand, flipped it, and snapped a picture of the back. Then, leaving the map in the water, he carefully removed the gloves from his hand, jumped up and ran back to his truck, not breathing again until he was a good way away. Taking off his coat, he shook it before getting in his truck.

Expanding the picture on his phone, he studied the map then the directions which simply read. ~Follow the map. Walk into the perfect trap. If you survive, maybe you'll all stay alive. You'll find your final orders under a stone, but if you're smart you will leave them alone.~ *If I was smart, I wouldn't be here to begin with.* Jim put the truck in drive and headed to Sheridan because he knew that was where Wade and Derrick were headed, not because that is where the map said to go. He dialed Kara Lee's phone, though he doubted it would go through. It didn't.

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"Ahhh!" Wade and Derrick woke up simultaneously to Kara Lee's blood-curdling scream. Wade grabbed his flashlight. "Ahhh!" Derrick pulled his revolver. They both jumped up. Wade ran over to Kara Lee's snow house fast. Derrick followed slowly, looking all around.

"What's wrong?" Wade asked breathlessly upon arrival, flipping his flashlight on.

"There's something in here!"

Wade pulled up the tarp and shone his flashlight in just to see Kara Lee sitting up huddled on one side of the room and a hissing raccoon, standing on his hind legs, his front legs with claws sticking out in front of him. He snarled at Wade and then took a swipe toward Kara Lee who reached for her revolver that had fallen out a few feet from her. She aimed it toward the animal, ready. Derrick re-holstered his revolver when he got to the scene. "Where running from murderers, and you're scared of a little raccoon."

"It could be rabid!" Kara Lee kept her gun aimed.

"It's scared to death," Derrick replied dryly. Wade shone his light in the coon's eyes, trying to temporarily blind it, so it didn't attack.

"Then why'd it come in here?!"

"Keep the light in its eyes." Derrick knelt down, pulling the cuffs of his coat sleeves over his gloves, he quickly grabbed the coon by the back of its neck and threw it out. Squeaking and chirping, the coon ran away into the snowy darkness. Standing up, Derrick looked back at Kara Lee. "You're safe, now."

"Thank you." She scooted back toward her blanket, wanting to say something like she had everything under control or that his assistance was totally unnecessary, but since she didn't and it was, she simply plopped down back in her spot and pulled the blanket back over her.

"Your welcome." Wade let go of the tarp, so it fell back down, and they both headed back to their own place.

"I wonder what time it is." Wade pulled out Kara Lee's phone. "Missed call. He must be there. Oh. Missed call thirty minutes ago." Wade turned. "I'm gonna go out and call him back."

Derrick nodded, yawning. "Be careful." Then he disappeared behind their tarp and plopped down on the ground.

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Feeling dizzy, heart racing, Jim pulled over on the side of the road. Staring ahead his vision blurred and then cleared and then blurred again and cleared. Throat tightening, he rubbed his face as his phone rang. *Wade*. He answered it. "Hey, Wade," his voice squeaked with hoarseness and he talked fast, trying not to sound out of breath, though he was breathing fast.

"Hey, man, what happened? You go to the bar? I saw your missed call."

"I went."

"What happened?"

Jim quietly sucked in a deep breath, not feeling like talking at the moment. "I got the map and the instructions."

"What'd they say?" Jim read off the rhyme. "Oh, man," Wade responded. Jim tilted his head back trying to loosen his tightened throat. "Can you read me the map so I can see if it's where we are going?"

"Yeah." Jim cleared his tightening throat as his body began to shake. "It says to turn off on a road before Sheridan. Then, take it down to a dirt road. Go," He swallowed hard. "go, a ways down that road, and then go off into a field. It looks like..." His throat loosened, but his body kept shaking. "It looks like maybe a half mile. Then there is a red X."

"You okay? You sound a little hoarse. ... Maybe a little shaky."

No. Jim shook his head. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Well, those directions aren't anything like where we're at."

"Well, maybe the 'final orders' are just to say to come where you are at."

"Who knows."

"We'd be pretty stupid just to walk straight into their trap."

"This whole trip is walking straight into their trap."

"Yeah.... True that." Jim rubbed his eyes and the bridge of his nose with one hand.

"But it's not your fight, and you really shouldn't go alone."

"Yeah. Let's just sleep on it and decide in the morning. I'm gonna park somewhere and sleep in the next town I come to."

"Okay, sounds good, but I don't want to ask you to risk your life for my baby. I couldn't live with that."

"Yeah, but I risk my life all the time in my job, and me 'n' Jess we were part of the last go-round with this organization. There's no guarantee that they will leave us alone if we don't take them down. In fact, they probably won't, so we do have a stake in this, too."

"I hate to say it, but you could be right. Crazy how hard it is to live in peace anymore."

"You're tellin' me."

"Look 'em, Kara Lee ordered you a snow mobile at the Snow Games Palace in Sheridan. It's rented for three days and waiting for you to, you know, replace the horse she stole."

Jim laughed lightly, a tired laugh. "You guy's treatin' Danny alright?"

"Oh, sure, he's sufferin' just like the rest of us."

"Now, that's good to know," Jim replied, dryly.

"But we're all gonna make it, and we're gonna take 'em down, right?" Wade practically yelled it in victory.

“Right,” Jim yawned back. “Call me in the morning if you like.”

“We’ll do.”

## Directions to Death

Though trying, Wade couldn’t get to sleep the rest of the night. His mind kept racing from one possibility to the next. He played and replayed every memory, every scenario, every possibility in his mind, trying to come up with the best plan of action, though it was basically impossible since they had no idea what was waiting for them at their destination or for sure if they were even going to the right destination. He kept rolling from one side to the other until the cellphone alarm sounded. He sat up and flipped on the battery-powered lantern since it was still dark. “It’s morning! Hey,” He grabbed Derrick’s arm, and lightly rolled him over. “It’s a new day.”

“Wonderful,” Derrick rolled back on his side.

“I’ll go wake up Kara Lee.” Wade rolled out from under the blankets and outside.

“You do that,” Derrick muttered, pulling his blanket up closer.

“Hey, Miss Reporter, time to wake up.”

“Who’s sleeping?” she muttered from behind her tarp.

“Well, you should have been!” he criticized. “We have a long day ahead of us.”

Blanket wrapped around her, she crawled out. “Who can sleep with all these wild animals around.” She walked over to the logs where the fire was. “Are we going to start this fire going again?”

“No, we are going to saddle the horses and get going.”

“Shouldn’t we warm up before we go on that long journey.”

“You’ll warm up when we start riding.” Wade headed toward the horses.

Kara Lee slid sideways toward the bag of food and started rummaging through it for something that wasn’t half-frozen. Wade started saddling the horses. Derrick, sleepily strolled from his igloo, came over, and plopped down across from Kara Lee, rubbing his face. “Wouldn’t it be nice to have a warm fire?” Kara Lee asked, munching on a cracker. Derrick didn’t respond, so he tried again. “It wouldn’t take long to throw a few logs together for some heat.”

“Maybe not, but I know it would take hours to get you away from it, and I think Wade’s pretty gung-ho to get going.”

“I’ve got the same feeling.” She munched another cracker. “Let him do all the work. Maybe it will slow him down a little. Didn’t you guys pack any coffee?” Yawning, Derrick shook his head. “Here, cowboy,” She tossed him an energy bar. “wake up.”

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“Good morning, sir, congratulations on being our first customer for the day.”

“Morning.” Jim replied, walking into the warm sport’s shop and heading over to the counter. “Does that mean I get a discount?” Jim tried to be lighthearted despite the heaviness in his soul.

“Unfortunately, sir...,”

“Yeah, didn’t think so. Fortunately, I don’t need one. I’m here to pick-up a rented snow mobile. It was ordered yesterday by an associate, Kara Lee Cummings.”

"Oh, yes, sir. I remember that one. I think," she leaned forward to see out the window. "Yep, they're just fueling it up. There's just a few releases here for you to sign." She got out the papers and laid them out in front of him.

Jim read through the papers, signed them, and handed them back. "Perfect." She looked over the signatures, filed them away, and leaned forward again. "Looks like they are just about done. You can just drive your truck around there and back up to the trailer, and you should be all set."

"Great. Thanks." He turned around and walked out, glancing up at the sky brightening into dawn. Some snow blew in his face as he got in his truck. He turned the heat up as he drove around back. Rolling his window down, he listened as he backed up until he heard his hitch knock into the trailer. Then he glanced in the mirror and watched as the attendants hooked it up.

"Okay, you're all set!" They gave him a thumbs up.

Jim returned a wave and headed out the snowy parking lot. His mind went back to his early morning conversation with Jess. He hadn't told her that she might be a widow in a couple of hours... because he had decided to walk into the enemy's trap to get the final instructions. He hoped they weren't so final as he turned East and headed out of town. He drove about ten minutes and then turned onto the country road. He drove slow looking all around for traps and then parked at a pull-off spot about halfway down the road.

The morning seemed eerily still as he got out of his truck and headed back to the trailer. His breath steamed as he looked over his shoulder but didn't see anything. He prayed casually as he backed the snow mobile off the trailer, but then knelt to pray harder next to the mobile before standing, placing the helmet on his head, and mounting the mobile. Pulling down his goggles, he kicked the kickstand and took off.

He road in the ditch for a ways before coming to a large field with no fence. He zipped the mobile up the ditch and into the field. First, he just road through the field, making a wide berth around the tall rock, looking for the trap. He didn't see anything but a snowy field and a tree-lined waterway in the distance. There were tracks leading up to the rock from the road. The closer he got, he could see the spot was marked with a headstone. He drove slowly toward it, cautiously. He eyed the tracks leading up to it and going around it. He felt pretty safe until he got up to the tracks, knowing anything could be mixed in the snow.

