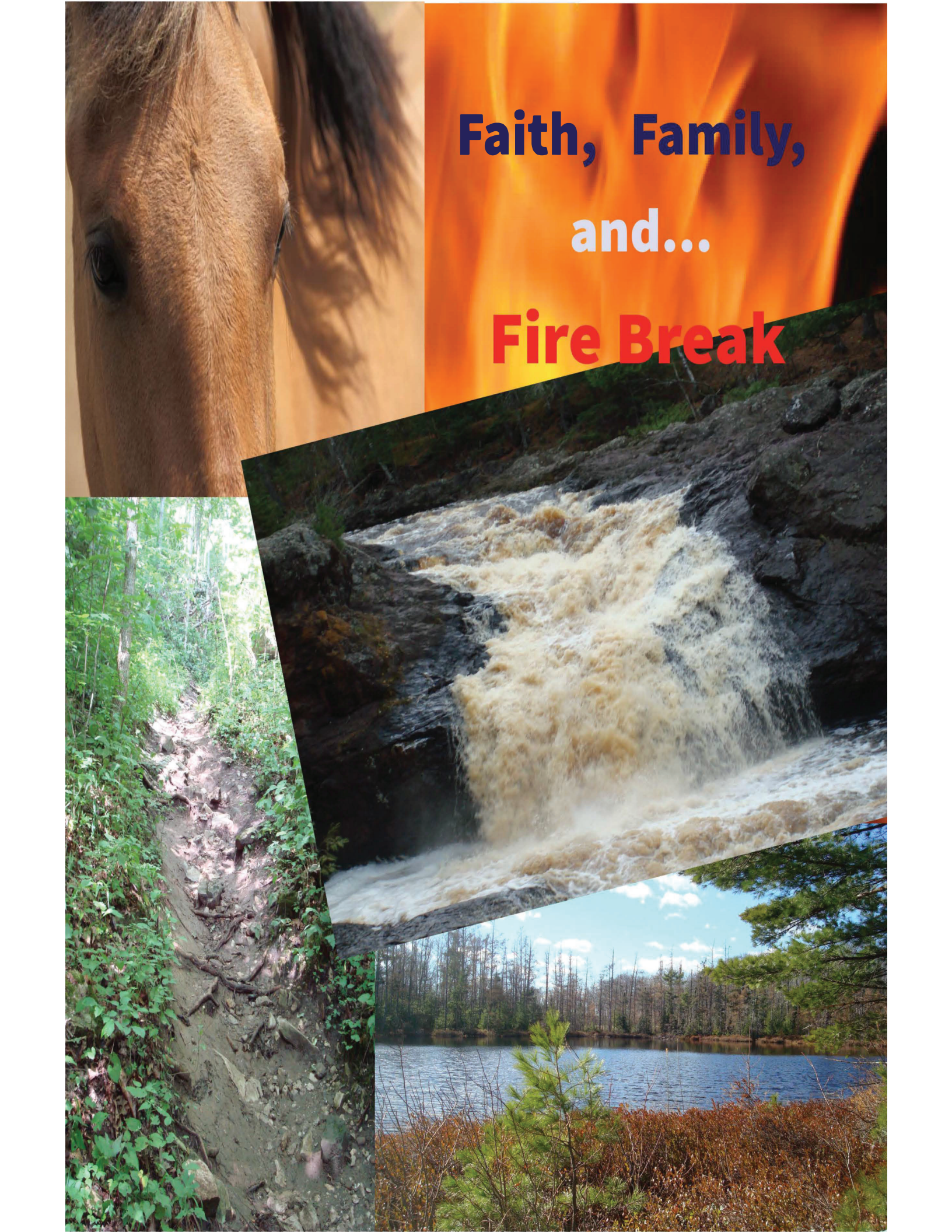
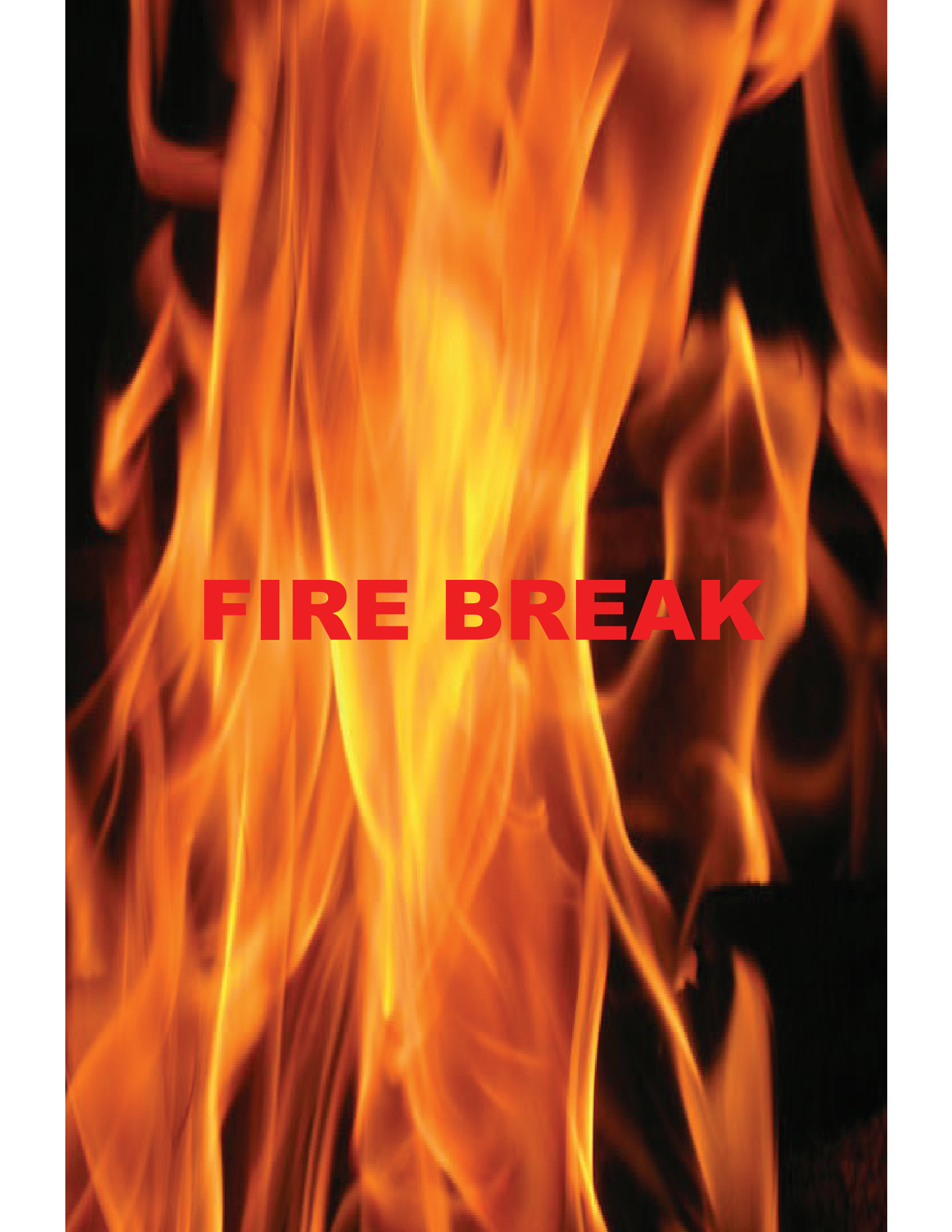




Faith, Family,
and...

Fire Break



FIRE BREAK

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ISBN:
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Derrick rolled up his shirt sleeves as he walked around a fire hydrant, cutting across the corner of the sidewalk. In his opinion, it was a perfect spring night, typical of mid-May. He looked up at the array of glistening stars that were so numerous they nearly cluttered the vast backdrop of blackness... deep 3-d nothingness... empty space. In wonderment, he stared a moment then continued on his walk home.

Putting one thumb in his pocket, he let his other arm lightly swing. The streetlights seemed to reflect against the strength-enhanced blue veins that protruded from his arms. He was naturally tall and thin, but his muscle-bound frame along with his confident demeanor gave anything but the impression of weakness.

Staring down at the pavement, he walked faster kicking a twig off the sidewalk and into the grass. Normally, he drove his truck to work, but last night he'd decided to walk to the station. The stunning purple and orange sunset had drawn him, urging him further and further until it had passed away. In fact, it had so enthralled him that he missed his turnoff to the fire house and had to run to get there in time for his shift. He had managed to keep his perfect record of never being late, but he was sure that he had broken the record for changing into his uniform the fastest.

Twenty-four hours later his shift was over, and he was walking back to his apartment. Taking a deep breath of cool air, he snatched a leaf from an overhead tree branch and ripped it apart as he walked. He was ready to go another round, but no one had needed a substitute. So he'd go home, maybe grab a snack then lift some weights while he watched a good action movie. He had to admit that, being a morning person, he much preferred morning shift changes, but for now they were switching at night, and he wasn't going to be the one to complain about it. Maybe....

BANG! He spun around toward the sound of the gunshot. *BANG! That way.* He ran toward the sounds. Just as he reached the ally, a black SUV squealed out barely missing him. He had leapt out of the way just in time!

Getting up from the metal trashcan he had smashed with his ribcage, he noticed a dying man lying in a pool of blood a few feet away. Derrick hurried over to him and knelt next his side, immediately trying to stop the bleeding. He was gut shot at close range, and it didn't look good. The man screamed as Derrick put pressure on the wound trying to stop the massive blood flow. "What's your name?"

The man just shook his head so Derrick didn't pursue it. Keeping pressure applied with one hand, he got out his cell phone with the other. "Hang on. I'm calling for help."

"Wait!" The man grabbed his wrist stopping him. Breathing hard and grimacing, he took his own phone from his pocket along with a handkerchief. "Use mine," He groaned. "and... and don't get your prints on it." Derrick didn't take time to question just grabbed it with the handkerchief and dialed. "Don't tell... them who... you are. Please. It... it's very important. I'll tell you when..." He choked. Raising his upper body, he coughed, gasping for air.

"Okay. Fine. Just relax." It was more like a demand.

"911. Do you have an emergency?"

"Yeah. I'd like to report a shooting in the alley behind Mac's hardware." Before he could say more, the man reached up and snapped the lid down. Derrick turned back to the man. Before he could speak, the man grabbed his arm. "Over there." He nodded in the direction of a nearby dumpster. "Underneath it." Shooting the man a confused glance, Derrick slid toward the dumpster. "It's a mini hard drive." Derrick slid his hand back and forth across the gravel and trash underneath until... he found it. Snatching it, he pulled it out and looked at it. "It... It means the lives of many innocent people. I didn't...know... I mean I..."

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Derrick slid back over to the man, leaning close and clutching the hard drive. The man squeezed Derrick's hand tight around the drive. "You have to keep it. ... You have to guard it." He squeezed it tighter. His voice was raspy. "Look at it, but don't let anyone know that you have it. You'll see why. Don't tell anyone... not the police, FBI, no one. Someone will find you. You'll be killed. You... you have to get it... to the hearing." The man was fading fast.

"What hearing?" He propped the man's head up a little. "Come on. Stay with me."

"July 18th. Chicago. You've got to... got to submit it... evidence. Get it there. Please, get it there." The squeal of sirens approached in the distance.

"Go! Get out of here!" He choked, coughing. "Don't let them see you. Go!" Derrick looked from side to side, unsure what to do. "Go!" He pushed him away.

Derrick got up and skidded behind the dumpster, seconds before the emergency vehicle's lights shone in the ally. Moments after Derrick was hidden, the man's head fell to the side and he knew that he was going into cardiac arrest. He glanced at the paramedics who were slowly getting out of their truck. Every nerve in Derrick's body jumped. He wanted to run over and start CPR but something held him back. Before his feelings were resolved, the paramedics had their equipment out and were beginning their procedures.

"We've got a gunshot victim here in full cardiac arrest!" The first medic shouted out as he began chest compressions.

Derrick watched them work for a few minutes until it was apparent that the man was not going to be revived. He looked down at the drive, knowing he held the dying man's last wish in his hand. Though the pull was strong to step out and make his presence known, the pull to first find out what was on the drive and what he was dealing with was stronger. Quietly, he slid between the broken boards of the battered privacy fence and snuck home in the shadows.

His nerves were still on high alert when he reached the parking lot of his apartment building. He noticed every little sight and sound to the minutest detail and made note of them in his mind. Glancing around, he stopped by the water spigot and washed the blood off his hands and forearms, thankful he didn't get any on his shirt. Then cautiously, he went to a side entrance and walked in. After hurrying up the stairs, he stopped dead in his tracks when he noticed the light gleaming under his apartment door. *Are they in there?* Something told him they weren't. It was too soon. Then again, maybe the men in the SUV *had* seen him well enough to identify him. Had they tracked him down already?

He walked to the end of the hall and took the fire extinguisher from its hook, not sure if he should throw it, spray it, or whack someone over the head with it, so he prepared himself for all possibilities. He just hoped this little weapon could hold its own against a gun if need be or at least give him time to make like Invisible Man. He took the pin out.

Silently, he unlocked the door, raised his weapon, drew in a deep breath, and then WHAM! He slammed his foot against the door, thrusting it open and banging it against the wall.

His sister, who just happened to be walking past with a sandwich, froze mid-step and stared at him, jaw dropping. After a moment of stare down, she raised her eyebrows and put a hand on her hip. "Where's the fire?" Derrick glanced down at the extinguisher and then dropped it to his side. "You know; I can put the sandwich back if it's that important to you."

Giving her a sideways glance, he turned around to put the extinguisher back in the hallway. "I didn't know who was in here."

"I hope you don't treat all your guests this way," she called after him as she finished walking toward the couch.

FIRE BREAK

When he returned, he dead-bolted the door before opening his closet door and discreetly sliding the hard drive under a hat on the shelf. "You could have at least texted me to tell me you'd be in here." He walked toward the recliner across from her.

"I never have before."

"Start." He plopped down into the chair.

"What put you in such a bad mood?" She flung her legs up on the couch and curled up, leaning against the arm. "You gonna take my key away next?" She took a bite of sandwich.

Derrick wished he could... without offending her to the point that he would never see her again. Maybe the situation didn't warrant it, yet. He hoped. After all, he still wasn't sure what he had. "If you want to keep it, just make sure it stays with you and you don't let anyone *else* in here!"

"I never have, but why would it be such a big deal if I did. I mean, seriously..."

"Just don't." His voice was firm, almost threatening.

"Fine." She propped herself straighter and huffed. "Seriously, if I wanted the company of a grouch, I would have stayed home."

He wished she had. He wasn't sure it was safe for her to be here. He, also, wanted to see what was on that drive, but he guessed he couldn't very well kick her out. He treasured her too much to hurt her. He had had to live for years thinking that everyone from his past was gone. He had lived isolated from the world, encased in an impenetrable wall, totally alone, allowing no one past his defenses. However, the past few months, things had changed. People had begun reentering his life. He had let himself venture back into the social world, and he had made himself a promise. He wasn't going to push people away again. "How was school?" He tried to soften his voice.

"Oh, same as always." She relaxed again. "Mostly reviewing, getting ready for our finals and ACTs," she sighed. "and graduation's not that far off."

Derrick nodded, getting up and heading toward the kitchen. "Lookin' forward to it?"

She nodded, finishing chewing. "Definitely. I am definitely ready."

"I thought you liked school. Any baloney left?" He opened the fridge.

"No, but there's some ham. I do, but I'm ready to be done."

He moved the apples and orange juice around and found it behind the bread.

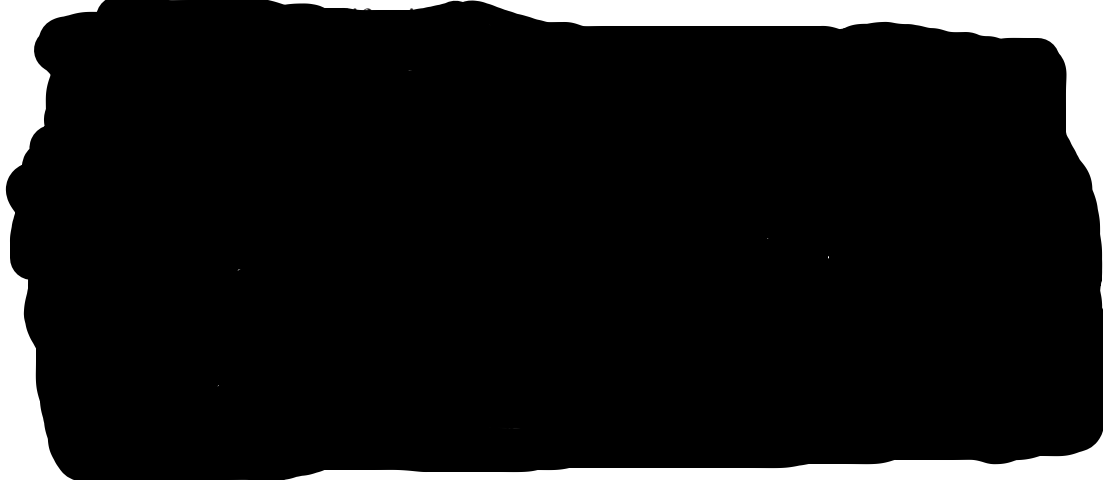
"Everyone feels like that at the end of the school year." He took the stuff to the counter and began throwing the sandwich together.

"Don't you start."

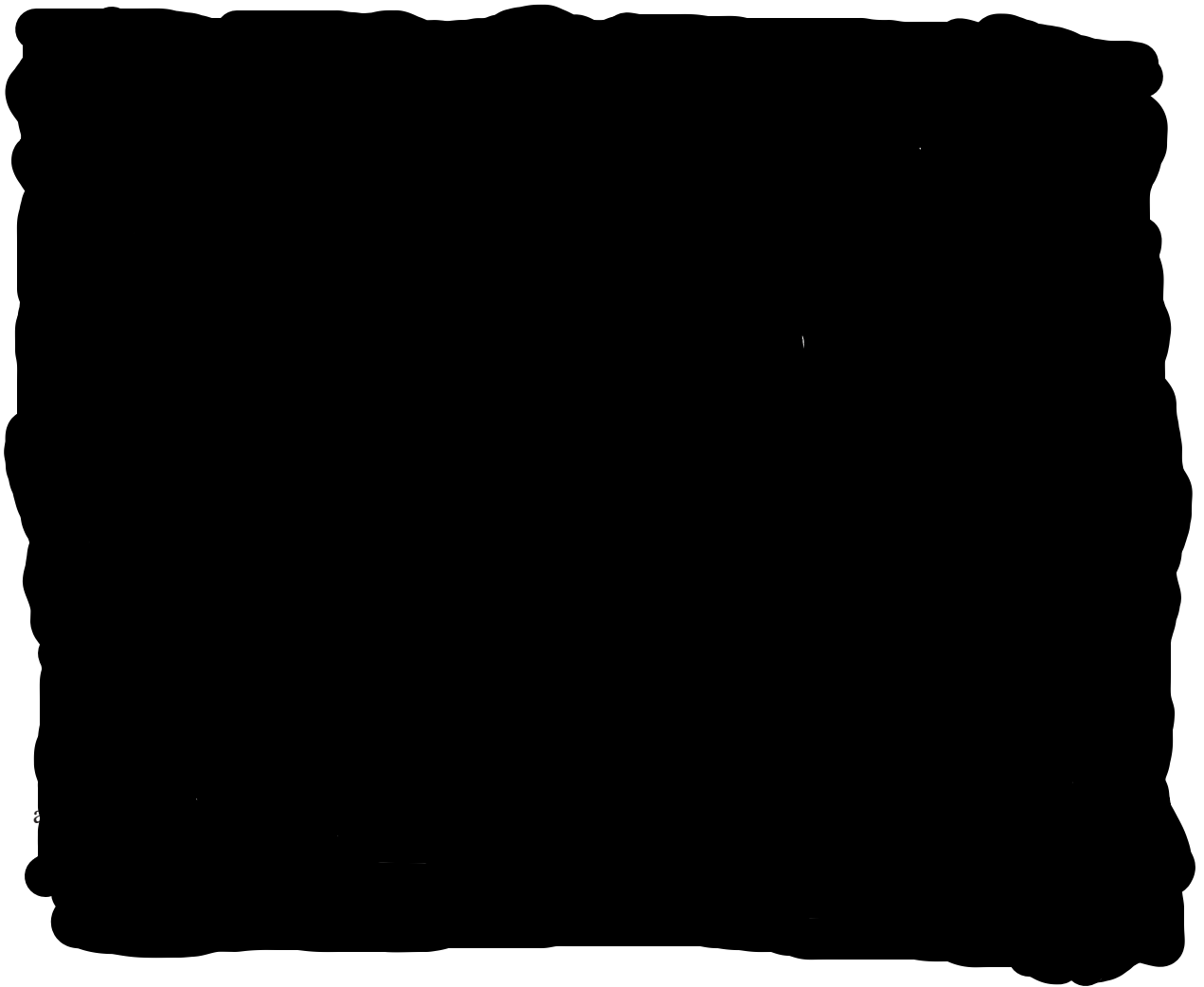
"Start what?"

"I wasn't meant for college."

"Okay." He came back over and sat down. "So, what are you planning to do?" He set his orange juice on a coaster.



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Sitting on the ground propped up by a tree, Jim pulled his arm closer around his wife. He loved having Jessica next to him, and tonight was the perfect night for togetherness after a delicious picnic supper. This had been their first cookout of the year, and with the temperature in the mid-sixties and the mild spring breeze, he didn't think there could be a better day for it.

Jess rested her head back on her husband's strong shoulder. Closing her eyes, she was refreshed by the flower-scented breeze blowing against her face. Gathering her hair together, she pulled it around her neck to the front of her shoulder so it wouldn't blow so much. For a few moments, they both just sat there quietly, watching Morgan play in the grass a few yards away. Jess smiled as the little girl topped her pyramid with one last excessively big block which caused the whole structure to come crashing down and land in a heap on the grass.

Jim repositioned himself, pulling Jess tighter against himself. She smiled, tingling at the closeness. "I need to be heading to work." He whispered in her ear.

She turned, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Go a.w.o.l." She kissed him. After a long moment, which seemed to Jess slightly cut short, Jim ended the love scene with a whispered statement that he really had to go.

With saddened eyes, Jess relented. "I'll miss you."

"I'm just going to work."

"Yea-ah." Jess laughed dryly. "See ya in 24 hours."

Jim stretched as he got up. "We can pick up where we left off when I get back."

"I don't know." Jess stood up and walked toward Morgan. "I don't usually make my plans that far in advance."

Jim grinned. "Well, mark it down 'cause it's a date."

"I'll check my calendar and get back with you." Grabbing her little one's hand, she helped her walk back. "Say, 'bye bye,' to Daddy."

Morgan looked up at him when they stopped. "Daddy?"

Bending down, he swung her up above him, planted a kiss on her giggling face, and swung her around a few times before gently setting her back down, sitting because her sea legs after swinging wouldn't support her.

Jim and Jess watched her laugh a few moments then exchanged smiles. "Love ya." Jim leaned forward to give Jess a farewell kiss.

"Love you, too." She watched him as he gave a slight wave and headed for the truck. "See ya tomorrow!"

Putting his foot onto his bed, Wade tied his shoelace. *Another shift... another day... another day of dealing with tragedy, blood, and pain.* He jerked the lace tight.

Mellissa walked into the bedroom holding Davy. Looking at Wade's shoe on the comforter, she gave a sideways glance of disapproval as she walked by. Wade ignored it and put his other shoe up. Reaching the dresser, she turned around and leaned back against it. "Leaving again?" She didn't look at him, but rather ran her finger along the cracks in the dresser.

"Going to work."

"You are always going somewhere. I never see you anymore."

He shot her an angry look. "You want me to stay home?"

She didn't answer until he broke his glare. "Sometimes. Between your work and mine, we never see each other."

"Nothing I can do about it."

FIRE BREAK

She sighed looking down at her baby. "I don't get to spend as much time as I should being a mother either."

Wade cringed. He didn't like the direction this conversation was going... again. He sucked in his stomach as he tucked in his shirt without loosening his belt.

"Wade?"

He turned toward her. "I need to get going."

"You don't have to leave for ten or fifteen minutes yet."

He sighed, crossed his arms, and leaned back against the bed post.

"Why can't I quit my job and be a mother?"

"You *are* a mother."

"For a few hours a day."

"We need the money."

"We'd make do. Your paycheck makes plenty to support us. Jess stays home and so do some of the other mothers at church."

"Jim and Jess board horses for a second income." He looked at his watch.

"They just started that. They did fine before."

"I don't have time for this." He walked over to the closet and grabbed his jacket. "I have to go."

You always have to go.

Without another word, Wade walked out.

She stared down into her baby's sweet, innocent face and listened for the front door to shut. When it did with rather a bang, little Davy jumped, his mouth dropped, and he tilted his head back, looking up at his mommy in surprise. Mellissa gave him a half smile of reassurance then looked out the window as she heard the engine start up and the van back out of the drive. *Bye. Again.*

Sitting cross-legged on Carlos's living room floor, Melinda closed her eyes as she vigorously shook the dice in the little, blue shaker-cup then dumped them on the floor. Opening her eyes, she gasped, clenched her fist and punched it above her head. "Yes! Yatzeel!" Grinning, she bounced a little and lightly slapped her knees.

"You haven't won yet. We still have to tally up the points."

Melinda playfully rolled her glistening sapphire eyes. "For-mal-ities. How many of those did you end up crossing out anyways?" She leaned forward trying to get a peek at his paper, but he flipped it over.

"This game is nothing but 100% luck anyway." He turned it back over and began calculating.

"Uh... uh. Takes skill and strategy." She crossed her arms, but was still grinning widely.

Carlos chuckled at her gestures. "Sure, cause you're winning. Hurry and tally yours. I've gotta be getting ready for work in a few minutes."

"Fir-rst... let me see yours." With a quick grab, she snatched his paper from his hands and laughed as she rolled under the coffee table trying to evade Carlos's grasp as he tried to get it back. "Uh huh. Uh huh." She giggled as she peeked out. "You, sir, have got to be the unluckiest guy on the planet." Laughing, she waved the paper in front of him.

Though laughing, too, he managed to catch her arm and pull her out. "Maybe not." He gazed deep into her eyes.

"Oh?" She put one hand on her hip. "Flattering the competition will get you nowhere."

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He pulled her closer. "Maybe this will." He tried to pull her in for a kiss, but she suddenly grew serious and pulled away.

"Don't." Her voice was quiet.

"What's the matter?"

"Maybe... maybe things shouldn't go farther between us. Maybe we should just be friends."

"Friends? You've never acted like a *friend* before."

She looked down and began playing with the carpet. "Things changed."

"I haven't changed."

"No." She looked back up at him. "I should. I'm a Christian, and I'm not living like it."

He sighed, throwing up his hands. "Come on, Melinda. Everyone tries out marriage first now days. It's not that big of deal."

"Maybe it should be."

He just stared at her. "I knew this would happen when you started going back to that church." His voice turned gruff and hard.

"Such a big difference? I've been saved since I was a little girl."

"You've never let it *rule* your life before."

"I know." She played with her hands, her voice sounding like she was getting nervous. "I haven't been living for the Lord or even caring what He thinks. I backslid when I was in college... and after... but now... now I want it back."

His eyes and voice softened. "Don't go back." He scooted close to her. "Go forward... with me."

"I want to do what's right."

"There's nothing wrong with what we've been doing. Trust me. Trust your feelings. There's nothing wrong with love."

"What we've been doing is wrong." She still looked down.

"How can it be wrong?" He put his arm around her. "I've loved it... every minute of it. I love you. These past months have been the best of my life."

She jerked her face toward his. "It's wrong." Her voice was firm.

"Why?" He responded in anger. "Because some pastor somewhere says it is? I thought you had a mind of your own."

"Because the Bible says it is."

He sighed and scooted away. "Come on, Melinda." His voice was weary. "Aren't you a little old for fairy tales?"

"It's not a fairy tale."

"Sure. Some guy rose from the dead?" He slanted his eyebrows. "Sooo," he mocked, "if you're real good, you will go to heaven and not hell. Do you still believe in Santa Claus, too?"

"Santa Claus isn't real. Jesus is. He's alive! He's answered my prayers! I've seen..."

"Grow up, Melinda!" He interrupted. "There is no heaven and no hell. When you are dead, you're dead. I thought you knew that."

Unable to hold the tears back, she stood up abruptly. "I'm leaving." She went toward the door.

"Where?" He got up and followed her.

"I don't know." She grabbed her coat from the closet and reached for the door, but he grabbed her arm and spun her around.

"Knock it off!" His eyes were angry.

"I'm leaving." She sniffed back tears. His threatening face sort of scared her.

"You live here!"

"Not any more. I'm not coming back."

"You can't break it off just like that!"

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She glanced down at her arm. Her eyes were firm. "Let go." After a few moments, he released her, and she walked out.

Jim turned into the firehouse and parked in his regular place. Whistling, he hopped out of his truck and headed in. He had been refreshed by his days off and now was ready for work. Swinging the door open and entering the bay, he rubbed his hands together and blew into his fist. "Chilly out there," he called to Dan, who, already in his uniform, was just coming out of the kitchen with a cup of coffee.

"I know." He held up his steamy mug.

"How's it goin'?" He asked as he passed the seasoned fireman.

"Goin' fine." He took a sip of coffee.

Jim gave a nod of acknowledgement as he kicked open the locker room door, whistling again. "Hey, Wade! What's up?" His voice was cheerful, but he almost did a double-take at Wade. *Talk about a melancholy face.*

"The sky." Neither his face nor his voice smiled.

"Well, that's true." He began whistling again as he unbuttoned his shirt. He flashed Derrick a grin, but Derrick didn't see it. He was too busy staring off into space, obviously deep in thought as he tightened his belt. *Huh.* He tried Carlos. "Carlos. How's it goin'?"

"Do you have to keep up that confounded whistling?"

Jim killed the tune mid-whistle and let his eyebrows jump. *Well, aren't we the picture of enthusiasm tonight... just a group of merry little workers.* "So, when do you take your paramedic test?" Jim tried again.

"Couple of weeks, yet." Carlos didn't look at him.

Jim nodded. "Then you'll be able to join with Wade 'n Derrick in the wonderful ranks of...."

"Probably won't pass." He turned away and slammed his locker.

Jim raised his eyebrows looking again from face to face. "Who died?" He wasn't sure if anyone heard him. "You all get diagnosed with Bubonic plague?"

Only hearing the last word, Derrick looked up. "What plague?"

Jim smiled. "Well, it's nice to know we're still in the same solar system anyway."

Br-ring... Br-ring...

Jess, who was lying on the living room carpet playing with Morgan, rolled over and grabbed the cordless phone from the end table. "Hello." Lying on her back, she smiled at Morgan, who tottered over and sat down on her stomach.

"Hi, Jess. It's Mellissa."

"Hey! What's up?" When Morgan scooted down to her knees, she raised her legs and bounced her, causing the little one to laugh at the tummy-tickling ride.

"Not much. Davy's asleep, and it's pretty quiet around here."

"Hmm. I was just teaching Morgan the basics of block-building. Her tower's always crash. I think her problem is she is always trying to put the foundation on the top." Her voice was bouncy.

"Umm. That sounds like fun."

"Quite entertaining." She plopped her legs down and watched Morgan giggle as she slid off onto the ground.

Mellissa gave a half-hearted chuckle. "I can imagine. Why I called was, I was wondering if you had plans for tomorrow."

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Morgan climbed back up on Jess's legs. "Mommy, more." She clutched tightly the knees of Jess's jeans with both hands.

"Nothin' special." She began bouncing her again. "Maybe pick up some groceries sometime."

"I thought maybe I could come over, and we could talk."

"Sure. That's right. Tomorrow is Saturday. You don't have to work. Maybe we could spend the day together if you don't have any other plans. It's been a while."

"It has. Between work and the baby, I haven't had time for anything, it seems."

"Hmm. Well, come on over, and just stay as long as you like."

"Great. When?"

"We-ell. We could share breakfast 'round nine."

"Sounds good. See ya then."

"Okie Doke. Bye."

"Mommy, more." Little Morgan demanded as Jess dropped her legs in fatigue.

"Mommy's tired."

"More, Mommy, more." She bounced up and down on her legs.

"Oh, you want more do ya." She snatched the little girl, hopped up, and soared her through the air."

Morgan laughed hysterically totally secure in her mommy's hands.

Jim poured himself a cup of coffee. *Three hours and nothing.* He was ready for a run. He glanced over at Derrick, who was leaning against the counter staring intently into his glass of water. Jim cocked his head. Curiosity was killing him. *What in the world is on his mind?*

BURRRRUZZZ! Everyone dropped what he was doing and raced out to the bay. The dispatcher announced a head-on collision as they all piled into their trucks. Doors up, lights, sirens, ignition, and they were off!

Rolling onto the road, the engine honked loudly as it gained speed.

In the squad, Wade's stomach tightened. He glanced over at Derrick driving, then out at the passing restaurants and stores, all illuminated by warm and friendly lights. He felt sick as he saw a cheerful group of laughing teens gathered around a stop sign as they rounded the corner and wondered whose mother, father, sister, or brother was mangled in a twisted pile of metal. Who would be grieving, screaming, weeping tonight? Whose lives would be destroyed by this unfortunate accident tonight? Friday night. Hundreds of vehicles pulled to the side, creating a tunnel for them to pass through. Wade didn't want to pass through. He didn't want to see what was ahead.

Derrick slowed the squad as they approached the swirling red and blue lights of police cars as they came to the accident. Two cars sat nose-to-nose, practically crumpled together as one in the middle of the road. Another car rested lop-sided over the curve, front-end smashed into a light post. They were the first rescue squad on the scene.

"I'll take the one at the light post!" Wade yelled, as they jumped out of their truck and grabbed their gear. Toting his medical bag as he raced across the street, Wade almost wished the street lights weren't working so he didn't have to see the puddle of blood engulfing the crumbled heap that Derrick was running toward.

Derrick arrived at the head-on the same time as Jim. Derrick stopped, trying to find a point of entrance into the remains of the black intrepid as Jim sprayed the smoking, smoldering engines with a fire extinguisher. He saw no way in, so he quickly diverted his attention to the blue van and ran to it. All of the doors were too dented to open. The only occupant seemed to be the driver. Slumped over the wheel, she looked deathly still.

FIRE BREAK

Derrick jumped up on the crumpled hoods and kicked the shattered glass of the windshield in at the passenger's side and jumped in beside her.

Wade's hands shook as he fastened the neck collar on the unconscious older lady in the passenger's seat of the ghostly SUV. He tried not to look at the dead driver behind him, but he could still feel the death. He rechecked the Grandma's pulse. It was still steady. He glanced up at the firefighters in the distance. The twirling red and blue lights from the emergency vehicles cast eerie shadows on the already eerie scene.

Derrick, who was performing CPR on the clinically dead young woman now on the road, surrendered the job to the newly arrived ambulance paramedics. After he was no longer needed at that scene, he got up and hurried toward the Intrepid just as the firemen were pulling out the remains of its occupants. Carlos shook his head. "No good, here!" he yelled over the noise of the jaws, pointing to the car with Wade. Derrick ran over to the car on the curb.

Wade's heart quickened as he noticed the lady's breathing become more labored and shallow. He increased the oxygen. It didn't help. Her heart-rate was becoming very erratic.

Derrick wiped his sweat-dripping forehead with his forearm as he rounded the front and ran toward the open window of the back door, glancing at the firefighters coming with the jaws, then turning back to the van.

Wade's hands shook as he readied the IV. He tried to force his breathing slower as he tied the tourniquet around her arm.

"Need help?" Derrick looked in the deglassed back door.

"Get in here!"

Derrick jumped in, scooting to the middle of the back seat. Without explanation, Wade slapped the IV bag in Derrick's hand, and scrunched back over the center divider to the backseat. "You insert the IV. I'll go get the back brace."

Derrick gave Wade a questioning glance wondering why they were switching places, but quickly dismissed it and climbing up front, quickly switched his attention to the patient. Glancing at the erratic rhythm on the heart monitor, he quickly readied the IV.

Wade took a long deep breath of fresh air as he stepped out of the car, only then noticing the shaking inside him.

Jim walked slowly past the wreckage of the mini van. They had had to cut off the entire roof in order to make sure there was no one in the backseats. In a fleeting moment of consciousness, the young female driver had said a name, and she had said it in horror like.... He stopped at the back of the van, thinking he saw the reflection of.... Jumping up on the back bumper, Jim leaned forward looking into the mass of jumbled suitcases and camping gear in the heavily vacation-packed van. He picked up a tarp, tossed off a few life jackets, moved the tent, and there he was. "Hey!" Jim yelled as he jumped into the back. "I found him!" Six firefighters and EMTs ran toward him.

"She's not responding!" Derrick took off his stethoscope and began searching through the drug box.

"We've got to get her out of here so we can perform CPR!" Wade looked around for a better solution than the jaws that were still in use at the van. The only option was the back window. "I'll go get someone to break the back window!"

FIRE BREAK

“Wait a minute.” Derrick checked the backboard to make sure it was snug. Reaching across her, he tugged on the seat’s lever, trying to get it to recline. It wouldn’t. He jiggled, jostled, whammed the lever, but it wouldn’t move.

“We’re losing her!” Wade yelled.

“Move over!” Wade moved over. Holding the backboard straight with one hand, he threw a massive punch to the frame of the seat with the other. The seat snapped, flying backwards. Wade repositioned the seat, and Derrick laid her down. “Switch!” Derrick demanded, and they both switched places. Once in the backseat, kneeling on it, Derrick grabbed the driver’s seat for support, lifted his leg, and slammed his foot through the window. Blood from his ankle spurted onto the glass, causing Wade to gag. Without hesitation, Derrick pulled it back in and began kicking around the hole, widening the circle until all the glass was out. “Okay! Let’s go!” Derrick grabbed the top of the backboard and slid her on top of the backseat and partway out the window, then jumped out the side window to pull her the rest of the way from the outside. Wade held her legs straight with one hand and tried to balance the oxygen and the heart monitor with the other. He tried his best to keep her steady as Derrick pulled her out, and then he climbed out the back window himself along with the equipment. By time Wade jumped down from the trunk, Derrick was already doing CPR.

Jim, leaning back against the side of the engine, running his hand through his hair, stared out at the smoking piles of twisted metal... *all this devastation*. “Hey, man.” He looked over at Carlos approaching him. “The kid’s awake. He wants to say something to you before they take him to the hospital.”

Jim’s weary face showed reluctance, but after a moment, he turned and followed Carlos to the ambulance. He had no idea what he was going to say... say to a teenaged boy, presently blinded and partially paralyzed who had just learned minutes ago that he had lost his older sister. Reaching the ambulance, Jim stopped a moment before going inside. He understood the terror of loss. He’d experienced its searing pain, but how to express his sympathy in words, how to really console a grieving person... he wasn’t sure there even was a way.

Jim stepped up into the back and went over to the bed. “Hey, buddy.” Staring down at the young man’s bandaged eyes and lacerated face, he announced his presence. “How ya doing?” He touched the boy’s shoulder.

“I’ll make it.” His voice was hoarse. Turning his head in the direction of Jim’s voice, he gave a weak smile. “I just wanted to thank...” His voice broke. “...thank you for saving my life.”

“It wasn’t just me. I wish we could of done more.” He squeezed his shoulder. “I’m sorry.” The boy nodded, his face grief stricken, obviously crying under the bandages. He lifted his hand, and Jim took it, grasping it tightly between both hands. “I’ll be praying for you.” Suddenly stiffening, the boy jerked his hand away. Abandoning all emotion, he lay there silent. Jim wasn’t expecting that reaction and wasn’t exactly sure how to respond. Squeezing his shoulder once more, Jim said, “Hang in there,” and then left without receiving a response.

After administering another dose of adrenaline, Wade looked back at the heart monitor - still no conversion. He wiped the sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve as he heard the squeal of the ambulance sirens begin. Someone was going to the hospital. At least one person was still clinging to life amidst this sea of carnage. He stared at Derrick

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as he performed CPR relentlessly, almost in attack mode. He had to be tired, but he didn't weaken. Wade was about ready to give up. If she hadn't responded by now....

Feeling her heart restart beneath his hands, Derrick stopped mid-compression. "She's back."

Wade was struck with a jolt of utter surprise. He jerked his head toward the heart monitor. Staring at the screen, he couldn't believe it. She *was* back.

"Bring that gurney over here!" Derrick yelled at one of the firefighters as he stood up.

Wade stood up, too, but more slowly. His legs felt weak, nearly shaking beneath him. He didn't know what he felt. He was so shocked, he didn't even feel joy or relief. He almost felt dazed. A lady firefighter walked in front of him, but, feeling off balance, he didn't back up for fear he would trip over himself. He just watched her and Derrick lift the lady onto the gurney. Knowing he needed to get himself back into the action, he picked up the oxygen and put it by her legs on the bed.

Wade walked with them to the ambulance, but stopped outside as they lifted her in. He was perfectly content to give Derrick the responsibility of taking her in... un-til.... He glanced over his shoulder at the wrecked car. The silhouette of her dead husband's body turned his stomach. Whoever stayed would have to help extricate him and put his remains into a body bag. "Wait!" Wade stopped Carlos from closing the doors. "I'll go in with her."

Derrick, who was already set to take her in, looked back at him in surprise. "I'm taking her."

"I claimed that car first." Seeing the raised eyebrows, Wade instantly wished he had phrased that differently.

Derrick got up and walked toward the hatch. For one wonderful moment, Wade thought he was going to relent, but instead of stepping down, Derrick stopped in the doorway. "Then make sure you sign its bumper before you leave so everyone knows it was yours." Grabbing both doors, he pulled them shut. Soon as they latched, the ambulance was off.

Wade crossed his arms, anger kindling inside of him. "He had no right to take over like that."

Carlos shrugged. "I thought he took over a long time ago."

Wade shot him an annoyed glance, but then did a double take in his heart, his anger turning to fear. Had Carlos noticed his fleeting moments of weakness and hesitation? Had Derrick noticed it? It was true. Derrick *had* taken over. True they had been working together, but Derrick *had* set himself up as the leader. Derrick was trying to show him up, to edge him out, to....

"Hey, man. You okay?"

Wade looked over at Carlos, realizing he had been staring off into space. "Yeah, sure. Of course," he snapped.

Carlos nodded suspiciously. "Let's go." He sighed. "We gotta get him out of there."

Wade nodded. He felt like he was going to be sick, but he followed Carlos over to the car. He almost gagged when he saw the outline of the man, but he fought the reflex and forced himself forward. Directing his mind to other topics, refusing to focus on it, he determined to get the job done. He determined not to burn out. He determined to force himself, convinced that if the chips were down, he could do it. He was a paramedic. It's what he was born to be. There was no other job for him. He was sure of it. He wasn't going to lose his wife and baby, not because he couldn't support them. He would not allow Derrick to show him up. He would not allow his capability to be called into question. He would not allow himself to burn out. Staring across the hood of the car, he listened to motor start up on the jaws. His eyes narrowed as they gazed at the spot where

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the ambulance had just stood. *You had better not try to take this from me, Derrick. Don't you even try!*

Raising her head from praying during her morning devotions, Jess closed her Bible and stretched. Curled up, leaning sideways against the arm of their couch, she stared out the large picture window. The sun was just beginning to paint the sky with streaks of bright orange, red, and purple. Each streak looked like an artist's brushstroke across a baby blue canvass. This was one reason she loved getting up early. Of course, she loved everything about morning ... the dew sparkling on the new spring flowers and large blades of grass, the little songbirds singing their hearts out atop the treetops, the quietness and solitude she had before Morgan got up, and of course, living on a farm, she got to hear an authentic rooster crow every morning.