When he got close, he dismounted, hung his helmet and goggles on the handlebar and carefully approached the gravestone. On the front was a shiny brass nameplate with the name UNKNOWN (SO FAR) and under it RIP. Jim just stood there and stared, wondering where the instructions were. Under RIP was an arrow pointing down. He gently kicked the around in the messed-up snow, looking for the trap as he slowly inched forward. Standing next to it, he gently kicked around the base, looking for a booby-trap but seeing none. He knelt next to it and dug around the base. His heartrate quickened as he started to lift it. He suddenly set it back down, wondering if there could be a landmine under it. He sat back on his heels, upset that he had come all this way, but didn't know how to get to the.... *Maybe there's nothing under it. Maybe it's a trap, and that's all.* He carefully dug under it with his hand, working it around until it ran into a metal canister disc... *landmine. Release the pressure, and you'll be blown sky high.* He carefully worked his hand to the side, feeling a bag. Grabbing it, he worked his hand back out and looked at it. Groaning as he sat back on his heels... *another folded map in a baggie complete with white powder.* He felt like punching something. He wasn't willing to expose himself to that white powder again. Then again, might not get the chance to decide. He lifted his eyes to see a chopper rising over the horizon.

He stuffed the baggie in his pocket, ran for his snow mobile, threw on the helmet and goggles, mounted and took off, first straight ahead and then toward the trees for cover. He looked back toward the chopper. It was coming fast. He asked the mobile for every ounce of juice, zipping it over rut and drift, booking it for the waterway. He was nearly there when the chopper caught up. He glanced back seeing a gunman in the open doorway of the chopper. Bullets showered toward him as he reached the trees, pinging off rocks and bark, cutting through leaves and twigs, spiriting up dirt and water from the creek. He weaved the mobile in and out between the trees, trying desperately not to be an easy target. Periodically, bullets rained toward him. His mind raced for a plan. He didn't even have time to check and see if he got hit. He tried to pray but all he could come up with was, "Help!"

Seeing a culvert going into the creek, Jim grabbed a box of ammo, bailed off the mobile, rolled down the bank into the creek, scrambled across the icy water and into the culvert as bullets rained down, pinging off the metal drainpipe but missing him. When they stopped coming, Jim emerged from the pipe and shot back, hitting the chopper, but not doing enough damage to bring it down. They did retreat. Jim watched the chopper swing out, circle, and then come back. They fired. Jim returned fire. The chopper retreated but then came back. They exchanged fire. Jim hit one of the gunman. The chopper retreated and headed

back toward the road. Jim splashed through the water, climbed up the bank, and jumped back on his bullet riddled snow mobile. Weaving back through the trees, he watched as the chopper sunk lower and lower in the sky. Then he stopped, mesmerized, as it went down nose diving right toward the gravestone. He imagined the men inside screaming as he watched the bottom of the chopper scrape across the top of the gravestone, knocking it over and activating the landmine. The whole scene erupted into a gigantic, eye-blinding fireball. Jim had to look away. When he looked back there was nothing but a white-hot skeleton frame of the chopper. Poetic justice... and yet he couldn't help feeling a bit sorry, not because evil was removed from the earth but because he knew those men would never escape those flames but would continue in them for all eternity.

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Derrick reined in Maverick and waited for Wade, Kara Lee, and the packhorse to catch up. Danny caught up first, stopping abruptly next to Maverick without instruction from Kara Lee. Kara Lee fell forward against the saddle horn. "That was his idea," she stated, pushing herself back.

"Figured that." Derrick glanced back at Wade and then pointed toward the mountain range. "See that mountain with the big plateau on top?"

"Yeah," Wade answered as he stopped next to them.

"That's it." Pushing off the saddle horn, Derrick repositioned himself in the saddle.

Kara nodded. "How long till we reach it?"

"Hour maybe. Then we will have to leave the horses at the base and climb it."

"How 'bout lunch?" Kara Lee suggested, feeling very hungry.

"It's not lunchtime yet." Wade frowned at her as he rode past.

"We can eat when we get there." Derrick took out an energy bar from his coat's chest pocket and handed it to Kara Lee before following Wade.

She accepted it gratefully and quickly unwrapped it, even as Danny took off after the others. She just let him have his head and ate her bar. *He probably knows more about what's going on than me anyway.*

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Jim had just gotten the snow mobile secured on the trailer when he heard sirens approaching in the distance. Running to his truck, he ducked inside and curled up on the floor until he heard the sirens go past and disappear in the distance. Then he jumped in the driver's seat and took off. Under normal circumstances, he would have stayed, but these were far from normal circumstances. Forgive me for not obeying the law this once. He glanced up.

His mind went back to the violence a few minutes before, replaying it in their mind. *Whew.* He took the moment to relax as he headed down the road. *Came pretty close that time.* Noticing white fluff protruding from his winter coat, he looked down at it and twisted it to see three bullet holes at various spots in the sleeve. *Real close.* His mind went back to the final instructions in his pocket. He tried to decide what to do. He decided to wait to decide until he caught up with the others. Taking a deep breath, he turned off onto another back-gravel road, wondering if he could find his way to the others without using the main roads.

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"What kind are these?" Kara Lee held up her half-eaten energy bar.

"Autumn Apple, I think," Derrick answered.

"Oomm. They're good," Kara Lee spoke with her mouth full. I'll have to remember to get these for myself next time I go shopping. Got caramel and cinnamon in them, I think."

"I don't think they have them around where 'we' live." Derrick guided Maverick around a half snow-buried log. "I got them in a little Amish bakery in Southern Illinois.

"Huh." She looked at the package. "They look so professional." She took another bite as her phone began to vibrate.

She stuffed her gloved hand in her pocket and worked to pull it out. "It's Jim."

Wade turned Windwalker back and trotted to her. "Let me talk to him." She handed him the phone, and he answered it. "Jim, what happened? Did you go? I tried calling, but...."

"Yeah. I got it," he grumbled.

"Well, great, aren't you pleased?"

"No, not really. It's got white powder all over it."

"Oh, that's bad?"

"Yeah."

"You okay?"

"Just fine. Someone's gonna have to pay for the snow mobile, though."

"What happened to it?"

"Got bullet holes all over it."

"Oh, really? What happened to them?"

"They blew up."

"They blew up?" Wade repeated, looking from Kara Lee to Derrick who were both watching him in interest. "So, is the snow mobile runnable? I mean can you make it out to us?"

"It's still running."

"Are you gonna try?"

"I'll have to look at Derrick's map and see if I think it will make it that far."

"Okay. Hope to see you soon... about the final instructions."

"I'll bring 'em with me. If you got any ideas on how to read them without releasing the powder, let me know."

"Okay. Did...?"

"Bye."

Wade took the phone down from his ear and raised his eyebrows as he looked over at the others. "I think he's having a rough time. Went through a lot to get the final instructions, but he doesn't want to read them because he says it's in a bag with some kind of white powder in it."

"Does he know what the powder is?" Derrick inquired.

"He must. He must know it's bad anyway." Wade shrugged, handing the phone back to Kara Lee.

"Who got killed?" she asked, accepting the phone.

Wade shrugged again. "The guys chasing him, I guess."

"I wonder if Satoro was one of them." They all three exchanged glances.

"I wonder if they are still gonna come to the exchange. I wonder if they know that was Jim and not you. I wonder if they know he made it out alive," Derrick said.

Wade shrugged. "Maybe they'll message me again." He pulled his phone out of his pocket.

"I think you should message them," Kara Lee suggested. "Act like you were there. Curse them out for shooting, and tell them you're looking forward to your next meeting."

"I can't curse them out!" Wade replied, shocked at the suggestion. "If ever we need the Lord's help, it's now!"

"Let me do it then," Kara suggested.

"You can think of something to say. We all will. Then we'll decide on the best message and send it when we get to the Red Rim Castle Rock."

"We're almost there." Derrick headed off again. The others followed.

Almost to the point of no return. Almost to the meeting house of death. Almost to the last stop on the suicide mission. Kara Lee was starting to have second thought about whether she should have even come. She wondered how good she would be at convincing gunmen that it was unethical to kill innocent bystander reports that they were one hundred percent neutral like the Red Cross. *One hundred percent neutral.... Well, he might buy it. Maybe he never read the story I did on his boss.*

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Coming to the blocked off road, Jim slowed his truck to a stop and pulled over far enough back so he could use the driveway to turn around. Draping his arm over the steering wheel, he stared out at the road block with a path shoveled the drift beyond it and then tracks going through the deep snow beyond it. Pulling out Derrick's map, he studied it, mentally calculating the distance. Folding the map, he got out of the truck with his gas can, filled up the snow mobile, put Derrick's map in the pack on the back of the mobile, took the can back to the truck, and slammed the door. Staring over the mountainous landscape, he wondered if he was even going to find a spot flat enough for his snow mobile to go. He wondered if they were riding the horses up and down these steep mountain peaks and valleys the whole way.

Coughing out a breath of steam from the cold, dry air, he headed back to the mobile, backed it off, mounted, and headed down the road, following the tracks of the others.

## Prepare for Battle

"Well, we made it." Wade rode up to the rocky mountain side, leaned his head back to stare up the cliff, and then turned around to face the others.

"Yeah, so far." Derrick rode Maverick over to a tree at the base of the mountain and dismounted.

Kara Lee stopped next to Windwalker and held out her phone for him. "See what you think. It was open to a text message with no sending address."

Wade took it and read it. "Well, that's not bad." He meandered Windwalker over to Derrick and dismounted. "See what you think of this." He handed Derrick the phone.

Derrick read it. "That's pretty good." He handed it back.

Wade nodded, glancing at Kara Lee in Danny. "Guess we can't compete with the writer. I'll copy it over to my phone and send it. He got out his phone and started the text.

Kara Lee dismounted Danny and lead him over to Derrick. Derrick tied the four horses and started unloading the packhorse. "That's a weird place to do a ransom exchange." Kara Lee looked back at the tall, flat-topped, jagged-sided mountain. "There even a path going up there?"