She glanced over at the clock – *five thirty. I should get up and get busy.* Yawning, she stretched as she stood – *a morning snack, a run on my treadmill, and if I'm lucky, a load of laundry all before Morgan wakes up.* Then she would have to get her house all presentable before Mellissa came over around nine.

Kneeling beside the medical bag in the bay, Derrick wrapped the blood pressure cuff and put it back in its rightful spot in the bag, not noticing Jim until he slapped him on the shoulder on his way past. Derrick looked up as Jim stopped and leaned back against the squad. "So, how's the horse comin'?"

Derrick draped his arm over his knee. "The shipment's gonna come in by train early Monday. Pickup time's between five in the morning and seven at night. Anytime you want to go is fine."

Jim nodded, grinning. "What's wrong with 9 am?"

Derrick gave a half smile at Jim's facial implication that he should be as excited as a little boy waiting for Santa. "It's your trailer. Whatever works for you." Looking back down, he picked up the stethoscope and put it in the bag.

"Sooner the better. I'm lookin' forward to seein' this wild mustang you picked out."

Derrick smiled up at him, trying to be polite, but the light didn't reach his eyes.

Jim furrowed one eyebrow. "Something wrong?"

"No." Derrick broke his gaze and pulled the zipper shut.

"Did I do something?" He followed Derrick as he got up and took the bag back to the squad.

"No." Derrick shook his head as he jammed the bag back in its compartment. For a moment, he just stared at the bag, the dying man flashing back through his mind, but noticing Jim watching him, he quickly shook it off and closed the doors.

"You're concerned about something."

Derrick shrugged, leaning back against the squad and looking the other way.

"Well, if you ever need someone to talk to," He put his hand on Derrick's shoulder, "I'm here."

Derrick nodded.

Jim slapped his shoulder. "Still plannin' on comin' over for lunch after church tomorrow?"

Derrick hesitated a moment, the contents of the hard drive going through his mind. In a few fateful moments, he had suddenly inherited a lethal connection to some of the most dangerous guys in the country. When he really got to thinking about it, he began to wonder if he should abandon all his friendships for their safety, but how could he avoid Jim? They worked together. Monday he was going to start boarding his new horse on his farm. Besides, if he even tried, it would only ignite Jim's curiosity, and that was the last

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thing he needed. It was better just to act like there was nothing wrong. After all, maybe no one even knew that he had the drive. Maybe...

"Derrick?"

Derrick jerked his head toward Jim. "Yeah. Sorry. That'd be great."

Jim didn't look convinced. "You sure you're alright?"

Derrick gave him a look. "Fine," he said, flatly. Then, pushing himself away from the squad, he left.

Standing on the top step of her porch and shaking out the cushion to her swing, Jess turned her head as she noticed a blue van pulling into her drive. Placing the cushion back on the swing, her face brightened as the sound of crunching gravel and a humming engine grew closer. She loved having company. A smile rose to her face as she went over to Morgan who was sitting on the welcome mat cuddling her dolly and offered her hand. "Come on, baby. Let's go see Auntie Mellissa."

Tilting her head back, Morgan looked up at her mother. "Mel-lissa?" Holding her baby doll in one arm, she reached up, putting her tiny hand in her mommy's big one and pulled herself up. Together, they walked down the stained, wood steps and toward Mellissa.

Getting out of the front seat, Mellissa grinned at the pair walking toward her, Jess and mini Jess. She smiled at the dirty smudges on Morgan's jeans. The big yellow sunflower embroidered under her pocket was nearly grey. However, her little red turtle neck had managed to stay clean, most likely due to her mommy's insistence on keeping her sleeves pushed up. "How are you two doing?" she addressed Jess before turning and sliding open the back door to get her baby.

"We're doin' fine." Jess leaned her shoulder against the front door, her smile widening when she saw little Davy. "How's Mrs. Thundercloud and company?"

Mellissa let her eyebrows jump as she unbuckled her baby. "Anymore, I have to remind myself that a few years ago my last name really did change." After swinging Davy, in his baby carrier, out of the van and exuberantly shutting the door, she let out an exaggerated sigh and leaned back against the van. "You know, if I did leave, I bet it'd be weeks before he'd even notice I was gone."

Jess smiled. "Or at least until supper time."

Mellissa gave her a look. "Yeah. It's a good thing he can't cook, or I'd be no more than... a mantle ornament!" She tossed her hands up.

"But an incredibly lovely mantle ornament."

Mellissa gave her a sideways glance.

Jess stepped next to her and put her arm around Mellissa's shoulders. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know." She shrugged, trying to laugh back a stray tear. "I'm sorry. I really didn't come here to cry on your shoulder."

Jess hugged her from the side. "If you can't talk to a good friend, who can you talk to?"

Sniffing back another tear, she touched Jess's shoulder. "Best friend." Then kneeling, she gazed into Morgan's dancing eyes. "You look more and more like your mama every day."

Morgan laced her fingers, shyly pushing her palms outward. "Fank you," she muttered, tilting her head back and looking up at her mommy.

Jess giggled, snatching Morgan and swinging her up into her arms. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Mmm... I'm famished."

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“Good. How’s French toast, simply smothered in syrupy, fresh-picked strawberries, sound?”

“Sounds delicious.” She put her hand on her stomach, following Jess toward the house. “Just not too many. These extra baby pounds are harder to lose than you think.”

“Tell me about it. How ‘bout fruit and yogurt?”

“Don’t you dare! I’ll start my diet...”

“On Monday,” they said together.

BURRRUZZZ!!! All the firefighters jumped up and headed for the bay. Jim couldn’t help but notice Wade’s annoyance as Derrick crossed in front of him. He made a mental note of it. They all jumped in their trucks as the dispatcher announced a boy over the cliff at the park. Jim figured it was probably at Lookout Point, the most scenic view in the state, and as far as he was concerned, also the most dangerous. More than one person had gone over the edge there, and considering the safety rail and all the prominent “Keep Off” signs, most people brought it on themselves.

Jess grabbed the bread from the refrigerator and a mixing bowl from the cupboard. “Ready for some yummy comfort food?”

“Totally.” Mellissa set her baby carrier on the table, smiling as she watched Morgan run over to her play horses in the corner. “Need some help?”

“No. That’s okay. I like to cook solo.”

“Fine with me.” She plopped down in a chair. “I’m getting burned out anyway.” She rubbed her face in her hands.

“How come?” Jess started cracking eggs.

“You know me. I’m used to being a pizza, eat-out, carry-out, frozen dinner fanatic.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got a job.” Jess stood on her tiptoes to search the cupboard for the cinnamon.

“That’s the whole point.”

“What?”

“I’m cooking all my meals from scratch to save money.”

“Save money?” Jess turned around, leaning back against the counter. “I thought...”

“I think we can manage with just Wade’s paycheck. So, to prove it to him, I’m just not going to cash my paychecks for a month.”

“You don’t think he’ll realize?”

“Not if I do it right.” She rested her chin on her fist.

Entering the park, Wade turned the squad onto Scenic Cliff Road. In the flatland state of Illinois, one little cliff and it seemed like the population went wild. Slowing, he honked his horn at a group of kids that ran across the road in front of them. Maybe he should write a manual, *Basic Conduct when Confronted with a Cliff*. Rule number one – stay on top; falling off may be hazardous to your health. He slowed the squad to a stop by a small crowd that had gathered around the guard rail, gazing over the edge.

Simultaneously, Derrick and Wade opened doors and got out. After last night’s horrific accident, the images of which were not allowing him to sleep, Wade was comforted by the fact that, for this one at least, he probably wouldn’t have to be on the very front lines. Derrick was the athlete, and if only one medic was needed to go over,

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Derrick was naturally the one to volunteer. The muscles in Wade's shoulders tightened as he followed Derrick over to the crowd, just hoping only one medic was needed. He was in no mood to repel... or to be confronted with more carnage.

The other firefighters were already managing the crowd. "Hey! Get back on this side of the rail, please!" Jim yelled at a teen who had crossed over and was peering over the edge.

"My friend's down there!" The boy was obviously panicked.

"Get over here!" the Captain yelled, joining Jim.

The boy crawled back and ran over to them at the same time as a teen girl started shoving her way through the crowd. They both arrived to Cap and Jim at the same time as Wade and Derrick did. "Help us!" The girl blurted out. "It's Mark! He fell! He slipped! We can't get him to answer us! He might be...!"

"Okay, just calm down and tell us what happened." Carlos and Dan peered over the edge, trying to locate him.

The girl barely paused for a breath. "We were just playing." She looked down. "I dared him to get a flower that was growing between the rocks a few feet down. He almost had it, but he slipped."

"How long ago?"

The girl's face was blank, but the boy quickly checked his watch. "About fifteen minutes. No one had their phone because..."

"Cap, I see him!" Dan called from the ledge. "I'd say about a hundred, hundred and ten feet down!"

The girl's mouth dropped. "How far is that?"

"He's on a ledge. I'd just say room for one medic."

Wade relaxed a little at that declaration. He wouldn't have to go down after all. He glanced over at Derrick who was already readying the ropes, tying them to the bumper of the engine since there was not a sturdy tree nearby. Glancing over at the others who were looking down the cliff accessing all angles of the task, Wade walked over to Derrick. "I can do that." He stared down at Derrick who was kneeling, tying the knots. "You should be getting ready."

"You can go down today."

What?! "Why?" Wade suddenly wished he had rephrased that when he saw Derrick's look.

Derrick stopped tying a moment, leaning back to put weight on his throbbing ankle, daring it to support him, but then removed the weight when the pain escalated to the point he thought it might show on his face. Most people would have insisted he'd seen a doctor, if they'd seen the state it was in after he'd smashed it through the glass, but he hadn't the temperament to deal with doctors recently, so he hid it. "We could just leave him down there." Wade rolled his eyes. "Of course, you would have to be the one to explain that to his parents." He commenced tying.

"You know what I mean. You always go down. Why not today?" He mentally cringed when he saw Derrick pick up on his slightly desperate tone.

"Some reason you don't want to?"

"No." Wade quickly replaced his fear with anger. "Some reason *you* don't?" He snatched the repel belt roughly from the ground and began stepping into it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Derrick shrug and shake his head. Anger welled in Wade's stomach. *He is just trying to show me up... tryin' a little too hard if you ask me. Who does he think he is?* Yanking the belt tight, he gazed at Derrick with hatred. *If he wants to go after me, fine! He's not going to get the satisfaction!* After tightening the last strap, he looked up to see Derrick staring at him. "What?" he asked, angrily.

Derrick looked away. "The, uh, ropes are ready."

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Wade nodded, sharply, but Derrick glanced back and began staring inquisitively again. “What?” Wade’s voice was annoyed.

“Do you want me to go down?”

Whatever gave you that idea? “No.”

Jess dipped the bread into the egg-milk mixture. “Then what’s the problem?” She glanced over her shoulder at Mellissa.

“I don’t know.” Mellissa shrugged. “We are never together anymore... but the worst part is, I think he prefers it that way.” Jess gave her a questioning glance. “Well, between his work and mine it’s lucky if we see each other much anyway.” She picked up her hand from the tabletop and rested her chin in her palm. “When we are together, he always finds an excuse to do something else. He’ll watch TV while I’m doing housework, but if I sit down next to him to talk, he’ll come up with some chore he has to do like changing the oil or fixing the cupboard door. Lately, he’s gotten this thing about coming home hours after I get home at night and then tells me he’s eaten out whether I have supper on or not!” Her voice held exasperation.

“Doesn’t he have a cell phone?” Jess dropped the batter soaked bread on the griddle.

“Oh,” Mellissa rubbed her face wearily. “he never has that thing turned on.”

The oil on the griddle popped and splattered around the bread. “You could ask him to tell you if...”

“He should realize that if I always make supper he should tell me if he’s not going to be there. He always used to. He always used to have a note there on the desk telling me where he was if it was his day off and he wasn’t home.” Mellissa watched Jess flip each piece of bread causing an increase in the tantalizing sizzling and revealing the enticing, crusty, brown side of each piece. The special French toast aroma began to fill the room. However, even that wasn’t lightening Mellissa’s spirit. She put her face in her hands. “He just doesn’t want to be around me anymore.”

After wrapping the rope around the carabineer, Wade clipped it to his belt and screwed the safety shut. Holding the rope tightly behind his thigh, he backed carefully to the edge, then loosening his grip, and began to walk backwards off the edge and horizontally down the side.

Halfway down, he tightened his grip on the rope behind his leg, stopping a moment to rest and regain his bearings. Finding footholds in the rock, he stood up, and releasing the rope in front of him, he grabbed a chunk of rock to stabilize himself. Glancing down, he could see the boy’s body sprawled out on the ledge below. Even at this distance, he could see his right leg was badly mangled. A shiver shook Wade’s body. He bent forward unable to restrain a gag, closing his eyes as the cliff threatened to spin. *Not again, Wade. Come on, pull it together.* He was beginning to hate this job. He used to love it. This was his life. What was happening to him? *God, help me do this.*

“Is there a problem?” Derrick’s voice came over his radio, obviously void of any concern.

Wade glanced up to see a couple firefighters staring down over the edge. He snatched the radio with a vengeance. “Just taking a break.” *If that’s okay with you.* Knowing Derrick, it probably wasn’t.

Getting back into position, Wade took hold of the rope in front of him, loosed his grip on the rope under him, and began slowly walking back down the cliff. He kept concentrating on the fact that this boy needed his help. As he reached the ledge, he could

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see the young man's chest rising and falling. *He's still alive...* He stepped down next to him, letting go of the rope. *...and it's my job to keep him that way.* He cringed when he saw the bone protruding from his leg. Wade's stomach retched, but he kept it down. Hard cases came with the territory, and this one was up to him. He got out his radio. "He's alive. Send down the drugs and stuff, also, a leg and neck brace along with the backboard."

"I mean he says such off the wall things like threatening to quit *his* job."

"When did he say that?" Jess picked up a syrupy piece of plump strawberry and dropped it in her mouth, savoring its juicy sweetness.

"Oh, he didn't mean it." Mellissa sipped her orange juice. "It's just whenever I start talking about quitting my job... anymore when I start talking about anything, he just seems to go off the deep end."

"Maybe the stress of his job is getting to him." Picking up the spatula, Jess checked underneath one of the toasts. *Perfect.*

"No." Mellissa shook her head. "That's not it. He loves his job. He worked hard to get where he is. It's all he ever wanted."

Jess began flipping the toasts onto the plates. "Maybe he needs a break. Does he have any vacation time? You could take a second honeymoon." Jess began pouring strawberries over each toast and then topped each with a dollop of hand whipped cream and more berries.

"Yeah, I could just imagine that. I bet it would be the first honeymoon in history without the groom ever present."

Jess spun around, setting the plates on the table. "I doubt that."

"Wanna bet? I'm serious. He doesn't want to be with me."

"Morgan, time for breakfast." Morgan got up from her toys and ran into her mommy's outstretched arms. "He doesn't seem to have a problem sitting next to you on Sundays." Grabbing Morgan by the waist, she swung her around and up to the sink, turning on the water. Morgan giggled and laughed as she played in the warm, running water before washing her hands.

"No that's true." Mellissa took a bite of the hot cinnamon toast and syrupy strawberry. "Probably because he doesn't have to talk to me during the service."

Jess smiled, plopping Morgan in her highchair and tying her bib. Then she began cutting Morgan's toast in little pieces. "All I can say is pray for him."

Mellissa looked down at her toast. She hadn't been giving much time lately to prayer or reading her Bible for that matter. She was just so busy. "I have." Her voice was quiet. Remembering she hadn't prayed for her food, she set her fork down and waited for Jess.

"I mean more than when you have your devotions. Pray that he'll come home for supper." Jess put Morgan's food on her tray, and went over to her own place. "When you see him come in pray that he'll want to talk with you and that he'll be in a good mood and that you'll be able to find out what's bothering him."

"I not sure I want to know what's bothering him," she mumbled.

Jess smiled as she sat down and slid her plate closer. "It's not you. He loves you. That's plain to see."

"I hope so."

"You want to pray for the food and for him, too?"

"Why don't you?" Mellissa's voice was still quiet, as she stared down at her plate.

"Okay." Closing her eyes, Jess bowed her head and began.

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Wade watched the litter with the injured teen as it began to rise toward the top. The boy was stable for now. Whether or not he would stay that way was yet to be determined.

Wade let out a sigh. He had made it through another gory rescue. Shaking his head, he knelt down and began gathering the empty, blood-splattered wrappers and tossing them in a bag. At least his stomach had settled, but his nerves were still shaking with fear. He crumpled the empty adrenaline wrapper in his hands. When the boy's heart had stopped, he had thought... He tossed it in the bag with the others. Emotionally, he'd never done well with particularly violent cases. Anymore, that seemed like all they were getting. Either that or he was getting more sensitive. Sitting on his heels, he stared at the stethoscope in his hands. He was really beginning to hate this job. The fleeting moments of miracles or gratitude or satisfaction were not strong enough to offset the periods of terror, pain, debilitation, and loss... at least not for him. The screams, the groans, the begging for the impossible, they haunted his dreams. They stole his rest. They shattered his peace. How long could he go on like this?

He threw the stethoscope in the bag, listening as the ambulance sirens began to scream up top... but how could he quit without starving his family, without making them homeless? The economy was rotten for a guy with no special skills outside the medical field. Ron, a young man at church, had everything going for him, yet last week he had to move his whole family back with his parents when his house was foreclosed. Twenty-five, responsible, polite, and he couldn't even get a job at a fast food joint. Wade knew that would be him if he quit. He had a job... a good job. He had to keep it to keep his family. He had to get through this phase. He had to harden himself to the screams. He *had* to find a way to get through this.

Noticing little Davy's strawberry juice mustache and goatee surrounding his ever exuberant smile, Mellissa picked up her napkin and, like every good mommy, pointlessly cleaned his face midmeal. He wasn't old enough for the toast, but, enthralled in his bowl of mashed strawberries, he didn't seem to mind. "You know," Mellissa fed Davy another spoonful, "maybe I should just quit my job. If he won't talk about it, I guess it's my decision."

"I wouldn't do that." Jess took a sip of water. "It might just make matters worse."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I'd wait until you can talk things out. If he is burning out..."

Mellissa shook her head as she finished chewing. "He's not burning out. He can't. We'd lose our home. Even if I worked every hour I can, I'd never make enough to support us. Right now, they are even talkin' layoffs. Besides, he's the man. It's his responsibility to provide for us."

Cutting a strawberry with her fork, Jess thought a moment before responding. "All I know to say is to pray for him. Pray with him when you get a chance, and talk. Although, if it were me, I wouldn't mention either of your jobs for a while."

Mellissa let out a long sigh. "I don't know." Her voice was weary. "I just don't know."

Putting her hand over Mellissa's, Jess smiled. "Why don't you and Wade come over for a picnic tomorrow after church? Derrick's coming, too. Maybe the guys will want to get in a good ol' game of tackle basketball or something."

Mellissa returned a polite smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Well, Wade needs something to cheer him up. At least if we come together, he'll have to stay within the general vicinity of me." Tears began trickling down her face.

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Getting up, Jess went over to her and gave her a hug from behind. "I could ask Jim to talk to him if you like."

Mellissa nodded her head and then spoke through the tears. "Maybe he would open up to him. You'll have to relay the discussion to me because I know Wade won't." She put her hand up on Jess's and then turned around to look at her. "If you don't think he would mind."

Jess shrugged. "I don't think so. I can ask him anyway."

"Thanks." Mellissa dabbed at her tears with her napkin.

"Now, how 'bout we take the kids outside to see the horses." Jess's normal bounce returned to her voice.

Sniffing, Mellissa pointed to Jess's plate, "You haven't finished, yet."

Jess laughed, putting her hand on her stomach. "Actually, I think my eyes were just a little bigger than my stomach. I'll have to save the rest for lunch."

Standing, Mellissa picked up her plate. "I'll help you clean up."

"Ready?" Dan called down to Wade, who was still on his ledge waiting to be pulled up.

"Yeah! Haul away!" His voice echoed through the small canyon.

"Okay!"

Holding his foot up slightly, Derrick watched the other firefighters pull Wade up, but noticing his odd stance, he quickly put his weight back on his hurt leg. He certainly wasn't going to give Wade the satisfaction of knowing he hadn't wanted to repel because of the stitches in his ankle.

Glancing over his shoulder, his mind went back to a maroon van parked on the shoulder a few hundred feet away. He turned and stared at it. It could be anybody. Accidents always attracted onlookers. It's just... they usually weren't so standoffish. He doubted they could even see the incident way over there... unless they had binoculars... unless they weren't interested in the accident. As he stared, the purple van backed up and drove away.

As Jess and Mellissa walked outside with their little ones, a bright, hot pink, mud-splashed jeep came barreling down the drive.

"Who's that?" Mellissa asked, hefting Davy higher as she walked down the steps.

"Kara Lee." Jess watched the dust fly up as the jeep skidded to a stop. "She boards her horse here."

"Interesting car."

"Mm hmm." Jess lifted Morgan by her arms, swinging her down the stairs. "She's a photo journalist. From what I hear that jeep has taken her down many roads and many places without roads." She smiled over at her.

"Interesting career."

"Exciting anyway, at least from what she's told me." They stopped a few feet from the jeep, just as the door flew open and Kara Lee swung out. "Hi, ya'll! What's up?"

"The sky." Jess smiled.

"Name's Kara Lee." She jogged over to Mellissa and offered her hand. "But everyone calls me Kair."

Mellissa accepted her hand, shaking it lightly. "Hi, I'm Mellissa."

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"Nice to meet you." Kair livened the handshake considerably, then let go. Clapping her hands and rubbing them together, she began charging toward the barn. "So, how's Machacho been keepin'?"

Jess had to pick up Morgan and walk faster to keep up. "Restless. I think he misses his master." They went in the barn.

"Same here." Kair threw up the roll-up, metal door to the tack room and grabbed his halter from the peg without turning on the light. "Just got back from Somalia a couple hours ago, but had to come see my guy before I go home and crash."

"Somalia?" Mellissa's voice betrayed surprise.

"It's a long story." After grabbing the horse brush, Kair jerked down the clattering door and headed through the barn toward the pastures out back. She laughed. "I'll leave you a copy in the barn when it comes out," she called over her shoulder as she stepped out into the sunshine.

Mellissa and Jess were still following, toting their little ones. "Well, that's one story I'd certainly be interested in." Mellissa shifted Davy to her other arm. "You chase a lot of news stories?"

"Every chance I get."

"You must like an exciting life." Mellissa noticed Machacho's head jerk up when he saw his master.

"You bet."

Jess smiled as a large red-brown mustang came galloping over to the gate, tail held high, mane flying. "You should hear the story of how she got Machacho." The horse snorted when he reached the gate, tossing his jet black mane and stomping his hoof. Jess loved the color markings on this fine animal. All four legs were black up to just past each knee where the color merged into a beautiful, shiny red which covered the rest of him except for a bright, white diamond on his face. His brilliantly thick, black mane and tail flew in the wind.

"Where'd you get him?" Mellissa asked as she watched Kair open the gate.

"Texas."

"Illegal immigrant." Jess whispered, cupping her hand at the side of her mouth.

"There is no concrete evidence to support that claim." Kair called over her shoulder as she slipped on the hot pink halter. "He looked every bit of an American citizen when I got him."

Machacho snorted. "What about before you got him?" Jess joked.

Kair gave Jess a sideways glance as she passed her on the way to the barn, leading Machacho. "What he did in his past life is of no concern of mine."

"I'm not sure I get it." Mellissa followed them back.

"He's a drug runner." Jess stated matter-a-factly.

Stopping abruptly, Kara Lee put her hand on her hip as she turned around. "And just how many people consider my life an open book, after talking to you."

"Sorry. I didn't know it was a secret."

Kair continued toward the barn. "I guess it's not."

"Don't worry. She won't turn ya in." Jess joked.

"Turn me in?!" Kair let herself sound outraged. "I saved this guy from a life of crime!" Her fluffy, red pony tail bounced as she spun full circle, nearly tangling herself in the lead rope.

Jess laughed, putting Morgan down as they came back in the barn. "Looks like he could use some exercise," she said, watching Machacho prance around, unable to stand still.

"Looks like it." Kair tossed the brush to the side and tied the other end of the lead rope to the halter. "Think it will break every rule of horsemanship to ride him without brushing him today?" After a long yawn, Kara Lee swung up onto his back.

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Jess smiled. "Just don't fall asleep on the trail."

"I'll try not to." With another yawn, Kair squeezed her legs and Machacho took off at a trot out the barn and onto the driveway.

Holding her mommy's hand, Morgan looked up at Jess, eyes sparkling. "Dan-ny."

Jess smiled, swinging Morgan's arm. "Let's go see him." They turned to head out.

"Back we go." Mellissa followed them out to the pasture.

Beep... Beep... Beep... Derrick rolled over and hit the snooze button. *Sunday morning.* He stretched. *Time to get ready for church.* Yawning, he sat up and rubbed his face roughly to wake himself up. Sometimes he couldn't believe how drastically his life had changed. If anyone had told him a year ago that he would be waking up early on Sunday morning to get ready for church, he would have never believed them. Just a few months ago, he had hated everything about God, everything about religion.

He reached over and flipped on the lamp on his nightstand. He'd been willing to go to hell in order to avoid God. He shook his head, realizing his own stupidity. Now, he loved his Savior. He loved going to church and learning from his Bible. He loved fellowshiping with other Christians and working on church projects. Most of all, he loved being free. He had thought he was free before, free of God and the shackles of religion, the shackles of having to be good and nice and moral... but now he understood what true freedom was. Before, he was enslaved to the darkness inside of him, the meaningless joy of sin which lasted but a few moments and left him feeling more empty than before... the pointlessness of life, the endless search for purpose, for fulfillment, for true unselfish love... but he had been walking in circles... getting nowhere... not finding peace. He loved God for showing him the truth... the right way to happiness. He loved Him for breaking down the concrete walls encasing his cold, hate-filled heart and warming it with His love.

Standing, he grabbed his shirt from off his dresser and put it on. Walking to his window and pushing the curtains open, he stared out at his grungy neighborhood as he tucked his shirt in his jeans. Sleeping in his jeans had been a habit ever since the fire when he was a kid. He chalked up the idiosyncrasy to his strong need to always be prepared... always be ready in case of an emergency. *And hey, he figured, if there ever was an emergency, he would not be the one running outside in polka dot pajamas.*

The need to be prepared... it's why he ate healthy, kept himself in top physical condition, and always carried a hidden handgun. In fact, he'd been carrying even before concealed carry was legal... and he'd gotten caught a couple of times. Actually, he had had quite the rap sheet as a juvenile. It was only by some miracle... and some slick dealing... that his record as an adult was clear. Monica had called him a security freak... *Yeah...maybe.*

Startled awake by the squeak of the front door, Mellissa jerked up and turned on the lamp. She looked over at the window. Light seeped through the slightly open blinds, and she saw the outline of a man jogging past, down the sidewalk. She leaned back against the bedstead, sighing. It was only Wade going out for his morning run.

Sliding over and sitting on the edge, she slid her feet into her slippers and grabbed her robe from the bedpost at the foot of her bed. After his run, Wade always made a beeline for the kitchen. Maybe if she was lucky, she could share it with him. She tied her robe shut as she stood. *No cereal today! Today, I am going to make him the best breakfast he has ever tasted.*

Walking into the kitchen, Jess stopped in the doorway, smiling at the picturesque scene of Jim sitting at the table, holding the newspaper with one hand, reading it, and eating peaches and cottage cheese with the other. Morgan sat on his lap, hand in her

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cereal, every now and then eating, but more often splashing her milk in Jim's cottage cheese.

Coming up behind him, she draped her arms around his neck. "Good Mornin'."

Both turned and looked at her, but Morgan was the first to speak. "Ma-me." Her eyes sparkled. Turning back to her cereal, she picked up a floating Cheerio. Holding it above her head, she grinned widely. "Ummmy."

Both parents watched as milk splattered into her hair and trickled down her arm.

"Um... Daddy."

"Yeah, got it." Jim grabbed a napkin and, smiling, wiped off her arm before the stream reached the pushed up sleeve of her princess pjs. Then holding Morgan with one arm, he pushed himself up with the back of his chair, reached up, and kissed Jess.

"Morning." Instead of returning it, Jess just stared unimpressed at the puddle of milk on the table dripping down onto the floor.

Mellissa opened a bag of shredded cheddar with one hand while dumping a bowl of diced tomatoes into the scrambled eggs with the other. This was going to be the best breakfast skillet Wade had ever tasted.

She pulled the pan with the sautéed green pepper and onion off another burner just as Davy started to cry from his crib in his bedroom. *Oh, just a second.* She picked up the sautéed veggies to dump them in. *After all I can't just leave the...* Davy let out a blood curdling scream. Dropping the pan, Mellissa spun around 180 and raced for the bedroom.

Soon as Davy saw her, he stopped crying and smiled. Mellissa rolled her eyes. Walking over, hands on her hips, she picked him up and headed back for the kitchen... just as the smoke alarm sounded. Her eyes widened as she was greeted by a haze of smoke halfway down the hall. *Oh no!* She started to run. Skidding to a stop in the kitchen, she was confronted with a hungry flame devouring her world's best breakfast and growing taller with each bite. *Oh, no!* She grabbed the salt canister from table at the same time as she plopped Davy down in his highchair. Then opening the can, she charged toward the flame.

Wade jogged up the driveway. He had had a rough night last night. Every time he tried to sleep, his dreams catapulted him into a tunnel of images and screams that eventually woke him up in a cold sweat. He'd been nearly depressed when he finally decided to get up, but his morning run had worked to lift his spirits a little. His body felt refreshed... and hungry. He was looking forward to making himself a giant bowl of cinnamon raisin oatmeal.

Without thinking, Mellissa grabbed the pan handle to pull it off the burner before dumping the salt. *OUCH!* Recoiling from pain from the super-heated handle, she dropped the salt and knocked over the open bottle cooking of oil with her wrist. It dumped all over the stove, popping and splattering when it hit the burner. Smoke plumed. Alarms screamed from every room. *WHOOSH!* The oil exploded into flames. She jumped back as the flames engulfed the stove top and jumped as high as the ceiling. She reached for the salt, but it was too close to the stove. So, she did the next best thing. She screamed... at the top of her lungs.

Continuing down the sidewalk, Wade froze in his tracks when he heard the blood-curdling scream. Jerking his head toward the house, he saw the smoke seeping around the edge of the curtain. Then he smelled it. Then he heard the faint screams of the smoke alarms. He took off racing toward the door. "Mellissa!" he screamed as he flung open the

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door, ran into the smoke, and grabbed the fire extinguisher from the closet. Racing into the kitchen, glancing at his wife, who was petrified, clutching a can of salt, he quickly pulled the pin and doused the flames. Only after the threat was gone, he turned toward her, mouth open. "What did you think you were doing?"

Somewhat dazed, Melissa looked down, set the salt on the counter, walked over to her wide-eyed, coughing baby, and picking him up, sat on the edge of the table, refusing eye contact with Wade.

Breaking his stare, Wade went over and pushed the sliding window up rather hard, causing the springs to squeak. Sharply turning back, he had an urge to start yelling, but seeing her staring down at her baby nearly in tears, his heart and his face softened. He walked over slowly. "You know," She looked up at him, straining to hold back tears. "generally speaking, I am supposed to be the one who can't cook." That brought her a little smile. Crossing his arms and raising his eyebrows, he slowly turned in a circle assessing the kitchen while light-heartedly shaking his head and uttering sighs. When he came back to facing Mellissa, he kept his expression teasingly accusatory. "The next time you bring up my little mishap the first time I cooked for your parents...."

Mellissa huffed a quiet laugh. "Little mishap?" Sniffing, she grabbed a Kleenex from the center of the table. "At least I didn't have fire and police departments out here."

Wade shrugged. "Of course not. I made it back in time... and rescued you."

Mellissa half-heartedly chuckled through her tears. Standing, she put Davy back in his highchair and wrapped her arms around Wade. She felt him stiffen and take a half step back, but she was too emotionally overwrought to be offended. Finally, he loosened up some and put one arm part way around her. A couple tears trickled down her face. "I was going to make you the perfect breakfast."

Wade didn't know whether to pull away or hug her tighter. He concluded he wouldn't pull away... while she needed him. "When I said that I liked my food well done, I didn't expect you to take me so seriously."

Laughing through the tears, she hugged him tighter. "I love you."

Wade's heart sank. He didn't want that. He didn't want to be tied here if he couldn't provide for them. He couldn't live his life as a failure, seeing others suffer because of his weakness. If he couldn't provide for them, he wanted to be able to leave. He wanted to be able to free her up to marry someone else.

Derrick pulled himself up on his Total Gym for the last rep and held it for thirty seconds. Then after lowering himself, he grabbed his towel and wiped his sweaty face. He felt good. Every muscle in his body had been twitching for exercise this morning. An intense strength training session was just what he had needed.

After taking a long drink, he jammed down the water bottle spout with his palm and stood up. Slings his towel over his shoulder, he walked to the kitchen. He was ready for a good breakfast. Pulling his bread from the fridge, he smiled when the "made from sprouts" logo caught his attention. Grabbing the eggs, he remembered the time Monica had tried to make bread from her own sprouts that she had grown in a jar. His heart warmed as he placed the ingredients on the counter while replaying the hilarious incident in his mind. She was actually a really good bread maker. He cracked the eggs into the skillet and dumped some prechopped tomato, green pepper, and onion in it. She always made their bread from scratch. He popped a couple slices in the toaster. In fact, there were few things cuter than coming into a flour-hazed kitchen and watching her in her flour covered apron with her flour-streaked face, putting her whole body into the effort of kneading an excessively large amount of triple-batch dough. He scrambled the eggs with one hand and opened the jar of a hundred percent fruit jam with the other. However, her first and only

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attempt at making spouted bread had been a complete disaster. He caught himself laughing out loud as the toast popped from the toaster. His smile faded as he grabbed the toast. She'd been gone for years, yet he still loved her.

Staring at his computer, Alberto Mansenie methodically tapped the end of his signature two-hundred-dollar pen on the top of his carved, solid oak desk. *Knock knock... Knock knock...* Mansenie let out an annoyed sigh. "What?"

The door came open a crack and a shy young man in a suit stuck his head in. "Mr. Mansenie? Can I come in?"

"Boy, if you've got something to say, get in here, and spit it out so I can get back to work." He looked back at his computer.

The young man straightened his posture as he walked in. "I've got some good news."

"You got the hard drive back?" He didn't look up.

"Well, no not exactly."

This time Mansenie did look up but with a glare so threatening it made the young man take a step back and lose some of his composure. "Then what *is* this *good news* that you have for me?"

"We think we know who has it."

Mansenie just glared, his eyes piercing.

"We are pretty sure that the man running away was a firefighter."

Mansenie's stare got even sharper.

"We *are* sure he was a fireman." He cracked his knuckles.

"What's. His. Name?"

Donald began talking fast, nervously. "There's only one station within walking distance. It would have just changed shifts awhile before. There are only two from that shift that live on that side of town, Wade Thundercloud and Derrick..."

"Derrick what?"

"We" re working on that."

Mansenie rolled his eyes. "Do you know why you are here?" His glare was stone cold. "Do you even have any idea what I pay you for?"

"We'll get it back!"

Mansenie slammed his fist on the desk and stood to his feet. "You don't even know where it is!"

"We do know where..."

Mansenie rounded the desk growling. "You listen to me."

"We'll get it back!" He squeaked. "He ran away when the first responders came. He's not planning to take it to the cops."

"Maybe," he grabbed the young man by the front of his shirt, "it would be easier if he did. Maybe my guys there could handle this simple task which you seem totally incapable of!"

"We'll..."

Mansenie lifted him up by his collar to eye level. "You get that hard drive back! You get it back, and you *kill* everyone who has seen it!"

Derrick stepped on the brake bringing his pickup to a stop at a red light. Tapping his fingers on the wheel impatiently, his mind wandered back to the hard drive hidden in his closet... the hard drive of death. There was so much information on it he still hadn't

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gotten through it all, but he had gotten the general idea loud and clear... mobsters and dirty cops joined together for a deadly duo. As the light turned green, he turned left onto the main drag. Evidence for murders, robberies, illegal gambling, human trafficking, and drug dealing – was there anything that wasn't on that drive? He passed a slow-moving car. And it was all linked to the Mansenie cartel. *Mansenie*. When he was runnin' with the gangs in Chicago, Mansenie had been a household name, not someone you wanted to mess with. Turning his truck onto a side road and stopping at a yield sign, he rolled up the sleeve of his dress shirt and stared a moment at the tattoo... the brand of his old life. He'd left that life years ago, and he didn't want any part of it back... yet... what could he do? HONK! He jerked his attention to the car behind him and stepped on the gas, circling his neck as he got up to speed. His mind went back to the night he got the drive. *Why me?* How come chaos always sought him out? Why did that guy have to get shot right then right in *that* alley? Flipping on his blinkers, he turned into the church's driveway. *Three weeks*. The trial was in three weeks. He pulled into a parking space beside the pastor's car. In the meantime, if *anyone* found out what he had, *both* sides of the law would come gunnin' for him.

Jim, Jess, and Morgan walked side-by-side into church. "Hey, Pastor." Jim stopped by the door to talk with him while Jess picked up Morgan and headed over to a group of ladies standing in a circle, laughing.

"How are you guys doin'?" He tapped Jim on the shoulder with his Bible, his smile warm and enthusiastic.

"Good. It's been a good week."

"Great."

They both turned their heads momentarily to look as Derrick came in the door.

"Morning, Derrick!" Jim greeted him cheerfully. Derrick, who was staring straight ahead as he walked past, didn't hear him. "Derrick?"

Derrick stopped and turned around, looking a little perplexed. "Did you say something to me?" He looked from Jim to Pastor and back to Jim, not sure who he was talking to.

"I said, 'Good Morning.'"

"Oh. Morning."

Jim smiled politely, yet extremely curious about Derrick's recent absentmindedness. "Still comin' over after the afternoon service for a picnic?" He expected a prompt yes but, instead, got a long pause. "If you have other plans...."

"No...uh... I can be there." He hesitated still concerned for the safety of those that got close to him while he held the drive.

Jim wondered at the hesitation in his voice, but shrugged it off, turning himself back to the pastor as Derrick left.

"Looks like a man with something on his mind."

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it?" He glanced back over his shoulder at Derrick, watching him as he pushed open the door to the auditorium and sat in the back pew by himself.

"Jim, I wanted to ask you a favor."

Jim turned back to the Pastor. "Sure. What?"

"You remember when you were a youngster?"

Jim's turn for confusion. "Ye-eah."

"Remember that rambunctious kid who would throw his suit coat and tie under the stairs every Sunday morning after his Uncle dropped him off? Remember the time he started the youth room on fire, accidentally? Remember the time you called *me* from

juvenile hall because you were afraid of what your Uncle would say?" Pastor laughed out loud as he recalled the conversation.

Jim's laugh was a little more hesitant. What was he driving at? "Yeah, those were the days."

"Maybe for you. You must of got Wade grounded more times than I can count."

"Yeah." They both laughed together. "That's true."

"Then there were those times when you came to me for moral support." Pastor laughed harder at a mental image. "I can still remember the look on your face as you sheepishly came to my office door. Must of just been twelve years old and mumbled, 'I just blew up my Uncle's henhouse.... It was an accident! Really it was!'"

Jim laughed harder, recalling that scene, but in the back of his head, he knew he was dead. The pastor only ever used his *Where Would You be without Me* speech if he was very desperate. However, Jim was still laughing, caught up in the reminiscing.

"Remember the time I accidentally chased a skunk into the church."

"Oh. Who could forget that!" Pastor put his hand up to his face. "What a mess."

"Oh, I know. Wasn't it?" Jim wished he wasn't actively encouraging this conversation.

After a few moments, the laughter subsided a little and Pastor, still smiling, shook his head. "Where would you be today if it weren't for a good youth pastor?" Even his smile was begging for a favor, and Jim was beginning to figure out what it was.

"I might have made it."

"Sure. Sure you would have." He slapped Jim's arm. "But would it have been near as much fun?" He smiled widely.

Jim grunted a laugh and then began shaking his head. "I am not going to be your next youth leader. No way."

"Jim. Don't you want to serve the Lord?"

"Yes! And I can't do that if I'm dead!"

"Don't exaggerate." He shrugged. "Sure we've had a few slit tires, a couple minor catastrophes, a few broken bones, but we haven't lost a youth leader, yet."

"Yet! John Mark's still goin' in for physical therapy, and he was three youth leaders ago!"

"Jim."

"I have a family to think of."

"Jim."

"Besides I'm terrible at speaking in front of a group." The secretary approached him with teen teaching material, stopping a few feet to his side. "Besides, I'm a fireman not a cop. Where's Trent? He looked around, noticing that half the congregation was watching in amusement. "At least, he would have legal authority!"

"Jim." Pastor slapped his hand on Jim's shoulder. "Just pray about it."

Staring a moment into the Pastor's eyes, Jim reached out his hand sideways in the direction of the secretary until she slapped the teaching material into it. Then, without another word, he turned and headed for the stairs. The entire foyer broke out clapping, everyone except Jess, who just plopped down in the outer pew, momentarily putting her hand to her forehead and considering the repercussions of changing churches. Rounding the banister and reaching the top step, Jim stopped and pointed at the Pastor, who was still watching him. "You owe me your *best* funeral!" and with that, he headed downstairs, hearing the congregation erupt in laughter behind him.

As Jim neared the teen room, thumping, singing, laughing, and yelling sounds all became evident. What had he gotten himself into? He braced himself as he opened the door. Evidently, he wasn't braced enough.... dumped chairs, sunflower shells scattered about, girls playing round robin at the ping pong table, boys yelling over a foosball game, a few stragglers playing something that resembled tackle tag, and all of them acting very

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rowdy. "Okay." He tried to speak over the noise. "Hey!" No one was listening. "HEY! Listen up!!!" Everyone stopped and looked at him. "I am going to be your new teacher." Groans all around. *Thanks for the warm reception.* Jim stepped over a fallen chair. "Okay. Let's get this place straightened up." Stares, but no reaction.

Jess came in, hopping over the same fallen chair in front of the doorway and next to Jim. Putting her hands on her hips, she looked around disapprovingly. "What a mess," she mumbled, then looked around at each of the kids. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! What is this... a house of God or a pool hall? Now, you all get this place cleaned up right now, or I am talking to each and every one of your parents today, even if I have to ride back with those that came on the bus. Let's go!" She clapped her hands, and they all went into action.

Jim breathed a sigh of relief, looking up. *Thank you, Lord, for a good woman.* It was a prayer and it was sincere. He hurdled his way over to the desk and opened his packet of teaching material.

Pastor walked out of his office into the foyer. It was almost time for church to start, but there were still quite a few people filing in. He stopped on his way to the auditorium when he saw Melinda. "Hi, Melinda." He gave a warm smile and offered his hand.

She shook it. "Hi, Pastor. You remember me?"

"Of course. It *has* been a while, hasn't it?"

She nodded. "I think since before college."

Pastor smiled. "I remember your last Sunday before you left for school. Your parents were so proud."

"Yeah." She laughed, lightly, "First generation college student," then looked down. "I still miss them."

His expression changed to compassion. "I don't think anyone ever totally gets over the loss of someone they love."