"Doubt it. We can walk around it to see. They'll probably come down in a chopper."

"That's why you brought the mountain climbing equipment?"

Derrick nodded as he pulled off the rest of the pack from the horse and threw it by the tree. "You can unsaddle 'em."

He grabbed the rope and carabineers and glanced at Wade. "I'm gonna climb up and anchor the ropes so we can go up and down."

Wade nodded absentmindedly. "Let me know if you need help." He reread the text, proofreading it."

Kara Lee absentmindedly loosened the cinch on Danny's saddle as she watched Derrick loop the rope over his shoulder, stop at the bottom of the cliff, and stare up looking for a good route. She pulled the saddle off, carried it over, and propped it up against the trunk of the sturdy oak tree. She glanced back at Derrick as he started to free climb. Swallowing hard, she stared toward him as she walked back toward Danny, feeling like piling some blankets at the bottom of the cliff in case he fell. Aren't you supposed to throw up a grappling hook or something to anchor yourself? She held her breath as watched him climb higher, rock to snowy rock. Every time he transferred his weight to one hand and swung over, she was afraid he was going to slip on the snow or his bandaged hand was going to give way and not hold his weight. Still staring toward him, she pulled the bridle from Danny and then meandered toward Windwalker to unsaddle him.

Wade put the cellphone back in his pocket. "Well, I sent it." He sighed walking over to Kara Lee and starting to unbuckle Windwalker's bridle. "I hope we were right about that being the best thing."

"Yeah." Kara Lee pulled off Windwalker's saddle, staring toward Derrick. She plopped it next to the other saddle and came back as Wade pulled off the bridle. "You would think he could have found some way to secure himself instead of free climbing like that." She stared toward Derrick, swinging toward a ledge almost to the top of the rock face.

Wade turned around to look as Derrick sat down on the ledge, draping his arm over his bent knee and staring off into the distance. "He looks like he's doing alright. He's almost there."

"He looks like he's shaking."

"He's just getting a breather before he finishes. That's a good idea." Wade took the bridle over and looped it over the saddle horn as he heard his cellphone ring. Fear shot threw him as he tentatively read it. Blushing, he raised his eyebrows as he read it.

"What'd he say?"

"He's coming." He put the phone back in his pocket. "He's mad."

"Yeah but what'd he say?"

Wade walked back and rubbed the girth mark off of Windwalker. "I know you aren't sensitive to curse words, but my daddy always taught me not to read that kind of language in mixed company."

Kara Lee smiled. "Well, condense it then, or let me read it."

"I did condense it. He's mad and he's coming. I sure hope this is the right spot... I guess." He rubbed the pinto's back. "Might be better for us if it isn't."

"That mad, huh?" She meandered over to Maverick and started unsaddling him.

"Uh huh." Sitting down on a boulder, Wade watched as Derrick started climbing again. He watched intently until he made it to the top. "He made it."

"That's a relief." Kara glanced back as she tossed the last saddle up against the tree.

Wade pulled out his phone as it dinged again. He groaned as he read the subsequent message. "He text you again?" Kara asked walking over, glancing up at the cliff as a single rope came flying down.

"Yep." Wade studied it for several moments. "At least it appears we are in the right spot."

"How do you know?" She kicked the toe of her boot in the snow.

"He sent a map. He wants to make sure we show up. He's looking forward to it."

"Hmm," she groaned, watching a second rope come down and then Derrick walking over and then repelling backwards down the side.

“He’ll be here tomorrow.” He stuffed the cellphone back in his pocket. “Twelve o’ clock high.” He stood up and rested his hand on Windwalker’s shoulders. “We’d better be ready for him.”

“Think we can do that?” She stared at Derrick jumping backwards down the hill.

“I think we better.”

“How?” She watched Derrick jump backwards from the cliff to the snowy ground beneath.

“I have no idea.” Wade went over to talk to Derrick as he unclipped his carabineer from his climbing harness. Kara Lee watched them talk a few moments. Then she ducked under the horse’s necks to reach the food bag. Unzipping it, she found three different flavored energy bars. She took them back to the rock and sat down. Wade and Derrick came over. Derrick looped the second rope around the tree. “What’s up?” She asked.

“Wade’s goin’ up. I’m gonna spot him.” He held the rope as Wade put on the harness and wrapped the rope around the carabineer.

“So, what’s the plan?”

Derrick’s mind answered. We don’t have one yet, but his mouth muttered. “To win.”

“Hope I remember how.” Wade gazed up the rocky mountain side as he walked toward it. “It’s been a long time.”

“Just like riding a bike,” Kara called back. Derrick tightened the slack as Wade walked. They both watched as Wade paused at the bottom of the mountain, looked up again, and then started to climb.

“Hey!” Wade yelled down as he reached the top. Standing in a crevasse, holding onto a chunk of granite, he stared at the piled snow. “The snow was up to your chest?”

“In spots!” Derrick yelled back. “It’s drifted. Nearly clear by the rocks where I tied the ropes!”

“Nice.” Wade just stood there gazing at the snow looking for a way up. He inched sideways over to Derrick’s tracks where he saw a rock, he assumed Derrick had used to pull himself up. He prayed it would hold him. Rolling his eyes, he brushed away a wider spot in the snow. He let go of his hold and grabbed the rock above him. His heart jumped into turbo speed as he pulled on the rock with one hand pushed off the ground with the other, causing his feet to leave the rock face.

“You can use the rope to pull yourself up if you need to!”

Too late, now. Starting to shake, he forced his arms straight, threw his left leg, and tumbled into the snow.

“You alright?”

Wade nodded, getting to his knees. “I’ve got it,” he mumbled as he crawled into Derrick’s tracks. He looked up at the four walls of snow around him, frowned, and stood to his feet. Literally, chest deep. He trudged through it until it suddenly ended and the snow was just a dusting on the rocks. He looked at the spot where Derrick tied the ropes. Then he unhooked the carabineer and walked around, thankful that the other side of the plateau had much less snow.

“Hey, send the harness back!”

*Alright. Alright. Just a minute.* Wade walked near the edge on the other side, looking down that side of the mountain and seeing tracks. Stepping out of the harness, he headed back, sighing at the chest deep snow as he grabbed the rope and then started to trudge through it. “Here you go!” he yelled as he threw it down. Quickly, he hurried back threw the icy snow cone until he reached the clear area again. Shaking his head, he looked around at the barren landscape, devoid of everything except icy blowing snow, not an ounce of cover anywhere. When they pick a spot, they sure pick them.

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Derrick handed the rope to Kara Lee. “If I fall, just hold the rope tight against the tree. Don’t try to pull me up or lower me down.” She nodded as she accepted the rope. Derrick walked over, got the harness, stepped into it, and got himself attached to the rope. He glanced back at Kara Lee and yanked the belt tight as he walked over to the rock face and found his handholds. Then, he climbed quickly and efficiently to the top, much faster than the time before without needing to stop for a break. Grabbing the rope, he pulled himself to the top and then trudged through the snow over to Wade. “So, what do you

think?" He brushed the snow from his coat and pants.

Wade shrugged. "Doesn't look like a lot of opportunity to dig in and make a stand. Still, I'm ready to start brainstorming. What do you think?"

"I think they'll probably come in on a helicopter."

Wade nodded, crossing his arms for warmth. "Stands to reason. They got cleared area over there to land."

"Yeah, or they could repel down to get the money and then repel down with the baby, if..."

"Yeah. We can't let that happen. They'll never come down the second time."

"Right. Let's hope they plan to land at all. They could just pass over and shower bullets or a bazooka."

Wade nodded again, gazing across the landscape. "We have to have cover."

Derrick returned the nod. "Concealment, so they don't know where we are until they land."

Wade turned and looked at him. "They might just think we aren't here." He gazed back over the landscape. "We could text them."

"We could make a sign out of sticks or rocks that they can see from above."

"Yeah. That's good. The text might not go through." He looked around. "But where are we going to be hiding when they come."

"Well, that ledge on the other side might work. Just have to put something there to stand on to see over the top and get a good aim."

Wade huffed a laugh. "And shovel all that snow in front of it."

Derrick returned a relenting nod. "It'll be a lot of work, and we really shouldn't both be together."

Wade pointed. "There's another ledge over there. It's not as wide and it's very close to the top. You'd have to duck down to keep from being seen."

Derrick nodded again, following his gaze. "Maybe we can build some sort of snow shelter that looks natural but will keep us hidden. The chopper will probably have a spotlight, too. That'd be good, though," he nodded toward it. "They're practically on opposite sides. I can have you covered from the other side while you make the exchange. Be nice if either Kara Lee or Jim would have you covered from that side."

Wade nodded, reaching down to pick up some snow. He formed it into a snowball. "At least it's packable."

"Good. Why don't you start making a shelter on that ledge?" Derrick stepped out the harness. "Keep this on in case you fall. Try to make it look like an ordinary drift if you can, except it can't have a roof," he shrugged.

Wade nodded. "Maybe a partial roof. We'll see what happens." He stepped into the harness.

"I'll go clear the area in front of the other ledge."

They both worked hard for several hours. Wade got his bunker made, a messed-up igloo with a side door, covering half the ledge. Derrick got his made, more like a lumpy snow-fort with a roof on one side and around the edge but not in the middle. His being down lower, he also had to stack a few large flat rocks to stand on like a ladder to reach. He was working on the sign when Wade climbed up to join him. "How's it coming?" He asked, walking over.

Derrick nodded, placing down a stick for the last part of the W. "I think mines pretty much done. Yours looks more like a drift though."

"Pretty sloppily perfect, ah?" Wade asked, obviously proud of himself.

"Well, you could fool me," Derrick's voice was tired.

"I doubt that." Wade slapped his arm. "Wanna go down for a lupper break? All we got left is to finish the sign and stock

the bunkers with rifles and ammo right.”

Derrick nodded. “Unless we think of something else.

“And we’ve got all day tomorrow.”