Melinda looked toward the auditorium as one of the deacons started the announcements before Sunday School. "It looks like the Pastor's tardy."

"I thi-ink," he craned his head backwards to look in the auditorium, "you're right." With a slight wave, Pastor turned to leave. Meeting up with his wife who was just finishing her own conversation a few feet away, they went in together.

Jim looked up from his teacher's edition as the commotion of busy teens began to slow. The room was nearly put back together. Jess was just setting up the last few chairs, and a young lady was winding up the vacuum. Waiting another moment, he looked up as a young man, who looked about sixteen, dressed in a beat-up, black leather, motorcycle jacket, swaggered in. Slowly walking up to the front, he knocked knuckles with a few guys as he passed and fist high-fived another before turning into the second row to take a seat next to a nice-looking young lady who had obviously saved it for him. He made a mental note to keep an eye on that relationship. Looking a little closer at the young lady, he wondered where he'd seen her before... not here... maybe nowhere. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something very familiar about her face. He glanced at the young man staring at her. It wasn't hard to see why he would like her. She was by far the prettiest girl in the group. Her hair was long and styled in an attractive up do, every hair perfect. She was slender and dark skinned and knew how to use make-up very effectively. All of them very good reasons for her to be careful whom she went with.

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Realizing he was staring, he looked elsewhere, and tried not to form any opinions without knowing them.

"I-I think..." Jess hopped over a boy's foot as he stuck it out into the aisle. "we are just about ready."

Jim got up, and took the book and his Bible over to the podium, but before he could speak, a teen guy shouted out. "Hey, what happened to the last guy?"

"He probably ran out of money for tires," Jim mumbled as he opened his Bible. The whole class booed. Jim wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

Walking into a noisy, crowded gym, two off duty police officers scanned the room for their boss. Spotting him, they walked over to the large muscular man pumping iron on the bench. "Brett!" one called as they got close.

Brett let the weights he had been bench pressing clang down into its stand and then slid out from underneath it, wiping his face with a towel as he sat up. "Well?" He looked up at them.

"Both paramedics are at church." Jake, a hefty man in his mid-thirties, plopped down on a nearby weight machine.

"Church?" Brett grunted a laugh. "At least they shouldn't be too tough to break."

"Yeah." Stan, tall and slender, yet hardly photogenic, leaned back against a metal beam. "Work together, go to the same church, I bet they shared this, too."

Brett grabbed his water bottle. "Possibly." He took a swig. "There is a watch set up on them both?"

Jake grunted, nodding. "Neither one has done anything suspicious, yet. ... Neither one of them have done anything at all." He rubbed his face, wearily.

Brett stood up. "Anyone have a plan how to get it back, yet?" He wiped his face.

Stan and Jake exchanged glances. "That depends on who has it." If looks could kill, Jake would be dead. "If the skinny guy with the wife and baby has it, it shouldn't be any problem. Just snatch his wife or kid, or him. He doesn't look too hard to break."

"What if the other guy has it?"

Jake looked at Stan and mumbled, "That could be a problem." Brett looked at Stan.

Stan shrugged nonchalantly. "I worked with him once at a robbery scene. I was supposed to assist him treating a couple of the gunshot victims. I have a feeling he's the type of guy who would die for a principle."

Brett shrugged. "So find someone he loves more than his life."

"That could take a while. He's got a reputation as a lone wolf."

"Everyone's got someone."

Jim stretched as he stood up from his desk. Most of the class was gathered around a table in the back of the room, enjoying the homemade cinnamon rolls a mother had brought in... everyone but Taylor and Jack. They still sat in their seats talking and laughing, sitting at a distance that was less than proper. "Don't you two want some cinnamon rolls?"

They both looked up. Taylor scooted back out of Jack's space, but Jack scooted closer and put his arm around her shoulders. "So." He pulled her toward him. "What *really* happened to the last leader?"

"No touching." His expression and voice showed disapproval."

"I see." He chomped hard on his gum. "You're gonna be one of those." He didn't remove his arm but instead rubbed her shoulder. "Actually," he cracked his neck, "the

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last guy finally seemed like he had it together.” He clicked his fingers over his head. “I bet it was those staunch fundamentalists that felt threatened and had to kick him out.”

“Did you hear what I said?” Jim found himself glaring at them.

Holding tighter, Jack smirked, looking over his shoulder. “You mean about the cinnamon rolls? They look....”

“No.”

Feeling uncomfortable, Taylor started to stand, just hoping her sleeve didn’t rip from his strong grip. “Let go,” she muttered as she broke free. “I think I will go get one.” She looked down as she spoke and started to leave.

“Wait, Baby.” Jack grabbed for her, but Jim blocked his hand.

“You’re heading for trouble, boy.” After staring a moment, Jim walked toward the cinnamon rolls to find Jess.

“Hi.” Jess’s smile widened as Jim approached her. “These are *really* good.” She took a small bite of a gooey roll. “Want one?”

“No, thanks.” He sat down on the edge of the desk next to her. “Do you know what the last name of that girl is?” He looked over at Taylor.

Jess nodded, her mouth full. “Why? Do you know her?”

“Her face looks really familiar.”

“It’s Fredricks.” Jess took a sip of juice.

Of course. Yeah. He looked again seeing even more of Dr. Fredricks in her face. That had to be his daughter. He noticed Jess still staring at him. “Do you know what happened to the last youth leaders?” he asked, pouring some juice.

“Ha!” She glanced around, hoping that burst of emotion wasn’t too loud. “I’m not even sure what his name was. This job has such a high turnover rate!” Jim grinned at that. Shielding her voice with her hand, she whispered to him. “I think I heard he changed denominations!” She glanced around in mock fear. “Is that what this job will do to ya?” Jim laughed.

Grabbing his Bible and lesson book from the desk, Jim let out a sigh while walking toward the door. He guessed today had gone okay. At least, half the kids seemed like they were paying attention to his very last minute, rush-prepared Sunday school lesson. All the kids made it through the morning service without incident. And the only casualty at lunch had been a bowl of tomato soup. Granted it had splattered all over the carpet, *but considering it just missed falling right on top Mrs. Hattie Erickson's head.... Yeah.* He flipped off the light switch and closed the door. Still, he was looking forward to the time when Pastor found a *real* youth leader. Tossing the keys in air, he walked fast to the back door he was supposed to lock, knowing Jess and Morgan were waiting for him in the van. Glancing out the glass, he was surprised to see Taylor standing outside next to it. "You need a ride home?" He leaned out the door.

"No, my dad's comin' to pick me up in about five minutes when he gets off work."

"Want us to wait? I think everyone else has pretty much left."

She shook her head. "He'll be here... and he'll be here on time. That's his *code*." She rolled her eyes, her voice holding bitterness. "He wouldn't *dare* stoop to the level of being late... if anything he'll be early." As she spoke, her Dad drove into the back drive. "What did I tell you?" Her voice held resentment.

"Wish my Uncle had been like that. Half the trouble I got into as a teen, happened while I was waiting for him to finally show up."

Reaching down to grab her purse, she muttered, "You can have it," and walked toward the car.

Catching Dr. Fredricks' gaze, Jim raised his Bible in a wave. Dr. Fredricks raised his hand in return, but didn't smile.

"Wade, where are you going? Home's that way," Mellissa protested as Wade made a wrong turn.

"I think someone's following us."

"Oh, Wade, don't be ridiculous. You've been watching too many detective shows."

"I'm serious. That gray car behind us keeps showing up."

Mellissa turned around to look. "How do you know it's the same one?" Wade turned. The car didn't. "See. He's gone."

"He'll be back. Just wait."

Initially, Mellissa just dismissed it, sighing as they circled blocks, until she saw the car show up again in the rearview mirror a few cars back.

"See him?"

Mellissa didn't answer, but her brow furrowed. Wade turned their van. The gray car drove past, but a few minutes later, it was back. "Wade!" Mellissa gasped. "He *is* following us! Oh, Wade, it isn't like last time?" She turned around again to look out the back.

"No."

"How do you know?" Her voice squeaked.

"Jim hasn't said a thing about Jess getting death threats."

"This is *not* funny! *WA-A-DE!*" She screamed, holding onto the door as Wade made a tight last minute turn. The car behind them went past, and Wade stomped the gas.

"What are you doing?" She grabbed the dash as Wade made another tight turn. Davy started to scream. After zigzagging around a few blocks at high speeds, without breaking speed, Wade zipped across a busy highway just barely squeezing between oncoming cars

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from both directions, leaving the gray car behind. As soon as Mellissa dared to breathe again, still stiff as a board grasping the door and the dash, she gasped. "Are you crazy?!"

Wade didn't answer as he ran a stop light, and took a shortcut across an abandoned parking lot. Davy was still screaming. "Will you get the baby?!" he yelled. Mellissa didn't move. In fact, she looked petrified in time. Wade squealed the van around another corner, spurted it ahead into a factory driveway, and squealed to a stop hidden behind a semi. "Wade?" Mellissa squeaked, still staring straight ahead.

"Wait a minute." He jumped out of the van and hit the ground, watching under his van and the semi until he saw the gray car drive past. Then he watched it turn around and drive past again, turn around again, going slow down the street next to the factory, but this time it kept going. Wade watched it until it was out of sight then got up and got back in the van, forcing a smile at the worker, who had stopped loading the semi and was staring at him.

Knock... Knock... Melinda, who was looking in the mirror taking out her dangly earrings, looked over her shoulder toward the door, wondering who that could be. As she walked to door, she could see Carlos out of the front window. She wasn't sure how to feel as she opened it. "Hi Carlos."

"Hi." He handed her a big bouquet of yellow roses. "I came to make up." He grinned widely.

Returning a cordial look, she stepped to the side, inviting him in. "With whom?"

Still grinning, he walked past her, setting the flowers on the end table. "Who do you think?" He turned back toward her, putting his arm around her, wanting a kiss, but she pulled away.

"What's the matter with you?" He slammed the door.

Crossing her arms, she leaned back against the wall. "I am a Christian. You can't make up with me until you make up with my Lord first!"

"Oh! Come on! We have a good thing going here, and you're going to throw it all away over religion?!" He didn't care that he was yelling.

"Maybe I don't think we have such a good thing going. Maybe we never did. *Maybe* we were living in sin!"

"We were living in love!"

"Not pure love... not clean love... with no regrets." Her voice was soft, half talking to herself.

"Melinda." His voice softened. He reached for her, but she put up her hand and stopped him. Sighing loudly, he threw up his hands and spun around. "What do you want me to do?" He was clearly exasperated.

"Leave." She put her hand over her aching forehead.

"What?"

"I don't know what to say right now. I'll call you later."

"Fine!" Throwing the door open, he stomped out and slammed it behind him.

"So, tomorrow's the big day?" Jess hopped up on the picnic table bench, sitting down on the edge of the table.

Derrick, who was leaning against a nearby tree, nodded his head. "Yep."

"Excited?" She was. She couldn't wait to see Derrick's wild mustang. ... She couldn't wait to see Derrick tame him.

Smiling, Derrick shrugged. "Yeah. It'll be nice."

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Jess grinned, turning to look at Jim who was coming out of the house toting hamburgers and whistling.

Jim slid the burgers on the table and opened the lid to a smoking grill. He glanced over at Derrick. "Hope you're hungry."

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about that."

Grinning widely, Jess hopped off the table and held out her arms as Morgan came running into them. Then kissing her, she swung her up as she hopped back up on the table and plopped Morgan in her lap. Morgan laughed ecstatically. "We were just talking about Derrick's horse comin' tomorrow." Jess turned toward Jim.

Jim flopped a burger on the grill. "Ah, yes, the Montana mustang."

"You must be quite the cowboy," she addressed Derrick. Derrick just smiled, but Jim choked on a laugh.

"What?"

Jim and Derrick exchanged glances, but didn't answer.

"What?" She laughed, but before Jim could remark about Derrick's limited horsemanship abilities, Wade and Mellissa's van drove up, catching all of their attention.

"There they are." Jim put another burger on the grill.

Wade looked over at Mellissa, who had Davy out of his car seat, holding him tightly rubbing his back. "Don't say anything about what just happened."

"Why?"

He sighed. "Just don't. I'll talk to Jim about it in private."

She didn't understand, but she didn't feel like arguing so she just gave him a look and threw open the door.

"Now, we need the rest of the food from inside," Jess said while swinging Morgan up over her, bouncing her in the air.

Jim flipped a burger. "Someone should go inside and get them." He flipped a couple more.

"But I'm watching Morgan." She lowered the little girl and plopped her down in her lap.

Jim glanced over his shoulder. "But *I'm* flipping burgers."

Derrick smiled. "What do ya need?" he asked, getting up from the bench.

"No." Jim was the first to respond. "You're a guest. I'll get it. Here." He handed him the spatula. "But if you let one of those burgers burn, you may be shot as a trespasser," he joked. "Hey, Wade." He slapped his friend on the shoulder, nearly running into him as he turned around.

"Hi. I'll help you get the stuff." Wade's voice was quiet.

"That's okay. I can manage."

"No. I want to."

Jim shrugged. "Okay."

"Hey, Wade." Derrick acknowledged his arrival, but Wade made no attempt at niceties. He shot Derrick an angry glance and turned away.

Jim glanced at Derrick questioningly, but Derrick just shrugged, so he dismissed it and followed Wade to the house. "So, how've you guys been lately?" He really wished Jess hadn't volunteered him to ask Wade about their marital problems, but he guessed if he had to bring up the subject this was probably a good time.

Wade shrugged. "You haven't received any more death threats, lately, have you?"

"Wha-at?" That caught Jim off guard. Stopping abruptly, he turned toward him, but Wade kept walking. "What are you talking about?" He had to walk fast to catch up.

"I didn't really think you had."

"Are you saying...?"

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Driving home, Derrick smiled to himself as he hit the blinkers and slowed his car at a stop sign. He always enjoyed going over to Jim and Jessica's. To him, they seemed to have the perfect family. Their little ranch was just the escape he needed from the harsh reality he had to deal with every day. He was glad that Jim picked him to be a friend, especially when he himself had been so unfriendly. Things had changed dramatically in his life in just a few months. A few months ago, he had sunk about as deep as he could go into the darkness of suspicion, loneliness, and doubt. He had been nearly past feeling, but now he felt more alive than he ever had, not because of Jim and his family but because of the One Jim had brought him to, because he had brought him to his Creator... Creator of life, Sustainer of life, Giver of true life and everlasting life. He had brought him to Christ.

Derrick glanced in his rearview mirror as he turned onto Chestnut Street. The SUV that was behind him went straight, but another car was just turning onto Chestnut Street a few blocks down. *Good ole Tonto*. He sighed. He decided earlier if he was going to be followed, he might as well, name the cars so he could keep them straight. Lone Ranger was the single red neck driving the SUV that had followed him from church, and Tonto was the duo in the small car that had followed him to Jim and Jess's. Now the two of them were hop scotching around in valiant attempts not to look suspicious. Like he would ever guess they were back there. He came to a stop at a red light. The driver of Tonto snuck a quick glance at him as he pulled up beside to go into the turn lane. Derrick felt like returning with a big sarcastic grin, but he didn't. The only thing he knew to do was play it cool. They couldn't know he had the hard drive or else they would have made a move a long time ago.

He watched Lone Ranger cruise past as he turned into his apartment driveway. Shaking his head, he pulled into his spot, put it in park, and pulled out the key. *Why does my life have to be so complicated?* Pulling his hand gun from under his seat, he put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. He guessed this newest predicament would give him good practice in his newfound prayer life. The truck started dinging when he opened the door so he turned off the head lights, locked the doors, and headed for his home.

Kara Lee sucked in a deep breath of crisp morning air as she swung the pasture gate shut. Crossing her arms and leaning them against the top of the cold metal gate she watched Machacho run back to his heard. A white horse reared up to greet him and after a few moments the whole herd took off running. She smiled, getting a storybook feeling as she watched them run off and disappear into the morning mist. She looked down at the lush green grass. The dew drops glistened, reflecting the early morning sun.

"Beautiful morning for a ride."

Kara Lee turned to see Jess coming toward her, holding the hand of little Morgan who was skipping along beside. She smiled. "It was."

"You must have gotten here at the crack of dawn."

"Only way to go on a sunrise ride." She leaned back against the fence. "Besides I'll be busy the rest of today and probably for a couple of days chasing a story."

"Have enough time to join me for a cup of coffee."

Tossing her lead rope and halter over her shoulder Kair smiled at her as she headed toward the barn. "The request of a lonely farmwife? Jim at work?"

"No. He went with a friend to help him pick up his horse at the train station."

"Gonna have a new boarder?" She tossed her halter onto the nail in the tack room.

"He may be quite the addition – a wild stallion from out west."

"No kidding. Who's this cowboy that's going to tame him?" She pulled down the tack door hard.

"I think he was bought more on the merit of price than challenge, although Derrick does like a good challenge."

She chuckled to herself. "Tame a wild stallion. Now, that is something I *would* like to see." She walked with Jess out of the barn, stopping as she watched the horse trailer pull in. "Maybe I will stick around for a while." She grinned.

Jess returned it. "Oom hmm."

Jim and Derrick both jumped out as soon as the truck rolled to a stop and ran to the back of the banging trailer that was rocking from the forceful kicks of the Stallion inside. Jim put his hand up on the side of the rocking trailer as he jogged to the back. "If it were possible for him to knock this thing over...!" He had to yell over the noise.

"Tell me about it!" Derrick pulled down the latch and swung open the back door. The giant, jet black stallion stopped kicking, but continued snorting, cocking his head to see behind him.

Jim glanced over at the girls standing in the barn's entryway. "You might want to take cover! This animal's spirited!"

Jess took that as a warning to keep their distance and pulled Kara Lee back as she began to go toward them. "Let's let them get him out first." Kara Lee rolled her eyes.

Jim jumped back in reflex to a powerful rear kick even though the powerful hooves could not reach them. Derrick didn't react. The horse craned his neck, bellowing with a high-pitched whinny, stomping his front hoof, and snorting.

"How do you plan to get him out of there?"

Derrick shrugged, casually. "Just bring him out." He went around to the side door that opened a ways in front of the horse.

"It took five guys to get him in there." Jim followed him.

"We don't have five guys."

No kidding.

They both stepped in the trailer and stopped, staring at the snorting, curve-necked creature. Jim was amazed he hadn't pulled the rings holding the crossties right out of the

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wall the way he was yanking at them. He stared a moment, having never seen a horse with such a large and muscular neck.

Derrick was the first to break the silence. "Instead of using the lead rope, let's untie the crossties, so we both have a rope to hold him down."

Jim gave him an unsure glance but then nodded. They both went to a side and began untying at the same time.

"Ready?"

"Go!" They both yanked the knots loose. In an instant, the giant Black threw his head up and reared partway, nearly pulling both men off their feet, and then backed out so fast they had to run to keep from getting dragged. Soon as he was out, the stallion reared high, shaking his head violently, trying to get free. Derrick and Jim both choked up on their ropes, pulling down hard. After a few moments, they finally managed to get him down.

Jess lifted Morgan up and put her in a nearby hay wagon for safekeeping, just in case the half-crazed animal broke loose and came charging their way.

Unable to rear, the black charged forward at Derrick, snarling and biting. Just in the knick of time, Derrick whapped the horse's nose with the rope, causing him to yank back. Derrick retightened his grip, nearly losing it. Feeling slack, the horse reared up again, whinnying and neighing. This time it took a few minutes before the men were able to pull him back down.

Jess hopped up next to her Morgan. Kair remained standing in the doorway.

"We have to get him over to the pasture!" Jim yelled the obvious over the loud snorting.

Derrick tried to back up toward the gate, pulling hard to get the horse to move. "We should have backed the trailer into the pasture."

"Why didn't you say that earlier?!" Jim yelled, nearly jerked off his feet as the horse backed up.

Derrick didn't answer, not seeing any reason to admit he just thought of it.

They were halfway there when the horse reared up and threw his head to the side at the same time, yanking Derrick off balance, causing him to fall to his knees. Then with the slack in the rope, he threw his hind end around and delivered a massive rear kick in Jim's direction. Jim jumped to the side just barely missing the impact from the horse's hooves, but he also dropped the rope. Immediately, he reached for it, but it was too late. The horse reared and started galloping in a circle around Derrick. Derrick, now standing, held the rope tightly. Standing sideways, he planted his front leg hard in ground and leaned his weight on his back leg, digging in trying not to be moved while turning slowly with the horse galloping in a circle around him.

Jess stared wide-eyed, wondering what was going to happen.

Kara Lee jumped around like a mom at a football game yelling, "Get the rope!"

Jim didn't know what to do. There was no way he was getting to that rope.

The rope flew up. Derrick snatched it, but it put him off balance. The horse felt it, seized the opportunity, and bolted for the woods, dragging Derrick behind.

Jim ran after them yelling, "Derrick! Derrick, let go!"

Gravel flew into his face. It ripped his shirt and cut into his chest, but he gripped tighter. Letting go was *not* an option. He grimaced as his leg banged into a tree when they entered the woods, but he didn't loosen his grip.

Kara Lee immediately ran over to the pasture gate. "Machacho!" she yelled, "Machacho, come!" Soon Machacho came galloping over. Swinging open the gate, she took hold of her horse, grabbed a hunk of mane, and swung up. Trotting over to Jim, she pulled to stop when she reached him. "Come on!"

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On principle, Jim only rode double with Jess, but this was an emergency, so he swung up in front of her and kicked the horse into a gallop. In an instant, they were galloping into the woods in hot pursuit of Derrick.

Head high, tail high, mane flying, snorting into the wind, the stallion cantered down the trail with no intentions of stopping.

Ignoring the pain, disregarding the sharp rocks and sticks, gritting his teeth, Derrick searched his mind for a solution.

Weaving through trees, jumping logs, Jim tried to catch up by cutting across uncleared ground.

Derrick's mind raced for a way to stop this unrestrained, wild animal, but he was coming up empty.

Jim secretly wished he could dump Kara Lee off. Not only did he not feel comfortable so close to her, but having two was making the ride much more difficult. Seeing Derrick go past in the distance, Jim saw a chance to cut them off. He pulled Machacho to a stop at the bottom of a slope. "If you got off, I could go over this hill and head them off." He spoke fast.

"Nothin' doin', Cowboy. I can stay on!" She removed her grasp on the sides of his belt and wrapped her arms around his chest. "Let's go!"

Jim stiffened, really uncomfortable, now, but he just rolled his eyes and kicked the horse in high gear up the hill. *Kara Lee never was one to take a hint anyway.*

Derrick's shoulder banged into a rock. *How do I get this thing to stop?* He tightened his grip on the rope. *You could pray.* He hadn't thought of that. Getting tossed up by a log, he twisted in the air to avoid a tree. *Dear Lord... OUCH!* His shin whacked a metal stake. *Dear Lord...* His eyes widened, seeing he was right on collision course with a giant oak. *HELP!* Getting tossed up again, he was thrown to one side of the tree while the horse went around the other. The rope snagged on a sharp branch coming from the tree trunk, pulling the Stallion to a stop. Still on his stomach not taking time to get up, Derrick threw the rope around the trunk three times and began to tie it. The black pulled back, whinnying and shaking his head trying to break free, but this time it was no good. Looking up at the wild animal snorting and pawing the ground, Derrick pulled himself up on his knees. Leaning against the tree, he closed his eyes having to take a minute as the world began to spin.

Jim pressed his hand against Machacho's neck, trying to balance himself as they cantered downhill. *Normally* he would just lean back *how-ev-er...* They both jolted as Machacho, coming to the end of the hill, jumped the ditch to the trail. Jim pulled him to a stop. Derrick and the stallion were nowhere in sight. *Where'd they go?* Jim turned Machacho in a full circle, looking, but he saw nothing.

Derrick used a branch to help pull himself to his feet. The stallion stood a few feet away, watching him, ears perked, body straight, muscles twitching with energy, but for now, standing still. Derrick just stared a moment, wondering how in the world, he was going to get this creature home. Looking down at the rope, he got an idea. Kneeling down, he unknotted it and began tightening the rope slowly, inching the horse toward him, stopping for a moment each time the animal began to fight. Soon, he was out of rope to fight with and within touching distance. Derrick reached up to touch the star on his face, but the horse snapped a bite at him. Jerking his hand away just in time, in the same instant, Derrick kicked the animal hard in retaliation. "Knock it off!"

Jim and Kair both looked back and forth as Machacho walked down the trail.

"Where could he have gone?" Kair whined.

"There he is." Jim kicked Machacho into a trot and headed for Derrick, stopping a few yards away. They both dismounted.

Kara Lee's mouth dropped open when she saw Derrick. *How did he get from being horse chow one minute to rubbing the animal's neck the next?*

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Jim noticed the blood seeping through Derrick's tattered shirt and streaking his arms. "You okay?"

"Fine," he answered with his eye half squinted shut from the swelling bump on his cheekbone.

Before Jim could reply, Kara Lee interrupted. "How did you do that?" She stared in amazement at the semi-calm horse.

"Captive audience." Derrick nodded toward horse's head nose-to-nose with the tree.

She crossed her arms. "How do you plan to get him home?"

That was Jim's question, but he guessed she might as well ask it. He was just as interested in the answer.

"Slowly." He looked at the horse. "Very slowly."

Minutes later, leaning against a tree, Kara Lee chuckled to herself as she watched Jim pick up the second rope that was lying on the ground and thought of their plan. The whole way home they were going to rotate tying the two ropes from tree to tree so the stallion was always tied to one as they inched their way home. She had a feeling it could turn out to be quite comical. On the other hand, it would be a slow process, and she had to be packed and on a plane by noon. She glanced at her watch. Still, she could stay a little longer.

Jim tied the last knot in the second rope which he tied to a tree as far away as it would reach.

"Ready?" Derrick called to Jim.

"Yeah. Go ahead!"

Derrick knelt down, untied the first rope, and unwrapped it from around the trunk. As soon as the horse was free, he reared up, kicking his front legs and began to bolt until he ran out of rope and realized he was still tied to another tree. Bucking and pulling, he tried to break free. Soon as the horse calmed some, Derrick darted for the loose rope, but the horse got there first and bit at him quick and hard. Derrick barely dodged it. Grunting, the horse spun his hind end around still attempting a rear death kick, but before he could get it around, Derrick jumped up and swung up on his back, not planned but simply out of desperation to find the quickest "safe" place away from the horse's hooves. The horse snarled, throwing a full-C buck, then bucking his back end up twice, shaking his head and front end, and then rearing up. Derrick literally held on for his life.

Watching, Kara Lee stepped forward, her mouth dropping open, shocked.

Jim ran over as close as he dared. "Derrick! Are you crazy?!" He didn't need an answer. He already knew it. Getting an idea, he ran back to the tree. Loosening the knot, he began pulling the rope quickly around it forcing the horse closer, though bucking and all. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Jim (and Derrick), the horse was all out of rope and room to buck. Somehow Derrick was still on top, knees gripped tightly around the horse's belly, hands gripped with white knuckle force to his mane, nearly frozen in place, but he was still on top. Jim's face spelled shock. "Why in the world...?"

Derrick shook his head, finally, forcing his gaze up away from the horse. "Ask me that tomorrow after I have time to think about it."

Jim could see him start to shake as he loosened his grip on the black mane and started to get down. "Wait a minute." Jim put his hand up to stop him.

"What?"

"Now, that you are up there. Why don't you stay there a while?"

Derrick gave him a look. "You mind explaining that?"

Jim smiled. "Let him get use to the idea... while he can't go anywhere." He picked up the spare rope and tied it to another tree.

Derrick clutched the mane tighter as the stallion bucked his hind end up as far as the rope allowed. *Get use to the idea... right.*

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Mansenie tossed his jacket to the maid and slammed the door behind him. "Brett!" He called to his man in the PD, who was standing in the corner enjoying a drink with one of his best girls.

Brett set down his shot glass, gave a parting nod to the young trick, and headed over to Mansenie. "What's the problem?"

"Is that how you spend my time?" He gave a sharp point in the direction of the exiting girl.

Brett didn't answer. Instead he cracked his large neck, quick to the right and then to the left. "Something wrong?"

"I just came from a meeting with some of my associates. They are not happy with the slowness in which you are dealing with this hard drive situation ... and neither am I," he growled.

"Yeah. Well. Maybe I don't want to end up like Martin. He sped things right up, sped himself right into the electric chair! Not me!"

After a moment Mansenie looked away, pulling a cigar from his shirt pocket. "Martin made an unfortunate mistake. He was careless." Mansenie struck a match on the sole of his shoe and lit up his cigar.

"I won't be."

"Which one is it?" His gaze was sharp.

Brett hesitated. "Wade Thundercloud."

"Are you sure?" His gaze turned threatening.

"We will be ... soon."

Mansenie held the gaze a little longer, then, cursing under his breath, he walked away.

Stuffing the grocery list in his back pocket, Jim began sorting through the bananas – *ripe without spots*. There was no way Jess was ever going to convince him that *she* did the grocery shopping. Sure she always started out that way, but even when she did make it inside the store, instead of dropping him off and “running another errand,” somehow she always migrated to the household section and *he* ended up at the ... hamburger. He glanced down at it debating between the healthier 93/7 and the cheaper 80/20. At least she wasn’t mad at him anymore. Her approval rating of him sharing a horse with Kara Lee had been zero, and when he had tried to change the subject and ask about lunch, he had heard mutterings about arsenic chicken in a cyanide sauce. He opted for the cheaper beef and spun around, nearly nailing Dr. Fredricks with his cart. “Opps.” He stepped to the side. “My bad.” Dr. Fredricks just raised his eyebrows and reached down for the 93/7. “Haven’t seen you for a while.”

“No.” Picking up the meat, he tossed it in his cart. “Would have been nice to see you the other day though.” He stared at him disapprovingly.

Jim got the same feeling he did as a kid when his mom came in the room with her hand’s on her hips and he couldn’t figure out which one of his many mishaps she was mad about. “Why?”

“Your friend could have used a designated driver to take him to the ER after your horse got done stomping on him.”

“His horse. Derrick? He told me he was fine. He told me he was good.”

“Good for a blood transfusion and a number of stitches. Apparently, when he started feeling lightheaded, he had the sense to....”

“He didn’t hit anyone?”

“The curb in front of the ER, luckily none of the patients.”

Jim shook his head, slowly.

“Don’t ever go into medicine if that’s all the more observant you are.”

“Hey, he was still fightin’ that stallion long after I threw in the towel. Ol’ Derrick’s too stubborn to go down for the count,” Jim joked. “Guess he won’t be at work tonight.”

“He will,” Dr. Fredricks answered softly.

Jim couldn’t hold back a laugh. “You gave him clearance?”

Dr. Fredricks sort of nodded.

Jim couldn’t help laughing again. “He always gets his way, doesn’t he?”

Dr. Fredricks relented with a nod of agreement.

“Oh, man.” Jim stopped laughing, but his eyes still sparkled. “Did your daughter tell you I’ve been elected the new youth director at church for a while?”

Dr. Fredricks shook his head.

“I didn’t even know you guys went there. I know it’s a big church, but I would have thought I would’ve seen you....”

“I don’t go. Taylor only goes because of a promise I made to her mother before she died.”

Jim’s face got solemn. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you’d lost your wife.”

“Years ago.”

Jim nodded slowly, then smiled again. “Well, she looks like an intelligent young lady.” He tried to complement.

Dr. Fredricks let his eyebrow’s jump, not seeming to agree. Jim knew his return expression questioned why, but Dr. Fredricks didn’t offer an explanation. Instead, he turned to leave and said, “Well... I guess I’ll see you around.” Jim watched him walk away, wondering about the story behind the mysterious man.

Another shift down. Wade rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, wearily walking toward the firehouse door. He didn't know how much longer he could keep this up.

"See ya later!" Jim cheerfully called as he went out a side door, whistling. Wade didn't acknowledge him. Jim's cheerfulness got on his nerves, especially after a shift like this one.

Wade shoved the door open and walked into the night, the cool breeze refreshing him. When he reached his van, he leaned back against the side instead of getting in. Closing his eyes, he called on the breeze to relax his tightened body, but as he closed them, the opposite happened as the gory scenes from the day flashed through his mind. Wade grimaced. *Why was reroofing that apartment so important? Why couldn't he have fallen onto the grass instead of the pavement? At the very least, why couldn't he have died on impact?* He put his face in his hand. *Why did his death have to be so violent? Why did he have to die so young? Why did his nearly teenaged wife have to watch?* He rubbed his hands through his hair. Would he ever be able to get her face out of his mind ... her horrified face as she stood there, clinging tightly to her newborn as she watched.... His stomach retched. Gagging, he ran over to a nearby tree, emptying the contents of his stomach behind it. *Why don't you care?* He looked up to the night sky. *God, why don't you care?!*

Driving into his apartment complex's parking lot, Derrick's brow furrowed as he looked up and saw that his apartment light was on. Before parking, he made a detour over to visitor parking. *One little red car.* His sister was visiting. He glanced in his rearview mirror. His "shadow" was parked on the side of the road across the street. He sighed as he pulled into his parking place. He'd have to make sure she stayed away. He felt great urgency to get rid of her before his enemies found out he had a sister. Jerking his keys from the ignition, he jumped out of his truck and headed inside.

Jogging up the steps, Derrick noticed a man, standing in front of a vending machine, glanced at him quickly then looked away. Derrick felt uneasy about him. "Hi!" He shot him a big grin.

"Uh, hi." The man didn't look at him, but rather fumbled for a button to press in an attempt to look natural.

Might want to put some change in first. Derrick continued past, keeping his head slightly cocked so he could keep an eye on him all the way to his door. They were getting more bold. This was the first time he'd noticed one in the building.

Going in his apartment, Derrick left the door open a tad. "What are *you* doing in here?" He yelled in fake exasperation as he tossed his keys loudly on the table.

She just stared at him, puzzled. "What's...?"

"Haven't I told you I don't want you coming around here anymore?"

"No." Her voice was soft. Derrick hoped the guy outside didn't hear.

"Do you still have my key?"

"You just..."

"Give it back!" He held out his hand.

"Derrick?"

"Hurry up!" She fumbled in her purse for the key. Derrick could see tears in her eyes. As she approached him, Derrick softened his face, shook his head slightly, and glanced pointedly at the open door, trying to clue her in. Her face still looked confused as she handed him the key. "Remember Grandma's Diner," he whispered to her.

FIRE BREAK

“Wha...?”

“Now, get out!” He shoved her toward the door, noticing the man at the machine watching. “And don’t come back!” He slammed the door.

Sam just stood there in shock a moment, staring at the door, tears stinging her eyes, her shoulder aching from where it hit the doorframe when he pushed her. What was going on? What had she done? Why was he acting like this? She glanced over at the man by the vending machine, staring at her and felt very embarrassed. Hanging her head, and looking the other way, she hurried past him, crying as she ran down the stairs.

What did he mean remember Grandma’s Diner, she wondered as she got in her car. The only Grandma’s diner she could think of was that little place with the big porch her and Derrick lived under for a while as kids when they were runaways. *Was that place what he meant? What did he mean?* As she backed out she glanced up at Derrick’s apartment just in time to see his curtain fall shut. *Why was he watching me leave? Did he want to make sure I made it out okay? Who was that guy at the vending machine? Is he in some kind of trouble again?*

Wade pulled to a stop in his drive. He was drained, weary, and beaten down. Part of him wanted to fall on the couch and sleep for two years. The other part of him dreaded sleep, hated sleep, feared the terrors that would inevitably haunt his dreams. He got out and walked inside. He hated his job. He was beginning to despise and disdain it for what it was doing to him, for how it was ruining his life for the kind of person it was forcing him to become. All he wanted to do was run from it, get away as fast and as far as he could and never ever come back. He walked in the door.

Melissa, who was kneeling on the kitchen floor scrubbing it, looked up at him as he came in. “Finally. What took you so long?” He didn’t answer as he closed the door.

“Could you take the garbage out?”

“Can I take my coat off first?”

“Before you take the garbage outside?”

“Fine!” He threw his hands up and went over to get the trash. “What is that smell?” He gasped as he walked past her.

“I’m cleaning the stove.” She kept scrubbing.

“Do you have to do that right when I get home?”

“When am I *supposed* to do it?”

“Don’t start that again.” He jerked the trashcan from the broom cabinet.

“No. I mean it.” She tossed her scrub brush into the soapy water and brushed her hair from her face with her forearm. “When am I supposed to do it? You expect me to work a full time job, take care of the house, and somewhere in there find time to raise my baby. There aren’t enough hours in the day!” She stood up abruptly. “Raising a child doesn’t mean dumping him off at daycare every day.”

“You spend plenty of time with Davy.”

She sighed, leaning back against the counter. “Why don’t you want me to quit my job?”

Wade suddenly felt very defensive. “How would *you* feel if I suddenly decided to quit *my* job?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well?”

“That’s different. You’re the one responsible to provide for this family... and you should be able to do it without my help!”

Ouch. That cut deep. Wade kicked the trashcan and headed for the door without the trash.

FIRE BREAK

“Where are you going?” His only answer was to slam the front door. Mellissa dropped her face into her hands, unable to hold back the tears.

Wade hit the steering wheel in anger as he got in the van. *That woman.* He banged his head back against the car seat. *Why can't she even try to understand?* He didn't know how to figure this out. *Life doesn't work. How do I make it work?* The last thing he wanted to do was lose his family, but he couldn't stay – a failure. He couldn't stay – supported by his wife, especially when she hated her job. He couldn't stay there and quit his job. He banged his head against the steering wheel. But how... how could he keep going to that job day after day after day? What had changed? Why couldn't he take it anymore? Why?

He squealed the tires as he backed out of the drive. Not sure what to do, he spent the next few minutes simply circling blocks. Coincidentally driving past Derrick's apartment building, he slowed, gritting his teeth in anger, considering going in and giving the guy a piece of his mind and his fist. *...trying to get me fired... trying to break up my marriage, trying to ruin my life...maybe trying to....* His eyes widened. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Anger balled in his stomach... He saw Derrick outside putting letters in the mail drop box. Trent had gone to great lengths to try to convince him Derrick didn't have anything to do with them being followed on Sunday. Wade guess it stood to reason that it could have been some teens from church. After all, it was Jim's first day handling the youth. Everyone knew they were friends... and he hadn't noticed anything strange since. He didn't care. He didn't know how to figure Derrick out. He wasn't even going to try. All he knew was that if anyone deserved this, he did. Pulling his van to the side of the road, he parked and got out. He didn't need a reason not to like Derrick. Derrick had been the start of all his problems. He was still the problem. Slamming the door, he headed toward Derrick.

Derrick looked back at him coming then turned around as he got close. “Hey. What's up?” WHAM! Derrick fell backwards against the drop box, not as much from the massive punch to his jaw as from the shock of Wade throwing it. *Didn't know you had it in you.* Still, half bewildered he stood back up. “Was it something I said?”

Annoyed by Derrick's apathy, Wade said the most cutting thing he could think of. “You were born,” he growled, his eyes narrow. With that, he turned and walked back to his van.

Derrick cocked his head in curiosity, rubbing his jaw as he watched him go. A lot of people held that against him, but he didn't know Wade was one of them. Shrugging, he turned and headed back for his apartment. *I don't know. Some days it just doesn't pay to get up in the morning... some weeks for that matter.*

“That was a delicious supper,” Pastor Thomas said, scooting his chair back from the table and getting up.

“Even if it was a little late?” Mrs. Thomas gathered the dishes.

“All the better.” Pastor took his to the sink. “How 'bout I wash and you dry?”

“Oh, no.” She put the plug in the sink and turned on the water. “I can have these done in a minute. Why don't you go see if there's something on the television? You've had a busy day.”

“You won't get any argument from me... if you're sure.”

“I'm sure.” She patted his arm. “Get some rest.”

After smiling adoringly at her a few moments, he stole a quick kiss and headed for the living room, but he was stopped at the front door by a knock. “Wade!” He smiled widely after opening it.

“Pastor.” His face was solemn.

FIRE BREAK

"What are you doing out this late?"

"I left."

Pastor waited a moment for more, but Wade didn't elaborate. "Left what?"

"Home."

"Oh." Pastor waited another moment. "I'm sorry. I must be missing something, but didn't you have to leave your home to come here?"

"No." Wade shook his head as he walked past the pastor and sat down on the couch. "That's not what I meant." He put his head in his hands.

Pastor quickly glanced outside to make sure Wade's family wasn't with him before shutting the door and coming over to join Wade on his sofa. "What's the problem?" Pastor slapped him on the knee as he sat down.

Wade looked up. "As my mother would say... my life is a bed of wilted roses, hit by hail, and twice plowed under. ... All that's left is stems," he stated in a dejected tone as he stared off into the distance.

Pastor raised one eyebrow. Then with perplexed expression said, "If it was twice plowed under how could there be any stems left?" Wade just gave him an unimpressed glance. "Okay. I sorry. What's wrong?"

"Life. It doesn't work. I thought Christian lives were supposed to work."

"They are if you are living for Christ."

"Yeah, well, I'm doing my best and it doesn't work. In fact, everything's falling apart, crumbling into a million pieces... hopeless."

"So," Jess, who was sitting curled up on the couch leaning against Jim, reached for the flipper and muted the commercial. "Any plans for tomorrow?"

"Just Derrick comin' over to train his horse as far as I know, but we don't have to be here for that if we don't want to." Jim took a handful of popcorn from the big metal bowl between them.

Jess chuckled. "Might be comical, though." She took a few pieces of popcorn. "If there was a stubbornness contest between those two, I don't know who I'd pick."

Jim huffed a smile. "Me either." His cell phone rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Speaking of Derrick." He answered it. "Hello?"

Brrring. Brrring. Jess got up to answer the phone in the kitchen. "Hel-lo." Her voice was chipper.

"Hi, Jess." Mellissa sniffed. Her voice was tearful.

"Hey, Mellissa, how's it going?"

"Wade left," she cried.

"He left?"

"Yes."

Jim came in the kitchen, closing his phone as he leaned against the doorpost. "Who left?"

Jess looked at him. "Wade left."

"Yes!"

"No. Sorry, Mellissa. I was talking to Jim."

"I know," Jim said.

"How do you know?"

"What does he know?"

"He went over and slugged Derrick."

"He what?!"

"What? He what?"

"Oh, sorry, Mellissa. He slugged Derrick."

FIRE BREAK

“Wade slugged Derrick?! Is he in jail?!” Mellissa gasped.

“Is he in jail?” Jess relayed.

“No, he’s not in jail.” Jim rolled his eyes as if that was a dumb question.

“No.”

“Oh, good.” She paused. “Where is he then?”

“You don’t know where he is?” She was talking to Jim, but she still didn’t cover the receiver.

“No! That’s what I’ve been...”

“No, wait, Mellissa, I was talking to Jim.”

“Oh. Does he know?”

“Do you know?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Oh. ... I bet he’s not even gonna come home tonight.”

“Do you want us to help you look for him?”

“What?” Jim stood up straight. He didn’t want to go out and track down his best friend... like a blood hound... or worse a nosey....

“No. I just wanted to see if he was there. ... I guess he’ll come home when he’s ready. ... I hope.”

“Let’s pray together about it.” Mellissa didn’t answer so Jess began.