“Well, and to practice.”

“Right. Let’s go refuel.” He grabbed Derrick’s arm and pulled him along a moment.

“Alright.” Sounds good. Together, they climbed down the mountain. First, Wade with Derrick spotting him from above and then Derrick with Wade spotting him from below.

They made their way over to the horses. Wade sat down on the rock. Derrick leaned against the tree a moment. “You know....”

Kara Lee came over toting a large arm-full of sticks and dropped them on the other side of the tree. “I like your message, Welcome to Death, but it sure takes a lot of work. This place isn’t exactly a national forest. Time for supper?” She went and got the food bag.

Kara Lee handed Derrick the food bag. “Thanks.” He took it and sat down on an un-snow-covered root. Digging through it, he found a large can of chicken and some crackers. Opening the can, he was pleasantly surprised to find just a thin layer of ice on the top and sides, freezing only the very outer chicken. Wade wasn’t so lucky. He had to bang his can of peaches against the tree for several minutes to get the top inch of ice to release and wound up with peach slushy for the rest.

“Hey, what’s that?” Kara Lee craned her neck to see a cloud of snow rising in the distance then stood to get a better view. Wade stepped over and Derrick stood, too.

“Look’s like someone’s coming,” Derrick muttered.

“Think it’s Jim?” Wade glanced at him then so did Kara.

“I don’t know,” Derrick stared at it trying to tell, but all he could see was a red blob bobbing up and down through the drifts. “Better not take any chances. Let’s get the rifles out.” He set his chicken and crackers on top the bag. “You get the ammo,” he addressed Kara Lee. Kara nodded.

They congregated behind the giant oak tree with six loaded rifles and three boxes of ammo. The oak tree’s trunk was very wide up to three feet and then split into two halves each branching slightly in opposite directions. Wade stood behind the left side. Kara Lee crouched down behind the right. Derrick knelt down in the middle and rested his rifle in between the two halves. “Know how to shoot?” He asked Kara. She nodded. “Hopefully, we won’t have to, but if things get hot and heavy, feel free.” She nodded, though she felt more like just loading for them. He lifted the back of his rifle and sighted down the barrel. Wade raised his to his shoulder and sighted it as well. Kara Lee pulled one close to her but wasn’t sure if she would have the nerve to use it. She’d carried a gun off and on for years, but she’d never shot it at anyone, *aimed it a couple times, though. Shot up in the air a few times... but to actually risk killing someone. I don’t know.*

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Jim slowed his mobile as the horses tied under a tree came in view. He turned toward them. *Must be them.* As he got closer, he looked around and slowed to a stop. He saw the horses. He saw the packs open and kind of dumbled around. He saw ropes hanging down from the nearby cliff, but he didn’t see anyone. The whole scene looked deserted. He hoped everything was alright. He started to go again, but then he stopped, not getting a good feeling about going forward. Call them. He nodded. Biting the glove off his hand, he took out his phone and dialed Kara Lee.

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Staring intently at the stalled figure on the snow mobile, Kara Lee about jumped out of her skin when her cellphone rang. Wade let his rifle fall from his shoulder and stepped toward her as she fumbled through her pockets. “Kara!”

“I’m trying!” she squeaked.

“Hurry up,” Derrick mumbled, still unmoved, sighting down his rifle.

"It's Jim," she said at the same moment as she answered it. "Hello?" Her eyes darted and her voice was urgent.

"Hey, it's Jim. I was just coming in on a snow mobile. I think I see your camp. Four horse, some packs, and some ropes going down from a cliff, but I don't see anyone. Are you guys there?"

"Yeah. We're here. Come ahead."

"Okay. See ya in a minute." Jim shrugged, stuffing his phone back in his pocket and plopping his helmet on, he started out again. Still cautious about the lack of activity, he went slowly unclipping the safety on his sidearm as he got close. He smiled as Danny turned and nickered at him and then relaxed as Wade and Kara Lee emerged from behind the giant oak tree. "Man, you guys know how to make a fella nervous," he said as he came to a stop near there packs and turned off the engine. He glanced toward the tree as he watched the nose of a rifle aimed in his direction fall and Derrick stand up behind it. "I told you it was me."

"Thanks for coming," Derrick stated, dropping his rifle, picking up his chicken and crackers, and sitting down on a giant root protruding from the oak tree.

"You're welcome." Jim didn't even try to keep his voice from sounding offended.

"Good to see ya." Wade walked up to him and slapped his back in a quick hug. "Can't say if I'm happy ya came or not... though." He stared into Jim's determined eyes with his soft ones. "You know we're going to be mighty out numbered."

"I know," Jim huffed a laugh. "I've already had a preliminary battle with them, which is what made up my mind for me. Those guys have no right exercising that much power in this country."

"Yeah, well, I keep praying that we end up going home with Davy and don't just end up as another notch on their guns." Wade walked away over to the food bag, leaned up against the tree, and grabbed his can of peach slushy from the ground.

Jim nodded, took off his helmet, and walked over to join them. "So, you guys got a plan?"

Nodding, Wade chewed quickly. "We..." Mouth full, he pointed toward the cliff as his cellphone dinged. Putting up a finger to say, wait, he pulled out his phone to look at the message.

"There's a ledge on each side of the cliff. We've got a make-shift snow bunker set up on each one. We just have to take up the guns and ammo. We figure they are gonna land on it with a chopper, so..."

"Oh, boy." Everyone turned to look at Wade. Wade looked up at them, turning pale. "They know where here."

"How?" Kara Lee squeaked.

"They are coming tonight."

"Tonight!" Derrick repeated.

"Tonight." Wade nodded.

"Midnight?"

Wade nodded again. Derrick threw his empty can down into the snow in anger. "I'll help you get set for them," Jim offered.

"Okay." Wade nodded, quickly, his mind racing. "Well, we don't have that much to do. We have to get the ammo and rifles up. We have to finish making the sign if we want to. We..."

"We have to come up with a plan," Derrick growled.

Wade nodded. "That, too."

"Okay. Well, I'll help you get the guns up. You want three in each bunker?" he glanced at Derrick, who nodded. Kara Lee handed him three energy bars. He took them and put them in his pocket as he walked toward the rope and harness. "You want to spot me?" He slapped Wade's arm on his way past. "Then you can send the guns and ammo up." He got in the harness.

Kara Lee got up. "I'll go get some more sticks for the sign." She walked away toward a distant grove of trees.

Derrick started to get up, but his arm gave way and he fell back down. Pulling the belt tight on the harness. Jim reached down, picked up a blanket, and threw it on Derrick. "Get some sleep, so you're ready for midnight. We've got this covered." First, Derrick gave Jim a dirty look and tried to get up again, but then he relaxed and laid back against the tree. "Think of a plan," Jim continued as he clipped the carabineer to the harness. "We all will."

Wade nodded and then looked at Derrick. "Yeah. Jim's right. Get some rest." He tossed another blanket at him. "We'll wake you about around ten if you're not awake, yet, and we'll," he shrugged again, "man, our stations and get ready to fight." Everyone gave a collective shrug back, hoping they could come up with a plan before midnight.

Reaching, Derrick grabbed a third blanket and started spreading them each over him as he watched Jim scale the rock face. He paused once, freezing in place, as Jim slipped on the snow halfway up, falling but quickly catching himself on another rock as the rope, Wade held firm, caught him and held him up. Derrick pulled a tarp underneath him to keep out the wet snow and slid from the root onto the ground. Lying on his side, quite warm under the blankets, he watched Jim make it to the top, get the rifles up, and the ammo partway up before he fell asleep.

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After Jim got the rifles, ammo, and sticks that Kara Lee collected to the top, he sent down the harness for Wade and Wade climbed up with Kara Lee spotting him. Jim loaded the far bunker and started arranging the sticks as Wade loaded the near bunker. Wade joined him when he was done. "You want to finish this?" Jim asked after arranging the C.

"Sure." Wade started arranging the O. "Why?"

"I want to check something out." Jim walked over, picked up the harness, and got in it again.

"What?" Wade followed him over to the far cliff.

"Those tracks down there."

Wade leaned over to see them. "You think they've been here? It's probably just animal tracks."

"After what I've been through with them, I want to make sure. Spot me, will ya?"

"Sure." Wade grabbed the safety rope and tightened it as Jim turned backwards and started repelling down the mountain.

When he got down there, he carefully walked down there tracks a ways, quickly confirming they were human tracks. He stopped, seeing they lead to snow mobile tracks in the distance. Crossing his arms, he stared down at them, noticing a small straight line next to them. Where they dragging something? But why did they cover it up? He knelt down in the snow next to it and carefully dusted the snow away, digging ever-so-slowly until he reached a thin wire cable, stretched taught under the snow, obviously tied to something at both ends.

Standing to his feet, Jim looked down the trail of the covered wire to his right, seeing only snow. Then he turned and followed the it toward the cliff, stopping when he got close enough and staring. After a few moments, he saw the wire twisting up the cliff side behind rocks and vines and dried leaves. He took a step closer and gently touched the wire, following it to a large, locked black box, that he assumed was packed with explosives. The wire kept going. He followed it to another box, screwed into the rock above his head. He followed the wire to five more boxes spaced several feet apart until he was practically all the way around the plateau. He went a little further just to confirm his suspicion and sure enough saw the horses in the distance. "See anything?" He heard Wade shout from the back side of the mountain and hurried back.

"Yeah!" Jim called back up.

"What?"

"He's got the whole cliff rigged with explosive, from the back all the way around the left side anyway!"

"You're kidding."

"No."

"You know anything about explosives?"

“No, but it looks they’re rigged with a switch!” Jim studied the box in front of him closer. “They are all connected with a taught wire to a regular metal switch that flips left or right. They are all switched left. When one explodes, it must pull the switch on the next one causing a chain reaction.”

“Be careful! You don’t know what might set them off!”

Jim started heading down the snow-covered wire trail toward the beginning. “Hey, come down, why don’t ya!”

“I don’t have anyone to spot me!”

“Then go down the other way. Just get away from it and keep the others from coming near incase I accidently blow it up!”

“Don’t blow it up! We’ll have no place for the exchange!” Wade pulled the rope and harness up.

“Well, you can’t do it sitting on a mountain of explosives either!”

“Well, just a second!” Wade ran over to the other side and yelled to Kara Lee telling her to stay away. Then he ran back and got in the harness. He’d repelled before without a spotter and figured that was probably the least dangerous thing he was going to do today. “Hey, Jim!” He yelled, connecting the carabineer.

Jim stopped at the gaggle of tracks, trying to see the where the wire was. “What?!” He knelt down outside of the messed-up snow and carefully dusted the snow into a pile, digging down until he found the wire.

“I’m coming down!” Jim glanced up at Wade starting to descend backward. “Is this okay? I mean as far as the explosives.”

“Yeah! You should be good. Just don’t go any farther to the left. Try to lean right... if you can!”

“Right.” Wade continued down, briskly. Jim resumed dusting, following the wire until it led him to a giant black box. Touching it, Jim noticed it was plastic. He carefully dusted down the side, seeing the wire connected switch. He dug all the way around it, dusting off all the sides, trying to decide how they were going to activate it. Sitting back on his heels, he stared at it as Wade approached, walking carefully in Jim’s footprints.

“What do you think?” Wade asked, stopping behind Jim, staring over his shoulder.

“How do you think they are going to activate it?” Jim asked. “Electronically, right? But I don’t see an antenna.”

“Maybe it’s inside the box.”

“Maybe.”

Wade looked toward the cliff and then gazed down the decently long trail that led up to them. “Why’d they put it way out here?”

“Hum?”

“I said, ‘why’d they put it way out here?’ Why didn’t they put it next the cliff where it would do some good when it explodes?”

Jim glanced back at the cliff. “That’s an interesting question.... Why?” He gazed up at the sky and tried to figure it out. Then he glanced back at Wade. “Does it matter?”

“Yes!”

“Back up and take cover.”

“Why?” Wade started to back up. Jim got out his multi-tool knife and opened out the wire cutter. Wade backed up faster and then turned and ran as Jim lifted the wire cutter to the wire and snipped it with one hand while holding the wire in it and holding the switch with the other. As he expected the switch wanted to go to center when the wire was released. He didn’t know, but he had a feeling that could be an explosive experience for everyone.

“Hey, Wade! Come here a minute!”

"Why? You're crazy man!"

"That's been said before... about you too. Come here. I need your help."

"I have a feeling," Wade started to go. "that is just moving that I need help, too... psychiatric help." He stopped behind Jim. "What?"

"Take my knife and make a hole in this plastic case."

"No!" Wade squeaked.

"I'm serious. This switch won't stay in place unless I tie it."

"Well, that's stupid." Wade knelt down behind Jim. Leaning forward, he touched his shoulder as he squinted to see the switch. "Push it further."

"What?"

"See that little indent there?" Wade pushed Jim's hand forward and up.

Holding his breath, Jim squeezed his eyes shut, preparing to see Jesus. Not hearing any music and starting to feel hot, Jim blinked open his eyes, relieved to find out he was only hot because Wade was laying on his back and that actually, he was still alive. Letting out a sigh and rolling his eyes, he carefully released the switch, confirming it was locked in. He glanced over his shoulder, shooting Wade a dirty look. "Well, you better go lock in the switch on this other one." He motioned his head toward the wire in his other hand.

"Yeah. Right." Wade got off of Jim's back and headed toward the next box, first slow then he started to jog. "Okay. All good." Wade waved after securing the switch.

"Wonderful," Jim muttered, getting up and heading to join Wade. Together, they separated and secured the switches on all the boxes. When they were done, they both stood there staring at the last one.

"Now, we are sure these are not going to blow up by remote control, right?"

"No," Jim relented.

"How dangerous do you think it would be to take them down?"

"We can always find out." Jim picked up a large chunk of rock and started backing. Wade went with him and further. In fact, when Jim stopped Wade jogged further back. Lifting his hand and pulling back his arm, Jim threw the rock with all his might and then hit the dirt as the rock slammed into the black box, cracking it. After a few moments, Jim took his hands from over his head and looked up. "Did I hit it?" He called to Wade.

"Yeah. You hit it." Wade walked toward him, joined him, and they both walked up to the black box, noticing the crack all the way down the front. "You're lucky you didn't hit the switch," Wade pointed out.

"Yeah, I guess," Jim conceded. He was pretty confident in his throwing ability and hit it right where he aimed, but he hadn't expected it to crack the black box.

"Might as we start unscrewing." Wade took out his multitool then so did Jim, and they each unscrewed a box.

"You know, this might just turn the tide for us," Jim said, while unscrewing.

"How so?"

"We could bury them at various spots under the snow where we think the chopper could land with a string attached to it. Could be a great bargaining tool if nothing else."

"No good. If the chopper lands on it, and flips the switch then Davy's dead, too." Wade lifted down his box and went to the next one. Then so did Jim.

"Yeah. It would have to be underground somehow."

“And it’s all rock up there.”

Jim paused unscrewing a moment. “But some of the rock is loose and brittle. Might be able to chop out a spot with the metal shovel. Did I pack the ice pick?”

“I have no idea.” Wade lifted down the next box.

“I bet I can figure something out.”

Wade shrugged, moving to the next box. “Well, more power to ya, then.” They worked in silence another minute. Then Wade suggested. “I’ll finish these up. Why don’t you go around to the front and climb back up with Kara Lee spotting you and finish the sign. Then you can haul me up while I’m carrying these little... packets of death.”

“Sure.” Jim set down the box he was working on. “I wonder if I could throw them out without making the switch go off until I wanted to switch it.” Wade just shook his head continually until Jim turned to go. “I’ll see if I can dig a spot.” Wade nodded even though Jim wasn’t looking at him.

In the next few hours, Jim and Kara Lee got the sign finished, the complete, Welcome to Death sign. Wade got the all the boxes around the perimeter of the cliff down, stacked a safe distance away, and two carried to the top. Jim got two spots chipped out of the rock, the explosives buried, and a string attached to their wire and stretched to his bunker.

As the sky darkened into night, they finished up, gathered next to the oak, built a fire, and waited. Jim prayed almost the whole time. Wade thought half the time and prayed the other half. Kara Lee ate some supper, took some pictures, her favorite being the Welcome to Death sign, and wrote down her notes for her story. Derrick slept, groggily waking a few times but not remaining awake.

## Showdown

Sitting around the fire, they all gazed in the general direction of each other without seeing each other, until Jim’s phone began to sing. “Ten o’ clock.” He turned off the alarm, turned around, and shoved Derrick, who was already waking from the alarm. “Time to wake up.”

“I know.” Lying on his side, Derrick propped himself up on his elbow. “Who wants to start with their plan?”

There was silence, so Jim started. “Well, we’ve got the two bunkers. You’re gonna be on this side.” He nodded to Derrick. “I’m gonna be on the other. We each got three loaded rifles and three boxes of ammo and a side arm. If Kara wants to go up and help load rifles it will have to be on Derrick’s side because there’s no room on mine. We have the sign done, and we have explosives planted.”

Derrick looked surprised and interrupted. “What explosives?”

“They had explosives tied all around the cliff, about ten black boxes. We took them down and buried two up to with a wire going to Jim’s bunker. They are activated with a switch, so if he pulls it....”

“We could all be blown to the hereafter!” Derrick exclaimed. “You don’t know how much power is in one of those things!”

“Well, apparently, they figured it’d take ten to take down the mountain,” Wade suggested tentatively.

“Yeah, or maybe they figure it’d take ten to blow it halfway to Mars!”

“Just listen to the rest of the plan,” Jim continued. “We have one buried in the middle where we figure the chopper will land. It won’t land close to me because of the signs there, and it won’t land close to you because of the snow you left over

there. It could land back on the far side away from both of us. That's where we planted the other. Wade's gonna be down on my ledge, talking to them... yelling to them. When someone comes out with the baby. He'll go meet them with the money. We'll have him covered. If they try to leave before we get the baby to safety, we threaten to pull the cord on the explosive."

"They'll know you won't do it with Wade out there."

"We'll just have to convince them we will. Besides Wade might not be out there, yet. I brought the megaphone from the youth group at church. As soon as they land, we can announce it's there."

Derrick shrugged. "Well that might work. Just don't sound too convincing if you're not gonna pull it cause as soon as I think you are, I'm jumping off the ledge."

"I'll text you, if I'm really gonna do it. You take Kara Lee's phone."

"Text me regular updates, I don't know if I'll be able to hear what's going down."

"I'll try to speak up," Wade said.

"I will," Jim added.

"And Wade should have his phone with him set to record in case we need that as evidence."

Wade nodded. "I know."

"Just remember," Jim looked into Derrick's eyes. "We aren't out here for revenge or even to wipe out evil from the earth. None of us are judge or jury. We are simply here to get Wade's baby back and get evidence for court. We're hoping to get out of this without anyone getting killed."

Derrick shrugged, "You're the one sitting on the explosives."

"And you've got plenty of fire power yourself. I want everyone's word that the only firing will be done if there is immediate danger of death for one of us."

Wade nodded, "You got mine."

Derrick shrugged. "That's the plan."

Kara Lee picked up her serious business camera that she had attached around her neck. "I don't plan on firing a shot... but me and Betty Lou will have the entire night documented for all the evidence and future reference you need."

"And that should also be a food motivator to keep everyone honest. It'll be recorded on film."

"Sure, Kara Lee, come on up and share my ledge," Derrick grinned at her. She lowered her camera slightly. Suddenly, she wished Jim had room on his as the picture of herself tied up in a tree in Kentucky flashed through her mind again. She snapped a picture toward Derrick, purposely letting the flash blind his eyes.