Derrick's truck sputtered up mud as he made a sharp turn onto the gravel road. Staring at the 3-d stormy sky, wondering if the showers would start again, enjoying a chilly morning breeze that blew against him from his open window, he inhaled the fresh rain-washed scent long and deep, loving every detail about the droplet glistening countryside after it had been rinsed with morning showers. He let out a long peaceful sigh, the endless waves of passing corn plants nearly mesmerizing him. Yawning and shaking his head, he forced himself awake. Normally he'd be full of energy at this time of day, but that was back in the day he could get an uninterrupted night's sleep, before hard drives, and mobsters, and stalkers, and killers all vied for his attention. He glanced up in the rearview mirror. He figured this morning should have been Tonto's shift, but he hadn't seen him around in quite a while. Lone Ranger was still back there. He'd been the one stalking all last night, too. *At least he got less sleep than I did.* That was some consolation. He knew eventually Tonto would show up, too. *He must have been detained with higher priority evils.* He glanced in his mirror, noticing Lone Ranger turn off. They were pretty good at what they did. Sometimes it took quite a lot of effort to spot them. Derrick combed his hand through his hair, wishing he knew why they were holding back. *How come they are just hanging around instead of moving in?* It was like they weren't sure it was him like they were just keeping an eye on him, but how could that be? How could they suspect him without knowing it was him? Did they suspect someone else too? Derrick rubbed his forehead. All this over analyzing was giving him a headache... and he still couldn't figure it out. He wished when Lone Ranger came back he could just stomp the brakes, cause a crash, and then pull him out and beat him up, but... he couldn't do that. He couldn't jeopardize the drive. A lot of people were depending on him to get the drive through, whether they knew it or not. They were depending on him for justice... and safety.

Mellissa intermittently wiped her eyes with a tissue as she zipped up Davy's jacket, secured his little hat, and fastened him in his carrier. Part of her wondered if she'd have to get used to getting ready for work every morning alone. Had he left her? She fell forward, leaning her forehead against the carrier handle as she let out another cascade of sobs. *What have I done wrong? ... Why doesn't he love me anymore?*

Hearing a car drive up, she forced herself to stop crying and tried to regain her composure by the time Wade and Pastor Thomas walked in the door. Mellissa wiped her eyes with her shirtsleeve trying to remove the evidence she was crying. "Pastor. Wade." There was an edge to her voice when she said Wade's name.

"Mellissa." Pastor nodded to her then looked at Wade, waiting for him to take the lead.

"Um." Wade stepped toward her, stopping on the opposite side of the kitchen table. "I talked to your boss. He said you could have a few days off of work." Mellissa just stared, not knowing what he was getting at. "And Pastor offered to take Davy up to be with your parents, who have agreed to watch him for a few days, and I got a replacement for my next shift. So, we can spend the next few days together... and a maybe work some things out.

Mellissa wasn't sure how to respond. "Okay." In the back of her mind she was a little mad at him for expecting her to hand over her baby instead of delivering him to her parents herself, but she didn't feel like she could argue the point in front of the pastor.

Giving her a nod, Wade picked up Davy's carrier and handed it to the Pastor. "Thanks."

FIRE BREAK

"No problem." Pastor accepted it and started to leave. "I'll be praying for both of you." His voice was soft. Stopping at the door, he turned back toward them. "Remember God made marriage for life. We, as mere humans, don't have the right to break a covenant set before God. *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder* (Mark 10:9)."

"It's you..." Derrick jerked the stallion forward with the lead rope. "...or me." Teeth gritted, Derrick slapped the rope over the top rail of the metal pipe fence and pulled it into a tight slipknot.

Kair leaned forward against the rail outside the arena, peering in, watching the two. She smiled as she watched the horse rear kick to the side right at Derrick as he bent down to pick up the saddle. Derrick responded by throwing the blanket at him. "Knock it off!" Kair couldn't help but giggle. *Who will break down first?*

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his forearm, Derrick picked up the blanket and went back over to get the saddle.

"Who's winning?"

Kair jumped at the unexpected voice behind her and turned around sharply. "Oh, Jim." She let out a sigh as she fell back against the gate. "You scared me."

"Too busy laughing at Derrick?" He walked up to the gate to watch.

"He knows nothing about horses." She giggled.

Jim smiled. "What he lacks in knowledge he makes up for in determination." They both watched as Derrick tossed the saddle and blanket up on the horse's back.

The horse bucked, but Derrick kept the saddle on. Holding it with one hand, he quickly reached under the Stallion's belly and grabbed the cinch. Black bit at him. Derrick dodged the bite without letting go and got the strap into the cinch ring just as Black fell to his knees. "Hey!" He pulled the strap tighter as the horse fell and tried desperately to get it knotted but didn't make it before Black fell to his side, kicked his legs out, and began to roll. Derrick jumped back to avoid his hooves, abandoning the saddle.

Kara Lee couldn't contain her laugh. "Valiant effort, Cowboy!"

Jim tried to be a little more understanding. "I think you gave him a little too much rope!"

I gathered that, now. Derrick didn't answer, but rather wiped the sweat from his face again and leaned back against fence, waiting for the horse to decide to stand back up.

"Hey, what are ya gonna name that boy?" Kara Lee asked as they waited for the horse.

"Submissive." Derrick grumbled.

Kair put her palms up. "What'd ya expect? He has no identity!"

"He has no sense of responsibility," Derrick went to retrieve the saddle after the black stood back up.

"You know you could have waited a while before introducing the saddle," Jim suggested.

"It's the principle of the thing, now," He mumbled as he flung the saddle up, and in an instant, snatched the cinch and the strap and pulled the strap through the ring just as the horse began to fall. This time Derrick held on and when black hit the ground, jumped up on his side, avoiding his legs and preventing him from rolling, knotting the strap in a moment and hanging on as Black jumped back up.

"Derrick!" Jim couldn't believe Derrick was actually on top that animal's back again, neither could the stallion. Snorting and grunting, the stallion bucked and pawed and pulled, nearly taking the fence down. "Derrick!"

FIRE BREAK

Derrick responded by catching the end of the rope and giving it a tug to release the slip knot. Soon as the horse was free, he skidded back, threw his head down, and went into a full-C, four hooves off the ground, mammoth bucking fit.

“DER-RICH!” Jim screamed running toward the gate.

“No way!” Kair clapped in excitement. “Ride him, Cowboy!”

Derrick was too mad to be scared. Clutching the horse’s mane and the rope with one hand, leaning back like on TV, holding on with his knees, Derrick tried to stay with the horse’s motion, but he really wasn’t even considering strategy. He just simply would not allow himself to be thrown.

Inside the arena, Jim found himself just jumping back and forth with no real plan on how to help. As the bucking, snarling horse ran at him, Jim dove to the other side, sliding on his stomach through the sand. He looked back at Derrick, who was still holding onto the rope. “Pull his head around!” Jim got up and started running toward them. “Pull his head to the side!”

Easier said than done, but Derrick decide to give it a go. Momentarily putting himself completely off-balance, he let go off the mane, reached up with his other hand, grabbed the rope, and jerked it to the side with all his might. Caught off guard, the horse spun around 360 and Derrick spun off but not completely. Managing to grab onto the horse’s neck before sliding to the ground, hanging on with all his might, knees clutched around the horse’s belly, Derrick refused to let go. The black reared and then raced full speed in the other direction... right toward Jim.

Jim froze midstep as the mustang charged him. “Derr-Derr...!” He ran to the left then to the right and then back to the left and jumped on to the fence a half a moment before collision.

“Pull his head around!” Jim shouted, clinging to the top of the fence, suddenly realizing in Derrick’s current position that was impractical.

Derrick looked down at the pounding hooves. Falling wouldn’t kill him. It was what would happen afterwards that might.

Suddenly mid-stride the stallion skidded to a stop, kicking up a cloud of sand. Derrick was clinging so tightly, he couldn’t have fallen if he had wanted to. Derrick glanced down at the sand then up at the horse’s face. The stallion looked back at Derrick waiting to see if he was going to get off. Instead, Derrick decided to slide his way back into the saddle. He had a feeling if horses could roll their eyes Black would be doing so right about now, but that didn’t keep him from standing his ground. To his surprise, the stallion did, too. In fact, he didn’t go anywhere for a long time. After a few moments of peace, Derrick allowed himself to relax. He noticed Jim release from his perch on the fence and begin to walk toward him, but the moment of security quickly fled as Black threw his head back, reared, stiffened his neck, and charged. Derrick grabbed the mane with both hands, quickly realizing he no longer had the rope. Again, freezing in time, Jim yelled as he jumped back onto the fence.

“So, where do you want to go?” Wade asked as he backed their van out of the drive. They were leaving much later then he had intended, but Mellissa had wanted to make some business phone calls so he had taken the opportunity to finish fixing the dryer, a project he had started weeks ago and one he knew Mellissa would be pleased to have done. Then he had gotten cleaned up and with eating lunch and helping Mellissa pick up, it was now well into afternoon.

“Doesn’t matter.” Looking down, she played with her ring.

Wade sighed. “It doesn’t matter to me either so you pick.”

“McDonalds,” she answered abruptly, throwing her hands up.

FIRE BREAK

“Fine.” Wade nearly squealed the tires as he backed onto the road. This was not going the way that he had hoped.

“Out.” Brett handed a gun to his brother, Stan, in the back seat. “Make sure you search every corner. Pull up floor boards if you have to, but find that hard drive!” He ordered him as he got out. Then pressing the gas, Brett took off following Wade and Mellissa.

Wade hurried out and jogged over to Mellissa’s door, opening it for her before she could.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve done that.” Mellissa’s voice was still solemn.

“This is supposed to be a romantic evening.” He smiled.

She looked out at the fancy restaurant, allowing a mild grin. “This doesn’t look like McDonalds.”

“No. I didn’t feel that would be exactly appropriate for my plans.”

“Oh?” Her voice was still lacking in enthusiasm, but she was trying.

“May I escort you?” He offered his hand.

She smiled cautiously, taking his hand and stepping out. “You may.”

Opening his pocket knife, Stan picked up a couch cushion and slit it down the middle then plopped down on the arm and began pulling out the fluff. Glancing around the ransacked living room, he hoped Mitch was having more luck than he was. Part of him wished that he would find the drive and be able to go back a hero. The other part of him wished Mitch would find the drive in the other guy’s apartment so they wouldn’t have to kill this couple. Normally, he wouldn’t be sentimental, but being raised without parents himself, he didn’t enjoy killing both the parents of any kid... even if it was necessary. His smile widened as he ripped out the fluff, knowing he could enjoy killing the other guy... and without guilt.

Laughing with her husband, Mellissa accidentally elbowed her desert plate causing her fork to clatter. Stopping except for a few remaining giggles, Mellissa glanced around, sheepishly, wondering if anyone was watching.

Wade leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Clanging in upscale restaurants is not allowed.”

She grinned back at him. “We should go,” she whispered. “We were done eating an hour ago.”

Wade motioned to the TV set across the room. “But the game’s not over.”

Standing up, Mellissa grabbed her purse and jacket. “The manager is going to be kicking us out long before then.”

“You’re right.” Wade got up and put his arm around her. “Besides we’ve got places to go.” He gave his best mysterious voice.

“Oh?” She smiled at him as he plunked down a generous tip. “What?”

“You’ll see.” He spun her around toward the door, and they headed out.

FIRE BREAK

"Are you two still at it?" Jess asked after entering the barn, leaning against the metal gate. Lightly shaking her head, she smiled at the scene – a weary, sweat-drenched Derrick leading a weary, sweat-drenched horse.

Derrick glanced over at her but didn't answer until after walking over, he reached the gate. "We're done for now."

"You look like you've both had it."

Not answering, he opened the gate and led the horse past her. She followed. "You want some supper?" She stopped as Derrick cross-tied the horse. "It's almost eight-thirty." Jim came in and stood behind her. She leaned back against his shoulder.

"We have plenty of leftovers." Jim draped his arms around her.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, Derrick pulled the saddle from the stallion and lugged it to the tack room. Jess smiled, noticing it looked a lot heavier for him, now than it had earlier. "I think I'll wait until I get home." Derrick pulled down the tack room door, came back, and started brushing the stallion. "But thanks for the offer."

Stan plopped down on the now cushionless old, musty couch in the basement. Sighing, he tapped his fingers on the couch's arm. He didn't get it. He had literally torn apart the whole house and no hard drive. Upon further reflection, he was sure it was them. They noticed themselves being tailed and ran while Derrick was oblivious his tail. They had sent their baby away with a friend. They had both taken time off their jobs. Maybe they were going to run... or try to hide until the trial. Maybe they were going to go to the FBI. Maybe they had the drive with them.

He was sure Derrick didn't have it. The guy was clueless. They could bomb his house, and he wouldn't get the connection. *There is no way that guy has the hard drive. It has to be here.* He pounded the couch's arm with his fist as he stood up. *It has to be here!* Kicking some of the mess to the side in order to give himself a path, he went over to an old chest of draws and knelt down to look underneath.

Perfect. Wade smiled down at the bright red flowers on the front of the romantic card he held in his hands. Then he looked over at Mellissa, who was a ways away down the card rack looking for her own special card to exchange with him. After gazing at her a moment, his eyes soft with love, he lifted them to the window and stared out at the darkening sky. They'd already had a lovely evening, and in a few minutes, they would keep their appointment with the sailor and his sailboat, and with what he hoped for a perfect sunset to round out there evening... just floating on the water, exchanging cards... and a little romance. He glanced at her as she snatched the bright red envelope and hide her card in it. Then with a smile toward Wade, she turned and began looking at and smelling the different candles as she waited for him to finish making his selection. He grabbed his envelope and went over to join her. Next to her, he slipped his arm around her waist as she twisted the lid off of the pumpkin pie candle and began to sniff it.

"You think he's still searching?" Jake asked from the backseat while lighting his cigarette.

FIRE BREAK

"In the dark? He better not be unless he found a flashlight," Brett mumbled.

Jake gave a gruff laugh. "He'd be just dumb enough to turn on a light." He took a long puff.

"Shut up!" Annoyed, Brett turned around sharply, but then looked back out the front window when he saw Wade and Mellissa come out of the store. "Here they come."

"They'll probably go home next."

"I know that."

Jake took out his cell phone. "I'll call."

"Just wait!"

Ring... Dinaaling... Ring...

"Give that to me!" Brett snatched the phone. Noticing Stan on the caller ID, he cursed him out for a greeting.

"I found the drive." Stan interrupted.

"And it only took you two years to do it."

"It was in the basement. I searched the basement last because I knew you'd blow a gasket if I turned on the lights anywhere else.

"There better not be any windows in that basement."

"There isn't... Pappy." The last word held a distasteful tone.

Brett started the engine and pulled the car onto the road, following Wade and Mellissa from a distance. "Get your gun. Go upstairs, and wait. We'll take them," He paused to make a right hand turn. "in the garage." He closed the phone before Stan could answer.

Noticing he had been disconnected midsentence, Stan rolled his eyes and pocketed his phone. Going up the steps, he took his hand gun from his holster under his jacket. At the top, he flipped off the lights and headed toward the garage.

Arms filled with two over-loaded brown bags of groceries, Dr. Fredricks kicked the car door shut with his foot and pressed the lock button on his remote. *What a day.* He sighed as he walked up the steps. Balancing one of the sacks on the railing, he quickly unlocked the door then grabbed the bag before it fell. He was hit with a tinge of worry because all the lights were out. *Taylor should have been home hours ago.* Worry turned to anger as he set down the groceries and heard giggling at the couch behind him. He swung around and hit the light switch hard. Immediately, Taylor and Jack both fell off the couch and jumped to their feet, looking scared. "OUT!" Dr. Fredricks yelled, pointing his finger and advancing toward Jack.

"DAD!"

"OUT! Get out!"

Heart racing, Jack ran past him and out the door.

"Dad! Why do you...?"

"SHUT UP!" He put his finger at her face. "You have no inkling of responsibility! Will you **ever** learn to control your stupidity?!"

Crying, Taylor ran past him and upstairs.

After a moment, Dr. Fredricks sat down on the couch and rubbed his face with his hands. He didn't know how to handle her. He needed her mother back.

"Oh, Wade." Mellissa finished laughing and leaning her head against her window, stared at her husband driving the van. "This was a good day."

Wade nodded slowly. "Yeah, it was."

"It's been a long time."

"Mmm hmm." Wade pulled into their drive.

"I wish it didn't have to end." She stared out her window at the stars.

Wade pressed the garage door opener. "Day's not over, yet. Then we've got all day tomorrow and the next day and the next and the..." He reached over to give her a kiss, but she met him halfway. The kiss lasted a lot longer than it took the garage door to go up, but neither cared. Both felt warm and peaceful as they drove into their little garage. However, that feeling was subject to change.

Wade opened his car door just as the garage door thumped closed. "Don't forget your purse," he reminded Mellissa as he got out.

"Oh, yeah." She grabbed it and joined him.

"Hold it." A man appeared from the shadows next to the door to their house, aiming a gun right at them.

Mellissa gasped, grabbing Wade's hand. Wade didn't know what to think. "What do you want?" He turned sharply toward the side door as it squeaked open and two more men with guns entered from the outside.

"Oh, Wade," Mellissa squealed, clinging to him.

"What do you want?" Wade repeated.

"Get back in the van," a big man demanded, waving his gun toward it.

"Nooo," Mellissa squealed again, beginning to panic. "Wade, what do we do? Oh, please don't hurt us. What do you want? Oh, please, God, help."

"Get in the van," he demanded again.

"Nooo!" Mellissa left Wade and raced for the third door on the other side, but Brett cut her off. Grabbing her bruisingly by the arm, he threw her hard against the side of the vehicle causing her to hit with a thud. Dazed, she lay on the floor for a moment in pain.

Brett raised his gun again. "Both of you get in the van, now!" Wade helped Mellissa up, and they both reluctantly got in the van.

Derrick yawned as he got out of his truck and limped his way into his apartment complex. He figured that horse had just about done him in. Bed never sounded so good. Holding on to the old worn railing, Derrick staggered up the stairs, half asleep as he walked, but when he saw his apartment, he stopped with a jerk and suddenly all his senses went on high alert. A light shone under his door. He knew he had not left it on.

Unzipping his jacket, he grabbed the gun from the holster under his arm and held it pointed up, ready. Standing to the side, he flung the door open and then pointed his weapon inside. The sight of a thoroughly ransacked apartment greeted him, but he didn't see or hear anyone.

Kicking a broken lamp to the side, he closed the door behind him and turned on the lights. Keeping his gun ready, he walked through the rubbish. Stepping on broken glass and kicking furniture fluff to the side, he went through every room, every closet, and every nook and cranny where someone could be hiding.

When he was satisfied that he was alone in the apartment, he returned his gun to his holster and leaned back against the wall with a sigh, looking over the mess, nearly everything he owned had been destroyed. *At least they didn't get the drive.* Unvelcroing the pocket on his tan pant leg, he clutched the drive and rolled it around in his hand glad

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that he decided to always take it with him. He had had to hide it in Jim's barn so it wouldn't get hurt when he worked with the horse, but he'd never let it get very far out of his sight. Now, he was very glad he had taken it because it didn't look like there was one secret place in his whole apartment they hadn't searched.

Sighing, he wondered what he should do next. He couldn't stay here, now. Even if they still didn't know he had it, they would once they saw he didn't call the police. He needed to hide out until the trial. He rubbed his face with his hands, trying to wake himself up. He would have to get his sister and take her with him. He couldn't leave her vulnerable. Sooner or later they would find out they were related.

He jumped at the sudden blast of a police siren outside. *Oh, great.* He went toward the window. Hearing his name over a policeman's loudspeaker, he froze. His heart began to race as he heard the man announce he was surrounded. He jerked his face toward the door as he heard men storming up the stairs.

Diving for the door, he hit the deadbolt, locked and chain locked it then spinning around, he looked in all directions, trying to devise a plan. He looked up. *Lord, what do I do?* He looked over at the closet, not sure why, but he had a feeling. Running toward it, he threw back the clothes. There was a door behind it. *It must adjoin.* He tried the knob, but it was locked. The policemen came to the door and began yelling and pounding on it. Derrick took out his debit card. To his relief, it worked to open the door. Closing the closet and replacing the clothes, he hurried through the door into the dimly lit utility closet. Soon as he was in, he heard them kick in his door.

He looked around. He could grab a mop and bucket and try to pass as a janitor, but he wasn't sure the cops would go for it. He could hear everyone clearing the building. Maybe he could escape in the panic. *The fuse box!* Without taking time to devise a plan, he flipped it. Everything went black.

He raced out the door and to the stairs by memory. He could hear screams and commotion in the other apartments. All of a sudden it hit him, and he skidded to a stop at the top of the stairs. *I still don't have a way out. They will search the crowd.* In desperation, he spun around, knocking into a couple who were just coming out of their apartment.

He raced for his own apartment, feeling the wall until he found the door that had been kicked in. He could hear the policemen yelling to one another, tripping, and breaking more glass. He paused, recognizing one of the voices but not placing it.

Jumping through the broken door, he ran, hopping through the mess, following one of their voices until he reached him, tackled him, knocked him out and dragged him a few feet away. The other officers didn't seem to realize what was going on, but he did hear one of them get on his radio about the lights. Quicker than anything he had ever done in his life, Derrick blindly undressed the policeman, switched clothes, jumped back out the door, and joined the chaotic crowd trying to find the exit. This was one time Derrick was grateful for the red exit lights. Rather than dashing out he kept himself in the middle of the crowd and tried to fit in, helping some of the residents he didn't know while avoiding anyone that might recognize him. When they were outside the building, he helped two little old ladies over to the curb, trying to keep his face covered with the police hat and yelling anything he could think of that would make him sound like a cop. He took them over to a curb then, praying that the Lord would keep him invisible to the enemy, he casually walked toward his truck and was able to get in and drive off without being spotted.

As soon as he was a safe distance away, he let out a sigh of relief. *Thank you, Lord.* Immediately, he headed for Sam's house, praying that he didn't come in contact with any more police or mobsters. There was one thing he couldn't figure out. What did they have on him to arrest him? Even if the dirty cops did want him locked up, what could they possibly dig up on him? Did they frame him for something somehow? And why did that

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cop he tackled seem so familiar? Unable to answer himself, he just shook his head and stepped on the gas. His life was so confusing.

Brr-ring! Brr-ring! Jim woke up with a start. “Hello,” he said groggily as he picked up the phone and turned on the lamp at the same time. Sighing and yawning, Jess rolled over and stared at him. “Trent? Why in the world are you calling me at...” He looked for a clock.

“Do you know where Derrick is?”

Jim yawned. “I don’t *normally* keep track of his going ons past ten o’ clock.”

“This is important.”

“At midnight it better be,” Jim mumbled, closing his eyes again. “What happened?”

“Wade and Mellissa have been abducted.”

“What?!” Jim sat up straight.

“Their house has been ransacked and a neighbor reported hearing a commotion in their garage that ended with them being taken by some men in their van.

Jim shook his head forcefully, trying to make sure he was awake and this wasn’t a nightmare.

“What? What’s going on?” Jess sat up next to him.

“I can’t believe that? Why? What’s Derrick got to do with it?”

“He’s a suspect.”

“What?!” Jim heard a siren and other background noise. “What’s going on?”

“We came to take Derrick, and he ran.”

Jim rubbed the bridge of his nose. *Why does he always do that?* “Derrick couldn’t have had anything to do with...”

“Jim, a few hours ago I thought the same thing.”

“What changed your mind?”

“He’s gone berserk. He tore his apartment apart, and then when we came, he dead bolted the door on us. We kicked it in, but he was gone. He got to the power source and cut it.”

Jim was dying to ask how he managed that, but he opted for a more logical question. “How do you know it was Derrick then?”

“We have witnesses that saw him enter the room. Besides I know.” He paused. “He tackled me and switched clothes when the lights were out.”

Jim almost choked on a laugh at that mental image, but his mind quickly returned to the seriousness of the situation.

“You know where he goes. We need to find him.”

“Derrick didn’t abduct Wade and Mellissa!”

“What?!” Jess gasped.

“Don’t get defensive. Even if he didn’t, we need to find him so we can figure out what’s going on. The point is, his home is destroyed. He dead bolted the door, turned out the lights, knocked me over the head, took my clothes and then ran. Does that sound normal to you?”

“Nothing about Derrick *ever* sounds normal, but you can usually make sense of it in retrospect.”

“Jim, the lives of your friends are at stake here.” Jim’s heart ached when he heard that. “Even if he isn’t responsible, he knows what’s going on.”

“Yeah.” Jim sent up a quick prayer asking God for wisdom. Feeling a peace about divulging Derrick’s hangout, he told Trent everywhere he thought Derrick might be. Hanging up the phone, he sent up a prayer for Wade and Mellissa. Chills ran up and

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down his spine as he looked over at Jess's inquisitive face and thought of a way to explain. This was all so strange... so very strange.

Trent! Derrick hit the steering wheel as he made a left hand turn. *It had to be him.* He looked down at Trent's uniform he was wearing and suddenly realized where his life was at right now. The mob was after him. He had dirty cops chasing him... and now, he had good cops chasing him. Was there anyone who wasn't after him? He switched off his head lights and pulled into the alley behind his sister's house. The house was dark. The trick would be getting her out without waking anyone up.

Quietly getting out of his truck, Derrick walked toward the house, looking up at his sister's window. It was open a crack. He was thankful for that, but he didn't see any easy way to get up there... so he chose the hard way. Walking over to the corner of the house, he grabbed the brackets on the storm drain and hoisted himself up... higher and higher until he reached the balcony. Gripping the bottom of it, he did a pull up then a pushup and held it with one hand as he reached up with the other, trying to grab hold of the top of the railing. He just barely got it before his pushup arm gave way. Breathing hard, he pulled himself up, over the railing, and collapsed onto the balcony. *So much for being quit*, he thought to himself, lying on his back, panting.

"Derrick?!" Sam gasped leaning out her window, staring at him.

Derrick rolled over on his stomach to look at her. "Shhh." Getting up, he crossed the balcony. It didn't reach her window, but there was only a little bit of roof in between. So, he hopped over the railing, balanced over on the slanty roof and jumped into her room with a sigh of relief.

"Derrick?!" She threw her hands up. "What in the world are you doing?"

"I need you to come with me."

"What?"

"I'm in trouble with some people, and they might use you to get to me."

Sighing, she plopped down on the top of her desk. "Derrick, why is your life always so susceptible to off the wall predicaments?"

"I'm serious." He went to her dresser and started pulling out clothes.

"Derrick, I'm not going with you. Whatever trouble you are in, I am not getting involved."

"You are already involved." He grabbed a duffel bag from beside her bed and started stuffing the clothes in it.

"No! I'm not!" She stood up in exasperation.

"You won't be for long."

"I won't be at all."

"I don't have time to argue about it." He zipped the duffel bag shut and walked toward her.

"Wait a minute." She put up her hands to block his grab. "We have to discuss this."

"I'll explain it later." He grabbed her arm.

They both turned toward the door as it flung open and Sam's dad stood there holding a shotgun. "Get out of here, Derrick." His voice was threatening.

"Wait a minute!" Sam stepped in front of him. "Don't shoot him."

Derrick jerked her to the side, giving her a look.

Her mom came and stood behind her dad. "I called the police."

Oh, great. Derrick rolled his eyes. "We need to go... now. Trust me on this," he whispered to Sam, starting to back up. She backed up with him.

"What?" Her father hadn't heard it. They reached the window. "Sam, do not go with him!"

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Derrick spun around and jumped out the window. Sam followed. "I'll call you!"
"Sam!"

Soon as they hit the ground, Derrick jumped back up. Duffle bag in one hand, he grabbed Sam's arm with the other, pulling her up and running with her to the truck. Jumping in, Derrick could hear sirens in the distance as started the engine.

Sam wanted to hide under the dash so the police didn't see her. She was so confused. She had no idea what was going on or if she was doing the right thing, and if the police did catch them she didn't know if she'd be guilty by association or a victim of kidnapping.

The tires squealed as Derrick stomped the gas, backing out of the alley and screeching onto a side street. The sirens came closer. Sam held onto the car door as Derrick accelerated close to sixty through the residential section. The police car swung out behind them, initiating a chase.

Sam whammed her shoulder against window as they rounded a curve. "Buckle up," Derrick ordered as he squealed a turn, and Sam was thrown into his shoulder.

"Why...?" Sam grabbed her seatbelt. "How do you get yourself into these.... Derrick?!" she squealed, ducking as he made a sharp turn onto a narrow land ramp over the ditch that went into a vacant field. The policeman, trying at the last moment to duplicate the stunt, began a second too late, missed the ramp, and landed in the ditch.

Sam looked out the back window at the same time as she saw Derrick looking in the rearview mirror. "Shouldn't we make sure he's alright?"

"Yes." They both bounced up as they hit a major rut in the dirt field.

"Are we going to?" she asked, not noticing their speed decrease.

"No."

"Crossing her arms, she flopped back against the seat with a sigh as they drove out of the field and onto the road. "So. When are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"When we're safe."

"From who?" They turned onto a gravel road.

"The mob."

"The...?"

"The police."

"The po...?"

"Good *and* bad."

"Oh-h-h." She rubbed her face with her hands. "On second thought, maybe I don't want to know."

For a moment, Mansenie just glared at the five men that stood in front of him. Then, turning around, he hit himself on the head and mumbled, "Idiots," as he walked toward the bar. "Idiots." He poured himself a drink. His voice held disdain. "I give you a simple assignment and you can't even...." He drank it. "If that...!" He pointed to the hard drive in Brett's hand. "is not the hard drive then where is it?"

They all looked at one another. Finally, Brett said, "The two downstairs must know."

"Then... wh-hy... don't you know?"

"We'll get it out of them."

Mansenie let a threatening glare sink in a moment then turned to Mitch and Donald, formerly known as Lone Ranger and Tonto. "You're satisfied that it's not your man?"

Donald seemed nervous, but Mitch answered with confidence. "We searched his entire apartment. There was nothing."

FIRE BREAK

Mansenie rolled his eyes and put his palms up. "Both of you claim there was nothing."

Mitch looked down. Mansenie looked at Brett. "I don't care how you do it," He glared at Mitch. "or *who* ends up possessing it." He lowered his voice to a low growl. "I want it found... now!"

"Wade, I'm scared," Mellissa whimpered, turning her head, but still unable to see him because they were tied back to back, sitting in hard wooden chairs.

"We'll be okay." His voice was sure even if he wasn't.

"How can you know?"

He couldn't so he didn't answer.

"Oh, Wade," she whined, "what can we do?" She pulled hopelessly against the ropes.

"For one thing, you can stop trying to convince them that we know nothing about this hard drive they want." He turned his head, saying it in a loud whisper.

"But we don't. We're innocent. They have to let us go."

"They're probably not planning on letting us go."

"Oh, Wade." Her voice squeaked. "Don't say that. They will. They just have to. Oh, Wade." She burst into tears.

Wade stared down at the cold cement floor. He wasn't optimistic enough to cry. He felt numb... numb except for the crawly feeling of death turning his stomach and tingling his skin.

Melinda opened her front door. "Oh, hi, Carlos."

Carlos's smile faded. "I think I've gotten friendlier greetings from an arsonist.

"You didn't tell me," she tried to put her hair back together, "you were coming."

He smiled tenderly, "I like you with your hair messed up," and put his hand up to her face, but she slapped it away." "Are we through?" His voice was gruff as he pushed his way inside.

"I don't know." She looked down.

"Do you love me?"

She looked back up slowly. "I thought I did... but maybe it's the wrong kind of love."

"Yeah." He took a few aimless steps of anger. "Or maybe now that new church of yours is turning you against me. Maybe they don't think I'm good enough for you."

"Don't be ridiculous." Her voice was soft. "They've never even met you."

He gave a bitter laugh. "I highly doubt that is a condition for them forming an opinion.

"Car-r-los..." She sounded weary.

"And you... You care more about your image than you do about me."

"That's not true. It's not about what people think. It's about what's right."

"Oh. So. I'm wrong." He moved around, too mad to stand still. "Just because we disagree, I'm wrong."

"Well, you ar-re." She crinkled her nose at the whine in her voice.

"Oh, well that's fine. Just fine!" He slapped his fist with his palm, his voice growing louder. "You can just...!"

"Don't yell."

"I'm not yelling!" He screamed.

FIRE BREAK

Melinda looked him in the eye. "Go away."
"I came here to make things right." His voice softened.
"Well, it's not turning out that way."
He threw his hands up. "What do you want me to do?"
She thought a moment. "Come to church with me next Sunday."
"No." He tilted his head back. "I'm not going to change my beliefs for you."
Suddenly angry, she threw her hands on her hips. "Well, neither am I!"
"FINE!" Turning around, he stormed out the door and down her sidewalk.

Turning on his battery powered lantern, Derrick pushed open the old barn door and went in followed by Sam.

"Five star," Sam criticized, arms crossed, looking around as she walked to the center of the barn where Derrick set down the light.

"Best I can do on short notice."

She glanced at him. "You know," she glared at the thick cobwebs hanging down from the hay loft. "very few times in my life have I ever felt like a criminal," She looked back at him. "and all of them have been with you."

Derrick couldn't deny the possibility so he just shrugged.

Rubbing her arms from the cold, she glanced down at her pj sleeves, suddenly realizing how strange her apparel was for their current situation. "Could you bring my clothes in?"

"Yeah." Derrick looked down at his own strange apparel. "I could use a change too."

Sam nodded while absentmindedly glancing around the barn. "Totally out of character."

Smiling in response, Derrick headed for the door. "Hungry?"

Arms still crossed, she raised her eyebrows, looking around again unenthusiastically. "Would it matter?"

"I keep some food in my truck."

"Save it." She kicked over an old filthy bucket. "Knowing you, we will probably be here so long we will be on sea rations soon."

"I think you've had enough." The bartender suggested while roughly wiping out the inside of a mug.

"I said..." Carlos rubbed his eyes. "I said, 'I want another.'" He slammed his glass down so hard it shattered.

A little reserved, the bartender went slowly to get another glass.

"You know." Carlos put his arm around the elderly drunk sitting beside him. "You know, I thought my girl was pretty with it, you know." He snatched the mug from the returning bartender.

"You?" The old man's voice broke. "You had a fight with your girl?" His lip quivered. He looked in Carlos's direction, but couldn't focus on his face.

"All of a sudden," Carlos spun his finger behind his ears, forming the "crazy" sign, "she starts all this God stuff."

"I believe in God," the man sniffed, nearly crying.

"You know, saints and angels and stuff." Carlos swung his mug up for emphasis accidentally slashing some beer out onto his head.

"I beweave in angles." The old man sniffed back tears.

FIRE BREAK

"She... she's completely losing all... all her common... sense." He took a large gulp of beer.

"I thaw an angel once." Tears ran down his face. "It was one night right after I left here." He pointed toward the door. "I saw this magnif... magnifis...mag-nifies-ent light."

"Oooh. It was probably jus a street light." Carlos slammed down his mug and pointed at the old man. "You know who's responsible for all this?"

"Who?"

"Derrick?"

"Respon... responsible for what?"

"He started this wh-o-o-le thing." Carlos swung his mug up.

"What?"

"Oh, he's all," He swung his mug around in a circle. "righteous." He burped. "He use to be a good 'ole normal..." He set his glass down, thoughtfully. "Well, he's never really been normal." He picked up his glass. "At least, he was..." His voice trailed off and then returned with a boom. "and *now* he's an all-fired saint." He slammed his glass down, sloshing the contents.

The old man put his hand on Carlos's shoulder, voice strained, tears of sympathy streaming. "He's ruining your marriage."

"Yesh. Yeah! The home wrecker!" The barstool squeaked as he shoved it back. Losing his balance, he had to catch himself on the counter. "I aught ta..." He swung his fist in the air. "I aught ta..."

"Yeah. Yeah! You take him!" The old man cheered, swinging his arms in the air.

"Yeah!" Carlos sat back down with a thud. "Firth, one more drink."

"Where do you intend for us to sleep?" Sam asked Derrick as he came back in the barn with some more blankets.

He stopped and looked at his sister who was wrapped in a blanket, sitting on an upside down bucket. "I'll sleep down here, and I'll make you a place in the loft."

She looked up at the hanging cobwebs above her, unimpressed. "Does that include evicting all mice, toads, spiders, and *all* other undesirable guests?"

He gave a half smile. "I'll see what I can do." Climbing up the rickety ladder, Derrick tread lightly, skipping the missing prongs and grabbing the loft soon as he could, not trusting the quivering ladder to hold him. "Keep an eye out."

"Fine," she mumbled, walking over to the window and plucking up the latch to let the shutters file open. Staring out at the sparkles of yellow fireflies flashing through the waves of baby corn plants, she sighed and began to contemplate their predicament. Glancing down at her hand resting on the dirty sill, she couldn't believe it wasn't shaking. Normally she was a real chicken about any potential threat. She hated guns and knives, even her father's. She never really felt very safe around people that were stronger than she was... except him. She glanced up at Derrick in the loft raking out the old hay. He was her brother. He was her protector. She couldn't ever remember a moment not feeling safe around him. She had always trusted him. She stared at him. Now that she was older and much more skeptical, she wondered if she could still trust him, trust him like she was doing now, trust him like she always had.

Derrick pulled out one of the trash bags he had gotten from his truck out of his pocket and flapped it open. Bending down to put the trash in the bag, he stopped, dropping to one knee as he thoughtfully stared at his sister. Last year at this time he had long since reconciled himself to the fact that everyone he had ever cared about was gone. He had accepted the fact that he was all alone in this world, whether he liked it or not, and had actually formed a habit of pushing people away so they couldn't hurt him...

couldn't leave him. Now he had a second chance, a second chance to hold on to a loved one, a loved one that had known him since he was a kid, who had been with him through it all, who knew everything he had gone through and had gone through it right along with him, his little sister, the same little girl he had always felt viciously protective of since the day of the fire, the little girl he had searched for vehemently since the day they lost contact until the day he had given up hope. Now he found that he hardly knew her. He had missed so many years of her life, the important ones, the years where she had changed from a little girl into a woman. Now, he found himself unable to reach her. Sure there was the same old bond, but there was also a wall that had never been there, a wall that he feared was one he couldn't break down because that wall was his relationship with Christ. If he wanted his sister back, he would have to pull her over that wall, over to his side, but how? Somehow... somehow he had to. She was headed for hell. Just like he had been... until last year. Somehow he had to make her understand. He couldn't lose his sister again. He couldn't lose her for eternity.

Brow furrowing, he pushed the pile into the bag. Right now, he had to protect her physically... from the enemy that was seeking to kill them both. Sweeping the last bit into the bag, he looked back down at Sam, wondering if he was quick enough, strong enough, smart enough. Last Sunday's family memory verse at church was Deuteronomy 20:4 *~For the LORD your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.~* He was claiming that verse for himself, now, asking the Lord to give that promise to him. All his life he had wondered if he'd fail those that he loved, if he was even able to protect them. He hadn't been able to save his parents. He hadn't been able to protect Monica. He'd lost his sister for years. Now, he was asking her to put her life in his hands... incapable hands... the hands of a failure. *~God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.~* (Psalm 46:1) He tilted his head up, closing his eyes. *I'm trusting you to take care of her. Don't let anything happen to her in this mess I'm in.* He looked down a moment then back up. *I'm trusting you to not ever let her die without you. Don't... don't let her go to hell, God!* His throat tightened. *If you never answer another prayer from me again, answer this one.*

BANG! BANG! BANG! Startled awake by the loud pounding on her front door, Melinda jumped out of bed, wrapped her robe around her, and ran for the door.

BANG! BANG! BANG! "MEL-IN-DA!"

Carlos? She didn't know whether to open the door or not. He was obviously drunk. She looked through the peep hole. He was swaying back and forth, holding onto the railing to stand up. "Carlos, go away!"

"I," He hiccupped. "I want to talk to you!"

"I don't."

"I want in!" He resumed pounding.

Melinda jumped out of the way afraid the door would fall in, the way it was shaking under his force.

"Go away!" She could hear the fear in her voice and feel her heart start to race.

He didn't. "Carlos, it's three 'o clock in the morning. Go home!" She was sure he was going to wake up the whole neighborhood. Glancing at her phone, she wondered if she should call the police.

"I want... I want to know why you threw me over!" He stopped pounding, momentarily.

"I never even said that I did."

"You never want to be with me anymore!"

"Not if you are going to act like this!"

FIRE BREAK

“Let me in!” Resuming pounding, he began yelling nasty remarks, cursing, and calling her names. Glancing toward the front window, she could see red and blue lights, flashing through the curtain. The pounding stopped, and she heard a car door slam and men start talking. *One of the neighbors must have called the police.* Yelling resumed as the police confronted him. Leaning back against the wall, Melinda put her face in her hands and began to sob.

“So, it sounds like we’re gonna be here awhile?” Sam asked Derrick as she sat down on the makeshift bed he had prepared in the loft.

“Why?” He had just explained the entire situation to her including the time table so he wondered what she was getting at.

“Oh my dad...” She looked down at her hands and her voice trailed off.

“What about him?”

“Oh, he’s got this thing.” She rolled her eyes. “He wants me to go to this Christian college for a year. Of course,” she crossed her arms, “you would probably agree with him now.”

Derrick shrugged with his expression. He did, but she was right. He wouldn’t have a year ago. “I didn’t know your parents were Christians.”

“Just Dad. Mom’s still normal.” She stared in the other direction as she spoke. “Anyway, in a moment of weakness, I promised him I’d give it a try. It’s in California so I figure I can still pursue my career at the same time.”

“Good.” He guessed. At least the college part was. “What’s that got to do with this?”

“The only way we can afford it is if I qualify for this certain scholarship. I’m sure I would if I pass their test, which I have to take tomorrow at my high school. It’s the last day, or I’ll lose my chance for this year.

Sighing, Derrick rubbed his face with his hand. *O-oh great.*

Sam smiled, shrugging. “Oh well... if it can’t be helped.”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“How?”

“When is it?” He stared off in the distance, thinking.

“Eight.”

“Get to sleep then. I’ll get you up at six.” He stood up and climbed down the loft.

Derrick rolled over on the hard ground and found his vibrating, ringing phone that was tangled in his blanket. He opened it and turned off the alarm, looking at the time. It was six o' clock. After his few meager hours of sleep, he wasn't sure he was ready for a new day. Rubbing his face, he stood up and tossed his blanket on top of a box. "Sam!" he called up the ladder. "Time to get up."

She sat up. "Like I could sleep through your annoying alarm."

Derrick smiled. He'd heard that before, especially from the guys at the station. No one seemed to appreciate waking up to night sounds and frogs croaking... but it was the best ring tone he had. "I'll go get us some breakfast from my car."

Still wrapped in her blanket, she began climbing down the ladder. "You don't happen to have an emergency space heater in there."

He smiled at her as she jumped to the ground. "It's not that cold in here. It's nearly summer." He headed for the door.

"In my book, one doesn't even begin thinking about summer till June." She plopped down on her upside down bucket she had claimed as her chair.

In a few minutes, he came back holding four cans. She watched him come toward her. "What does my health foody brother pack for emergency food? Canned Brussels sprouts and kidney beans?"

He tossed her a can. "Canned chicken," he tossed her the other, "and peaches."

She looked at each skeptically. "In water and in their own juice." She nodded at him. "Healthy."

"Technically, nothing in an aluminum can is..."

"Oh, ple-ease!" She snatched the can opener from him and began opening the peaches. "So," she picked up a peach with her fingers, "what's the plan for today?"

He began opening his chicken. "I'll take you to school first. There's enough security in there you should be safe, especially just for a couple of hours. ... Besides that's the last place anyone would expect you to be. While you're there, I need to get a couple of things from my apartment then I'll come back and pick you up."

"What if someone recognizes your truck? It won't be *hidden* under a tarp while we're drivin'?"

"Pray that they don't."

Sam rolled her eyes.

"That's one reason I'm going... get some paint for the bumpers and some electrical tape to change the numbers on the plates."

She began opening her chicken. "Make sure you pick up some more food while you're at it."

"I've got it!" Donald ran inside the mansion ecstatic, but suddenly restrained himself when he saw a meeting of mob bosses turn and look at him.

"Gentlemen," Mansenie took his arm from around the trick beside him and stood from the couch. "Help yourselves to the drinks. I have a small matter that requires my attention," he smiled, "but I will return, shortly." Walking to another room, he motioned for Donald to follow him. Donald closed the door behind him. "Well?"

"I've got it!" He pulled out a j-peg from his leather jacket. "I searched his locker at work. It had a false bottom, and it was underneath it."

"That's a j-peg."

"I already looked at it. It's got the right stuff on it."

"I told you a hard drive." His eyes narrowed.

FIRE BREAK

“Well, maybe there was some sort of mistake. Here,” He held out the j-peg. “look for yourself.”

Mansenie snatched it from him, turned and walked slowly toward his desk, reasoning the possibilities. Sighing, he sat down on a desktop, staring at it. “He must have made copies.”

“Maybe he just...”

Mansenie became quickly annoyed. “Not everything that was on that hard drive would fit on this j-peg. This is just a backup.” He sighed, loudly. “Who knows how many more of these he’s made.” He cursed, then looked back up at Donald. “Whose locker?”

“Derrick’s.”

Mansenie grunted thoughtfully, shaking his head and looking down at the floor in a way that made Donald know he was thinking about the two downstairs.

“You want us to kill ‘em?”

“No, not yet.” He spoke while thinking about something else then looked back up. “They might still know where it is or at least some of the copies.” He held up the drive. “Even if they don’t... we can still use them to get to Derrick.”

“Let’s go.” Derrick came back in the barn.

“Just a second.” Sam dipped Derrick’s handkerchief in some water and scrubbed a dirty spot on her baggy plaid shirt.

Derrick gave a crooked smile. “That shirt needs the dirt to look authentic.”

“Oh, hush up.” She scrubbed harder. “The least you could have done was pack me some decent clothes.”

“Just grabbed the stuff in the top drawer.”

“For future reference, you know, in case this ever happens again. The stuff in the top drawer is work clothes. School clothes are in the second drawer.”

Derrick raised one eyebrow. “Shouldn’t work clothes be in the bottom drawer?”

“No.”

Derrick shrugged. “Okay.”

“This outfit is probably going to give the teacher serious doubts about whether I am responsible enough for a scholarship.”

“The test will do its own talkin’.”

She put her nose up as she passed him. “So will the kids in the hall.”

“I don’t know if I want to do this.” Taylor said as she watched the other four kids in the park pavilion pass around the lit joint. When it reached her, she hesitated to take it. “If my dad ever found out, he’d kill me.”

“Come on, Babe. He won’t care.” Jack smiled at her.

“He’d care.”

“If he cared about you, he’d spend time with you. He’s just like my old man. Needs someone to yell at.” She passed the joint to the next person. “Oh, come on. He’s never going to be happy with anything you do. You don’t want to be a recluse like he is.”

“He’s not exactly a recluse,” she said quietly.

“Really? When’s the last time he’s had a date?” Jack took a puff when it reached him.

“He doesn’t date.”

“When’s the last time he did anything with anyone, other than work?”

“What’s that got to do with this?” She passed it by again.

FIRE BREAK

"Nobody's going to want to be your friend if you don't even *try* to fit in."
"Yeah, come on Taylor." A girl more beautiful than her took a long whiff. "It will make you feel good. Don't be a chicken."
"I'm not."
"Prove it." Jack lit a new joint and handed it to her.
"It's not good for you."
"Prove it!" They all stared at her.
"Oh, fine." She grabbed it and took a little puff.

"Why don't you wait, and I'll go with you," Sam suggested as she unbuckled her seatbelt when they pulled into the school parking lot.
Derrick shook his head. "No."
She rolled her eyes. "You really think I'm safer here... *alone*?"
"You're not alone. There's security." He stopped in a parking place.
"Not for me... particularly. Things could still happen."
"You're a lot safer here than there."
"I *hope* so." His voice hinted of disapproval as she got out. After walking down the parking lot and in the school, she turned back and watched as Derrick drove off. Maybe she wasn't alone but she felt like it without him there. No one else knew what was going on. She wasn't even sure she understood the whole situation completely.

Driving a little faster than someone who couldn't afford to attract any attention should be, all Derrick could think about was hurrying, grabbing the few things that he needed and then getting out of there as fast as he could. He prayed that nobody would be watching his apartment, and that he would see them if they were. He kept his attention moving in every direction, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Turning into the parking lot and then pulling into his space, he glanced over his shoulders again. He hadn't seen anything, but he had a bad feeling, a feeling he couldn't justify or explain so he decided to ignore it. He reasoned it was just an illogical fear. Besides he needed that paint, electrical tape, food, and... Monica's picture. He stared at the building. Sometimes he felt like Linus holding onto his security blanket when it came to that picture, but he didn't want to lose her. That was the only picture he had left to remind him of his precious wife... of her smile... of the life they had together. It had survived a fire. He would make sure that it survived this, too.

Jumping out of his truck, he had a tugging feeling at his heart, but slamming the door behind him, he ignored it and went on in. Keeping his face turned from the family passing him as they went out, he darted for the backstairs, hoping they hadn't recognized him. Running up the steps, he took them two at a time then didn't break stride as he ran through the door, down the thankfully empty hall, and to his apartment. His door was crossed with yellow crime scene police tape. After pulling the edges down, he tried to restick them to the door so the crime wasn't too glaring. After all, he figured breaking into his own apartment was no worse a crime than conking a cop over the head and taking his clothes.

Derrick sighed as he went in and glanced around. His whole house was lying on the floor, broken and shattered. Picking up his gym bag and shaking the glass off of it, he headed for the kitchen. First, he grabbed the electrical tape from the drawer then opened his pantry and started dumping in cans. Leaving the bag on the counter, he went back in the living room to look for Monica's picture. *There it is.* Kicking some rubbish to the

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side, he made his way to the little frame, sitting on top of a deflated football. The glass was cracked, but the picture inside was unharmed. Taking it back, he set it in the gym bag along with a can opener, a first aid kit, a sewing kit, and the rest of his boxes of ammo. Even with its abnormally large size, the gym bag was stuffed. He hoped he could fit in the can of paint.

After walking a few steps back into the kitchen, he stopped short at the noise of a group tromping up the stairs and down the hall. He hit the lights and ducked back in the kitchen.

The steps stopped at his door.

Zippering the bag and throwing the curtains open, he grabbed the gun from his holster.

The apartment door squeaked open.

Quietly, he thrust the window up. He could hear the men kicking things out of their way. He jumped onto the counter. Just then a gunman came in view.

“Hold it!” The villain raised his gun.

Derrick grabbed the bag and jumped through the window.

BANG! BANG! The gunmen fired.

Derrick’s feet stung as he hit the ground, but he didn’t pause for a beat. Jumping up, he ran.

One gunman ran for the window. The other two ran out the door.

The hair on the back of Derrick’s neck bristled. He could feel the presence of the gunman... getting him in his sights. Spinning around, he took a shot at the window taking less than a moment to aim. *BANG!*

The gunman ducked back in.

Derrick sprinted for cover behind a van.

The gunman reemerged from the window, along with two more that came running out the front door.

Keeping completely still, Derrick hoped they wouldn’t spot him. That hope was short-lived. The two started heading straight for him. Not allowing them to get close, he jumped up and took a shot off. *BANG!* They scattered in opposite directions. Derrick took the moment to grab his bag and slide under the adjacent car. As he did, *BANG!* a shot came from above. He scooted out from under it and *BANG! BANG! BANG!* under the next. *BANG!* The glass in the car window above him shattered. Quickly, he scooted under as glass rained on top of him. His car was the next one. *BANG! BANG!* He scooted under his car. Adrenaline surged through his veins! Unlocking it with his remote, he jumped up, flung open the door, hopped into the driver’s seat, and tossed the bag in the back. *BANG!* He ducked. Stomping the gas, he squealed his car in reverse. *BANG!* He squealed it to the side and headed for the road. *BANG!* A bullet shattered his taillight.

SQUEE-AL! An SUV came after him in hot pursuit. Derrick tromped the gas.

Seventy... Eighty... Ninety... The SUV matched the speed and then some as it shot up and banged Derrick’s bumper. *BANG! BANG!* Derrick swerved, trying to avoid the bullets. Glancing at an older couple walking on the side of the road, he swerved into the other lane, knowing this chase needed to end... now! He saw a road coming. Tromping the gas, he baited the SUV to speed up then at the last possible second, he jerked the wheel to the left and squealed onto the side road, the back of his truck swinging over the curb. Without pausing, he jammed the accelerator down. The SUV laid rubber as its driver tried to stop, but instead squealed past the turn.

Derrick tried to rabbit away, but in moments, they were back on his bumper. Anger knotting his stomach, he rolled down the window. Then as soon as he felt it was the right moment, he took his right hand from the wheel, grabbed his gun, turned, leaning out the window, and with one shot, *BANG! SQUEE-E-EAL!* He shot out their front tire, causing

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them to squeal in a circle and ram into the curb. He glanced in his rearview mirror. They were stopped for now. If only, he could find a way to make that condition permanent.

Glancing down at his clock, he decided to only apply his brakes slightly. He was supposed to be back for Sam, now, and this chase had put him way on the other side of town. Slowing a little more, he weighed his options. The last thing he wanted was a run in with the police right now, but if he was over a half an hour late, he had no idea what Sam would do. He'd given her his phone so she couldn't contact him.

Walking toward Derrick's apartment, Sam had a feeling she should have waited at the school a while longer, but she had waited and waited and Derrick hadn't shown up. She was scared... scared for Derrick and scared for herself. So, when her best friend had offered to give her a ride, she jumped at it, not from reason she guessed, but more like a desperate plea for help. She kicked a rock off the sidewalk. Thing was, her friend couldn't give her that help. She couldn't even tell her what was going on. Now, she was really all alone. She had asked her friend to drop her off at the corner of the street to Derrick's apartment, knowing she couldn't get her any more involved. So, here she was all alone... really alone. Her friend was gone, and she had no idea if Derrick would be there when she got there. *What if he isn't?* Fear rose within her.

Derrick pulled into the school's parking lot and turned into the first parking place he could find. Tossing the gun under his seat, he jumped out, and raced for the building. His heart sped up, not seeing Sam anywhere. Once inside he ran straight for the office and burst in. "Ma'am, do you know where my sister is? Sam Lozano?"

The secretary did a double take at the young man, covered in dirt, dripping with sweat, out of breath, and in emergency mode, but her reaction was quick. "She left a little while ago with her friend." The lady stood up, but Derrick was already out the door. "Hey!" She followed him. "Is something wrong?" She called after him, but he didn't pause to answer. Rather, he burst out the doors, ran down the drive, jumped into his truck, and was heading down the road in less than a minute.

Walking down the center of the apartment parking lot, Sam glanced from side to side at the two rows of cars. She didn't see Derrick's. Her heart raced as she searched. *Where is he?* Stopping short, she let out a deep breath. *Finally.* She walked toward the silver truck parked right out front. *There it is.* Since there was no one in it, she headed for the building, feeling a little calmer, convinced Derrick was there.

Speeding more than was safe through a residential area, Derrick slowed down when he saw some cars up ahead. Having a nagging feeling one might be a cop, he detoured at the next intersection and went around the block. He wasn't exactly sure where she went. He figured she either went to his apartment, looking for him or, after calling her parents, decided to go home. If she went home or anywhere else he figured he would have had time to call his phone and ask her, but if she went to his apartment there was no time, and his only hope was to get there before something awful happened.

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Seeing the retaped ends to the crime scene tape on Derrick's door gave Sam more confidence that Derrick was in there, but as she opened the door fear reentered her heart. "Derrick?" she called softly into the dark, quiet, ransacked room. Timidly walking in, her heart sped back up as she looked around, and came to the realization there was no one there. Closing the door behind her, she walked further in, still hoping. "Derrick?" *Please, be here.* Walking through the trash on the floor, she went toward the kitchen. "Derr..." Her heart jumped as she heard a group of heavy-footed men, marching down the hall. Heart spurting into turbo speed, she jerked her face to the right then the left looking for... *There!* The cabinet under the sink. After desperately opening it as quietly as she could, she crawled in, willing the door not to squeak as she closed it. It didn't.

Waiting what seemed like forever, she couldn't tell if the men had come into Derrick's apartment or not. She wanted to peek out, but she couldn't decide if she should. She didn't hear anyone trudging through the mess in the living room. They were behind her, on the other side of the kitchen wall. *What's back there?* She jumped at a loud thump... *like someone throwing a metal can?* Losing her bearings in the darkness, she couldn't remember what was back there... or if it was even part of Derrick's apartment. *Derrick's bedroom? No. That's on the other side.* Was it someone else's apartment? She didn't even remember an apartment next to his. She searched her memory. *The cleaning closet?* She chuckled at herself, concluding it must have just been the janitor, but quickly second-guessed that conclusion. There was definitely more than one person back there, and they sounded much more like they were making a mess than cleaning one up. She heard someone trip, someone else say, "Hurry up! Let's go!" and then all of them run out. What she couldn't figure out was what was going on... *who are those guys, and what were they doing? ...and where is Derrick?!*

Gripping the wheel with white knuckle force, Derrick refused to relax until he saw his sister... until he was sure she was safe and sound. He had to force himself to slow down at the stop signs. He was only minutes away, but seconds felt like hours.

Soon as the apartment was in view, his eyes widened and adrenaline shot through his veins. Smoke plumed from the second story window. Flooring the gas, the tires squealed as he turned into the parking lot.

Still crouched in her hiding place, Sam sniffed the air. *Smoke!* Instinctively, touching the wall behind her, she felt heat. She gasped, springing out of the cabinet. *So, that's what they were doing.* Racing through the haze for the door, she jumping over a fluff bleeding cushion and then, skidding to a stop, stared a moment at the smoke seeping under the door. She could hear smoke alarms sounding all over the building and people coughing and yelling as they evacuated their rooms. After making a mad dash for the door, she touched it, but it was burning hot. *Why?!* She stomped the floor. Picking up the armchair cover, she used it to turning the knob and opened the door... just a crack when... *WHOOSH!* Tongues of flames leapt at her. She slammed the door. *How do I get out of here?* Derrick's smoke alarm sounded. Running back to the sliced couch cushion, she pulled out as much fluff as she could and stuffed it under the door. Then she looked around desperately. *How do I get out!*

Screeching his truck to a halt, Derrick jumped out into the parking lot and raced through the group of frantic tenants. Fire jumped from three windows and smoke vented from every side. He could hear the fire trucks en route. Running through the crowd, he looked for Sam. "SAM!" He yelled it. "SAM!"

"Everyone's out," An older man said, coughing into his sleeve. "All the apartments are accounted for."

"What about mine?"

The old man looked blank, but two young men came walking toward him. "Your apartment's been sealed, and we are holding you until the police come."

Derrick rolled his eyes and went to walk past them, but one of them reached for him. Spinning around, he side-kicked him in the stomach. Breathless, the young man dropped to his knees in pain. Derrick glanced at the other. He backed up.

Turning around, Derrick ran for the building, but skidded to a stop as flames jumped in front of the door. Turning, he made a mad dash for the back door. Two men built like King Kong intercepted him, tackling him to the ground. Derrick could hardly breathe underneath them much less overpower them. He struggled, but to no avail. They pulled his arms behind him. He heard one of them yell to the other, "Get that rope! Mark, get that rope!" Mark got off to get it.

God, please. Give me strength. He fought hard, but couldn't get his hands loose. *Please, God, my sister! God, she'll go to hell!*

"No, Mark, over there." The giant man turned slightly, inadvertently loosening his grip and lifting his knee from Derrick's back. Able to get leverage, Derrick seized the moment, thrust the man off of him, and broke free of his grasp. Jumping up, he ran. They ran after him, but once he was through the back door, they stopping, not willing to chase him inside.

Concern showed on Derrick's face, as he stared up the staircase at the super-heated smoke and the flames dancing from the ceiling. Reopening the door to outside, he sucked in a long deep breath of fresh air, and stepped on the doorstep to hold it open. Then closing his eyes, he grabbed the railing and raced up the stairs blind. The higher he went the hotter it got. The heat was suffocating when he reached the top... so was the smoke. He hit the floor and took a breath of ground air. Crackling, hungry flames chopped down the doorframes slurping their way toward the floor, bringing the heat with them.

Immediately, Derrick started crawling toward his room, but then stopped. *The fire extinguisher!* Crawling back to the wall by the stairs, he knew he might need it to get in his door. Rolling on his back, he lifted his heels to break the glass case. After a couple of misses, he hit it. The glass shattered. He kicked the extinguisher out onto the floor. Grabbing the handle, he drug it alongside him as he crawled blindly down the hall. He couldn't run his hand along the side his apartment was on because nearly the whole length of it was crawling with flames. So, he stayed close to the other side, running his hand to count the doorways, and trying his best to avoid the overwhelming heat. Sweat dripped down his face and dampened his entire body.

When he reached the apartment across from his he stopped. Even with his eyes closed he could tell by the heat and the thickening smoke the fire was the worst here. In fact, he figured it might have started around here. He hoped with all his heart, it hadn't been started in his apartment. His heart was nearly rending from the need to find his sister alive. He refused to go back. He had to go on. Dead or alive he had to find her. He had to find her or die trying. He coughed on the toxic air, suddenly realizing he was nearly out of breathable air. He had to make it to a window. It was his only chance. Turning the extinguisher, he pulled the pin, aimed it, and sprayed the perimeter and surface of the door until the can was empty and he could feel a reprieve from the heat.

FIRE BREAK

He rolled toward the door. Lying on his back, he brought his heels up and kicked the door in. Crawling in, he was able to get a breath of good ground air because the smoke was so much less. "SAM?!" He didn't really expect an answer, but he guessed he could try. "SAM?!" He searched the floor with his hands. "God, help me find her!" Blinking his eyes open, they stung from smoke, but he saw what he was after... Sam lying on the kitchen floor. He sprint-crawled toward her.

"Derrick?" Her voice was weak, but audible. Derrick's heart leaped with joy. Not only was she alive, she was still conscious. He stopped next to her. "Derrick?" She coughed profusely then rasped for air.

"Take it easy. We can get out the window." Jumping up, unable to see through blurred and burning eyes, he delivered a smashing side kick in the direction he thought the window was but instead smashed his foot through the wall. Scowling, he pulled his foot out of the drywall and dropped back to the ground, taking another breath of ground air. Fire was quickly spreading through the living room, sucking up the cotton stuffing like a hungry cyclone. The crackling was getting louder, and the room was getting hotter.

"Great shot," Sam mumbled.

Derrick was in no mood for levity. Jumping up, he tried again, and this time, the result was loud, shattering glass. Desperately diving onto the counter, pain prickled him as he cut his hand and leg on the glass, but he couldn't care less as he inhaled long, deep breaths of clean, live-giving air. Brushing the glass into the sink, he jumped back down and hefted Sam to the window. Jumping up next to her, they both spent several moments taking in air. Every moment the fire increased its threat to crumble the structure it consumed. "Hey! HELP!" He yelled out the window, but they were on the back side of the building, and no one came. "HELP!" Still no one. He figured they couldn't hear him over the crackling flames. "We have to jump!"

"I can't." She shook her head, weakly.

"We have to."

Looking down, she shook her head, lethargically. "It's too far. I'm too weak." Her voice was hardly audible.

He glanced back at his blazing living room. They were out of time for discussion. Grabbing her arms, he flung her over his shoulders, and held tight, scooting to the open frame. With a quick glance back, he lunged forward, jumping out. Freefall. Down... Down... Down... Impact. Derrick hit the ground feet first and then fell to his knees, then to his elbows, then to his face, causing Sam to tumble over his shoulders.

Collapsing onto his back, eyes closed, he just lay there a few moments, sucking in air and mentally thanking the Lord. It was just then that he noticed the pain from a heat burn up and down his left arm and side from the flame in the hall, along with his sliced hand and leg. First he grimaced as pain seared through his side, but then he smiled, laughing out loud. *I'm alive! Sam's alive! Life is good!* "Hey! We've got two victims over here!" He heard a fireman yell from a distance. Derrick groaned. *Or life could be good if everyone else would just go home and leave him alone.* Rolling to his side, he figured he better get up and fight for himself if he didn't want to be handcuffed to a gurney in the next few minutes, but opening his eyes, he fell back to his side when he saw who was standing over him. *Great. Just who I wanted to see.* He just stared up at him.

"Hi, Derrick." Trent's voice was purposely demeaning. "Where's my uniform?"

Derrick just stared a moment at the blurry figure. "In my truck."

Trent rolled his eyes and nodded, then offered his hand. Hesitantly, Derrick accepted the gesture and let Trent pull him up, feeling sort of guilty for getting blood all over his hand. Once up and steadied, he looked over at Sam, who was now sitting up but experiencing coughing fits. "You okay?" Trent put his hand down on Derrick's burnt shoulder.

FIRE BREAK

“Fine.” Derrick decided not to expend the energy reacting to the pain. Two paramedics came over, glanced at Derrick, and then went over to help Sam.

“He’s standing up!” Donald slapped the steering wheel in anger and slammed down the binoculars.

Grinding a toothpick with his teeth, Mitch stared out the passenger’s side window. “That boy has got to be the luckiest jerk I have ever had the misery of dealing with.”

Donald rubbed his face wearily. “I think it’s more than luck. The guy just won’t die! How do you kill a guy that won’t die?”

“Oh, he’ll die. Someday, somewhere, somehow... and I would give anything to be the one to do it.”

Shaking his head, Donald picked back up the binoculars and grumbled. “Maybe the building will fall on him.”

“Well, there it goes.” Mitch watched it crumble. “Where’s the kid?”

“In the parking lot... a good ways away.”

Mitch’s dismay evolved into anger as he slammed his fist into the dash.

Donald set down the binoculars. “You didn’t really expect it to fall on him.”

“What I expect is you and me in the state pen for life if we don’t get this guy... **and** all his hidden drives!”

“Well, any that were in his apartment are ash.”

Mitch turned and sneered at him. “It only takes *one*.”

“We’ll get him... and he’ll give us *every last* drive.” Donald jerked the shifter in reverse and backed onto the road.

Derrick watched as the paramedics helped Sam onto a gurney and then lifted it into the back of the ambulance.

"She'll be okay." Trent, who was next to him leaning back against his squad, glanced over at him.

Grunting in agreement, Derrick leaned back next to him, crossing his arms. Both just watched the medics work for a few moments before Trent broke the silence. "So, tell me what's going on." He didn't look at him. Derrick didn't respond. "That was not a question, but for your benefit, I will rephrase it. Tell me what's going on, or you can tell it to the jail walls downtown."

Derrick's expression didn't change. He continued watching Sam. "I'll tell you..." His voice trailed off. "I'll tell you in my truck as we follow them to the hospital."

"No way." Trent shook his head. "You have an appointment downtown... and the station... with finger printing."

"*You* have an appointment with death," he paused, "if you stick too close without knowing what's going on," he paused again. "So do Wade and Mellissa."

Trent huffed. He didn't know whether to laugh or get mad. He could ring Derrick's neck, and this was not the first time he felt that way. "Let's get something straight here. I am the law. You are the outlaw. You should have been handcuffed and in the back of that squad car a half hour ago."

"Don't trust me?"

Now, that is a good question. One that had caused him more than one headache. The answer flip-flopped around so much it made him feel like a fish flopping around out of the water, or a puppy chasing his tail, or like he felt after a gravity ride at the fair... dizzy. "How could anyone *really* feel safe trusting you?" Maybe it was too direct, but at least it was a logical question.

Derrick smiled, glancing at him for the first time in the conversation. "Yeah, well, you never did search me," he said simultaneously with pulling out his hand gun, and ejecting the empty cartages right in front of him so that they bounced on the pavement by his feet, catching the two live one's before they hit the ground.

Trent just stared down at the cartridges a moment. He hadn't neglected to search a suspect since he was a week one rookie... *gravity machine*. He slowly shook his head... *dizzy*. There was no better word to describe it. If his decisions were for the sake of his sanity, he would suggest a jail in another state. He glanced up at the ambulance as it started to leave. "You're going to get me fired," Trent mumbled, standing from his squad and heading toward Derrick's truck. Pleasantly relieved, Derrick followed.

Standing inside a vacant factory, where they were holding Wade and Mellissa upstairs, staring at Mitch and Donald, Mansenie threw up his hands, rolled his eyes, and turned away. "How can two supposed men be so stupid?"

"We did our best!" Mitch shot back.

"Yeah." Mansenie spun back around, pointing his finger in Mitch's face. "Your *best* isn't good enough!"

"Look, guys, I've got a plan." Donald tried to calm the situation down.

"I don't want to hear any more of your plans!" Mansenie shouted.

"No, this will work. You'll see. You..."

Mansenie slapped him hard across the mouth, causing his lip to bleed. "You listen to *me* now!" He walked a few steps away, thoughtfully. "We have to use them." He pointed up. "We can't keep going after him. We have to make him come to us."

FIRE BREAK

“Wade, I’m scared,” Mellissa whimpered, “What do they have planned for us?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his hanging head.

“Pray with me.” She turned her head, wishing they weren’t back to back so she could see him.

Wade lifted his head, but didn’t answer. It seemed like ages since the last time he prayed. He used to read his Bible and pray every morning like Jim, but lately the only Bible exposure he had was at church and even there his mind seemed to wander through half the message and most the prayers. He felt strange about praying, now... just when he needed help... like hey, God, I know I haven’t thanked you for anything in ages... or even talked to you... or acknowledged you were there, but would you mind helping me, now? He cracked his neck, feeling even more guilty for not thinking of it himself. Praying used to be so natural to him. It used to be one of the first things to come to his mind when he was in trouble. Why did it seem so foreign, now? Why hadn’t he thought of it?

“Wade?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you go ahead?”

Bowing her head, Mellissa began to pray, crying out to her Lord.

After a quick knock, Jim walked right into the ER room where the nurse said Derrick was. She was right. He lay sideways on the bed, shirt off, revealing the massive heat burn down his arm and side as well as a white bandage, wrapped around his shoulder. Obviously talking to Trent at the time, he glanced from him to Jim when he burst in. “You okay?” Jim was the first to speak.

“Yeah. Fine.”

“What are you doing here?” Trent asked, turning to Jim.

“Trying to figure out what’s going on.” Jim walked closer.

Trent turned back to Derrick. “That makes two of us.”

“Good.” Assuming that meant Derrick was talking, Jim pulled up the doctor’s stool and sat next to Trent. “Go ahead.”

Derrick glanced from Jim to Trent. “I thought I had just finished.”

Trent glanced at Jim. “This is a police matter.”

“Oh. What’s that?”

Trent just gave him a look. Then they all looked up as Doctor Fredricks came, stopping abruptly, surprised at the crowd. “Another one?”

“There’s only three of us,” Jim replied.

“Sometime when you get a chance, take a moment and look around at the size of this room.”

Jim glanced around. “We all fit.”

“Yeah. Everyone except me.”

Jim kicked off the bed, rolling the stool backwards. Trent also backed up

Giving them an annoyed look, Dr. Fredricks walked past them to his patient. Stopping by Derrick’s shin, he pulled back the pant leg the nurse had cut up to the knee, removed the gauze, and examined the wounds, some still penetrated with glass.

“So.” Trent got up and walked to the head of Derrick’s bed. Jim followed.

“Where’s the drive, now?”

“Why?” Staring at the bloody wound, Derrick looked disinterested in them.

“So I can see for myself, what exactly is going on.”

FIRE BREAK

Derrick turned his head and stared at him. "I thought we were going to work together on this." Dr. Fredricks went toward the medical cabinet but stopped short at Jim, who was standing in the way and gave him a mad look. After a delayed reaction, Jim returned a sheepish smile and backed up.

Derrick looked at the computer in the room, then at Trent. "I want it back."

Trent looked at the computer. "You have it here?" His voice betrayed disbelief.

Grimacing, Derrick reached down to the leg pocket of his cargo pants, pulled out the drive, and held it out.

Rolling his eyes, Trent snatched it. *Should have searched him.* "Mind if I use your computer?" he asked the doctor as he passed. Still annoyed, Dr. Fredricks mumbled something inaudible as he went over to the computer and typed in the password.

"Thanks." Trent pulled over the stool and sat down, quickly hooking up the drive. Jim casually walked over and stood behind him, watching as he pulled it up.

Derrick watched Dr. Fredricks pulling out glass shards from his numbed leg. "Where's Sam?"

"Room eight."

"With two policemen guarding her," Trent added, detecting a hint of concern in Derrick's voice, but not looking from the screen.

"What about her parents?"

"We're still trying to contact them." He pulled out a large piece of glass, covered in blood. Watching, Derrick felt like cringing even if he couldn't feel it. "No luck yet." *Good.* Derrick thought, trying to work out an escape plan in his mind.

Trent let out one long whistle as he started scrolling through the info in the first file. Jim leaned forward, trying to get close enough to read, but quickly stepped back when Trent shot him a warning glance.

Inside his cold, claustrophobic jail cell, Carlos lay on his back, staring up at the bottom of the bunk above him. He had long ago concluded that he was never going to speak to *that woman* again, and if he did, it would only be for a brief moment when he would really tell her what he thought of her. He might even hit her. Even the visions of picking her up and throwing her against something made him feel better. *The witch.* Bending his left knee up, he picked up his right foot and propped his ankle on his left knee then tapped his fingers on his right one. *Who does she think she is anyway? Put me in jail... in a cage like a dog... and of course she, little Miss Perfect, was innocent to the whole thing... an innocent bystander... a victim.* He spit on the ground. Nothing would give him more satisfaction then to see little Miss Priss in the cell next to him... right in the middle of the pack of rowdy bikers.

"Want a shock?" Derrick glanced from Dr. Fredricks who was cleaning his wound to Trent who was hurriedly scrolling through files, trying to get a general comprehension of it all.

"What?" Trent didn't budge his eyes from the screen.

"Look under the drug deal 9-18b."

Trent backed his way to the main list of folders and then found 9-18. After clicking it, he clicked on the second subfolder and began to scroll down... but he didn't have to scroll far. Suddenly, he stopped at the third photo and stared in shock.

FIRE BREAK

“What?” Jim who was at the other side of the room came over and peered over his shoulder. “Hey, he looks familiar.” He stared at the picture. “Didn’t he use to go to our church?”

Derrick huffed. “He *used to be* Trent’s partner.”

“He did?” Jim questioned Trent.

Trent shook his head “Maybe he was undercover.”

“Read the paragraph at the bottom.”

Trent scrolled down slowly, pausing briefly at each picture that attempted to incriminate his once closest confidante. When he reached it, he couldn’t read it. He could only stare at the two pictures above it. He tried to convince himself that theoretically they could have been photo shopped... *would take a professional to tell for sure...* but to him... they looked real... his friend... strangling a girl... the body. *Was he really... a murderer?* Pulling his eyes from the photos, he forced himself to read the paragraph. Reading, he swallowed hard. This incident had been while they were working together...at the tail end... but still. He had thought Brett was in Colorado on vacation, but the dates... the times... the reasoning... it all made sense... even the quotes. His heart froze when he read one of the quotes. It had been one to him. He replayed the conversation in his mind. This man who had put together this drive had overheard a conversation he had had with his partner while on patrol in the car. Their car had been bugged. Trent couldn’t fathom it.

“Did he kill him?” Jim broke the silence.

Trent just glanced over his shoulder at Jim leaning over him, but didn’t answer.

Dr. Fredricks, who, quite strangely, was done in by his curiosity, slapped some gauze over Derrick’s wound, commanded, “Put pressure on it,” and went over to the computer.

Holding pressure on the wound, Derrick slid off the bed and hopped on his good leg over to the crowd.

“Is he still on duty?” Jim asked while bent forward reading.

Trent, engrossed in his own thoughts, didn’t answer.

Derrick hopped closer. “Did you notice the hidden message?”

“Huh?” Trent was only half listening.

“If you take the first letter of each word, it spells, Body under....”

“Derrick!” Trent out yelled him.

“Ga-ze-bo.” Doctor Fredricks finished, quickly studying the words.

Trent rolled his eyes. “What is this? A community meeting?” He spun himself around, doing a double take at the group of men gathered behind him. “You know; this *is* private classified police evidence.”

Jim looked skeptical. “How can anything that’s been in Derrick’s pocket all day be classified police evidence?”

“It’s not.” Derrick’s voice was deep as if warning Trent not to overstep. “Let’s get this straight. I did not give that drive to the police department. I let you look at it.”

“Derrick, this is a police matter.”

“I agree. It’s a police and mobster matter. They work together on *all* the crimes.”

Trent sighed. “I don’t see what taking it to one trial is going to accomplish. I mean, there are a lot of crimes here, committed by a lot of people. I...”

“But one major person,” Derrick interrupted. “One big boss. He’s comin’ up for trial in a week... a double murder trial. If he’s convicted, he automatically gets life. From what I’ve researched about the trial, it sounds like he’s got the witnesses silenced and all his bases covered... all but one.” He thumbed toward the drive. “This one.”

Turning back around, Trent stared at the computer. “You should still entrust it to the proper authorities. They know how....”

“You mean entrust it to someone you trust... like your old partner maybe?”

FIRE BREAK

Putting his elbows on the desk, Trent rubbed his face with his hands. *Who can I trust?* He groaned. Why did being around Derrick always leave him with a headache? Why did Derrick's life have to be so complicated? "Maybe you're right."

"Makes sense to me," Jim added.

Dr. Fredricks didn't comment. Instead, he walked over to the cabinet and took out a sterile suture kit. "The bed," he ordered Derrick.

Derrick didn't move, not because he was opposed to lying down, but because it was his natural response to such a dogmatic order. He didn't think this was any time for giving an impression of weakness.

Dr. Fredricks walked past him to the bed and began arranging the suture materials out on the tray. "Of course, I guess, there is a redeeming quality to bleeding to death. At least, you won't have to worry about your troubles anymore." He turned around and glared at him.

Feeling forced by his present circumstances to relent, Derrick hopped back over to the bed and plopped down, grimacing as he landed on his burned arm. *Ouch*. After accidentally dropping to his burned side, he quickly rolled over onto his back. *This is not my day*.

Ding Dong Ding... Taylor, who had been sitting on the couch studying, looked up from her textbook when she heard the doorbell. *Ding Dong Ding...* Getting up, she went over to answer it. "Hey!" Her surprise from seeing the kids from school changed to delight when she realized they might just brighten up her rather dull and lonely evening. "What's up?" Her smile widened, and her eyes sparkled in anticipation.

"Hey, Princess," Taylor glanced over at the tall, handsome Senior-higher speaking. She didn't know his name, only that he was a very prominent Senior whom she assumed would never notice her. "We need a place to hang tonight. The gang wanted to come over here. How 'bout it, cutie?"

Star struck, Taylor couldn't think of the right words to reply. No one had ever called her Princess before. "I... a..." She couldn't pull her eyes from him. "Sure. Come on in." She stood to the side, unblocking the doorway. She was going to assure them that no adults were home, but they seemed to already know. The handsome young man smiled and winked at her as he walked by. Unable to conceal a grin, she looked down, blushing. Obviously jealous, Jack shot her a dagger glance as he went past. Walking over to a wall a little ways away, he leaned back against it, crossed his arms, and glared at her. When everyone was in, Taylor went over to him. Obviously giddy, she raised her eyebrows as she bounced back and for against the wall next to him. "Jealous?" Her voice betrayed that she hoped so.

"He's got a girl," Jack glared at her disapprovingly. "They've *been* together for almost two years."

"Oh." She straightened her posture a little. *So much for tall, dark, and handsome*. She glanced over at Jack, realizing even if he wasn't the flashiest guy on the planet, at least he cared about her.

"Besides I kinda thought *we* were a pair." His eyes betrayed hurt. Taylor glanced around as half the lights went off and the room went dim. She heard half the kids laughing in the kitchen, raiding her refrigerator and saw the other half paired off in the living room, talking... and stuff. Sure enough Mr. Handsome sat on the couch with his arm around a girl. Another girl took out her phone and turned on some music. "I thought you were my girl."

She looked back at him. "I care about you, Jack. You know that."

FIRE BREAK

He broke his gaze and stared off into the distance. "How much do you care about me?"

"How much do you care about me?" Chills ran up her spine.

Jack turned toward her and put his arm around her. "I love you." He stared deep into her eyes.

She stared deep into his. Her breathing quickened. Her heart sped up. She felt tingly and high. "Jack, I..." He stepped closer. Lost in his eyes, she forgot to breath "I..." Putting his arm around her back, he pulled her close and kissed her.

"I assume you are not staying overnight for observation?" Doctor Fredricks taped down the bandage on Derrick's side.

"No." Derrick groaned as he sat up.

"Why? Where are you going?" Trent mumbled, still scrolling.

"Somewhere," Derrick pushed himself off the bed and limped over to Trent. "where no one will find me," Grimacing, he bent forward and pulled the plug. "or the drive."

"Wait a minute." Trent stood up. "You cannot take that drive!"

"Watch me." He began buttoning his shirt.

Trent shook his head. "We need a plan. Somehow we have to go through the proper legal channels. This is a vital piece of evidence, and we can't risk it getting hung up on a technicality."

"You're the cop. You figure it out... without handing over the drive." Derrick grabbed his jacket from the cot.

"Wait. What about Wade or Mellissa?" Jim interrupted when it looked like they were heading toward the door.

"I wouldn't know. Ask the cop." Derrick thumbed over his shoulder at Trent as he went out.

Jim looked at Trent. Trent sighed. "They must think they know something about the drive? Did you tell Wade about it?"

"No."

"Hold it." Dr. Fredricks stopped them, holding out a couple pieces of paper. "Prescriptions." He handed them to Derrick. "Fill them *and take them as directed* unless you want to be dealing with infection." Turning around, he headed the other way.

Trent stared down the hallway, thoughtfully as Derrick read the papers. "Maybe they got you two mixed up.

Jim had a hard time not laughing. "Get those two mixed up? Ha! As long as it's possible to get night and day mixed up."

Derrick looked up, trying to figure out if he should be flattered or offended by that comment.

"Derrick!" a nurse behind a nearby desk called. "Derrick!" He turned toward her. "You got a call!" She held up the telephone receiver, pointing at it.

"Ex-cuse me." Derrick shoved Trent's shoulder with his own as he walked past. Jim followed then so did Trent.

Chewing on a pencil, the nurse flipped the receiver over with her hand and handed it to him. Picking up the box with it, Derrick took it to the farthest corner of the desk. Exchanging glances, Jim and Trent followed. "Hello?" He turned his back on them.

"Derrick?" The voice was soft and nervous.

"Wade?"

FIRE BREAK

Surprised, Trent quickly came up next to him, putting his ear to the receiver. Derrick glanced at him, but didn't step away. Rolling his eyes, he tilted the phone, slightly so Trent could hear.

"Derrick, I'm sorry for everything. Please help us. We don't know what's going on, but you..." It sounded like the phone was ripped away.

"As you have heard your friends are still alive... for the moment," a mechanically altered voice began, "if you want them to stay that way, do exactly what I tell you."

"That depends on what it is."

Shocked by that answer, Trent elbowed Derrick hard in his burnt side. Derrick reeled, stepping sideways, doubling forward, grimacing, but managing somehow not to vocalize the pain. He did manage to shoot Trent a dirty look.

"Take the drive to the baseball diamond and put it under home plate and your friends will be returned to their home."

Derrick laughed into the phone, making Trent jump. "You have got to be joking." Trent grabbed for the phone, but Derrick blocked him.

"Beg your pardon?" The robovoice uttered.

"Maybe you have worked with some idiots in your time, but I'm not one of them. You want to work with me, you are going to even the playing field a little."

"How 'bout I kill them right now?"

Derrick kept his voice nonchalant. "It'd all come out the same in the end... especially if I were stupid enough to follow your idiotic plan." Trent closed his eyes, swallowing hard. Blinking them open, he looked back at Jim, who was obviously praying. *Good idea.*

"What do you want?" The voice growled.

"The Broadhead Theater. They are showing a musical. It'll be letting out at ten. You come in the parking lot from the left. I'll come from the right. We'll meet under the overhang to exchange. I'll hand your driver the drive. You let Wade and Mellissa out of the back."

There were a few moments of silence on the other end. Trent prayed the guy hadn't hung up. Finally, the answer came. "Fine. Ten 'o clock." *Click.* Dial tone. Derrick hung it up slowly, deep in thought.

Trent let out a long sigh of relief, trying to remember how to breathe again after holding it for the whole conversation. He had to give him a nod of respect, a somewhat nerve-wracked nod, but he guessed he *did* manage to pull out a good deal. Glancing down at his watch, Trent said, "Ten 'o clock. That's in forty minutes." Derrick nodded, sliding the phone box back to the nurse and heading down the hall. Trent noticed he was going toward his sister's room and not the door. Shaking his head, he followed behind Jim, unable to believe they were probably going to end up taking her, too. Sure he thought it was a bad idea, but he was just as sure that arguing the fact with Derrick would do no more than waste precious time without changing the outcome.

"What's going down at ten?" Jim asked as they walked.

"Tell ya in the car." Trent had to walk fast to keep up with Derrick's pace.

Reaching Sam's room, Derrick barged in without knocking. "Hey!" he called to her.

She sat straight up in the bed, pushing the hospital gown a little higher to her neck.

"What?"

"Get dressed." He tossed her clothes from the chair to her and jerked shut the curtain.

After a few minutes, she pushed back the curtain and walked out, looking a little weak and unstable.

"You gonna be okay?" Jim asked.

Sam nodded slowly.

FIRE BREAK

“Let’s go.” Derrick opened the door peeking around it, and then motioned everyone out and down the hall to the main entrance.

Used to being in charge, Trent felt like a fifth wheel, and a shaky one at that, but he decided not to fight it, not yet anyway.

Walking by the front desk, Sam noticed her mom standing there. Looking away, Sam tried not to be noticed, but her mom wasn’t to be fooled. “Sam!” she exclaimed running toward them. Derrick didn’t stop walking so neither did anyone else.

“Mom, I’ll explain later,” she told her when she came near and started walking beside them out the door and into the parking lot.

“Explain what? What’s going on? Who are these people?”

Trent guessed it was obvious from his uniform that he was a cop so he didn’t bother to say it.

“I can’t tell you now.” They reached Derrick’s truck. “Don’t worry. Everything’s fine.” Jim opened the back door for Sam, and she got in. “I’ll call you!” She yelled out while scooching in and over to the other side.

“But...”

Jim got in beside her, while the other two got in the front. “We’ll take good care of her.” He closed the door. Before she could respond, Derrick backed the truck up.

“Wait!” Mom ran a little ways after the truck but then stopped and watched it go.

After pulling into his garage, Dr. Fredricks just stared a few moments into the darkness. Today had been one of those days. It started with a loved mother of five dying from cancer. Tilting his head back, he grimaced at the memory, wondering if he would ever get the screams of those kids out of his mind. Then the day had ended with a child, who had run out in front of a car, dying in his parents' arms... and technically he wasn't even on shift when he had to handle that one. *Then again... Would have missed...* A half smile crossed his face and he shook his head when he thought of Derrick's predicament. Just being there for that was almost worth the overtime. He wondered a few minutes at that incident and wondered how it would turn out, but it wasn't long before his mind went back into melancholy over the repeated death and suffering the day had brought.