"Well, are we ready?" Slapping his legs and standing up, Jim looked from person to person. Derrick and Wade both nodded and stood up.

"Let's pray around one more time," Wade suggested, surprised that Jim didn't. Jim nodded. They all bowed their heads and prayed around.

"Alrighty," Jim said, lifting his head. He grabbed the megaphone, draped the strap over his shoulder, got into the harness, and walked toward the cliff. Wade took hold of the rope to spot him. They all watched him as best as they could see in the dark until he made it to the top and sent down the harness for Wade.

Wade got in the harness, grabbed the duffel of cash that Jim had brought, swung the strap over his neck and pushed the duffel to his back as he headed toward the snowy mountain. His heartrate quickened as he looked up. A cold wind cut into his face. He placed his gloved hand on a snow-dusted rock, gripping hard as he pulled himself up. His right leg began to shake as he climbed. Involuntarily, he kept imagining his foot slipping, even though he was fine. Halfway up, his left arm began to shake as he realized he couldn't see the top or the bottom of the cliff. He breathed deeply, forcing his breaths steady as he kept going. If there was ever a time he wanted to run home to his mother, this was it. Ice crystals dusted down into his black hair, melting, as

the wind ruffled his hair to the side. The icy wind felt good against his heated, panicking body. Rock to rock, hold to hold, step by step, he made it to the top and over the edge, collapsing at Jim's feet. He wanted to stand up and laugh off his nerves, but he knew his shaky legs weren't going to hold him as his whole body went into convulsions.

"Lot different tryin' to climb that thing at night, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Wade pulled off the harness and crawled to the side, trying to regain his composure in private.

Glancing at his shaking friend, Jim sent down threw down the harness, hoping Wade would make through the night. He knew his friend he knew his friend had deep feelings, but he also knew he could perform under pressure. A great deal of the outcome of the night depended on Wade. He was the one set to do all the communicating with Satoro. Jim felt sorry for him. Out of all of them, higher pressure situations were the hardest on Wade, yet he was the one called to be the point man. There would be a lot resting on him in a couple hours, and yet, he smiled toward his friend as he watched Wade push himself to his feet knee-buckling on the way, and yet even if he's shaking like a leaf, he can still manage to make it to the top.

Tightening the belt on the harness, Kara Lee stared toward the plateau, second-guessing if she wanted to climb it. Wade picked up the safety rope and waited, studying her face as she argued with herself about whether she really wanted to go up there. "You don't have to climb it if you don't want to," Derrick said. "You can give me the camera, and I'll take a few pictures for you."

"Sure, you will," she muttered, tightening the belt harder.

"I said I would."

"I can do it." Tossing her red ponytail, she marched off toward the mountain. Derrick tightened the slack in the rope and sent up a pray for her as he did the other two as she started to climb. She climbed a few feet and then jumped back down. She tried again, got a foot up and slid back down. She tried again, got about four feet up and slipped. Derrick lowered her down.

"Wait a minute." Knowing the harness had a weight limit of about 380 pounds he mentally calculated his and what he figured was Kara Lee's weight as he walked toward her. "Hey, Jim! Spot us from above, will ya?"

"Sure!" Jim threw down the other rope, and Derrick handed it to Kara Lee.

"But you don't have one," she said unhooking the one carabineer and hooking the other one.

"This harness should hold us both." He unbuckled his belt, looped it around the back of Kara Lee's harness, and buckled it again. "Unless you want to stay down here?"

"No! And I'm a good shot you might need me!"

Doubt it. Derrick nodded and said, "Okay, well, don't just grab anywhere. See how this rock has an edge, it makes it easier to hold."

"I know how to rock climb." She tossed her fluffy, ponytail again, hitting him in the face with it.

"Then why'd you fall three times?!"

"Just nervous, I guess. I have to physic myself up for this sort of thing. I didn't fall, I jumped down," she maintained defiantly as she grabbed hold of the rocks and pulled herself up. Derrick climbed behind her, the span of his arms and legs wide enough to be able to keep one hand and foot on each side of her without touching her. He had to admit she did seem to know what she was doing that time. She climbed nearly effortlessly halfway up. Then finding a sturdy crevasse for her feet, stopped for a break, sighing. "Good exercise isn't it." Her arms burned.

"Yep."

"How much further is it?" She kept her voice formal, portraying that she only asked for purely informational purposes and not emotional ones. She turned her head to look at him, suddenly losing her bearings when she took her eyes of the rock and started to fall backward, her arms straightening but not losing hold of the rock.

"Not far." Derrick let go of the rock with one hand and pushed her back forward against the cliff.

She laughed nervously. "Uh, yeah. Thanks." Carelessly, she started to go again before she was ready, didn't put her feet

into anything, and slipped. Her hands hung on, but her feet dangled.

Derrick caught the back of her coat and held her up until she got her feet in a hold. "To the right." She moved her right foot to the right and found the hold. "Both of them." Then she moved the other one.

Laughing nervously, she stood frozen against the rock face. "Um, a, thanks, sorry. I, a, um, maybe...." She looked down into the bottomless darkness and leaned in that direction. "Maybe I should go back down."

"You're almost there, now. See that rock to the right? You can reach it can't you?"

"I don't know." She stood there frozen.

"Try. You're in a good sturdy spot. You could let go with both hands and be fine." Tentatively, she let go with her right hand and reached for it. "There you go." He kept his right hand on her coat. "There's a foot hold right below it." Clearing her throat, she started climbing again with him following close behind until they reached the bunker. "Now you got to climb over it, and we'll drop down from the top.

"Kinda running out of hand holds aren't we?" She gazed over the smooth rock, looking for something she could hold onto, not seeing anything in the dark.

"I'll lead," Derrick suggested. "Put your hand where mine was. He put one hand over her head and moved his whole body to the right, opening up the spot where his right hand had been.

Standing on her toes, she reached for it. "Yeah, right."

"Here." He grabbed the back of her coat and lifted her to it.

"Derrick!" She screamed, her feet leaving the rock face. She reached his hand hold, but being much shorter than him, she had no place for her feet. "Der...! Hel...! Ahh!" She screamed again.

"Yeah. I know." Holding her suspended in the air with one hand, realizing that this was a terrible idea since he was the one without a harness on, he climbed with his free hand and his feet while she screamed until they both got above the bunker and dropped down into it through the roof.

Falling under the roofed side of the bunker, Kara Lee's mind raced over protests, arguments, insults, threats, but her mouth couldn't keep up. "Derrick, you...! I can't...! You shouldn't...! How dare you...! What in the world were you...! If I ever...! If it's the last thing I ever do...! You're a... and worse!" she screamed, getting to her knees as Derrick got to his feet and stood on the two, stacked boulders he was using as a ladder to see over the top of the cliff.

"Everything alright?" She heard Jim ask with a chuckle in his voice.

"No!" Kara Lee screamed back. "Your friend is the most reckless, inconsiderate, thoughtless, son of a lunkhead, I have ever met!"

"I think she's mad at you," she heard Jim say and could see Derrick nodding. "If I could have the harness," He yanked on Kara Lee's belt. "I'd wind the rope up and go over to my side."

Muttering, angrily, she stood up, yanked the belt loose, step out of the harness and said, "Here!" as she threw it up at Derrick. Smiling, Derrick caught it. "Well, that's a fine, 'thank you,' for maybe saving your life." He set the harness on the top.

"You mean almost ending it!" She threw her hands on her hips.

"You were the one wearing the safety belt!" Derrick squeaked.

"And you were the one attached to it!" Her green eyes blazed. "If you would have fallen, you would have taken us both down."

He gave her a look. "No, my belt buckle would have snapped, but you would have been just fine."

"Whatever," she looked away, not even wanting to be pacified.

Chuckling, Jim took the rope and harness over to the rigging, set them on top and headed to his bunker. Wade was standing near it, arms cross, wind blowing his coat and hair, staring over the landscape. Jim pushed his cowboy hat down farther

on his head so it wouldn't blow off. He slapped Wade on the shoulder on his way past. Breaking his concentrated stare, Wade nodded at him, turned and followed him to the bunker.

Gazing down into the darkened abyss, Jim knelt down, grabbed hold of the rock on top and slid down to the ledge. He tossed the megaphone to the side into the snow fort and then crawled into the cave. Wade swung down after him, tossed his money bag into the snow fort and then crawled in after it. Sitting down, knees up, arms draped over them, he imagined and reimagined what he was going to say in response to any hypothetical remark or question he could think of.

Derrick checked each rifle again, making sure they were clean, loaded, and ready. He opened two boxes of ammo, climbed up, and arranged them on either side of him within reach in a spot in the rock face. He climbed back down and handed the third box and a rifle to Kara Lee, who was watching. She set the box next to her and then hesitantly took the rifle, flipping it over and looking at it. "I carry a hand gun for protection, but I haven't shot one of these in years," she spoke, meditatively. "I've never actually shot at a person before." She looked up at him, eyes question marks.

"You don't have to. If it comes down to a fire fight and you want to, just shoot in that direction, bounce some bullets off their chopper."

She nodded and set the rifle beside her.

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Wade's mouth went dry, and his heartrate quickened as he heard the whirring thumping sound of a chopper approaching. "Here they come." He glanced over at Jim. Jim nodded, readying his rifle. Wade heard the chopper circling and saw the spotlight as it passed over them. Then he listened as the sound changed to hovering and heard his name come over their loud speaker. Picking up his megaphone, he crawled out of the shelter into the darkness, figuring the chopper was hovering over the middle of the plateau. "I'm here! Land and come out! We'll talk!" He waited for a response, getting one that was more explosive than he expected. He heard the chopper flew a ways away and then jumped when he heard a gunshot and an explosion. He saw a glint of orange flames to his right. Though most of his view was obstructed by the cliff, he saw enough to know that they had exploded the initial black box that was supposed to start the chain reaction for the others. "Nice try, but we're on to you!" Wade proclaimed through his megaphone, trying to sound tough. He heard the chopper come back and hover where it was.