Rubbing his face, he let out a sigh. He hated the finality of death. He'd come to accept it, even harden himself to it, but when it came to losing someone who was loved and depended on far too much.... A picture of his own kid's faces when he had told them about their mom flashed through his mind. *People shouldn't get so attached. It will only hurt them. Emotions hurt people.* He knew it all too well. Slowly shaking his hanging head, he got out of his car and kicked the door shut. *A couple of beers and a good night's sleep.* That's what he needed.

Entering the kitchen from the garage, he tossed the keys on the counter.

"Hey, Dad!" Taylor bounced into the room, invigorated by her night with her friends and relieved she had gotten them out of the back door in time.

He grunted for reply and walked over to the fridge, stopping to stare at four bags of potato chips stuffed in the trash.

"I, a, had some friends over."

After getting a beer, he turned around and leaned back against the fridge.

"*Friends...* that were drinking my beer." He popped the lid, releasing some fizz.

"A few of them did."

"I don't want your *friends* drinking alcohol here. You should know that."

Elbows leaning against the counter, she rolled her eyes. "Another rule?"

"Not that you pay any attention to them anyway." She rolled her eyes again, though the comment kinda stung. She had tried for years to be good, but he never noticed anyway. He took a long swig. "Get your homework done?"

"Is that all you care about?"

"I expect *all* A's on your report card next time. No more B's because you're too lazy to...."

"I study more than nearly anyone in my class."

"That's not saying much."

Taylor rolled her eyes again and looked away.

"Who'd you have over?" He took another drink.

She shrugged. "Just some of the gang."

"You've stopped seeing that Jack guy, I hope." He gulped too fast burning his throat.

Taylor intentionally looked offended. "You don't even know him."

"He's bad news."

"How would you know?" She sneered and then turned and left, going into the living room and sitting down on the swivel rocker.

Grabbing a bag of blue corn chips from the cupboard, he followed her into the living room and plopped down on the couch. "Don't want to hear the truth?" He grabbed the TV remote.

"Truth. Like you would know. You don't know *anything* about life outside your work."

FIRE BREAK

“Shut up. I’m sick of your mouth.” He turned on the set. “I get enough stress at work. I don’t need it at home.”

“Well, *excuse* me.” She got up and headed for the stairs.

Dr. Fredricks looked over his shoulder at her. “Just don’t do anything stupid.”

Hitting the bottom of the banister with her palm, she spun back around. “Is that all you care about... your precious reputation?”

He didn’t look at her, but kept flipping through channels. “I don’t know where you lost your regard for yours, but you’d better get your act together.”

Shooting him a look of disgust, she turned around and headed upstairs.

“Five minutes.” Trent, who was in the passenger’s seat, looked at his watch.

Jim unbuckled and leaned forward to the front seat. “They aren’t going to be able to tell the difference are they?” He looked down at the drive Trent was holding.

Trent, who was turned sideways, glanced from the drive to Derrick. “Yeah, are they going to notice a difference?”

Derrick hesitated a moment, then answered, “The original was blue.”

Trent groaned, staring down at the drive he held, undeniably black. “Where is the original?” He knew he’d asked that before, but Derrick kept evading the answer.

“Not close enough to get to.”

“Hey,” Jim slapped Trent’s shoulder. “Here they come.”

Trent sighed. “Just pray.” He turned to face out the front. “Let’s go.” Derrick gave him a look in response to the demand then put it in drive and headed for the overhang, meeting a black SUV just as the people started milling out. The SUV quickly rolled down its window, wanting to make the exchange before more people came, but Derrick waited a few moments until there was a bigger crowd, to the obvious annoyance of the hoods.

Noticing the can of paint under the seat, Jim suddenly got an idea. Kneeling on the floor he grabbed it and ducking down, crawled out the back passenger’s side door and rolled under the truck.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Sam instructed. “Jim just rolled under the truck.

“What?!” Trent turned toward the back just as Derrick rolled down his window. So, he turned back.

“What is he doing?” Trent resisted the urge to look out his window and try to spot him.

“I don’t know, but this guy’s getting nervous. Hand me the drive.”

“It’s about time, jerk! Where is it?” Mitch bellowed.

Derrick showed it. “Where are Wade and Mellissa?”

“Let the girl up here.” Mitch yelled to the back. “Help!” Struggling against her guards, Mellissa got her head between the front seats. “Help us!” Derrick handed it to him, but didn’t let go. “Let them out.”

Mitch nodded. The side door to the van slid open, and Wade and Mellissa got out their hands still tied. Grabbing the drive, Mitch handed it to someone in the back seat.

“He’s checking it out,” Trent groaned.

“Get in!” Derrick yelled at them, but before they could, the guards grabbed them back.

“We want the original!” Mitch growled out the window. Derrick didn’t answer.

“You have it by midnight tonight, or you’ll be looking for bodies! We’ll call you with a place!” As soon as there was a slight break in the traffic of people, the van weaved around a few guys and squealed out of the parking lot.

Jim jumped back in the truck.

FIRE BREAK

Derrick inched the car forward until the crowd stopped for him then he squealed out the other side of the parking lot. "What were you doing?!" Trent asked Jim while thrusting down his seat belt as Derrick accelerated.

Jim pulled down his seatbelt, too. "You don't have to chase them. I poked a hole in your paint and tied it to the bottom of the van."

Derrick pulled his truck to a stop. "Good," He looked in all directions. "because I lost them."

"Lost them?" Sam piped in. "You never found them."

Trent sighed. "Well, go back and find the paint trail."

Derrick turned the truck back toward the theater.

"That was a good idea." Trent glanced back at Jim.

"Uh huh." Sam crossed her arms. "The paint will probably run out before they get there."

"Are you always such an optimist?" Jim asked.

Ignoring him, she looked out the window.

Tapping her fingers on the couch's arm and twirling the foot of her crossed leg, Jess stared at the TV screen, not paying any attention to the show that was on it. Annoyed with the noise from the set, she muted it. *Where is he?* She glanced at the clock. *He left hours ago.* She glanced down at Morgan who was climbing up on the couch next to her and helped her up. All he had said while rushing out of the house was that he heard on the scanner that Derrick's apartment was on fire. That had been this afternoon. Since then she had tried calling him at least half a million times just to find his phone was off. She tried Trent's phone... same story and Derrick's phone... the same. Trent's family hadn't heard from him. The fire department didn't know where any of the three were, and the police department didn't only lose track of them, they warned her against hiding them!

Uncrossing her leg, she stomped her foot down and recrossed them the other way. This whole thing was beginning to get to her. She couldn't convince herself that she was even remotely safe. First, there was the startling and unsettling shock of Wade and Mellissa being kidnapped for seemingly no reason; even the thought of it gave her shivers. Then, there were the images of Derrick's apartment building burning on TV, and now she couldn't contact *anyone*. It was like they had all just vanished. She jumped to her feet, startled by the sound of the wind knocking a branch into the house. Startled, Morgan looked up at her in fear. Jess tried to give a reassuring smile, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Jumping a couple of feet and spinning around in the air at another irrelevant sound, Jess figured at least she didn't have to brave this night alone. She could go pour out her heart to Pastor and Mrs. Thomas, or if nothing else, she could go sit in Walmart just so she wasn't alone. Grabbing Morgan's hand and teddy bear, she headed for the garage, snatching her purse on the way out.

Just as she opened the door, *brring... brring....* She looked back at the phone. Morgan clung to her mommy's leg, scared from the sudden excitement. After hesitating as her heart jumped into turbo speed, Jess went across the room and picked up the receiver with shaky hands. "Hello?" She knew her voice held fear.

"Jess, are you alright?" It was Jim.

"Jim." Her voice was a strange sigh, half relief and half hot with anger. "Where are you? What's happening? And why have you had your phone off all this time? I could kill..."

"Jess, listen. We think we've found Wade and Mellissa." Jim talked fast.

"We who?" she interrupted.

FIRE BREAK

"Me, Derrick, and Trent."

"Where at?"

"I can't say, but listen. I want you to pack up a few things, food and clothes, but only as much as you can fit in one of the gym bags and not too heavy."

"Jim, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you when I get there. Just be ready to go. Keep an eye out. If you see anyone coming other than us, hide or something. We'll be in Derrick's truck. It might be a little while."

"Will you have your cell phone on this time?"

"No, and I'm not calling from it now. Can't risk being tracked."

"Are you working with the police?" she asked, but she was afraid she already knew the answer.

"Jess, I've got to go."

"Just be careful. Please, be careful."

"I will. Love you, and see ya in a while." *Click. Dial tone.*

Jess slowly hung up her phone, stared at it a minute, then grasping Morgan tighter, spun around and headed for the hall closet to get the gym bag.

Running across the street and into the alley where they were parked, Jim quietly hopped in the back seat of the truck.

"Well, did you get her?" Trent asked, just finishing loading his semi-automatic hand gun.

"Yeah. She'll be ready." Jim noticed Derrick checking his revolver and then returning it to the holster under his coat. "What's the plan?"

"Sam has agreed to stay in here." Trent glanced up in the rearview mirror. "Right?"

"I already said I would a million times."

"The rest of us," he continued, "can just go out and look around the factory and see what we can find." Jim nodded. Derrick zipped up his jacket. Trent opened his door. "Okay. Let's go." They all got out and headed down the dark alley.

Jess zipped the stuffed gym bag closed that she had sitting on the kitchen table, picked it up with one hand, took Morgan's hand with the other, and shut off the light as she headed out of the kitchen.

Setting the bag on the couch and letting Morgan go back to her toys, she walked over to the front window, pulled back the curtain and stared out into the dark night, the chilly wind rattling the glass and seeping through, chilled her hand. Just then, seeing headlights approaching, she focused her attention on the road. Her eyes widened as she saw them start to turn into their lane. They didn't look like headlights to a truck, and it was too soon. Suddenly afraid, Jess spun around, hit the lights out, grabbed Morgan and the bag and headed for the back.

Holding Morgan tightly and running across the backyard to the barn, Jess's heart raced as she saw the headlights slowly inching closer.

Leaning forward, staying low, Jim ran through the shadows back to Trent after scouting out his side of the building. Hearing some clatter, he ducked behind a dumpster. In the darkness, he could hear the squeaks and feel the little bodies of the vermin

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scampering across his shoes. Cobwebs tangled around his finger as he ran his hand against the chipping brick wall of the building behind him, guiding himself to the other side of the dumpster.

After a moment, when he was convinced it was safe, he dashed between the buildings and over to Trent who was hiding behind a corner of the factory. "Derrick get back yet?" he whispered out of breath.

"No." Holding his gun pointed up, Trent leaned forward peering around the corner. "Did you make that noise?"

"No."

"I wonder what did." He glanced back at Jim. "What'd you find out?"

"Nothing really. I saw a faint glimmer of light that seemed to be coming from Derrick's side."

Running back, Derrick stopped behind a stack of boxes, looked in all directions, and then ran across the alley over to Jim and Trent. "Did you guys make that noise?" He asked when he got there.

"No." They both said at once.

Derrick looked over his shoulder and around suspiciously. "Maybe it was a cat," he mumbled, but he didn't look convinced.

"What'd you find out?" Trent asked still standing guard, gun pointed up, staring around the corner.

"They're on the third floor in a pretty large room, two windows down from the fire escape."

"Wade and Mellissa?" Trent asked, dropping his gun to waist-level and turning around to talk.

"Yeah. They're tied back to back in chairs. I couldn't get a good enough look from the fire escape to see how many gunmen. There's at least two guarding them."

"How'd they look?" Jim asked.

Derrick shrugged. "Fine."

Trent clicked on his flashlight and shined it down on his watch. "Here's what I think we should do."

"Wait." Derrick stopped him.

"What?" Trent looked up.

"Shhh." Derrick put his hand up. "I heard something."

"What?" Trent held his gun higher and turned to peer around the corner.

"Wait!" Derrick reached for him, but it was too late. He had already looked and was seen by an approaching gunman.

"HEY!" The gunman shouted, raising his rifle. Trent quickly ducked back. Derrick ran to the back of the building out of sight of the gunman and darted to the other side of the alley. Then staying in the shadows and behind boxes or dumpsters whenever possible, he quickly made his way back. "Hey!" The gunman crept closer. "Whoever's there, you'd better come out!"

Trent could see the head of the gunman's shadow as he crept way too close for comfort. Heart throbbing, temples sweating, he gripped his gun handle tighter as the shadow got larger... and larger.

Quietly, Derrick crossed back over the alley behind the gunman and began sneaking toward him.

Coming to Trent and Jim's corner, the gunman paused for a beat and then swung around it, aiming his semi-auto rifle at Trent, who already had his pistol out and pointing at him. For a brief moment, the two stared illuminated by the moonlight... face to face... eye to eye... gun to gun... until... *WHAM!* Creeping from behind, Derrick slammed his revolver into the back of the gunman's head, instantly knocking him out. Trent fell back against the building in relief. Instinctively, Derrick knelt down and checked for a pulse

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then stood back up. "He'll be fine." Jim rolled his eyes as he went to get some twine from out of a trashcan. He guessed that was a good thing, but secretly he wished the guy a slow recovery. Cutting the long twine in half with his pocket knife, he handed half to Trent. "Get his legs." They both knelt down and tied him up.

Pumped for the battle, Derrick stomped his foot impatiently as he waited. Jim smiled, wondering where in the world the guy got his energy, after all he'd been through. He concluded, that was just Derrick. *Can't ever resist a good fight.*

"Let's go!" Derrick ordered as soon as they were done tying. Without waiting for response, he started running for the door to the factory. Trent followed, then so did Jim.

When they reached the door, breathless, Trent stopped them. "Wait. Two of us should go in, and one of us should go up the fire escape way to keep an eye on the inside of the room and have another point of entry."

"I'm going in." Derrick demanded.

"Okay. Then I'll take the fire escape, and Jim can go with you. Remember he doesn't have a gun."

Derrick nodded and started to go in, but Jim stopped him and turned back toward Trent. "You gonna keep in contact with us?"

Trent sighed, looking up as if he was trying to decide. "The only way's with the phones," he mumbled. Derrick stomped his foot impatiently again. "Yeah, let's turn them on for now. If there's a problem, I'll text you. Otherwise just go in." Trent took out his phone to turn it on. Derrick took off into the building so Jim turned his on, on the way.

"Where is he?" Brett paced back and forth by the door.

"He should be back by now," Stan added, keeping his rifle pointed at Wade's head.

"Maybe there was someone out there," Jake suggested nonchalantly, leaning back against the wall, but keeping his gun pointed squarely at Mellissa.

Obviously annoyed, Brett looked down at his watch, squinting in the dim factory light. He said nothing.

"We'll go check it out," Mitch said, heading for the door and grabbing Donald by his shirt's shoulder on the way out.

Jim and Derrick ran up the metal staircase as quietly as possible. Reaching the top, Derrick's bad leg buckled, and he fell to his knees on the landing. Jim reached for him. "You okay?" He knelt beside him, grabbing his arm to pull him back up. Up to now, all Derrick's energy and determination had effectively masked the reality of his physical condition. It was only now that Jim noticed his heavy breathing and the sweat dripping from his neck and temples. Jim groaned within himself. *Come on, Derrick.* This was no time for him to fall apart.

"Fine." He took a moment to catch his breath then let Jim help pull him back up. They both continued on. Derrick had a little limp, but he managed to maintain a quick pace.

Jim's phone vibrated a little ways down the hall. Concerned, he quickly read it. *Two men just left the room.* Jim grabbed Derrick's shoulder to stop. "Hey, wait," he whispered. Feeling Derrick stiffen and jerk away, he remembered his burned side. "Sorry."

Derrick switched off his flashlight and hid behind an arched beam. "They're coming." Jim listened and heard footsteps. "Go to the other side." Derrick pushed him. "We'll jump them."

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Giving Derrick a look of panicked disagreement as he was pushed to the other side, Jim realized he couldn't see the look anyway and huddled close behind the beam. He thought just hiding and letting the men walk past was a much better idea, but there was no way of communicating that to Derrick, and the footsteps were growing louder.

Lord, please protect us... and Wade and Mellissa, Jim prayed pushing himself back against the wall. *Help us get these guys!* He gritted his teeth and readied himself as he peered behind the beam and saw a thin flashlight beam approaching in the dark hallway.

The light came closer.

The footsteps got louder.

Derrick leaned forward on his good leg ready to jump.

Closer and closer... until....

Donald stepped into range. Jim tackled him to the ground and struggled to pin him. Mitch shone his light on the fight. Then stepping forward, he raising his metal cased flashlight over Jim's head just as... Derrick rammed from the front, knocking him backwards. Slamming down on his back against the cement, Derrick on top of him, all Mitch's breath whooshed out. Before he could take a breath, Derrick had his hands around his throat, not allowing a breath of air until he was sure Mitch was unconscious.

Quickly, Derrick turned his attention to Jim, who was still struggling in what looked like a pretty even wrestling match. Going toward him, Derrick was stopped by another surprise at the stairs. A newly arriving gunman charged him, tackling him not just to the ground, but down the stairs. Clutching each other in combat, they rolled down together one over the other.

Hitting the bottom landing, Derrick knew the victor would be the one that recovered fastest. So, as soon as he hit, he jumped to his feet. World spinning, he widened his stance to steady himself, but with his bad leg nearly numb from pain, he found it difficult to maintain. A dim light bulb hanging from a wire barely illuminated the scene. Just as the gunman began to stand, Derrick ran toward him. Managing to lift his bad leg while supporting himself on his good one, he stiffened it and thrust a sidekick into the gunman's stomach, throwing him back against the wall, knocking the wind out of him.

Going toward him, Derrick's bad leg gave way, and he fell to his knee. Seizing the moment of weakness, the gunman got up and charged. Grabbing Derrick by the front of the shirt, he lifted him, spun him around, and *WHAM!* slammed him into the wall. Derrick lost his breath... and his strength. Pulling him forward, the gunman slammed him again... *WHAM!* and again... *WHAM!* until letting go, he leaned against the wall trying to recover himself as Derrick slid down to the ground.

In a moment of triumph, Jim was on top and in a good position as he raised his fist over Donald's face, mustering all his strength for a lights out blow...un-til... Donald set him off balance and flipped him over. He tried desperately to get out from underneath him, but was instead met with *WHAM!* a smashing blow to his face that pounded his head back against the cement floor. *Ouch.* Jim had to fight hard the impending unconsciousness. Nearly blind in the darkness, Jim stared at the nearby flashlight to try and bring himself back. Feeling the man's hands rising toward his throat, he quickly shot his own up and managed to get his hands around the man's throat first. Soon as he did, *Wham!* Donald slammed his fist into Jim's cheekbone, thrusting Jim's head hard to the side. Disoriented, unable to think, fearing for his life, Jim could do nothing more than hang on tighter to Donald's throat. *Help me, God.* Donald clutched Jim's hand's, trying to pry them away, but Jim held on. *Help me, God.* Donald slammed his knee down in Jim's stomach, but Jim didn't let go. Donald gripped his own hands around Jim's throat, much

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harder than Jim was to him. *Help me...* Finally, Donald lost consciousness and limply fell to the ground. Jim scooted out from underneath him, but didn't get up.

Seeing Jake push himself off the wall and walk over toward Derrick's gun that had fallen out by the stairs, Derrick forced himself up, charging at the man and jumping on him from behind, Derrick wrapped his arm around the man's neck. Generally, he detested choke holds, but he had a feeling he was taking his own last earthly breaths if he didn't bring this guy down, so he... *Oh no*. Feeling himself slipping as the big man bent over, he held on tighter... but not tight enough, he guessed as he flew over Jake's head and landed with a thud on his back. Lying there, he wasn't sure he could get back up. He wouldn't have the chance, anyway. Jake came at him again in a rage. Instead of grabbing the gun, he picked him up by the front of his shirt and began slamming him against the wall, determined to kill him with his bare hands.

Derrick groaned, slammed back against wall again... and again, too weak to fight back, unsure what to do. Nearly positive he would be seeing Monica again, very soon. The room blurred as his head knocked back against the wall. Suddenly, he saw the rage in Jake's face turn blank as he began to fall. Derrick felt himself falling. They both crumbled to the ground.

Hitting the ground, Derrick just stayed there a moment, relishing the opportunity to lie down and breathe. Soon, curiosity forced him to roll over and look up. "Jim?" Half-dazed, he stared at him through blurry eyes, unsure that it was him.

Pushing the unconscious man he had just knocked out to the side, Jim knelt down next to Derrick. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Derrick closed his eyes and lay back down. "Thanks," he said groggily.

After several minutes, Derrick reopened his eyes, blinking them to try to clear his vision. He watched Jim finish tying the gunman's hands, but didn't move. Right now, he felt content to lie there for the next two days. Watching Jim come back over, Derrick gathered enough strength to stand up. Soon as he stood, his bad leg started shaking. His knee buckled, but he caught himself on the metal railing at the staircase. He noticed Jim reach out to catch him. Not responding to it, he used the railing for support and began climbing the stairs.

Brett paced back and forth next to Wade and Mellissa, holding his rifle at his side. Hearing a noise, he stopped abruptly and raised his gun. "What was that?" His voice was gruff.

Stan, who was sitting on the edge of the desk, ankle resting on his knee, rifle in his lap, looked toward the door. "I don't know," he mumbled, standing.

"Go check it out."

Standing over Jim, who was tying Donald and Mitch up at the top of the stairs, Derrick looked down the dark hall and kicked Jim's knee when he heard someone coming. Jumping up at another noise, Jim jerked the last knot tight around a still unconscious Donald's hands. They both hurried behind the metal beams.

Listening, they both waited as the man came closer, his flashlight panning side to side. Though tied and gagged, Mitch made as much noise as possible, drawing Stan closer until his flashlight beam fell on him. "Mitch?" Stan came faster. Focusing on

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Mitch, he didn't notice Jim and Derrick. Soon as he was past, Derrick and Jim came out behind him. Gun drawn, Derrick ordered, "Drop it." Jim grabbed Stan's wrist to encourage him not to try anything. Stan dropped his weapon and Jim tied him up.

Jim's phone vibrated as he knotted the last knot. The text read, *I think one of the gunmen must have left the room a few minutes ago.* Jim simply texted back, *I think so 2.* Then, he asked, *How many r left?* Trent texted back, *One. He's armed pacing beside Wade and Mellissa in the middle of the room. Text me when you get there, and we can go in together. Be careful.* Jim texted, *K.*

After gagging Stan with his own handkerchief, Jim got up and headed toward Derrick, who was standing next to the metal staircase leaning against the wall. In the dim light from below, Jim could see the rapid rise and fall of Derrick's chest. Eyes closed, he was sweating profusely. He blinked his eyes open when Jim came over to him, but he still looked done in. "You okay?" Jim asked, putting his hand on Derrick's cold sweat-drenched shoulder.

No. Derrick tried to calm his breathing before answering. "Yeah... fine."

Hand still on his shoulder, Jim could feel his body start to shake as he stood free of the wall. After a moment, he fell back against it.

Giving a reassuring smile, Jim squeezed his shoulder then slapped it. "We've got this. There's only one gunman in the room and Trent's gonna come in from the fire escape." Eyes closed, too tired to speak, Derrick simply nodded and handed Jim his revolver. Jim slapped his shoulder again and then turned and ran up the stairs. Derrick collapsed to the floor and fell asleep instantly.

Getting to the room, Jim took out his phone. *I'm here. Ready?* A text came back. *We'll go in together. Ten seconds starting, now.* They both started counting in their heads. At three-one-thousand, Jim clutched the door handle, and Trent took out his baton, ready to break the window. At five-one-thousand, Trent cocked his semi-automatic handgun and pointed it up. At eight-one-thousand, Jim pulled back the hammer on Derrick's revolver and pointed it up. At nine-one-thousand, both men braced themselves for action. *GO!* Trent smashed the window. Brett spun toward him, gun raised. Jim crashed through the door, "FREEZE!" Looking from one to the other, Brett looked stunned. Gun aimed at him from both directions, he held his hands up, gun above his head. "Gun down!" Trent ordered. Brett set it on the ground. "Kick it away!" He kicked it. "Now, on the ground!" Trent advanced toward him.

Soon as Trent was tying him up, Jim uncocked his gun and headed for Wade and Mellissa, quickly untying them. "Oh, Jim!" Mellissa cried, throwing her arms around him in gratefulness. "Thank you." Tears rolled down her face. Then standing she turned to Wade who had just gotten up and fell into his arms, sobbing.

Jim, suddenly over whelmed with gratitude, looked up toward heaven, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you."

Jess, crouched together with Morgan inside their wooden storage box in the tack room, she silently prayed, repeating cries for help and protection. Suddenly she stopped, her mind and body frozen with fear as she heard the clatter of the tack room door roll up. Feeling a wool blanket in the corner of the box, she quickly and silently grabbed it, covering Morgan up with it and then with her body, hoping that even if she was found, they wouldn't find Morgan. Her heart rate quickened as she heard footsteps and someone searching the room. She prayed that the things she removed from the box would not be obvious or at least not be obvious that they came from the box. She feared her prayer was not to be answered as she heard the footsteps come closer and closer until... *Sque-eak.*

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She cringed at the light entering as the lid was lifted, but she couldn't force herself to look up.

"Jess?!"

Jess raised one eyebrow at that distinct squeaky-surprised voice. *No, couldn't be.* Rolling over onto her side, she looked up to see.... "Kara Lee! What in the world are you doing here?!"

Shaking her head adamantly, Kara Lee crossed her arms. "Uh uh. Me first. What in the world are you doing hiding in your barn in a tack box in the middle of the night?"

Brushing herself off, Jess uncovered Morgan, lifting her to her feet as she stood up, indignantly. "I wouldn't be hiding here in this box," She stepped out. "getting filthy," She lifted Morgan out by her arms. "if you hadn't come storming in, in the middle of the night," She knocked down the lid. "without warning."

"Storming in? I was driving slower than normal."

"Exactly." Jess put her hands on her hips. "What could look more suspicious? You didn't even come to the door."

"That's because you were running toward the barn!"

"Why are you spying on me?"

"It's kind of hard to miss someone running toward their barn with a suitcase in the middle of the night just to sleep in the tack box."

Jess rolled her eyes. "Let me rephrase the question. What are you doing here?" Bending down, she picked up Morgan who was staring up at her with wide eyes.

Kara Lee leaned back against the door frame to the tack room. "I could just say I came to give my horse a bath." Jess gave her a look that could kill. Kara Lee smiled. "You know that story I've been chasing for quite a while, the one that took me down to those drug lords in Mexico?" Jess nodded her head. "Well, from there it took me to a notorious crime boss in Chicago and from there it took me for a few loops and then right over to your house."

"What?" Jess hoped with all her heart she had heard that wrong, but she was afraid she hadn't.

"Actually it led me to Derrick's house first, but since it's no longer there, I figured Jim might know what's going on."

Putting her nose in the air, Jess turned and walked away. "How is it even *possible* that you don't know *everything* that's going on?"

"Oh, come on, Jess." She quickly followed her. "Fill me in."

Stopping by a window, Jess turned around sharply, a little annoyed. "There's more at stake here than a news story."

Offended, Kara Lee threw her hands on her hips. "You weren't the one that saw a twelve-year-old boy murdered in Mexico."

Jess turned back to the window and gazed out mumbling, "No, but I might be a widow before long. There was a moment of silence, then Jess's eyes perked with interest as she saw a pair of headlights turning into their lane. Soon as she could make out its image in the moonlight, she knew it was Derrick's truck. Hefting Morgan higher on her hip, she spun back around and jogged toward the duffel bag, snatching it up mid-stride and heading for the door, hitting the light switch as she passed.

"Wait! Jess!" Kara Lee ran after her.

The truck pulled up to the barn, the door flinging open as it pulled to a stop. Jess didn't even pause as she ran for it and hopped in the back seat, crawled over Jim and sat in the middle. Kara Lee was hot on her heels. "I need to come!" She demanded, breathless, when she reached Jim, guarding the door.

Jim glanced at Derrick who had gathered enough strength from his short nap to be in the driver's seat. "No!" Derrick yelled.

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"I really need this!" She talked fast, all hyped up. "I can help. I've got information that..."

"Close the door!" Derrick demanded.

"I'm serious! I've got..." Just as she reached for the door to hoist herself in, Derrick stomped the gas pedal, causing the tires to spurt up gravel as he squealed out. Kara watched a moment in disbelief, until the thrust of the wind blew the truck's door shut. Coming to herself, she spun 180 and sprinted for her jeep, hoping she could still catch them.

In the backseat, scrunched between Mellissa and Sam on one side, Jim on the other, and Morgan on her lap, Jess could barely breathe much less see where they were going. She could only feel the car underneath her flying down the road at high speeds and assumed they were being chased.

Pushing herself up, she tried to see over Wade who was sitting in the middle of the front seat, but what she saw only made her scream... literally. She felt Jim grab her, but it didn't help. Her eyes got wider and wider the closer they got to a T in the road without breaking speed from 95mph. Just at the very last second before they ran out of road, Derrick swung the truck to the left, causing Jess to fall into Jim. Mellissa and Sam fell on top of her. Smothered inside the sandwich of people, Jess wasn't sure what happened to Morgan, and she couldn't budge to find out, until finally the gang commenced to get off of her, Sam pushing off of Jess's left kidney to get herself up. Jess was too discombobulated to react verbally to the pain, so she just gave Sam a dirty look that she knew she couldn't see in the dark, anyway. Then she started looking for Morgan. She found her on the floor under Jim's legs and picked her up, setting her on her lap. "Did we lose them?" she asked, looking over her shoulder out the back window.

"Her," Jim corrected.

"Her?!" Jess jerked her face toward him, having assumed it was the bad guys waiting for them on the road.

Jim nodded, "Kara Lee."

"Uh!" Jess squeaked in outrage. Arms around Morgan, she plopped back hard against the seat, sarcastically vowing to herself to kill Kara Lee next time she saw her. "What happened to her?"

"She didn't make the turn," Mellissa muttered, putting her hand to her forehead as if she had a headache.

Jess's eyes widened and she looked out the window then at Jim. "Is she okay?"

"I didn't see," he answered. Jess started to get worried.

"She's fine," Trent called back. "She just drove down the ditch into the field. It didn't flip."

"Oh. Good." Jess sighed. Feeling the car rolling slower, she tried to look over Wade to see Derrick. "What's the matter?" She noticed Jim doing the same.

"What's wrong?" Jim asked, looking at Derrick, who pulled the truck over to the side and leaned forward against the wheel.

"You drive." Derrick answered him, bluntly.

"Are you okay?" Jim leaned against the back of the front seat. Derrick just shook his head, but didn't answer or look up. Wade, who sat next to him, just stared at him looking unsure of what to do. Trent slowly opened his door and got out then so did Jim. They exchanged glances without speaking and then walked around the front of the truck. Trent opened the driver's side door but let Jim take the lead. "Hey." He slapped his hand around the back of Derrick sweat-drenched neck. "You okay?"

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Derrick lifted his head, but didn't answer. Unbuckling his seatbelt and pushing off the steering wheel, he tried to get out, but his legs gave out and he started to fall. Both reaching for him at the same time, Jim caught him and positioned under Derrick's arm to support him. "Let's put him in the passenger's side," Trent said, turning in that direction.

"No." Derrick's shook his head, his voice strained. "In the back." Jim just looked toward the truck bed, not sure that was a good idea since they would be driving on the interstate. "It's too crowded in there, and... I need to lay down."

Jim nodded, "Okay," and helped him in the back.

"You do know this is illegal," Trent grumbled, latching the hatch.

"Sure you don't want to sit back there with him?" Jim smiled. "It'd give us more room." Trent just gave him a look and headed for the front. Jim took that as a *no* and headed for the driver's seat. They had decided the safest bet was to head up to Wisconsin and hide out in Derrick's cabin until the trial. Then two of them would take the drive to the trial while the other two stayed back with the women. Jim hopped in behind the wheel, *which is going to make this one long night of driving.*

Lying on top her bed, ankle in front of her bent knee, twirling her foot impatiently, Taylor stare up at the ceiling, thinking angry thoughts about her father downstairs. She had a pretty good book propped up on her stomach in front of her, but she wasn't reading it. She decided she'd rather feel sorry for herself and... She glanced at the door. *...feel mad at him. Here are the rules. Everyone must live by them. His rules. His standards. Why? What in the world is wrong with getting a "b?" Why is it the end of the world to let your guard down and goof off once in a while? Does he even know the meaning of the word "relax?" The only man I know who acts like he's at a funeral on a popcorn and movie night. Why is he always mad? One thing for sure, I never want to be like that...* She twirled her foot faster. *...and Jack's right... nothing I ever do will please him. Why try?* Tears began to burn her eyes. *Why did mom have to die?* She rolled over on her side and stared at the door. *He doesn't love me. He doesn't even care about me. He doesn't care about anyone.* She rolled onto her back, anger welling inside her. *Friends? He doesn't have any. He's a work-aholic. That's all he does.*

Her memories drifted back... way back to her mom... to mom taking her and her older brother and sister on a picnic on their last Mother's Day together. It had been a glorious day... even without him. He, of course, had to work. He always had to work. *That's all he ever does!* Sure he was a brilliant doctor. Sure he had three totes full of awards, citations, and newspaper clippings up in the attic, but what good were they if no one ever saw them? *He never tells anyone!* She was sure ninety percent of his patients didn't even know how talented he was and one hundred percent didn't know he had a heart. She had a little trouble with that herself. She figured it appeared sometimes on birthdays and would flash by somewhere around Thanksgiving and Christmas. Other than that...

She glanced toward her door again. He was downstairs watching TV, and she knew what. Not a drama, not a murder mystery, for sure not a comedy, she reckoned he was probably enthralled in a documentary discussing some new earth shattering discovery... like the newest anesthesia or something. Last night had been something about abdominal aortic aneurisms. Why did he spend all that time studying and try to be the best? For what? *He doesn't care about people. He doesn't care about awards.* He didn't even tell her last year when he was going to be on TV. *Why does he love his job so much? What does he do it for?*

BUZZZZ...BUZZZZ... Picking up her cell phone, she read the text. *Hey, hey, little Tay, how's my mini sunshine ray?*

Reading the text, she smiled at the silly rhyme and typed a reply, *Hey, Jackie Boy! What's up?*

Awesome night sky. Wanna share the stars with me?

Curious, she typed back, *U just left.*

Only cuz ur old man came home. Wer gonna make a nite of it. Baxter's parents r gone. We're finishin the party @ his house. Then, we r goin to lookout point and watch the sun rise. U in?

She glanced over at the clock - a quarter after midnight. Biting her lip, she swung her legs off the side of the bed and sat up, staring at the door. Her thoughts returned to her dad downstairs. She told herself she didn't care what he thought, even though she did... right now she didn't. She knew he'd be mad if he found out. Last time he was really mad the roof had nearly caved in from his yelling, and he confiscated her cell phone for three months. The time before that he had grounded her by making her volunteer at the hospital. *My life. Don't get grounded at home like most kids. I get grounded at his work.* She looked back at her phone remembering the serious dent that

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job had put in her social life... yet wanting to go. Chewing on her lip, she looked toward her window. *I could probably get out the back without him noticing. Could probably be back before breakfast.* Chills ran up her spine as she remembered her dad's cold face and his threatening voice. Sometimes he scared her when he was mad. She looked from the window to the door and back to the window, trying to decide. *Go or stay?* Suddenly, she didn't care. *Let him throw a fit. See if I care.* She grabbed her phone and typed the reply hard, *I'll be at the back door in a couple of minutes.* She flipped down the lid. *So there,* she nodded defiantly toward the door as if at her father and swung off the bed onto her feet and quietly marched toward the door until... she froze, her heart skipped a beat in fear as she heard Jack's motor rev. She thrust open her phone and quickly typed another message, *Keep that motor quiet! Dad's home!*

Jack messaged her back, *Sorry, cutie pie. I'll be waitin' at the curb.*

c u in a sec. Closing the phone, she rolled her eyes and headed downstairs.

Tiptoeing past the living room, she peeked at her dad to make sure he hadn't heard. He hadn't. He was still relaxing with his evening entertainment... *Uncommon Causes and Diseases Linked to Heart Arrhythmia*, produced and directed in complete lecture format. She rolled her eyes. Wouldn't he ever get a life?" Continuing past, she went through the kitchen and out the back door, her smile widening when she saw Jack leaning against the hood of his truck.

"Ready to go, Baby doll?" he asked as she neared.

She jogged the rest of the way to the truck. "Ready and waitin'." She hopped in.

Jack grinned as he got in. "You. Are. Gonna. Have the time of *your* life!" He stomped the gas.

Sitting in the back of pickup next to Derrick, leaning his head back against the rear window, Jim stared up at the night sky. He had just switched driving with Trent and had decided to sit in the back to give himself and the others more room.

"You kno-ow," Jim looked down at Derrick, surprised to hear him when he thought he was asleep. "I can't believe you let *the cop* drive my truck."

Jim smiled at Derrick's sarcastic name calling. He knew they didn't really mind each other, but he also knew Derrick would never admit that. "I thought you were asleep."

"How can I sleep with *him* commandeering my vehicle?" Derrick spoke with his eyes closed.

"I needed a break." Jim yawned. "Besides Trent's a great driver."

"Just as long as he drives in the right direction."

"He's on board with this."

"You may trust him..."

"We were just discussing security a little while ago. He's been involved in police protection before, and he thinks your shack will be perfect. With all the acreage you own around it and no roads, it'll be hard for them to get to, even if they do somehow figure out where we're at." Derrick looked skeptical, but Jim was too tired to argue the point. "Rather Wade be driving?" Derrick shot him a look. *Didn't think so.* Smiling to himself, Jim closed his eyes and let the cool breeze on his face lull him to sleep.

Yawning, Dr. Fredricks rubbed his face with his hands. Sometimes he was sure his brain was incapable of holding one more ounce of information. He groaned as he stood up. There was so much he had to know... and he had to know it perfectly.

FIRE BREAK

Stretching, he got up from the couch and made his way over to the TV. He ejected the DVD and snapped it into its case, while glancing up at the old Grandfather clock in the corner. It was after two. Yawning, he figured he better get some sleep if he was going to be at the hospital by six to fill in for Dr. Clarkston.

Wearily trudging upstairs, he set the alarm on his phone as he walked, but stopped short when he saw the light under Taylor's door. His brow furrowed. *Why is she still up?*

"Taylor?" He knocked first, but when there was no answer, he walked in and looked around, quickly discovering she wasn't there. He checked the bathroom, the guest room, his room, the kitchen, the basement, the garage.... Finally, he concluded she wasn't home.

Standing in the kitchen, torn between, anger and fear, he smacked the phone receiver off of the wall, causing it to ring as it bounced off the floor. Snatching it up, he dialed Taylor's cell phone.

Taylor, who was caught in the middle of a chaotic dance with two partners, barely noticed Jack coming toward her. "Hey, Tay, your purse is ringin'!" She could barely hear him over the loud music.

"Okay! Thanks!" she called back. After the dance was over, still bubbling with excitement, she laughed as she asked her two dance partners to excuse her. Tipping their hats, they turned to go. She giggled at them clumsily swaying and staggering as they walked away on drunken sea legs.

Finding her purse, she was surprised her phone was *still* ringing. Whoever wanted her sure was being persistent. *Three guesses who.* Momentarily afraid, she didn't want to check the caller ID. She checked it... *Dad.* Fear rose in her heart as she held the phone a few moments, unsure of what to do. Anger, guilt, and fear all vied for her emotions. In the end, after great discussion and faulty reasoning with herself, anger won out. Throwing her nose in the air, she shut off the phone in defiance and walked back to her dance feeling a great deal of satisfaction.

Getting the answering service after three rings, Dr. Fredricks hung up and tried a seventh time. This time he got the answering service right away. He slammed the phone down, realizing that she had turned it off. His anger kindled hotter. He was relieved she was probably alright, but furious at her defiance and disrespect. Snatching the keys from the hook, he stormed out to the garage, determined to find her and drag her back home.

Head banging back against the window as they hit a pothole, Jim grimaced, waking up. Opening his eyes, he stared out at.... Sitting up straight, all his senses stimulated as he stared out at the car, following close behind... the police car.

Turning, he looked in the back window and saw Trent repeatedly glancing up in his rearview mirror. He knew Trent was going to rabbit as soon as the policeman turned on his lights. *Maybe it's just a coincidence.* Maybe it was just because they were riding illegally in the back, but either way, he knew they couldn't stop to find out.

He glanced from Trent in the driver's seat to Jess, who was curled up in the back seat, holding Morgan tightly as she slept. He didn't want a car chase. He knew all too well how easily it could end in disaster. Images of some of the wrecks passed through his mind. *There has to be a better way.*

FIRE BREAK

Suddenly feeling very defensive of his wife and seeing the handle of Derrick's pistol sticking out of his unzipped jacket, he got an idea and grabbed for it, but barely got his hand around it before Derrick woke up with a start and grabbed his wrist, hard. "Derrick, let go. It's me," Jim whispered.

When he was awake enough to recognize Jim, Derrick let go. "What are you doing?"

"There's a police car following us." Derrick tried to sit up, but Jim pushed him back down. "I'm gonna shoot out the tires to avoid a chase."

Derrick glanced up at the cab. "Tell Trent to slow it down, first."

Jim nodded, realizing the danger to the policemen if they lost a tire at these speeds. Turning around, he rapped on the back window. Jess woke up and slid it open. He smiled at her as she plopped back down. "Trent?" He spoke in a loud whisper, trying not to wake the others. If he turns on his lights, pull it over. I'll shoot out his tires." After a moment, Trent nodded in agreement. Keeping the gun hidden, Jim scooted closer to the hatch.

After a few minutes, the police car's lights flipped on. Jim silently pleaded with the Lord that his plan would work and that no one would get hurt.

Soon as they were both on the shoulder, before either had completely stopped, Jim raised Derrick's pistol and fired, hitting the right tire dead center. Then without hesitation, he shot out the left one just as Trent stomped the gas and squealed the truck back on the road.

Dr. Fredricks slowly drove around the school. He didn't really expect her to be there, but he was running out of places to look. He had already driven through both parks, down lover's lane, and past all the houses of everyone in her address book. Then he had gone into all the 24 hour restaurants, stores, and even the fitness club. Circling a parking lot, he rolled his neck. *Where could that girl be?*

"Jack, stop it!" Taylor giggled, falling back against the trunk of a tree as Jack tickled her.

"What?" He tickled her again. "What did you say?" He laughed, yelling over her giggling.

Rolling over on the grass, she pulled away, still giggling uncontrollably. "Qui-it it!" She laughed, still feeling the high from an entourage of earlier drugs.

"Hey, you guys!" a girl from the main group called. "Come over her!"

Still laughing, Jack sat back up. Though unsteady, he used the tree to pull himself up. "Come on, Tay." He offered her his hand, but nearly fell backwards while pulling her up.

Holding hands, they giggled as they repeatedly bumped into each other, unable to walk a straight line as they stumbled toward the group in the spotty light from the battery of lanterns and flashlights. Taylor was amazed at the size of the group when they got there. Only ten had come to Lookout Point from the party, but now there were nearly twenty. "What's goin' down?" Jack asked, swaying a little.

"Weeee," A girl got right in his face. "are going to see who's chick-en!" All the teens stared cackling and flapping their arms like wings. Jack and Taylor both started laughing and then joined in.

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Driving next to the canal, Dr. Fredricks strained to see down the hiking trails or for any movement in the woods. This was the longest shot he had tried yet, but he was running out of options. Stopping at the T in the road, he stretched his neck, circling it around. *What now?* Leaning his head back against the seat, he looked up at the ceiling. *Where now?* He had already checked everywhere. Either he kept missing her or she just wasn't around... anywhere. Tapping his fingers on the wheel, he reran his mind over every possibility until... *Lookout Point! Of course.* He turned the car hard right. *It has to be.* He accelerated around a curve. Just last week the police had brought in a group of whacked out teens to the ER after a night of excessive partying there. Accelerating ten miles over the limit, he shook his head. He never would have believed a daughter of his could be so stupid.

Laughing hard, Taylor flapped her arms like a chicken with the rest of the group, cackling at the young man, deemed the most recent "chicken." It was barely breaking dawn. It had been pitch black when they started the death runs. Lanterns and flashlights formed a long runway from the trees past the guardrail and all the way to the edge of Lookout Point. At the edge was a very long drop off from the jagged cliff down to the raging river below. Taylor had to admit it was exciting to watch, as well as funny. Three teams ago the match up had been the schools star quarterback with a little four-foot-eleven girl. It was hilarious to see the brawny muscle man skid to a stop three feet from the end while his tiny competitor did a dance with death, her toes inches from the edge. Later, when he got mad and left in a huff, she was glad he had been shone up.

"Who's next?" Baxter yelled over the crowd.

Mini, a little Asian girl, stepped up and glanced around for her partner.

"You're next, Taylor!"

Oh. Taylor stopped cackling and looked over at Baxter. She hadn't even been aware she was in line, but she guessed she'd go for it.

"You're next, girl!" Jack hollered. "Go, girl, go!" Taylor walked toward the head of the runway emotionally bouncing between twinges of seriousness and cascades of giddy carelessness. The closer she got to the start the more hyped up she got, the yells and screams from the crowd making her even more bold. She wanted to be brave and fearless. She wanted to be the one everyone was talking about. She wanted people to look up to her and respect her. She wanted to be the boldest one there. She decided she wasn't stopping until her feet were partially over the edge... so they couldn't draw an end line. She was going to outdo them all!

Dr. Fredricks turned into the park, squealing his tires with a fast turn, taking all the corners a little too fast as he sped toward lookout drive, barely slowing as he turned onto the narrow bridge that connected to the drive.

"Ready?" Taylor strained her eyes, trying to see the end in the dim morning light. She glanced around at the kids lining the pathway, cheering. Her energy soared. She felt invincible. "GO!"

Mini and Taylor took off. The teens cheered loudly.

Dr. Fredricks saw the crowd in the distance, anger welling as he drove toward them.

FIRE BREAK

Mini ran faster. Taylor sped up, trying to outrun her. The cliff's edge got closer... closer.

Dr. Fredricks stopped his car, his headlights illuminating the scene, his anger turning to fear as he understood what was taking place, when he saw... *Taylor!* He jumped from his car and started to run. He could see Taylor swaying unsteadily as she ran. He knew her. He knew she would try to outdo the other girl. He knew she would go for the edge. His heart nearly stopped as he watched them hurdle the guard rail. He ran faster, harder, as fast as he could.

Mini skidded to a stop. Taylor tried to fit in two more steps... skidding at the very end... slipping... screaming as she flew over the edge.

Dr. Fredricks heart froze. *NO!* Dr. Fredricks reached out his arms, though he was hopelessly far away... hundreds of feet which felt like hundreds of miles. He reached the run way.

Taylor screamed continually as she fell. She reached out into the nothingness but found nothing. She fell...down... down... down...down toward death... her life passed in front of her... fear and terror shrouded her. *NOOOO!*

Running down the runway, he yelled "Call 911!" He jumped over the guard rail, his heart rending as he heard the splash. Without hesitating he dove over the edge and to the rapids below.

Slicing through the water with his dive, he quickly abandoned his form and fought to slow down his momentum before he reached the bottom of the river. Getting his head up inches before reaching the earth, he brushed a rock with his knee as he headed back toward the top.

Reaching the top, he shook his head hard, trying to shake the water from his vision as the fast moving water swept him downstream. Blinking, he searched through blurry eyes, but didn't see her. His stomach knotted.

Swimming hard, he propelled himself downstream, searching as he went. The further he went the faster the water churned until he was engulfed in a full-fledged class of rapids. Tossed up and down by the waves, he lost all ability to swim and nearly all semblance of control. The waves thrust him toward a giant boulder. Fighting forward, he barely missed it. In the flash of a moment, he saw Taylor bob above the water downstream.

Gritting his teeth, he fought harder against the waves, battling toward his daughter. Fear filling him, he cringed as he watched her limp body thrust against a rock. Adrenaline pumping through his veins, he fought harder to reach her.

Suddenly, he froze, the deafening sound of the thrashing water out yelled by an ominous roar. ... A waterfall was coming. Determined to reach her, he beat through the water until he was just twenty-five feet away... fifteen feet... 10 feet... 5feet... *Taylor! The waterfall...* He reached. The water with a mighty swoosh swept them both over.

Dr. Fredricks didn't know which way was up as he tumbled through the air, water splashing his face, somersaulting, flipping, until... *SPLASH!* He hit the water hard. The force stung his shoulder and side. He sank to the bottom, hitting it with his leg, then floated back up to the top. Tilting his head back, he gasped for air when he reached the surface. The water more slowly propelled him forward another hundred feet before calming into a quiet pool. *Taylor?* Regaining his senses, he blinked his eyes open, then remembering, spun himself around in a circle, searching for her. He didn't see her. Frantically, he spun around three times until... *Taylor!* Spotting her, he beat the water, swimming toward her. At the river's edge the gentle current, tossed her back and forth against the bank.

Soon as the water was shallow enough, Dr. Fredricks tried to stand, collapsing the first two times on weak legs, but the third time he managed it and ran toward her as fast as he could on rubbery legs. "Taylor!" Panic filled him when he saw her battered body.

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No, please. No! Not her too! She was all he had left. “DON’T TAKE HER AWAY FROM ME!” He screamed it toward the sky. Reaching her, he cradled her broken body in his arms and stumbled onto the shore. Searching frantically for a pulse, he felt nothing. No breaths. Shaking, half panicked he tried to expel the water from her lungs. Then he began CPR.

Waking up with a start, Jim swung his arm in surprise, accidentally smacking a sleeping Derrick in the stomach, waking him up also. Looking up he saw Jess, who, leaning out the window in the back of the cab, had just tapped him on the head. Jerking around, still half asleep, he stared at her. She smiled back. "Good morning," she chirped.

Jim answered by just looking up at the softly lit dawn sky. Bouncing through ruts, he grabbed the side of the truck bed to steady himself. Just as he was getting his bearings and opening his mouth to speak to Jess, Derrick, rolling onto his side, shoved him sideways, banging him against the side of the truck bed. "What'd you do that for?" Jim growled pulling himself up, but Derrick's eyes were closed again, and he didn't respond. He didn't have to. Jim knew why. It had to be a delayed reaction to whacking him in the stomach.

"Derrick, don't go to sleep yet," Jess said, leaning out the window. "Trent needs to know where to go from here." Hitting a rut on the dirt lane, she bounced up, banging her head on the top of the window. She rubbed it. "Ouch."

Muttering, Derrick grumbled as he sat up. "Where is here?" Bouncing again, Derrick fell into Jim, causing them both to fall down sideways. Pulling himself up, Derrick gave Jim a dirty look as if it had been Jim's fault. Breathless, Jim consented to defeat and stayed down.

Dr. Fredricks tried to stabilize his breathing, knowing that if he didn't he was going to hyperventilate. His whole body shook as he watched them lift the gurney and load Taylor in the ambulance. The CPR had worked to restart her heart, but he had no idea how long she had been without oxygen. He couldn't bring himself to imagine the possible damage she could have for the rest of her life if she lived. Maybe it would be better if she didn't live. The thought threatened to destroy him. What if she didn't make it? What if the last person he had in the world was gone? What if every night he had to go home to an empty and lifeless house? What if...

"Sir?" Dr. Fredricks looked at the paramedic standing in front of him. "A second ambulance is on its way for you."

"I'm going with her." It wasn't a question. It was a statement. The paramedic started to protest, but was stopped by the anger and determination in Dr. Fredricks' face. After staring the medic down a moment, Dr. Fredricks walked past him and into the ambulance.

Leaning back against the hood of the truck, standing in knee high grass, arms crossed, Wade stared into the distance, anger knotting his insides.

"Beautiful sunrise isn't it?" Jess chirped, going around the truck in front of him.

Wade glanced at the sunrise. "No," he muttered. He was in no mood for sunrises. In fact, he wished it would just rain... to complete this horrible day. He glanced back at Jess who was humming as she lifted Morgan from Sam's arms and out of the truck. He wished it would rain on her... thunder if necessary... anything to out yell her confounded cheerfulness. Watching her, he ground his teeth as she spun around and accidentally blocking Jim, pecked his cheek with a kiss as she passed. The glowing smile it brought to his face gnawed at him.

"Wade?" Mellissa approached him quietly.

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“What do you want?” he snapped, shooting her an angry glare. Looking around, embarrassed that anyone heard, she turned and left. Wade didn’t care. He was too grouchy to care about anyone else. *Here we are parked in the grass off a tiny dirt road in the middle of nowhere, miles from anyone or anything, going to hike into deeper woods, even further from civilization and...* He glanced over his shoulder at Jim and Jess laughing as Trent tossed Jim the duffel bag and nearly dropping it, he exclaimed, “What’d you pack in this thing?!” *...and they act like we’re going on a picnic!*

“Everyone ready?” Trent yelled over the chatter of the group. Wade stood from the truck and turned toward them. Derrick, who was leaning against the back of the truck, grimaced slightly as he stood from it. “Okay. Let’s go.” They all followed Trent out into the woods. Wade glanced back at Derrick, who, limping, was lagging behind. Somehow it made him feel better. *You aren’t so tough, now. Are you?*

Sitting in a ghostly quiet hospital waiting room, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, Dr. Fredricks rested his face in his hands, eyes closed, not wanting to open them to the present horrors of reality.

His skin crawled with the eerie memories of the last time he sat here... in this same waiting room... anxiously waiting for news of his wife... his beloved wife. He gazed over at the exit’s double doors in a trance, seeing himself... him and the kids... reliving the moment as if it were happening all over again... telling them... crying... the four of them walking out... alone.

He returned his face to his hands. He didn’t think he could handle that again. This time he would truly be alone... all alone. In the months and years after her death, he had successfully alienated every friend he had... even his two older children. As soon as they had been old enough to leave, they took off as fast and as far as they could. All he knew was that Charity was somewhere in the military. He didn’t even know what branch. She had left without even saying goodbye. He knew Mark was somewhere in California, but they hadn’t spoken in years. There were no holiday gatherings or family reunions. He worked most holidays anyway. The ones he didn’t... His throat tightened. Tears came to his eyes as he remembered the spindly Christmas tree Taylor had gotten for free and set up the year after her mom’s death. He hadn’t wanted Christmas. Mark and Charity hadn’t wanted it, but somehow with a spindly pine, a box of ornaments from the attic, some popcorn and hot chocolate, and a cheerful Christmas CD, she had brought Christmas to all of them. He smiled, staring out of watery eyes, remembering the times she had drug him to a firework’s display on the fourth. He almost lost it when he remembered the Father’s Day and birthday gifts she had given him throughout the years. Sure he’d given her birthday and Christmas gifts, but not with a quarter as much love.

Sniffling, he choked on his tears. Why hadn’t he ever told her that he loved her? Why didn’t he even try to care? Why had he pushed her away? Tilting his head back he tried to suck back the tears, but they kept coming. Why did Sandra have to die? Why did their baby have to die? Why did he have to drive his kids away? Why? Why Taylor? Why?

Happily hiking next to Jim, who was carrying Morgan, clasping his hand and swinging it back and forth, Jess continued her merry musical of nursery songs she had been working on teaching Morgan since they began hiking. Every once in a while, Morgan would join in on the chorus especially with Mary Had a Little Lamb. Jim listened contentedly. His expression betraying his enjoyment even if he wouldn’t lower himself to

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joining in in public. Trent the old pro at nursery rhymes made sure to correct her whenever she mixed up the words. She didn't mind. *With all his kids... Wait!* "Trent?!" She spun around, stopping abruptly... midphrase on *"he followed her to school one day."* The whole group halted in reaction and looked at her. Trent pulled out his gun. "What?" He spun full circle, gun drawn. "What?"

Jess just stared at him a minute then continued walking. "I didn't mean that."

He holstered his gun. "Well, what's wrong?" They all started walking again.

"I was just wondering what about your wife and kids?"

Trent smiled. "They're fine. They've been in the wilderness of Canada for a week. Visiting Mother-in-law. Must be havin' fun. Only bothered to call me once. There's no phone service in her mother's *reclusive* cabin. It wouldn't even be possible to get to them before the trial. Believe me they are perfectly safe."

Huh, Mellissa moped staring down at the rocky root-gnarled trail, wishing she could be as sure about her Davy. They had already been almost to the North Woods before anyone even bothered to bring him up, and of course, Wade had insisted he would be safer with her parents right now, than with them. Maybe it was true, but every time she looked at Morgan laughing, safely snuggled in her father arms, she wondered.

Dr. Fredricks couldn't get the mental images of his wife and baby out of his mind. It was supposed to be a routine delivery. No one had anticipated any complications... until they came... until it was too late. He rubbed his face, trying to erase the horrible images... her lifeless body being carried out on the stretcher... the vacant face and limp body of their breathless baby he held in his arms... the horror of lifelessness... finality... hopelessness. He'd witnessed it many times, but it was never so real. He had known her nearly as well as he had known himself. Then suddenly, without warning she was gone... her body was empty. He looked over at the aquarium in the corner, trying to bring his mind to something else. He knew he had to quit dwelling on this or even he was going to get sick.

"Dr. Fredricks?" Dr. Fredricks looked over at the surgeon approaching him and stood up. "Your daughter is out of surgery," he said formally.

Dr. Fredricks nodded. "Can I..."

"She's in recovery. A nurse will tell you when she's back in her room."

"Is she going to be..."

"The next few hours are critical." The surgeon turned and left. Dr. Fredricks watched him go. He knew the man's name. He worked with him frequently, but he didn't really know him. He never got to know anyone, and... no one cared to get to know him. Of course, that was his own doing. He had fought hard to make it that way. He hated death. He hated losing to death. He enjoyed fighting it, but he had been beaten by it enough times to learn to protect himself. He didn't want to become emotionally tied to anyone that might die. He didn't want to become emotionally tied to anyone ever again... or so he had thought, but somehow it had happened. Without him even knowing it... and now. He pictured Taylor lying in the recovery room. ... *and now she might die. Then I will have nothing. No one.*

Feeling someone staring at him, he glanced over at a couple of gossiping nurses, who quickly turned away. He sat up a little straighter. *I can only imagine what they are cackling about. ... His fault ... He should have been a better father. Then again...* Glancing down at his sliced jeans streaked with blood and feeling the sting from the large bruise covering the right side of his neck and down his shoulder, he figured it could have been his appearance. His wrist was black and swollen. He had a gash on his leg that needed stitches, and he was almost positive he had at least a mild concussion.

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He smiled to himself. Of course, the staff knew him well. When he came in tonight, thankfully most everyone rushed to help his daughter. The remaining personnel just stared at him. All he had to do was state that he was refusing medical treatment and ask for the paper. He was formally handed the paper by the receptionist and everyone left. He had to get his own butterfly Band-Aids to stop the bleeding. He guessed he didn't really mind. After all, if anyone had tried to stop him from following his daughter, he would probably be sitting in jail on assault charges right now, but he had to wonder if it might have been nice if someone had offered him a Band-Aid.

Being a loner had its merits. He asked for nothing, and he owed no one. He was content being alone... or so he thought, but maybe... maybe it had been the wrong thing for Taylor. Maybe it was his lifestyle that drove her to those bad friends. Maybe he had caused this... like everything else. Maybe....

Motion behind the windows of the double doors caught his attention. Suddenly a rush of doctors and nurses converged in such a way that could only mean one thing. Disregarding the rules, he burst through the doors just in time to hear a nurse say there was a code blue in recovery. She didn't have to say the name. He already knew. Fast as the crowd allowed, he followed the team to recovery. Arriving a few seconds behind, he had no sooner pushed open the door and caught a glimpse of Taylor, the team around her, and the doctor yelled, "Get him out of here!" A male nurse grabbed his arm and pulled him out, despite his protests. He tried to get back in, but the door wouldn't open.

Falling to his knees, beside the nurse's station, he grabbed the corner of the desk, grasping it with white-knuckle force, not knowing what to do. *No! Please, no.* If she died, he would, too. He wasn't going to live the rest of his life hated and alone.

"Do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man? Oh, do you know the muffin man who lives on Cherry lane. Okay, Morgan, try it with Mama."

"I've got a better idea." Trent interrupted.

Jess turned and looked at him. "What?"

"How 'bout not, and incidentally, it's Dreary lane not Cherry."

Jess looked at him sideways. "What's dreary about a muffin man?"

"He didn't bring us any muffins," Mellissa mumbled.

Jess smiled at her friend's grievance. "Well, if the majority of folks want me to discontinue the nursery rhymes, I will cease." The majority of people chorused their agreement.

"What's that?" Mellissa asked, stopping.

The rest of the group stopped. "Must be the river coming up," Trent said, looking at the map Derrick had given him.

Jim glanced over at Derrick, who was leaning back against a tree, eyes closed and dripping sweat.

"There better be a bridge to cross this river," Mellissa warned.

"Well figure out a way," Trent mumbled, still studying the map.

"A way to what?!"

Trent glanced at Mellissa. "Get across."

"Doctor?" Dr. Fredricks looked up to see Melinda kneeling next to him, her bright blue eyes, clouded with sympathy. "We got her back." She put her hand on his shoulder.

Overcome with relief, closing his eyes and tilting his head back, he sighed, his heart feeling a release from his tearing emotions. Swallowing hard from relief, he felt the

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cool drops of sweat beading his throat and the streams trickling from his temples and suddenly felt self-conscious, yet touched by Melinda's display of sympathy. He glanced back at her but, he guessed his face must have spelled annoyance because she quickly jerked her hand away and stood up. Trying to correct the impression, he nodded and said, "Thank you," though the words sounded more formal than he had hoped.

Returning a sympathetic nod, she turned and left.

Approaching the river, walking close beside Derrick, arm around him, supporting his weight, Jim looked over at Derrick's sweat drenched face. Seeing Derrick struggling, he had come back to help, and Derrick had accepted it. He wasn't sure if Derrick could walk on his own or not, maybe... Jim stopped and stared at the raging water in the distance... but could he cross that? Jim stopped at the bloated river's edge, flooded from the recent rain. He heard Derrick groan and knew how he felt. *How in the world are any of us gonna cross that thing?* He looked over at Trent, who was glancing from the map to the river and back to the map.

"That map's not going to tell you how to get around this thing," Derrick said, lowering himself to ground as Jim released him.

Trent put the map down. "Well, how did you and Jim cross it with horses?"

"Actually pretty easily," Derrick leaned back against a tree and shut his eyes. "since it hadn't rained in a while. Usually, this end of the river is calm." Everyone took their gazes from Derrick back to Trent. Not having an answer for them, he walked down to the bank and began following it down stream, looking for a way across.

Jess plopped down on the ground, cross-legged and pulled Morgan onto her lap. Sam sat down next to her. Mellissa carefully reclined on a fallen tree. And Wade lowered himself down in the grass a distance away from the rest of the group.

After a while, Trent came back. Jim was the first to notice him. "Well?"

Trent shrugged as he walked toward them. Everyone but Derrick got up and gathered around him. He certainly didn't look enthusiastic, but he also didn't seem overly concerned. "There's a fallen tree probably a quarter mile downstream. It's the only way across that I see. It's wide enough... barely, but it's pretty close to the water."

Wade had come over and joined the group, arm's crossed, looking cynical. "What about him?" He glanced over his shoulder, motioning his eyes at Derrick. Everyone looked at Derrick including Jim who was still standing next to him. Derrick opened his eyes and looked at them, but didn't answer. "He's not going to be able to cross." The girls looked to Trent who didn't give a solution so they looked back at Derrick.

"Someone will have to stay here with him," Jim suggested.

"No-ot me!" Wade quickly protested. The girls looked at Trent. "And *none* of us are going back there without police protection!" Wade added, stubbornly. The girls looked over at Jim.

"I'll stay," Jim volunteered.

"No," Jess whined, pulling Morgan closer in front of her. "We need you."

Derrick finally spoke. "I'll be fine."

Wade nodded. "Give him a gun and some food, and he can catch up later."

"No!" Jim's voice was strangely demanding.

"We can't just leave him here." Jess's voice was more matter a fact.

"I'm not leaving him," Sam insisted

"Seriously. How could he defend himself?" Mellissa shot Wade an angry glance.

Wade did a double take. That stung. Even his wife was against him. "With the gun!" He shot back.

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Jim glanced down at Derrick, watching his labored breathing as he lay back against the tree, eyes closed. This was the first time he had ever seen him admit he was played out. He was admitting it with his silence. Normally he was paranoid of needing anyone, and he showed it by refusing help and demanding to be left alone even if he was in a crisis situation, but now, he wasn't demanding. He was silent. Rather than brazenly pushing onward. He silently let others decide his fate, content to deal with it. Jim determined not to let him down.

Jim reached down for Derrick's arm and pulling him up, got under his shoulder to support his weight. "Let's check out the crossing before we start making decisions." It sounded more like an order than a suggestion. Supporting Derrick, he walked past them, and they all conceded to follow, starting with Jess and ending with Wade.

Reaching the log, they all stopped on the elevated river bank and stared down into the raging water. Looking over at Derrick, Mellissa was the first to speak. "You're not going to be the only one not crossing."

"We *all* have to get across," Trent corrected. Mellissa just shook her head vehemently.

Jess picked up her little girl. "What about Morgan? It'd be too dangerous for her."

"Someone could carry her?" Trent suggested.

Jim shook his head. "I agree with Jess. That's too dangerous. Just walking across that thing..." His voice trailed off as he lowered Derrick to the ground.

"Do you have any other suggestions?" Trent looked at him then so did everyone else. Jim looked down at the river. *Lord, how do we get across?*

"How'd you get across?" Sam looked at Derrick. "When you were out here last year, you had to cross it at night down by the waterfall, and that water's got to at least be as rough as this." Everyone but Jim and Wade looked at Derrick.

"Looped my belt around the log and swam it," he mumbled.

"You're kidding." Mellissa stood on her toes, peering over the edge to get a better look at the rapids, obviously aghast.

"I think we can safely rule out that option." Jess rubbed Morgan's back as she stared into the frothy water.

"We've got to cross the *log* somehow," Trent insisted.

"Or at least one of us," Jim mused. Detecting an idea, all eyes turned to Jim. He looked back at them. "We've got that rope from the back of Derrick's truck. It's long enough. Someone will have to take it over to the other side and tie it off. We'll loop my belt and Derrick's belt both around the rope and tie Trent's belt around the person, hooking it to both belts that are around the rope. Then the person can slide themselves across."

Trent nodded his respect to the plan. Wade still looked skeptical. "Why two belts?" Sam asked.

"Just security. Make sure they hold the weight."

"What if someone freezes halfway?" Mellissa asked, staring at the water, obviously imagining herself doing just that.

Jim looked around. "We still have Wade's belt," he thought out loud. "We'll just have to use single belts so someone can go out for a rescue if needed."

Smiling, Sam bobbed up her hand and then pointed to her belt. It was shiny black leather with silver conchos, but it would work. "Okay. We're all set then – main line and a rescue line." Everyone started taking off their belts.

"Who's gonna go over first?" Sam asked.

"Not me." Wade proclaimed. Mellissa gave him a dirty look. Actually, she didn't want him to, but that was beside the point.

FIRE BREAK

No one was volunteering. Jess looked worried. Jim figured she had a right to be. "I'll go," he volunteered. Her face fell. "You be in charge of loading," He looked at Trent. "and I'll be in charge of unloading?" Trent nodded.

Passing Jess, Jim slipped his arm around her, giving her a brief squeeze of a hug. *That better not be any form of a goodbye*, she thought as she watched him get the rope and tie it off on this side with Trent and then head toward the log. She held her breath and prayed... and prayed him all the way across, not relaxing a moment until he was back on solid ground.

After wrapping the rope around the tree slightly above two sturdy limbs that would hold it, Jim jerked the knot tight and then wrapped it around a couple more times and knotted it again, tugging on it to make sure it was secure. "Okay!" he yelled, jumping down from the tree. "All ready over here!"

"Alright!" Trent shouted back, then looked around the group for his first volunteer. No one volunteered. Mellissa quickly looked away. Jess stared down at Morgan. Sam looked willing, but he preferred starting with an adult. Settling on Derrick who was using a limb to help pull himself up, he watched him take a couple of steps before his bad leg gave out and he fell to his knees. He glanced at Wade, who was just standing there staring with his arms crossed. So, he went back to Derrick, who had again pulled himself up and was making his way over. When he got there, Trent tossed him the belt. Leaning against the giant log, Derrick put it on. Offering his hand, Trent asked, "Can you get up there?"

"Yeah." Clutching Trent with one hand and grabbing the fallen tree by its roots with the other, he pulled himself up, slowly and painstakingly, but he made it to the top. Trent quickly attached the belts together.

All eyes were on Derrick as he slowly pulled himself across, pausing at times but continuing onward. There was relief all around when he made it safely across... without any of the belts snapping.

"Doin' good." Jim reached out and pulled him the rest of the way in. "Well, it worked," Jim said, unbuckling the belt to release Derrick.

"Yeah," Derrick half hopped, half fell to the ground. "How are you gonna get the belts back?" He sat leaning back against the log.

Jim looked at the belts in his hand. That was a good question. Why hadn't anyone thought of it earlier? "Well, I'm certainly not taking it back every time!" Derrick nodded slowly, agreeing. Jim looked back over the water. "Any ideas?" Derrick shook his head. Jim stared down at the raging water. *Lord, what do I...* Jim's eyes fell on a rock and he got an idea. Taking off his jacket, he put a couple rocks in it and tied it with the arms. Then he slipped the belt under the knot and hooked it to the other two belts that were hooked to the rope.

Derrick, who had been watching, gave Jim a nod of respect when he understood the plan. "Ni-ce."

Pulling it back, Jim let the rock go with the biggest heave he could muster. It started out fast but slowed quickly. Jim willed it to make it to the other side. It didn't quite.

Inching his way a few feet onto the log, Trent strained to reach it without venturing to far over the churning froth. Losing his balance, he fell forward. He heard Mellissa gasp. Leaning against the belt, he pushed back overcompensating and losing his balance backward, nearly falling in. Thrusting forward, he lost the log entirely, but still held the belt. Holding on for dear life, dangling in the air, he reasoned there was only one thing left to do. "HEEEELLP!"

Spinning like a top, he couldn't see anyone coming, only churning water and blurry trees. "HEELLP!" After what seemed like an eternity as the spinning slowed, he could see Wade coming, not running, walking. "Hurry up!" Trent demanded as Wade climbed up on the log. Wade's response was to pause a few moments and stare at him. Trent

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seriously contemplated punching him when they both got on solid ground... if they ever got on solid ground. "Wade, will you...." Wade inched his way out, bobbling halfway. "Careful. Be careful!" Trent demanded. Wade paused, giving him another classic *you're a fine one to talk* glance. Trent closed his eyes, arms burning as he imagined himself letting go and tumbling into the raging river rushing under his feet. *Hurry u-up*. He felt someone grab him and pull him over. Relief soothed him as his feet landed on solid log. Getting his bearings, he loosened his hold on the belt and guided it back following Wade to the end of the log.

They were almost there when... *Uh oh*. Trent lost his balance. "No-o-o-o!" He grabbed Wade, and they both went down, ending in a splash on the river's edge. Wade grabbed a root. Trent grabbed Wade and Wade pulled them up onto the bank. Crawling up, Trent sat down, out of breath in front of the group of on looking women. Wade didn't sit down. He pulled himself up and then reached down and pulled Trent by the front of his shirt, not giving him a chance to react before... *WHAM!* He punched him in the nose, glared at him, spun around, and walked away. Trent just stood there a minute, half stunned, wondering what had just happened. Touching his bleeding nose, he wondered if it would swell and contemplated the satisfaction it would give him to prosecute the guy for assault... to the fullest extent of the law.

Leaning forward, forearms on his knees, Dr. Fredricks stared down at the carpet in a daze. Every once in a while, he would grab a piece of lint and absentmindedly roll it around with his fingers. He didn't engage his mind. The memories were too painful. The possibilities were too depressing. His life was too hopeless.

Looking up, he saw Melinda coming through the waiting room. She was holding her purse, which probably meant she was off her shift and going home. He found himself wondering about her home life. She always looked so happy. Rubbing his face, he concluded anyone's home life had to be better than his. "Doctor?" He looked up, seeing her standing in front of him. "You can go in and see Taylor, now. They have her in a medically induced coma, but she's holding her own."

"For now," Dr. Fredricks mumbled, gazing toward the double doors. He turned back to see her looking at him sympathetically. "Heading home?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'll be praying for Taylor." She said it hesitantly as if she was halfway expecting to get her head bit off.

Contemplating that, Dr. Fredricks figured it was a fair assumption, however, at this moment, he was grateful for her concern even if he didn't like God. "Thanks."

Cocking her head, obviously surprised by his quiet response, she nodded, paused a minute, and then turned to go.

Standing on the log, Wade watched as Jim helped Trent off at the other end then he glanced down at Mellissa. They were the only two left to go over. He could tell from her actions since the beginning that she was nervous about going through with this, but as the time drew closer those feelings seemed to escalate. Right now, she was a ways back, periodically rubbing her hands together, half pacing, half walking in tight circles. "Almost ready to go?"

She shook her head, walking faster. "I... I can't...do that."

"Too bad," he huffed, feeling in no mood to be diplomatic.

"Wade, I can't."

He hopped down from the log. "Everyone else has gone."

"I'm sorry. I... I just can't." She stayed in one place to look at him, but was still pacing forward and back.

"What do you want us to do? Just stay here by ourselves?"

She looked at him half hopeful, half pleading, half surprised. "You mean you'd stay here with me?"

Wade looked up, rolled his neck fast, and jerked his gaze back to hers. "No!"

"Wa-ade," she whined, turning from him.

"You're lucky I'm out here in these... *woods* at all. I'm not staying alone."

She pointed fiercely toward the river. "I can't cross that thing!"

"Everyone else did! With no problem at all!" He was yelling. She just looked away. He sighed. "I'll go with you." She looked at him, hopefully. "We'll do it together." He could see some of the fear dissipating. She nodded, relenting. "Let me get the emergency line hooked up," he mumbled, wishing he could give her the one with only one support belt since she was lighter but knowing all too well that not only would she never go for it but that she would take the suggestion in totally the wrong way. As he hooked it up, she sat down on a tree stump, waiting, still rubbing her one hand nervously.

He was almost done hooking up the belts when turning toward Mellissa, he heard a rustle in the bushes behind her. "Mellissa?" Hearing it too, she jumped up and turned toward it, screaming as a large black bear jumped out at her. "MEELISSAAA!" Wade jumped from the log and sprinted for her. She stood frozen in time as the angry bear charged. Reaching her, Wade tackled her inches before the bear's mighty paw made contact. After rolling together into some bushes, Wade jumped up, grabbed Mellissa by the arm and they took off running. The bear charged after them, roaring. Reaching the log, he hefted her up and yelled, "Run!" Instead she screamed, and Wade ducked under the mighty, furry paw of the bear as it slapped at him. Under the bear, Wade rolled out as it came down on all fours. Mellissa kept screaming. Wade ran full circle around the bear. The bear spun around, trying to catch him. Reaching the log, Derrick lunged for it. Landing on his stomach, he clung to it. "Run!" Mellissa ran. The bear stood on his hind legs, roaring. Wade jumped up, following her close behind, barely dodging the bear's last attempt. After sprinting to the other side, they jumped down at the end. Out of breath, they exchanged glances.

Jess's eyes were wide and her adrenaline high as half panicked, she had been trying to come up with an idea to help and not gotten one. "Are you two okay?!" Mellissa gave a shaky nod and a half smile. "Never thought I'd be going across that way."

Jim laughed gently, "I always knew you wouldn't end up using the rope." Mellissa smiled then so did Wade.

Sam began to laugh. "Must have been scary and everything, but you two sure did look funny bookin' it from that bear." Replaying the scene in his mind, Trent couldn't avoid chuckling. Jess restrained herself until she saw Mellissa start to giggle and then even Wade, mildly. Soon they all joined in. Mellissa felt like falling into Wade's strong arms, yearning to feel his strength as he held her, but she didn't feel comfortable doing it. After the laughing ceased, she stood and stared thoughtfully at him a moment. On one hand she felt the zing of admiration and new love like she felt when they were dating, but in the back of her mind tugged the feeling of the lost love she had been living with for the last few months. *I still love you.*

Melinda yawned, pulling her leg closer under her as she sat on her sofa reading a Christian romance novel. This was not what she needed right now. *At least these dumb characters could have the courtesy not to lo-ove each other so much.* Holding it with one hand, she reached over to her plate of crackers and cheese on the end table next to her and took one topped with jalapeño cheddar. She looked at it. *You're probably the most spice my life will ever have in it.*

Knock, knock, knock... She looked over at the door, wondering who it could be at this latish hour during supper. Sliding her legs off the couch, she got up to answer it. She looked out the window first. *Carlos?* She was under the impression he was never going to speak to her again. She sighed, wishing her love life was as simple as the romance novel. She really did love Carlos, but at the same time she wondered if things should go any further between them. Regardless, she opened the door. Not knowing what to say or how to react to seeing him, she simply leaned against the door post and let him lead off.

"Melinda." His voice was soft. He held out a bouquet of multicolored carnations, but she didn't accept them. "I wanted to explain."

"What's there to explain?"

"I wanted to apologize," he corrected.

"For getting drunk or for accidentally coming here and letting me see a part of you I never knew."

"I'm not a drunk."

"You *were* drunk."

"You caused it!" Offended, she stepped back and started to close the door. "Wait." He stopped the door with his hand. "Just hear me out." She waited. "This cold shoulder is hard for me to deal with."

"That's why you got drunk?"

He rolled his eyes. "Can't you ever give a guy a break?" He paused. "Of course. I forgot. You would never stoop so low as to make a mistake... or have you?" She didn't answer. "Can't we talk this thing out? I thought we loved each other."

Confused and unsure how to respond, she let her eyes wander around then back at him and sighed. "I don't know what was between us." She let her hand fall from the door and Carlos snatched it, holding it close to himself. "I do. I love you." He offered the flowers again. This time she accepted them.

"I've got some crackers and cheese inside and I can make some coffee. Want to come in and share them with me?" A pleasant, respectful smile crossed his face. Walking in, he put his arm loosely around her, but she pulled away. "Just talk," she warned.

"Are we almost there?" Mellissa tried not to whine, but she was hot and tired and starting to get bug bitten.

Trent looked at his map. "Should be able to see it soon... maybe a half mile, yet." He glanced back looking for Jim and Derrick, who were lagging behind, and stopped a minute to let them catch up. Both were hunched over, dripping sweat, dragging their feet and breathing hard. A few feet before they had caught up, Jim, unable to support Derrick's weight anymore, began to fall. They both fell to the ground. Trent and Jess went over to them. Jim sat up, but Derrick stayed on the ground, lying on his back in obvious pain. "We'll rest here for a few minutes," Trent proclaimed.

They all found a place to sit down. Jess sat down in front of Jim and leaned back against his chest. He put his arms around her and held her close, leaning back against a tree and closing his eyes.

FIRE BREAK

After a little while, Trent stood up and said, "Everyone ready to go?" No one moved. "Come on, you guys, only about a half a mile more."

"About?" Mellissa mumbled.

Jess was the first to get up. Then Jim slowly pulled himself up, and one by one everyone but Derrick got up. Derrick hadn't budged since he lied down, and his breath was still hard and fast. Trent watched Jim take a few steps toward him and then stumble, catching himself with Jess's shoulder. "I'll take him," Trent said, going over to Derrick.

Eyes closed, Derrick shook his head. "Can't walk."

"Fine. Then sit up!" Trent ordered. Bending down, he grabbed Derrick's arms, pulled him over his shoulders, and began carrying him. Nodding to the group as he passed, he said, "Come on," and they all headed out.

Mansenie tapped his fingers impatiently on his mahogany desk when a knock came to his office door. "What?!" He shouted angrily. Mitch walked in casually. "After the way you guys screwed up last night, any news you have better be good news."

"We haven't located them, yet."

Mansenie scowled. "How have you progressed?"

Mitch put his palms up. "They're gone!"

"They are not gone!" Mansenie pounded his fist on his desk as he got up. "You know when they are gonna show up?!" He came around to the front of his desk. "They are going to show up at the trial with evidence that will hang all of us if we don't find them first! Stopping in front of Mitch, he put his finger in his face. "You had better find them!" He warned.

"They've all disappeared! The kid with the drive, his sister, his paramedic partner, his best friend, their wives and children, even the cop and his whole family!"

"Find out where! Find them and kill them!"

Just then a little short guy with longish, curly hair walked in without knocking. "We have a problem," he muttered, staring down at his tablet.

"What now?" Mansenie growled.

"Your contacts at the police department are getting a little edgy. When that cop didn't show up for work, the clean cops started looking around for him."

"Find anything?"

"No, but they're looking, and digging a little too deep for comfort, especially when they got the missing persons reports on the three firemen and found out their families were missing, too. That just egged them on, and it's makin' our boys a little nervous."

"And why should they be any different from us!" Mansenie kicked a metal cabinet, denting it, then went over to his desk and sat down, turning on his computer. "Get out of here." He motioned with his hand.

"There's one more thing you should know." Mansenie glared at Mitch, but stepping closer, Mitch continued. "We found this." He held out a j-peg. "The kid with the drive mailed it to his friend."

Mansenie put his hand to his forehead as if he had a headache. "How many of these does he got floating around?" Looking up, he pounded the desk with both fists, jumped up, and pointed at Mitch. "Get out of here! You find them, and you kill them!"

After what seemed like forever times two to Jess, her face brightened up when she finally saw their destination in the distance. *Finally*. Though part of her spirit was relieved to finally be there, the other half of her heart sank when she saw...

FIRE BREAK

“We’re going to live in that thing?!” Mellissa exclaimed in disbelief as they all walked up to what looked like a soon to be condemned, one room fishing shack.

“It’s shelter from the elements,” Trent growled, bending forward dumping Derrick on the ground. Derrick gave Trent a look after landing with a thud on his back.

Crossing her arms, Sam pointed toward the shack. “I don’t think *that* is the lesser of the two evils.”

“We’ll just have to clean it up.” Stomping up the steps, Jim brushed the cobwebs to the side to get to the door. Clutching the filthy door knob, Jim jiggled it trying to get it open.

“Key’s under the floor board!” Derrick called loud enough for Jim to hear, yet grimacing at the pain it caused in his head.

Squatting, not wanting to kneel in the dirt, Jim picked up the only board in the deck that looked loose but quickly dropped it when a huge black garden spider ran over top his hand, and down into the dirt, leaves, bugs, cobwebs, and who knows what else. He saw it and holding his breath, snatched it up quickly. Then glancing at the group, he stood up and confidently unlocked the door, taking a giant step in as he opened it, before jumping backwards so fast that he fell down hard as two raccoons and a squirrel came darting out in front of him.

Jess covered her mouth trying to conceal her laughter. Sam wasn’t so subtle, and Mellissa couldn’t keep from giggling. Playfully, Trent took out his gun, holding it pointed up in the air as he went toward the door, plastering himself back against the wall and then swinging himself in front of the opening. He brought his gun down and exaggeratedly looked in all directions inside the shack. Then turning to Jim who was still sitting on the ground and furrowing his brow, he said in his best detective voice, “All clear agent 86.”

“Whoa. Good boy, Machacho.” Kara Lee leaned forward in the saddle and patted the horse’s muscular neck. “Now back. Come on. Back.” Sand hit against the large blue barrel as she backed the horse around it in a circle. “Good job.” She rubbed his neck and then nudged him to go forward, just letting him walk around the outer edge of the arena.

Holding the reins in one hand, she thought back about last night and the information she had gathered... which amounted to practically nothing. *How could anyone get more squeaky clean then Jim... and Jess... Wade... and Mellissa... Trent... and his family?* Whatever was going on, it had to revolve around Derrick, she concluded. *But what?! What is going on?* She turned Machacho and began weaving him through the barrels. This morning her brain had been so twisted around possibilities, it was nothing more than a muddled mass of confusion. So she came here to try and unwind... to ride Machacho... and to revisit the source. She told herself that she was being a good neighbor, feeding and watering the horses while they were gone, even if they could probably manage with the stream and grass, but... Pulling Machacho to a stop next to the open barn door, she stared over his head at the house for a long while. Maybe the clue she needed was in there. Guilt of breaking and entering tugged at her conscious, but she desperately tried to justify it. *After all, they could be in deadly trouble. Maybe something inside that house could help me get them help, maybe even save their lives. Wouldn’t hurt you any to get a breaking news story either, would it?* Her conscious argued. *That is beside the point, and that’s not why I’m doing it!* She protested, knowing full well there might be a little white lie hiding in that statement somewhere... *but just a little one.*

Stopping to smile at Jess who was fervently trying to wash the caked mud off the window panes, Sam decided not to stop and help, but went over to where Derrick was lying under a tree, wanting to have a nice little chat with her older brother. “You asleep?” she asked, standing over him. He didn’t respond, so she lightly kicked his arm and asked again.

Opening one eye, Derrick looked up at her. “Not now.” Pushing himself upright, he leaned back against the tree for support.

Sam plopped down next to him. “You okay?”

Head throbbing, stomach feeling like it would lose all its contents if indeed it had anything in it, and unable to visually focus on far away objects, Derrick considered his words before he answered. “I’m fine.”

She smiled, pulling her knees up to her chest. “Some things never change. You are still the strongest person I know.” Derrick’s reaction to the praise was to halfway smile and look down, but he didn’t comment. “Other things....” She sighed, her voice trailing off.

“What things?”

She sighed again. “You never used to care about religion. Now it’s like your whole life! Like you said you’re fine, so why are you worried about death.”

“I’m not worried about death... anymore.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not worried about death. I’m worried about life. My life was a mess before I found Christ and now,” He paused. “now, things are starting to look up.”

Arms crossed, she tossed her hair behind her shoulders. “That’s just a coincidence.”

“No, it’s not.”

She looked at him indignantly. “There’s no difference between going to church and gathering together at some social function, or doing some sort of volunteer work, or listening to an inspirational speaker. They all make you feel good... if you go for that type of thing.”

“There is a big difference.” he said, bluntly. “And since when have I ever gone for that type of thing?”

Not looking at him, she shrugged. “You’ve changed.”

“Not that much.”

“You mean you’d never go volunteer at a food pantry or soup kitchen?” she asked, knowing full well that he did.

“Well, yeah, now.”

She nodded. “Like I said, you’ve changed.”

He smiled to himself, thoughtfully. *Yeah, I have, but it’s because of Christ.* “So have you. I never knew you were interested in being a model.”

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t in the cards for the boney, disproportioned little girl you knew back then.” She laughed, softly.

Derrick chuckled inside, but didn’t vocalize it. “Not a lifelong dream then?” His voice was hopeful.

She smiled back, but replied stubbornly. “Not one subject to change.”

Derrick shrugged looking ahead but then, turning back toward her, grew more serious. “Why do you want men to gawk at you? Wouldn’t you rather just have one that really cares about you, than a hundred that just want to use you?”

Obviously offended, she jumped to her feet. “I can be a model *without* being a sex object!”