"Good job. You past the first test for your survival."

"Yeah, right!" Wade laughed into the megaphone. "We've countered you a whole lot more than that! Maybe we should be making the rules!" Wade swallowed hard, immediately wondering if he should have said that."

"You think you can make the rules?" He practically spit out the words. "Why don't we just leave with your kid? Why don't we just drop him from the plane? You dare talk up to us when you should be begging! You've got no idea how to get to us!"

Wade's mind raced for a way to counter that. "Maybe I don't know how to get to you, but Derrick does and he's getting closer every day! He's with me here today, and if you harm my baby in any way. I will be with him every step of the way until we take you down!"

"I want to talk to Derrick!"

"He's not coming out until me baby is safe with me!" Wade waited, listening to the chopper blades, heart thudding, mind racing for possible replies and how to counter them. He remembered how Derrick had said that they might not even have Davy with them, and his heart sank. He waited. They all waited... until finally the chopper landed and the whirring blades began to slow.

Starting to shake, Wade stood up. He watched as a man descended from the chopper holding a toddler. His heart squeezed with anticipation and urgency. He grabbed the bag of money, climbed to the top, and started to walk toward the man. After a few steps, the high-powered spotlight swung toward him. Throwing his shoulders back, he marched toward them with confidence, though he knew he could be stopped by a bullet at any moment. He stopped halfway to the chopper. The gunman met him. Wade held out the duffel of money. The gunman handed Wade the baby. Wade accepted the bundled up baby, quickly removing the knit hat and muffler to see the little one's face. He studied it, *black hair, brown eyes, and a small birthmark on his right temple. Davy.* His heart calmed and a smile lifted to his face.

The gunman unzipped the bag and gazed over the money. "All here?" he growled.

Wade's mind raced for an answer, but his hesitation was answer enough. He could see that in the gunman's cold eyes. "Almost." His voice softened. "All me and my friends could get together." He put his hand to hip, so it was close to his sidearm. "You're not here for the money. You don't need it." He took a step back. "You're here for Derrick, and he's not going to come out until we're back to safety." Wade kept his voice confident.

The gunman stared at him with steel eyes and then yelled, "He doesn't have all the money!"

"Almost!" Wade yelled. "It's all I've got, and Derrick's not going to show until I'm out of here!" Wade backed up, slowly but steadily.

"Derrick!" A voice roared over the chopper's speaker. "We've got guns aimed on your friend! Show yourself now or he's dead!"

"I said I want to see Satoro, not one of his stooges!" Derrick yelled out. Wade kept backing.

"Show yourself, now!"

A shot rang out from Derrick, shattering a front side window. Wade turned and dove for the ledge, swiftly sliding down next to Jim, amazed he made it. He set Davy in the shallow cave, feeling bad for his crying, but not having time to comfort him. He grabbed a rifle. The chopper lifted. Jim fired toward it. Derrick fired toward it. It came full throttle toward Jim's position. "Under it!" Jim drove toward the cliff and squeezed as close to the rock as he could getting partway under it. Wade crunched himself into the small cave, holding a screaming Davy as showered down toward them, cutting through the snow bunker, bouncing off the rock. Wade hugged the baby, tightly, covering him with his body. After zooming over, the chopper circled and headed back, this time getting a better angle even with the ledge. Still, lying as close as he could to the rock, Jim lifted his rifle and began firing. Wade set Davy behind him, got his rifle and fired hard as the chopper came straight at them. They fired threw all six rifles praying the whole time. Without returning fire, the chopper lifted, aborting before it could get a clear shot as it took many hits. It circled and came back. Jim watched it hover above them for a few moments before getting a feeling for what they were planning to do. "Grenade!" he shouted, bouncing to his feet and firing, hitting it too close above him. He dodged to the left as a piece of shrapnel cut into his shoulder.

Leaving Davy, Wade came out and joined Jim, both of them firing as multiple grenades dropped from the chopper. Wade missed two, but Jim got them, also when they were too close, getting a small piece of shrapnel in the side of Jim's face and in Wade's neck and chest. After what seemed like an eternity to Jim and Wade, sweat pouring off both of them the chopper lifted and started circling the rock. "What are they doing?" Wade asked, wiping his sweat-drenched face with his sleeve.

"They must have figured out Derrick isn't over here. They're looking for him." Jim's voice held an accidentally haunted tone. Wade shut off the recorder on his phone and put the phone in a safe spot next to Davy in the cave.

Staying close to the cliff, Jim stood up to see over the edge, rifle ready. Wade joined him. They watched as the chopper searched the far side of the cliff with their spot light. Then they heard a shot ring out as Derrick fired at them, hitting their window again. Getting the message this time, the chopper headed straight across the plateau for Derrick's side, flying low. "He doesn't have a chance," Wade mumbled. The chopper reached the middle and Wade's heart jumped, remembering. "Pull it!" he yelled. They both reached for the string, pulling it together in perfect timing with the chopper. They watched as fire erupted from the ground, blowing the belly out of the chopper. The chopper fell like a rock, and the flames spread. Four men ran out of the flames, their clothes on fire, and rolled in the snow. Another man, wounded by a bullet, stumbled out of the chopper and fell next to it, not escaping the flames.

Jim glanced at a flash from Derrick's side and shook his head, knowing that Miss Kara Lee Cummings was taking pictures. Then Jim and Wade heard a shout from Derrick. "Hey! They got more coming by land!" Jim turned to see a line of snow mobile headlights approaching in the distances.

Then they heard Kara Lee yell, "Derrick! Get back here! Don't leave me!"

Wade looked at Jim. "What now? Go down and fight them or keep our position here with them above and below us?"

Jim looked at the agonizing men up top with no weapons. "They aren't much of a threat. All are ammo's here. It will be harder for them to come up to get us then to fight us on even ground."

“Yeah, but we’re trapped up here. They surround us, they can keep us pinned down until another chopper comes.”

Jim nodded. “Got reception?”

Wade checked his phone and nodded. “Yeah.”

“This may be a good time to call 911. Wait and see.”

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Kara Lee watched nervously as Derrick free climbed down the snowy cliff. She wanted to protest further, but she knew there was no use. She wanted to call him a coward for deserting, but there was no point. She’d let him know it later for sure... if they all survived this. Standing on her toes on the rock ladder, she craned to see the men at the top. They were laying in the snow, crying and cursing, their clothes steaming. At least, they don’t look like much of a threat, presently. She looked back down toward Derrick, but couldn’t see him anymore as he had disappeared into the darkness.

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Rifle strapped over his neck under his arm and around on his back, Derrick jumped from the cliff into the snow. Then without breaking stride, he ran for the horses, trying to decide the whole way whether to take a horse that could go more place and last longer but go slower or take the mobile that could sprint away but would shortly run out of gas. He raced for Maverick, not planning to desert just planning to hide at a safe distance and watch until he decided what to do... attack from behind, call for help, get the black box bombs.... Reaching Maverick, he yanked his rope free from the branch, tossed it over his neck, tied the other end to the halter, forming reins, and jumped on his back. Squeezing his legs, he sent Maverick off in a full canter toward the other side of the cliff.

Soon as he was to the side of the cliff, he stopped when he heard a distant squeal and then yelp. He stopped and listened harder until the distant sound clarified into the sound of sirens. Good ol’ nosey Trent. He nudged Maverick again and rode him at a lope into the frosty distance.

## February Fourteenth

Driving through their snowy town on his way home from work, Jim decided to take a detour and pull into the cozy, little flower shop on the south side of town and buy Jess some flowers. He figured she probably had plans for tonight. He couldn’t remember any Valentine’s Day she hadn’t made special. He merely tried to keep up. *She’s also a fine one for secrets.* He shifted his truck to park and stepped out into the slush. *If she’d keep me informed, I would know whether to buy her steamed flowers or a corsage.* He felt a little guilty as he slammed the door and walked toward the bright, cheerful shop. He knew Jess preferred a bouquet that should could put on the table and admire all week. It was only his pride that wanted to show off a beautiful expensive corsage if they went out to eat. He stomped through the clumpy snow on the sidewalk and kicked a clod before pulling open the glass down. The bell jangled and the yellow and purple wreath flopped away from the door and then back as he walked in greeted by the aroma of sweet cinnamon and warm air.

“Good Morning!” A pretty lady arranging a bouquet of flowers behind the counter looked over her shoulder at him. “Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.”

“I’m looking for a Valentine’s bouquet for my wife.” He walked over to the counter. “She loves pink, blue, and peach, but whatever looks... special.”

“I see.” With a smile, she abandoned the bouquet and walked over to their Valentine’s bouquets. “Here’s a very nice bouquet for only forty dollars pink baby roses, blue bells, yellow roses, bleeding hearts, delicate baby breaths, and a few fine ferns. Very crisp and new. They will last a long time.”

“Sounds great. I’ll take them.”

“Good.” She picked up the vase and carried them over to the counter. “I know Jess will like them.” She smiled at him, handing him the card to write on as she rung them up. Pen in hand positioned over the card, Jim stared off trying to decide what to write. He was so thankful for a nice peaceful holiday to share with his wife. He was so thankful for the peaceful last couple of weeks. Everything seemed to be getting back to normal. He was cautiously optimistic it would stay that way... for a while at least.

~To my beautiful wife who I love with all of my heart. I look forward to every holiday and nonholiday that I get to spend with you. I hope you like this small gift I got to say Thank you for all you do. ~

~Jim~

She stuck it in the flowers for him as he put his debit card in the card reader. He had to feel sorry for Carlos though. Not that long ago he was in love with a beautiful nurse near his age, hoping for a bright future. Now, he was in jail looking at a very glum future for the next few years at least. He couldn't hold to much malice against the man, more than anything he just seemed like a victim of circumstances that had no backbone to stand against the tide... and yet... and yet what he did was very wrong. “Here you go,” she squeaked with a bubbly smile, handing him the vase.

“Thanks.” He took it and headed back out from the warm cinnamon-smelling shop out into the blustery cold. Smiling to himself, he headed back to his truck, ready to go home and spend a nice relaxing day with his wife and daughter.

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“Something sure smells good,” Mellissa said, wrapping the belt of her blue robe around her as she walked into the kitchen. She smiled at Wade, seeing him open the oven door, gaze at his creation, suck in a deep breath of the sweet cinnamon-smelling air, nod in satisfaction, and then turn the oven off. “Perfect.”

She did have to admit whatever it was smelled very good. “Good morning, honey.” She walked over to the table.

Looking over his shoulder, he grinned back at her. “Morning, honey.”

“Whatever you're cooking sure smells good.” Smiling at the arrangement of sparkled pink and white daisies in the center of the beautifully set table and then smiled again at the highchair next to the table, though a tear threatened her eye at the same time.

“Um. Hum.” He grabbed a grape from the fruit salad and ate it. “We have Cinnamon rolls.” Picking up a hot pad, he pulled out a square pan of four puffy, oversized cinnamon rolls bubbling in melted cinnamon sugar and set them on the stove. “We have fruit salad.” He brought over a bowl of colorful salad. She saw strawberries, grapes, pineapple, kiwis, bananas, and mandarin oranges. “And we have coconut and whipped cream to go on it.” He circled back to the stove and picked up his mixing bowl of white frosting. “How's Davy this morning?”

“He was sleeping when I looked in on him.”

“Got a special breakfast whipped up for him too,” he grinned toward his baby bowl. She couldn't tell what it was only that it looked pink.”

“I should go get him.” She turned to go out but then turned back. “You can't tell when he's awake anymore. He hardly ever cries... even when he should.” Her voice was strained with emotion.

“I know.” Wade set the frosting down and walked over to her. “He'll be okay. He's really young. He'll readjust.” He put his arm around her.

“I hope so.” She looked up at him. “He always looks scared.”

“He'll be fine. He just needs some more time. Wait and see.” Arm draped over her shoulder, he walked with her. “Let's go get him together.”

Thankful for his closeness, she put her hand up on his forearm, knowing he was right. They were all going to be fine. She could feel that.

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“Hi, Carlos,” Pastor Thomas offered his hand as he walked into the near empty room and stopped at the heavy white

table Carlos was shackled to.

“Pastor.” Carlos stood from the chair and shook the Pastor’s hand with his free hand that wasn’t shackled. “Thanks for coming.” He hung his head slightly as he sat down but then looked back up.

“When do you leave?”

“Tonight... the guy’s think anyway. They don’t tell us for sure. There’s a bunch of us going in a bus.”

Pastor nodded sympathetically. “At least it’s not as long as it could have been.”

“I guess that’s true.” He looked down again. “But life will never be the same again, even when I get out.

“No. That’s true.” Pastor agreed. “But maybe it could be better than it was before.”

“How do ya figure that?” He looked him in the eye.

“You could change your life today by accepting Jesus’s free gift of salvation. You can get an inner joy despite your circumstances, an everlasting hope in heaven, and a peace that passeth all understanding.”

“Your telling me that if I accept Christ, I will always be happy?” Carlos looked skeptical.

“That you’ll always have a friend,” Pastor clarified, “a friend that sticketh closer than a brother. The kind of happiness you know, doesn’t last. It’s like a yoyo way high like when your drinking or with women and way lo when the natural consequences of sin come about. Jesus gives his people rest and peace. Despite the circumstances, he’ll be there.”

“I could use one of those kind of friends, but being a Christian in jail will not make life easier.”

“I think it will. You might not fit in as well, but then again fitting in and doing what those people expected of you is what got you into this mess to begin with.”

“They’re my family,” he glared.

“Maybe it’s time to get a new family... an eternal one.”

“We went to church growing up.” He stared off, remembering. “Mass.” He looked back. Pastor nodded. “I haven’t been to confession for years, and I have committed mortal sins. I’ll be in purgatory until...”

“The Bible says, There is none righteous no not one. Not by works of righteousness that you have done, but according to God’s mercy He saved you. By grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves it is a gift of God not of works least any man should boast.”

“Yeah, well, I was taught you have to confess to a priest so that...”

“Were you taught to believe the Bible?” Carlos shrugged and nodded slowly. “They Bible says, we have one High Priest, one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. Were you taught to obey the ten commandments?”

“Of course.”

“What about the second one. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image the likeness of anything in heaven above or in earth beneath or in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down and serve them for I the Lord Thy God am a jealous God.”

Carlos tossed his head a little. “Well most of the images are of him. The crucifix is...”

“Is not the only one. There’s Mary and St. Christopher and...”

“Alright. No bodies perfect.”

“That’s right. Not even priests, the only one is Jesus. He is the only One that is able to intercede to the Father. He’s the only One that can forgive sin. He is the only way to heaven. Jesus sayeth unto them, I Am the Way the Truth and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

“You believe in just confessing once... Jim and Derrick, Trent and Wade believe that, too.”

“We believe that you must be born again. Have a time in your life when you repent of your sin, your sinful lifestyle, living for yourself and the devil. You have to change sides to become a Christian, accept Christ’s free and join his family. You want to have your name written in the Lambs Book of Life, a heavenly birth certificate to state that you belong to Jesus that you are part of his family.”

“Yeah,” Carlos was still skeptical. “How do you get that?”

“If thou wilt confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. Call upon the name of the Lord and thou shalt be saved. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ thou shalt be saved. And he said unto him, here is water what does hinder me from being baptized? And Philip said unto him, ‘Thou mayest if you believe with all your heart.’ And he said unto him, ‘I believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God.’ Do you?”

“Ye-ah.” He shrugged. “I believe Jesus is the Christ.”

“Do you believe that He and only Him can get you to heaven?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. Maybe.” He stared off.

“You have to know.”

Carlos nodded. “Well, what I’ve been doing hasn’t worked out so well. Maybe I should try this.”

Pastor accidentally rolled his eyes and looked away. “You can’t try it out. Either you believe it or you don’t!” Swallowing, he glanced around wondering if he had said it too loud.

Carlos gave an exaggerated shrug. “A lot of my family are Christian... a lot of them are in jail.”

“Anyone can claim to be. I’ve heard you claim to be before.”

Carlos gave a relenting nod. “Yeah, sorta, maybe.”

“Sorta and maybe don’t cut it, if you are one you’d know it, you’d know Him, Jesus, and more importantly He’d know you. I am the Good Shepherd. I know My sheep and am known of mine. To as many as received them to them gave He power to be called the sons of God even to them that believe on his name. If you were His son, you’d know it.”

“How?”

“Through answered prayer.”

Carlos nodded slowly. “I do want it. I want what the others have. I might not understand everything, but I know I’m a sinner. I know Jesus is Christ and that he rose from the dead.”

Pastor nodded. “You want to pray with me now?”

“Yeah.” Carlos bowed his head and closed his eyes.

Pastor began. “Lord, I pray for this dear man, that you would answer his questions about you. He’s been told a lot of things through his life that are after the traditions of men, but contrary to your word. Show him the clearness of your word and the clear straight past. Help him to grow in his relationship with you and to find peace in you through difficult times.”

Carlos waited a moment then looked up. “What do I say?”

“That’s up to you. He’s a person. What would you say if He were standing here?”

“Well, em, God,” At first he felt foolish but then he began to feel like there was someone there listening, waiting for him to go on. “I guess I’ve pretty much done what I wanted to in life... trying to make it work... trying to make it fun. Things haven’t worked out too well. I’ve always believed you were around. I’ve tried not to be the worst guy in the world, and a lot of the bad things I have done I was forced into. I guess that doesn’t matter. I still need your forgiveness. I asked a lot for forgiveness when I was younger, just kind of got out of the habit, but maybe it doesn’t work to go through a priest. Maybe I need to ask you directly. I think so. It would be great if what they say is true that if I ask you once that will take care of all of it. I am sorry for my sins. I believe that Jesus is the Christ that he died and rose again. I do want to be a Christian.” He spoke softly. “I can’t promise

to be perfect, but maybe with your help, I can do better.” He started to look up.

“You should end it in Jesus name.”

“In Jesus name I ask it.” He looked up again.

“Well, welcome to the family brother.” Pastor stood up and shook his hand.

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Whistling, Melinda picked up the curling iron and twisted a generous lock of hair from the back around it. She pulled the front part back but left a long loose strand if curl on either side to frame her face. Now, she was working on putting some loose curls in the back to give her long blonde hair body. She always tried to look nice for work or church or any occasion where she was likely to see people, but for some reason she had a special desire to look extra nice for Matt. She hadn't felt that way in a long time. She couldn't even remember feeling this way about Carlos. Carlos was a chum, and it wasn't right for multiple reasons for things to move on further between them. Matt felt like something special. At first, she hadn't even liked him... just respected him. Then she got to like an admire him. Lately, she was getting an electrical charge through her when he stood close to her. She smiled to herself, staring into the mirror and lowering the curling iron, as a metal image of him passed through her mind. *Strong, steady, reliable, extremely smart, capable, incredibly good looking... and yet...* Her smile faded as she raised the curling iron again. *How well do I really know him? Pretty well. Yet the man you know wouldn't drive away all his kids... and yet.* She started curling again. He's changed. He's changed a lot. Nobody used to like him. You didn't like him yourself. It's Jesus that made the difference. That's why you couldn't continue with Carlos. You didn't have the same spirit. I wonder how his last wife felt about him. He obviously loved her. Did she love him as much? She brought the curling iron down again and thought about Davy. *That sweet, innocent, motherless child. Just make sure you are falling in love with the man and not the idea of having a family of your own... for the first time in your thirty plus year life.* She unplugged the curling iron and drug her makeup case over, resolving not to worry about it today. *Today, I'm just going to enjoy the outing.*