“It doesn’t usually end up working that way,” His voice was matter of fact. “especially in a secular market.”

“I can’t control what men think. They ought to grow up and be responsible with their minds!”

FIRE BREAK

"It all comes out the same... because they're not gonna change." Spinning around on her heel, she started to stomp off in the other direction. "Sam, wait." She stopped but didn't turn around. "I just don't want you to get hurt." Hesitating a moment, she seemed to consider his statement, then walked away more slowly.

Waking up, Jess rolled over in her blanket. Feeling the dampness of the morning air, she stared up at the canopy of trees above her, listening to the songbirds singing their morning praises. Rolling onto her side, she watched a grasshopper jump from a cluster of dead leaves to a clump of pine needles near her head. Yawning, she sat up and looked around wondering where Jim was. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she stared at the morning sun glistening through the trees. They had not been able to get the cabin livable in time to sleep in it last night, but as far as she was concerned sleeping under the stars and then the morning sky had its benefits.

"Ohhh!" Mellissa slapped a mosquito against her neck as she sat abruptly. "Don't those birds ever shut up?" She slapped at another bug. "Wade?" She jerked around, looking in all directions. "Where'd the boys go?" She looked at Jess.

Jess glanced down at Morgan who was rubbing her eyes just waking up. "I don't know. I wonder, too." Morgan climbed up in her lap, and Jess pulled her close.

"Wonder what?" Sam yawned, but didn't open her eyes.

"Where the guys went." Standing, Jess swung Morgan up into her arms. "I'm sure everything's fine."

Skeptical, Mellissa rose her eyebrows and looked down, fingering the dirt. *Anything could happen out here.*

"Hey! Women of the house!" Jim yelled coming from the woods.

"Get the fire kindled!" Trent finished, arm draped over Jim's shoulder, both of them holding a string of good-sized fish.

"Fish?!" Sam looked surprised and outraged at the same time.

"Fish!" Jim flashed her a wide grin as they walked by. Sam didn't return it.

"Nuuutritious and deeelicious." Trent tossed his line around the branch of a tall maple tree and tied it joyfully.

"For Breakfast?" Mellissa grumbled.

"Oh, it'll be great. Just wait." Jim whistled as he started gathering wood. Excited, Jess hurried to help. It had been ages since she had had a good fresh-caught fish.

Kneeling beside her bed, Dr. Fredricks stared into his daughter's face, methodically rubbing her hand. He'd been here all night as if somehow, by holding on to her, he could will her to hold on to life. If somehow she pulled through this he promised himself ... and her... that he would be a real dad. That he would listen to her and talk to her and laugh with her and spend time with her. He promised to care about her, to be the kind of dad that she deserved... that she needed. He would learn to show emotion again. He would resurrect that portion of his heart that had died with his wife... if it was indeed humanly possible.

For too long he had convinced himself that he didn't need people that he didn't want them, that he just wanted to be left alone. He had dedicated himself to knowing everything that was possible for him to know. He had engaged in some sort of futile quest to stamp out sickness and death, to keep the horrors that he had to endure from coming against another living soul, if it was possible. He lived and breathed work. He had let himself become so absorbed in the statistics and procedures of saving a life that he had

FIRE BREAK

forgotten what life was. Life wasn't solely survival. That hadn't been Sandra's life. Her life had been her smile. Her life was in her laugh. Her life had been in her love. He suddenly realized that in his futile quest to save all life he had been living dead. He determined to change... if indeed it were humanly possible.

"Father?"

Dr. Fredricks looked up, startled by the gruff, familiar voice. "Mark?" For one awful moment, he wasn't sure if the image of his son in the doorway was real or only a vision. Casually, Mark walked up to the other side of the bed and stopped, looking down at Taylor. "What are you doing here?"

"One of your coworkers called me," he replied, bitterly.

Dr. Fredricks decided against mentioning that he didn't have his son's phone number. "You got here awfully fast."

"Took the first plane I could get. Figured someone better be here for her." His voice held disdain. "Don't you have some very important work to do somewhere?"

That stung, and it bred anger. Standing up, Dr. Fredricks was angry enough to slap him and it showed in his face.

"Don't you have some outbreak to deal with or something. Don't worry. You needn't stay. I'll fulfill your *obligation* for you."

"Get out!" Dr. Fredricks growled in a low voice.

"No." Mark's voice was just as low. His eyes narrowed as he pulled up a chair. "The last thing she needs when she wakes up... is you."

"Well, that was good." Jess tossed her empty plate next to the fire.

"Tolerable." Sam tossed her plastic plate on top.

"What's next?" Melinda got up and took her plate over.

"Well, one of us should do the dishes and the rest should start tacklin' that cabin." Jess hopped up.

"We're going hunting." Jim quickly spoke up for the men.

Jess gave him a playfully dirty look. "We have plenty of fish for lunch and supper."

"For lunch and breakfast," Trent corrected. "I'm not eating it three times a day."

"I'll do the dishes." Mellissa began collecting them.

"I'll help her," Sam added.

Hands on her hips, Jess just stared a moment at the dirt-laden shack and let out a long sigh. She was not tackling that thing alone. "Let's all do the dishes." She grabbed the pan from beside the fire.

"Did you bring any shampoo?" Sam began searching through the duffle bag.

"Outside pocket." Jess stacked the dishes in the pan.

"I thought you were gonna help us?"

Sam brushed the dirt off the knees of her pants as she got up. "It doesn't take three to do dishes. At least," She slap-rubbed her hands together trying to eliminate the dust. "I can wash my hair."

"Here you go, Honey." Mrs. Thomas handed Kara Lee a mug of coffee and sat down across from her at the table.

"Thank you!" Kara Lee took a long sip. "Mmmm... Coffee makes everything better."

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Mrs. Thomas smiled over the steamy mug she held in front of her. "You say you used to be an old college friend of Jim's?" Setting down her mug, she dumped some cereal for Davy on his highchair tray.

Lying, Kara Lee nodded. "Partners in crime," she laughed. Mrs. Thomas joined in. "He was quite the character in his younger years." Kara Lee laughed again, relieved to see the nod and laugh of confirmation from Mrs. Thomas.

"He certainly was." Mrs. Thomas smiled at Davy who had just thrown a Cheerio at her.

"He used to talk about you and your husband a lot. You must have been pretty special youth leaders." *Actually, I heard it from Jess, but what's it really matter?*

"We had some pretty special youth." She took a sip.

Kara Lee nodded slowly, looking convincingly sympathetic. "I work in the law enforcement field now, and last week he called me. I could sense something was wrong from the beginning. He was just about to tell me when we had to break the conversation off suddenly. I tried getting back with him later the next day, but I couldn't get a hold of him and then I saw this story." She laid the newspaper on the table, obviously not letting on that she was the one who wrote it. "It's telling about their disappearance." Mrs. Thomas looked down, nodding somberly. "I want to help." *And get a good story.* "Since I know Jim so well I think my chances of figuring this out are pretty good." *Actually, if the clues I got from his house are any indication, I think Mexico has a better chance of freezing over.* "I haven't seen him in years. Anything you can tell me would really help." At least the last sentence was true. She had long ago been gratified by the fact that her nose was of no relation to Pinocchio.

"Well," Mrs. Thomas sighed. "I don't know much of anything about this recent situation, honey, but what is it you'd like to know?" Mrs. Thomas offered sweetly, ignoring a strange nagging feeling that this girl wasn't all she said she was.

Following deer tracks through the uncut woods, Jim glanced over at Wade who was walking next to him. It'd been a while since he'd done anything with just Wade. Usually activities were either with a church group or the girls or including Derrick, now that he'd also become friends with him, but with Derrick needing rest and Trent staying behind to guard the campsite and the girls, it had turned out to be just him and Wade, which to Jim was reminiscent of the *good ol' days*. "Been a long time since we've been hunting together just us two." Wade grunted in acknowledgement. Jim tried again. "Every miss those days?"

Wade grunted in agreement.

"Of course, I wouldn't trade life now for anything. I love it!" Wade shot him a sarcastic glance and grunted in argument. "You don't?"

"There's nothing to love about my life right, now."

"What about Mellissa?" Wade didn't answer. "Don't you still love her?"

"It takes more than love to take a marriage."

"Like what?" He wasn't contradicting but trying to figure out how Wade was thinking.

"Money," Wade grumbled.

"Now that's not true." Jim was very matter-a-fact. "You can be married and live out of the back of a van."

"The van isn't paid for either."

"I wasn't referring to you." Jim smiled at Wade's determined dreariness. "I didn't know you were having financial difficulties."

"Everything about my life is difficult right now."

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Jim couldn't stop the "Yeah, right," look that came, and he knew Wade saw it. "Things can't be that bad."

Wade stopped abruptly and glared at him. "Things would be a lot better if I didn't have a wife, a mortgage, or a job, and was living at the dump!"

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Jim joked. "We have an extra room above our barn..."

Wade mumbled something inaudible as he resumed walking.

"...if worse comes to worse." Jim smiled.

Wade shot him an annoyed glance. "Just forget it."

Jim chuckled. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"Sure you are."

"No seriously." Jim got somber. "I'm concerned for you two. Why don't you tell me what's going on? You know you can trust me to keep it confidential."

Wade stared at the ground a few moments as if trying to decide. "Everything's such a confused mess right now... I don't know what to do."

"You mean because Mellissa wants to quit her job?"

Wade kicked a rock out of the way. "Because I want to quit mine." Jim stopped abruptly, shocked. Wade glanced at him but kept walking. "I didn't expect you to notice since you ride the engine. Ask Derrick. He's pushin' for it."

Jim allowed a confused expression. "What d' you mean 'pushing for it?'"

Wade shrugged. "Tryin' to show me up."

"I haven't noticed that."

"You aren't always around."

Jim decided it was pointless to defend Derrick to Wade. The emotions ran too deep for him to kindle a friendship there. "You're burnin' out?"

Wade stared straight ahead. "I don't know how much longer I can take it. It's getting so I can't sleep at night. It's getting so I start shaking inside every time I see blood. I'm afraid I'm going to freeze sometime and cost someone their life."

"If it's getting to you so much," Jim went around a branch, "you'd better quit... not just for the job, but for the sake of your health and your marriage."

"If I quit, I think that will be the end of my marriage."

Jim followed Wade in climbing over a log. "Mellissa would understand."

"I'm not so sure. Even if she did, I wouldn't. I'm not going to live supported by my wife."

Jim shrugged. "It'd just be temporary until you find a new job. Pray about it." Jim glanced at him, surprised by his sarcastic huff of a laugh. "What?"

"How long have some of those people *needing* work been listed in the prayer bulletin?"

Jim shrugged again. "God's plan is perfect."

"Yeah." Wade rolled his eyes. "I'm beginning to think that's an excuse to justify unanswered prayer."

"No and wait are both answers."

"Or polite stall letters."

Offended, Jim didn't answer. Wade stopped and turned toward Jim in anger. "Where was God last Easter when that young mother was hit by a truck and ended up losing her arm?"

"With the story."

"What story?"

"Her story. You don't know anything about what was going on in her life. The Bible says, *And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.* I'm not trying to be insensitive. I know

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it would be horrific for anyone, but if somehow that incident brought her to salvation, then it was well worth it, and I'm sure she would be the first to admit it."

"Don't you think that's a little harsh?" Wade hissed.

"Not when we're talking about an eternity in hell."

Wade resumed walking. "You don't know that that's what happened anyway. She could have been a good, godly young lady."

"Could have been. I've known of a few Christian families that have suffered great tragedies and have turned them into great good, using that platform to reach out and spread the good news of the gospel all over the world."

"Don't preach to me," Wade returned, angrily.

"Shhh." Jim raised his rifle, pointing toward the deer. Burying the gun in his shoulder, he aimed and fired. *BA-A-ANG!* The rifle kicked, making the shot seem to Jim as though it shook the forest.

Mrs. Thomas hesitated, "Well, Derrick has a cabin."

"A cabin?" *Alright! Now we're getting somewhere!*

Mrs. Thomas nodded. "Last time he was in trouble, he went up there."

Where? Tell me where? "You don't happen to know where it's at?"

Mrs. Thomas shook her head. "Just somewhere in Northern Wisconsin."

"He must have an address somewhere." Kara Lee said it thoughtfully, mainly to herself.

"I don't know," Mrs. Thomas took a sip of her coffee. "I hear it's pretty deep in the woods. It might not even have an address, honey."

"Someone's got to know," Kair mumbled.

"I'm sure someone must, but when I told the police about it, they said that there was no land registered in his name up there."

Kara Lee looked confused. "How can he own it and it not be in his name?" Mrs. Thomas shrugged and Kara Lee sighed within herself. Knowing nothing about this story was going to be simple.

Washing dishes in the river, Jess was getting tired of the melancholy silence, so she decided to splash some water at Mellissa.

"Hey!" Mellissa ducked another splash. "What are you doing?"

"Water fight!" Jess exclaimed playfully. Mellissa just glared at her, and Jess's smile faded. "Or maybe not." Mellissa went back to somberly scrubbing dishes. "Oh, come on." She sent a little splash her way. "You need to lighten up. I haven't seen you smile in weeks."

"Months," Mellissa muttered. She dipped the plastic plate into the river, the chilly water feeling good on her hand. "I can't believe all this is happening." Her voice carried a familiar whine. "Other people have plain old ordinary lives. Why do ours have to be so..."

"Complicated?"

Mellissa nodded. "We are up here all alone in the woods, being watched right now by who knows what kind of animals, washing dishes in a filthy river..." Jess peered into the river thinking it looked pretty clean to her. "...hiding from the mob!"

Jess smiled. "The Lord will take care of us."

"How do you know that?" Mellissa dipped a plate in their pan of boiling water.

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Jess stared into the water a moment before answering. "What makes you doubt Him?"

Mellissa hesitated. "He doesn't care about my marriage. Why would He care about this?"

"I think you're wrong there. I think He cares very much about your marriage."

"Then why is He letting it slip away?"

"Have you talked to Him about it?" Mellissa didn't answer. "Have you even asked Him to save your marriage?"

"Sometimes," she mumbled.

"Have you asked what you should do or say... especially during the hard moments?"

"I don't have time for my devotions any more... hardly ever."

"Leave something else out. That's the most important part of every day. You can't make your life turn out right without Him."

"I guess."

"And you certainly can't expect Him to make everything turn out well for you when you don't even include Him. The Bible says over and over, 'Ask.'"

Mellissa nodded. "I do need to do better in that area." She looked exaggeratedly around at all the trees. "Now, would be a good time. After we get done with the cabin, I doubt there will be a thing to do."

Jess smiled. "That cabin might take us till it's time to leave."

Mellissa laughed, "True." She put the last plate on the stack, then sighed. "I don't even have my Bible."

Jess put the last fork on the stack of plates then stood up, bent down, and picked up the stack. "I packed a couple extras."

Mellissa laughed. "Is there anything you don't have packed in that bag?"

Jess shrugged, innocently. "Jim would say, 'the kitchen sink.' That wouldn't fit."

Mellissa giggled then looked over at Sam, who was desperately trying to style her still damp hair. "Vanity, vanity." She laughed and followed Jess.

Jim glanced up at Wade standing over him as he gutted the buck. Wade's face seemed to get a shade whiter with every organ that came out of the deer's body. Now he looked to be swaying a little, his eyes glued to the bloody deer. "Maybe you should go sit down," Jim suggested, sticking his knife in the ground and shaking the deer a little, causing more blood to drain from the cavity in its stomach.

Blinking his eyes shut, rocking back on his heels, nearly losing his balance, Wade spun around and ran a few feet to behind a tree where he lost the contents of his stomach.

Jim looked down at the deer, smiling lightly to himself, feeling sorry for Wade. Wade was a strong man. Jim knew that all the overwhelming emotions coming at him right now were weakening him. He didn't want his friend to feel weak. His mind went back to all the happy times they had spent together hunting and felt a tinge of sadness that Wade may no longer be able to handle it, but his greater sadness was for losing a friend at work. He would miss not having his friend there with him, working, laughing, playing together like they had for years, and he wondered what would become of Wade and his family. What was it he would do now? The fire department had been his whole life. *Lord, please help Wade. Please, show him the way, and give me the words to say.*

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"Here you go." Jess came over to Mellissa who was sitting on a fallen log and handed her the Bible. "Don't feel like you have to rush. Me 'n Sam can manage fine with the cabin until you're finished. Just take your time."

"Thanks." Mellissa carefully opened the book to the middle. "I do try to read it every day even if it's only a couple of verses before bed, but sometimes I just can't stay awake." Jess just smiled, caringly. "I guess I could give up a TV show at night or listen to it on the way home from work."

Jess nodded. "You have to make it a major priority or the devil will make sure something comes up. That is one thing he doesn't want, you in the Word. He doesn't want your marriage to hang together, or for you to raise little Davy for the Lord or to serve in the church or to do anything that will further the cause of Christ, and believe me he will fight it!"

Mellissa nodded, speaking softly and thoughtfully. "I know."

Wade, who was carrying the back legs of the massive buck while Jim was toting the front, looked up at Jim. "I don't know how to tell her."

Jim looked back at Wade. "Tell Mellissa you're burning out?"

"All she can talk about any more is how she wants to quit her job and be a stay-at-home mom. How can I tell her that not only can she not quit, but she has to support me, too?"

"It's not her support you or even you supporting her. The Bible says when you get married you are no longer two, but one flesh. You're not individuals anymore; everything you have is shared. That includes the hard times. You can no more leave than the right side of your body could decide to leave. *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.* (Mark 10:9)."

"Yeah. She can bring home the paycheck, and I'll be the house wife."

"You don't know. You haven't even quit yet. Maybe the Lord has another job lined up ready for you."

"Like what?" he grumbled.

"It probably wouldn't take a lot to become a nurse if..." Wade was already shaking his head. "A 911 dispatcher would..." He was still shaking his head.

"I'm not staying halfway in. I couldn't do that. If I'm out, I'm out."

"Pray for wisdom. James one says, *'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.'* (James 1:5)."

"You're a regular walking Bible today, aren't you?"

Jim stopped walking and looked back at him. "It never used to bother you."

Wade nudged forward and started walking again. "I don't know. I'm not very happy with God right now."

Jim cringed, the statement seeming just short of sacrilegious, and it made him angry. "Why what is it you think God owes you?" He could hear the anger in his voice.

"He doesn't have to be so mean to me."

Jim stopped and turned around abruptly. "Oh, so it's God who's the bully now. Seemed to me that was the devil. Here I thought we were created for God and not the other way around."

Wade was silent a moment. "Yeah, but he blesses other people." They resumed walking.

"Everyone has their problems. They just don't all talk about it."

"Not everyone has as many problems as others." He tried to justify himself.

"That's God's business not yours."

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For the Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand. He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him. Mellissa read the last few verses of the third chapter of John and closed the Bible. She had started at the beginning of John, but just felt compelled to keep reading. Once she got started, she felt so thirsty, thirsty for the Word, thirsty for her Lord. It was just then that she realized how truly long it had been, too long to be without her spiritual food.

Closing her eyes, she let out a peaceful sigh and enjoyed the cool breeze, brushing past her face. Earlier she had felt so fearful, but now she was overflowing with peace. For the first time in a long time she felt calm. Her heart felt warm, and she felt safe. *Lord, I'm sorry it's been so long since I've really spent time with you. It feels so good. I guess I really needed it... in more ways than one. Life seems like such a mixed up mess right now, Lord. I'm not sure how to untangle the knots. You said, thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Please give me that light and show me the way to go. Please, show me how to save my marriage. Please, you save it because I can't. Wade won't even talk to me. I don't know what he's thinking or what his problem is. Please, please, Lord, don't let there be someone else. If there is, please destroy that relationship. Please, keep my husband only for me. Please give me wisdom and longsuffering in dealing with him. Lord, I'm afraid he's going to say he wants to quit his job.* She paused. *I'm afraid you're telling me he's going to say that. I can't support our family! I don't make enough! I know you promise to provide for us, but it's scary, Lord. I know you want me to trust you. If this happens just, please take care of us.*

After walking in silence for quite some time, Jim decided to take a chance and say something. "Jess packed some extra Bibles if you want to read one when we get back." As soon as Jim spoke the words, he was sure they didn't sound as innocent as they were intended to be.

"Oh, you think I need that, do you?"

"I think everyone needs that... every day... including myself."

"And you just naturally assume that I haven't been reading the Bible up to your standards."

"I wasn't assuming anything. Why? Haven't you been reading it?" Jim had a feeling he shouldn't be pursuing this discussion.

"Like everyone, I don't *always* have time."

"You have time to run every morning."

"I need that to stay in shape for my job!"

"You're not." Jim mumbled

"What?"

"You may be in shape physically, but that didn't help you keep your job because you neglected what was more important."

Wade dropped his end of the deer, causing Jim to jerk back and stop from the weight. Jim looked at him. "Go ahead and preach it, brother, but don't expect me to be around to listen!" Turning around, he stomped off in the opposite direction.

"Wa-ade!" Wade didn't acknowledge him. "Wade! I apologize! Don't go and get yourself lost!" He called after him, but Wade didn't even pause. *Lord, please don't let him get lost.* When he could no longer see him, Jim bent down and grabbed the buck.

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Flinging it over his shoulders, he headed back for the camp, continuing to pray for Wade to find his way... back to camp *and* back to Christ.

“Alright!” The older man quivered, staring into the barrel of the twenty-two pointed at his face. “Alright! I’ll tell you!” He glanced up with his only eye that wasn’t swollen shut at the evil gunman standing over him, slowly scooting from his place on the floor further back into the corner. “I’ll tell you.” He nearly whispered, grimacing from the pain of broken bones.

Brett glanced quickly at the end table. “Give me that note pad!” he ordered Stan. Walking over, Stan picked it up and tossed it to Brett, who caught it with one hand and quickly released it, throwing it into the old man’s face. “Draw a map!” Stan tossed the man a pencil.

“I wasn’t leading the search and rescue team last year. Just following. I don’t know,” he grimaced, “if I remember all of it.”

Brett growled. “You had better remember enough.” He pulled back the handle of the revolver, threatening. Blinking, the man swallowed hard and then began drawing on the paper.

Jerking the keys from the ignition, Kara Lee jumped from her jeep and hurried up the sidewalk as fast as she could before her final lead could disappear like the last three had. *Man*, she thought to herself, *chasing Derrick’s history is like chasing a black cat on a moonless night...* She hopped up the stairs. *...in circles... backwards!* She punched the doorbell hard. Derrick’s past had already taken her to two churches, his sister’s family, the family of a deceased wife, an orphanage, a cemetery, a hardcore Chicago gang, and finally... She punched the doorbell again, *Ding dong ding*. ... here. She hit it again, *ding dong ding*. She mentally warned this guy to be home... if he wasn’t, she concluded, she wouldn’t be responsible for her actions. She might just pull out all his geraniums for good measure. She hit it, *ding dong ding*. As far as she could tell, this guy was her last hope of finding someone that knew the whereabouts of Derrick’s cabin. If they used to be good friends, she thought and hoped that he had been shown the map. She went to press the bell again when all chaos let loose in the house, causing her to jump as a Great Dane, barking wildly ran full sped through the kitchen and living room, landing with a crash finish into the door. She jumped to the side, thinking the door was going to fly off the hinges with impact. It didn’t, so she peered in the side windows to see three dripping little kids in swimsuits run through the house screaming and chasing each other, a frantic dad carrying a beach towel in one hand, baby in the other, running behind.

Watching them run into the other room, she stepped back from the window, figuring she was going to have to wait a few minutes. She guessed she had a few minutes. She had ended up wasting hours trying to find the way from the police department up there that had gone in for Jim, Derrick, and Trent last year. They simply had “lost” the records. She couldn’t locate the chopper personnel, and she couldn’t get through on the phone to any of the three search and rescue experts. She had a nagging suspicion that their landlines had been cut and their cell phones were either stolen or deactivated. Peering back into the window, she rocked onto her tiptoes and back a couple of times. “Come on. Come to the...” The door swung open, and she leaped three feet, not seeing him coming from the other side.

“What do you want?” The man in his undershirt and jeans bounced a crying baby in one arm and held the giant dog’s collar with the other.

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“Ummm.” She stared down in a trance at the drooling animal, then broke her gaze and glanced up.

“Can I help you?” He yelled over the noise as his three kids ran over and started playing tag, running circles around him.

I think you need some more than I do. “Yes. I...” Just as she stepped forward, the dog broke loose, jumping up on the screen door and sending it crashing open. Frozen in time, seeing the mammoth Great Dane coming flying straight for her face, she took the only logical step and hit the dirt, letting the dog sail over top her. She didn’t wait for the dog to land before jumping up and hopping onto the nearby swing. Standing on her perch, watching the barking, snarling dog, she just shook her head. Nothing about Derrick was simple.

Smiling contentedly, Jess knelt next to the campfire, probing a log with a stick, looking around at the group. On one side of the fire, Jim and Derrick sat on the ground around Trent, nodding and laughing at some story he was telling. On the other side, Sam and Mellissa sat together on a log engaged in small talk, and a few feet away, little Morgan was curled up on a blanket fast asleep, exhausted from a busy day “helping” mom clean and then berry picking before supper, even if she didn’t pick any.

She glanced back at Jim who caught her attention by leaning forward to pull off a piece of meat from the deer roast they had cooked on a stick over the fire. In her opinion, fire roasted deer meat, fresh picked raspberries, and canned green beans had made for the perfect supper. Closing her eyes, she inhaled a deep breath of piney air. She almost felt guilty enjoying herself so much when they were supposed to be fugitives. She only hoped this was to be the extent of their adventure.

Jess’s attention drew to Sam who was looking over at her. “She’s worried about her husband.” She mimicked Mellissa, playfully.

“Hey!” Mellissa shoved Sam sideways. “Seriously. He’s been gone for hours. I’m worried about him.”

“I’m sure he’s alright,” Jess reassured. “He’s used to camping,” Jess laughed. “Remember those camping trips we used to take together. Remember how we would joke him about being Mr. Compass.”

Mellissa nodded, smiling half-heartedly. “I remember those days. Mr. Compass.” She spoke the words softly to herself. “I hope Mr. Compass can find his way back to me.”

Jess’s heart jumped when Derrick, grabbing his gun, jumped to his feet, and then Trent and Jim followed. “Someone’s coming,” Derrick warned.

“Girls, get behind the trees,” Trent ordered, motioning his gun in the direction of the forest. As they went, Jim went behind a large tree on one side of the campsite, and Derrick did the same on the other. Trent knelt behind the log the girls had been sitting on. All of them had their guns ready and were tensed, ready for action as the shadow slowly approached.

The shadow stopped a few feet from the light of the camp. “Hey! Hey, is anyone there?!” It was Wade’s voice. Cautiously, no one answered since they couldn’t see him. Wade slowly took a few steps forward, walking carefully into what looked like a quickly abandoned camp.

After it was obvious that Wade was alone, Trent stood up, dropping his gun to his side. “Where’ve you been?” Everyone came out from their hiding places.

“Having supper with our neighbor.”

“What neighbor?” Mellissa asked when she got close.

“Neighbor?” Trent grunted out the word, suspiciously.

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“An old man in a cabin a couple of miles away.”

“Jack Marticello,” Derrick confirmed. “He comes up and stays a couple of months every summer.” Trent relaxed a little, but just a little.

“Why didn’t you come back and have supper here?” Mellissa demanded.

“Don’t start!” He sneered at her and walked away.

Jess looked over into Mellissa’s hurt face, wishing she could do something or say something to help her friend, but what could she say?

Dr. Fredricks let out a sigh as he bent down to get a drink from the water fountain. Lifting his hand to wipe his mouth, he noticed it quivering. It was just then he realized how weak he felt from the effects of this ordeal. Craning his neck, he let out a sigh. Realizing he hadn’t eaten in nearly forty-eight hours, he debated going down to the cafeteria. The last thing he wanted right now was food. He felt guilty having a meal when Taylor couldn’t. He was afraid to leave her for too long, for fear she wouldn’t be alive when he got back. He didn’t want to face his coworkers and colleagues. He could see the whispers and only imagine the rumors. He was sure that in less than a couple of days, his son would have the whole hospital labeling him as the “Frankenstein father.”

“Dr. Fredricks?”

Dr. Fredricks turned around to see the staff’s newest intern standing there in his white lab coat, looking condescending.

Clicking his pen shut and sticking it in the chest pocket of his white lab coat, the young intern took a few steps toward him. “You need to get some sleep, Doctor.”

Doctor Fredricks resisted the urge to roll his eyes and just glared.

“If you insist on staying here, I can arrange for an extra bed to be...”

“Fine.” Doctor Fredricks walked past him.

“I’ll also see that some food is sent up.” He followed him.

“That’s not necessary.”

“I think it is.”

Dr. Fredricks resisted the urge to tell the punk off.

“Look, Doctor, I feel it’s my duty to tell you that if you continue to...”

Dr. Fredricks spun around, eyes hot with anger. “Boy, it is not your duty to inform me of anything, not that I would consider your opinion of any more value than a witch doctor’s anyway. I have no intention of standing here wasting my time listening to an unqualified kid without the proper experience to prescribe a dose of aspirin. Get out of my sight, and go back to your nursery!” He glared for a few minutes at the shocked intern before turning and heading back for the room. Turning the corner, he could see the bubble-burst intern still standing there, posture slumped, jaw hanging. He couldn’t help wondering if the kid was planning to take root there.

When Dr. Fredricks reached his daughter’s room, Mark was just coming out and stopped, blocking the doorway. “She doesn’t need you in there... and neither do I.”

“Then you can leave,” Dr. Fredricks growled, shoving past him into the room.

Mark turned around in wrath and spit out. “It’s your fault she’s like this! You did that to her. She’s a sweet little girl.” He spoke slowly and deliberately. “She deserves better than you for a father.” He waited a moment to let the venom filled comments sink in before, satisfied there would be no response, he turned around and left.

Stomping the accelerator, Kara Lee swerved into the right hand lane swiftly passing a semi, who she dubbed as “lingering” in the left lane. A quick glance at her speedometer

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effectively debunked that theory since it read ninety-five. She just shrugged. *There's hardly anyone out here at three in the morning, anyway... and I've got places to go, people to see, and a story to find!* Twisting her hands around the steering wheel, she bit her lip as nervous excitement raced inside of her. She was in the throes of a major caffeine and adrenaline high and *loving* it. She fed off mystery, intrigue, and fear... and right now, she was nearly full to the brim. Grinning eagerly, she glanced over at the shadow of her heavy duty, high resolution camera, nestled in its bag on the passenger's seat and let the excitement tingle through her veins. She concluded she was on her way to the story of a lifetime. *Look out, North Woods, cause the press is comin'!*

The day was barely breaking into dawn when Mellissa woke up. Rolling off the unreasonably thin mattress of the corner cot, she slipped on her shoes and made her way outside, looking for Wade. Not seeing him or his makeshift fishing rod, she decided to head down to the river and see if he was there. On her way past a box of supplies, she decided to grab Jess's Bible and take it with her.

When she got close to the river, she could see the shadow of her husband shrouded in the morning dew, sitting on the river bank, dangling his line in the water. Coming up slowly behind him, she ran her hand from one of his shoulders down the other and sat down next to him, bringing her knees up to her chest and draping her arms around them. Wade barely acknowledged her. "Where were you last night?" She gazed at him.

"I slept outside."

"Why?"

"It's more comfortable than the cabin."

She looked away. "You mean it's better than sleeping with me."

Wade hesitated. He didn't want this conversation, but he knew if they didn't work things out soon, their relationship was going to fall apart. "I didn't want to wake you up."

She looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't been sleeping very well lately."

"Oh." She looked down. "I thought you were annoyed with me."

"I'm annoyed with life right now." Swallowing hard, he turned and looked at her. He didn't know any other way to say it but to come right out with it. "I'm burning out. I want to quit my job."

"Wade." She felt breathless, fear overtaking her. Somehow she had wondered in the back of her mind, but she wouldn't accept it. She told herself that it wasn't true, that he loved his job. "When did this start?" She tried to stay calm although she felt shaky inside.

"It's been going on for quite a while." He looked back into the sparkling stream. "I held out as long as I could, but I don't think I can take it anymore. It's always with me... in my thoughts... in my dreams."

"Maybe... maybe there's some way you can find to handle it... so it doesn't get to you... maybe..."

Wade was already shaking his head. "I can't take it anymore. I have to quit. That's just... just what I have to do." He stared straight ahead. "If you want to marry someone else... someone who can provide for you..."

"The Lord will take care of us." She said it to herself as much as to Wade, staring dazed into the water. "You'll find another job. One that's better for you." She tried, unsuccessfully to keep the quiver from her voice. Wade just nodded, unsurely. There was a long silence, both consumed in their own thoughts. Mellissa looked up, jerking her attention back toward him. "Then it was never me?" Her eyes found hope.

Wade stared into her bright sapphire eyes for several minutes, overcome with the beauty of the morning sun reflecting through her hair. He shook his head. "I love you." Bringing his hand to her face, he ran it down the side. "More than anything I want to keep you... and the baby. I... I'm just a failure." His voice broke. "You can't quit your job," It broke again. "and be the mother you should... because I can't support you. Things change." He looked away, "If you want to leave..." He started to take his hand down, but she reached up and clasped it.

"We'll make it through... together. As long as we're together..." Tears burned her eyes, and she couldn't hold them back. "Don't leave me again," she begged, shaking her head. She sniffed back tears. "I feel like I've been alone for months... and I need you." She let the tears come. "I need you!"

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Looking back at her, Wade put his arms around her and pulled her close into a hug.

Brett barely broke speed as he pulled the car off the road and into the grass. Skidding to a stop, the tires spit up earth. "Okay! Let's go!" he shouted, grabbing his semi-automatic rifle and jumping from the SUV. Taking their guns, Stan, Jake, Mitch, and Donald followed.

Rolling over on the cot, Jess yawned, awakened by Jim getting up and sitting on the side of the bed. "A new day?" Jess stretched as she sat up.

"Yep." Jim rubbed his face.

"Thee day." Watching Jim nod slowly, she pushed down the covers and crawled over to him, stopping behind him. Draping her arms over his shoulders, she rested her face on his head. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"Trent will make sure you all stay safe."

"I'd feeler safer with you," she whispered in his ear. Turning around, Jim pulled her into a long romantic kiss. She stayed in his arms letting him hold her. "Isn't there some way to disguise Trent so he could go with Derrick and make it into the court house unrecognized?"

"You mean like bleach his hair blond and find a false mustache?"

"And the glasses. Don't forget the glasses."

Laughing gently, Jim whispered, "I love you," and pulled her into another minute-long kiss. Still staring into her eyes, he explained, "Even if there was time for all that, which there isn't, there would always be a greater risk from the start of the journey to the courthouse that he would be recognized, and with all we've been through, that's a risk we just can't take."

Lying in his arms, she stared up into his face. "I just don't want to risk you."

"I'll be fine... with God's help." He brought his face close to hers. "Pray for me while I'm gone."

"I will." They both kissed.

Dangling her feet in the water, Mellissa splashed it gently with one foot, though she tried to be careful not to scare any prospective fish. "Wade?"

"Huh?" He bobbed his line.

"I brought a Bible with me. You want to read it with me. We haven't had devotions together in a long time."

Wade nodded slowly but didn't respond, so Mellissa continued. "Want to read what you read to me on our first date?" She grinned as she opened the Bible to the middle and started looking for the twenty-third Psalm from there. "I was sure you were trying to tell me something."

Wade smiled back. "Just because *you* had only heard it in hospitals and at funerals, doesn't mean a thing. That used to be my mother's favorite Psalm," he said matter-a-factly, turning his head to look at her. "I figured you would like it, too."

"I do. You have effectively changed my perspective of it." Finding it, she began to read, *The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.*" (Psalm 23:1-3a)

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Bounding over a fallen tree, Kara Lee ran effortlessly with excitement. She had gotten here before dawn and flashlight in hand, had started out in the dark. After hours of replaying the map in her mind on the drive up, she knew she could find this place blindfolded. Just a couple more miles, and she would be there... at the source of the story... *the story of the year!* She ran harder. Even though she had driven through the night without sleep, she felt no fatigue. Any hint of it was masked by her nerve-tingling excitement. Her imagination was running wild, and her feet were doing a pretty good job matching it.

Sitting in a chair next to Taylor's hospital bed, slumped forward, head in his hands, Dr. Fredricks sat mulling the recent events around and around in his mind, mentally listing the things he should have done differently and trying to figure a way to improve in the future, not sure if he could. He felt numb, helpless, and depressed.

"Dad?"

Dr. Fredricks jerked his head up and over to the weak voice... Taylor's voice? He stared at her a moment... waiting... wondering... was he dreaming? "Taylor?"

Blinking her eyes open, she squinted at him. "Dad?" Her voice was hoarse and shaky.

Dr. Fredricks couldn't hold back the tears... tears of joy. Falling to his knees beside the bed, he grabbed her hand. "Taylor. You're going to be fine."

"Dad? Dad, what's going on?" Her voice was filled with fear. "The last thing I remember..."

He held her hand tighter. "Taylor, you're going to be fine. You're going to be fine, Princess." He intentionally used the old nickname, the one he hadn't used since his wife's death."

"I'm scared," she started to cry. "What's going on?"

"You are going to be fine, Taylor," he said, as if a command. "You are going to be fine."

Breathing hard, Kara Lee grabbed a root and dug her toe into the dirt, trying to climb up the very steep slope. After a few more hard efforts, she yanked herself up onto the grassy landing on the top and took a minute to catch her breath.

Startled by movement in the distance, she squinted, staring into the deep woods below her, trying to make out what it was. It didn't take her long to distinguish it as a group of hikers, but who? She couldn't tell. *Who else could it be?* Concluding it had to be Jim, Derrick, and the others, she let out a long sigh and swung herself over the edge heading back down the hill.

The closer she got to the group, the more she began to wonder about their true identity. Slowing down, she approached with caution until she could make out... *YIPE!* She jumped behind a tangle of black raspberries. *Way to go, Kara Lee. Find the assassins instead of the victims.* This was not the side of the story she wanted to be on.

For a moment she refused to exhale, for fear she would rattle a leaf, and they would hear it. *This could be it... the end... obliteration!* She stared wide-eyed at the group of armed gunmen, forcing herself not to shake.

As the gunmen started past, she was just beginning to relax to the point of terror when her heart jumped twenty feet at a rustle a few feet beside her. *A rabbit.* A rabbit whose gentle hip-hop seemed to be as loud as a jetliner. Then it happened. The bunny's

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hip rustled a branch and its hop shook a third of the bush. In horror, she watched as one of the gunmen turned around. Wincing, she squeezed her eyes shut, preparing to die. *Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, she recited fast in her mind, hoping it would put her in a little better standing before God. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be...* Suddenly noticing a surprising absence of obliteration, she mustered up enough courage to blink open one eye and then the other. Relief swept over her when she noticed the conspicuous absence of her murderer. The large villain was back with his group, standing near the swollen river's edge, looking for a way across. She glared at the rabbit.

Brett slung the strap of the rifle he'd been carrying over his shoulder. "There's no point arguing about it. We have to get acrossed. So, we either use the log or the rope."

"The log's wet," Donald insisted. "The water's too close."

"How did they get across?" Stan stared at the rope in bewilderment. "The women wouldn't of been strong enough to monkey bar it."

"It doesn't matter how they did it!" Brett yelled in anger. "Figure which way *you* are going to do it, and let's go!" Jumping up, Brett grabbed the rope and quickly monkey-bared himself across.

Watching Brett reach the other side and fall to the ground, Kara Lee wished he hadn't made it so easy. She wished he had at least gotten wet. *I wonder if... Cracklety-crunch. Hip hop. Cracklety-crunch.* She jerked her attention back to the rabbit. *Be quiet! Cracklety-crunch. Hip Hop. If you make one more sound, I swear, Cottontail, someday I will find you. Cracklety-crunch. And when I find you, you will be lucky to escape a pot of stew! Hip Hop.*

Kara Lee turned back to watch the second gunman as he effortlessly balanced his way across on the damp, mossy log, thankful that they didn't seem to notice her noisy neighbor.

Suddenly her stomach tightened from the knowledge that this is where things would start to get intense. The little group was being hunted. Sooner or later there would be a showdown... and from the artillery these guys were packing, she wouldn't lay five bucks on the good guys winning. At close range, those rifles could penetrate the wood of a cabin easily and make short work of anyone inside. Patting her camera case tied to her belt, she refused to entertain a single thought of going back. Watching the third hood easily monkey his way across, she sighed within herself helplessly. For the time being, the only thing she could do was try to will them to fall in.

Tying her bathrobe around her, Melinda yawned as she walked into her kitchen and pulled a box of cereal out of the cupboard. Stopping by the refrigerator, she gazed at the picture of her baby niece inside a magnet heart frame on her fridge. Her face fell. She wanted that. She wanted to know the feeling of holding her own little baby, innocent...helpless... totally dependent... a little life that would hold onto her, hug her, and love her. A little life made from the love of her and her husband.

Opening the door, she thought of Carlos as she grabbed the milk. Maybe she was too picky. Maybe there was no "perfect" guy. After all, at her age, she wasn't swamped with options. Maybe she had been too hard on Carlos. *After all, lots of men drink*, and she figured anyone that drank could possibly get drunk and fly off the handle. Maybe she had

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judged him too harshly. Maybe he didn't have to be a Christian for them to get married. Maybe through her example she could bring him to Christ.

Derrick tossed his plate next to the fire, looking earnestly at Jim. "We need to get going."

Jim looked down at his half eaten fish. "Mind if I finish this first?"

Derrick looked annoyed.

"The trial doesn't even start until eight in the morning tomorrow. Relax." Jim took another bite.

Derrick crossed his arms. "You don't know what might happen between now and then."

"Derrick." Jim talked while chewing. "We'll have the drive there and be all set for the trial - at the latest by suppertime."

"Assuming," Trent got up and brought his plate over, "everything goes without a hitch and nothing happens to the hard drive on the way." He tossed it on top of Derrick's.

"If anything does, there is another at the post office. In fact, there is another copy at each post office on that side of the city."

Jim gave him a puzzled glance as he got up. "How do you set up all those post office boxes without someone getting suspicious?"

"It wasn't easy." Eyeing Jim as he dropped his plate on the pile, he quickly added, "You ready?"

Jim glared over his shoulder. "In a few minutes. You mind if I say, 'Goodbye' to my wife and baby first?"

Rolling his eyes, Derrick turned around muttering, "You should have done that already," as he walked off.

Shaking his head, Jim went toward the cabin to find Jess. He figured he better make this a quick "goodbye" or *Derrick might just...* "Jess?" He walked inside.

After a few minutes, Jim came out of the cabin with Jess and Morgan and walked with them to the fire. "Okay, Derrick." Derrick walked over. "Let's all gather around and have a word of prayer first and then I'm ready to go." Everyone gathered around, and Jim began. "Father, I want to thank you first of all for keeping us all safe so far. Thank you that everyone here knows You and has a home waiting for them in heaven if anything should happen, but I ask that nothing would, that You would keep each of us safe so that we can be together as You have placed us in this world. You know that very soon me 'n Derrick are going to be heading for Chicago for this trial. We pray that..." Pausing, he jerked his head up, feeling the presence of someone behind him. "GET DOWN!" he yelled, tackling Jess and Morgan. Everyone else hit the dirt just as a spray of bullets came at them. Over top Jess, who was over top Morgan, Jim quickly crawled with them toward some bushes, praying all the way. He could hear Jess repeating over and over, "Lord, help us. Keep us safe."

Once they were safe behind the bushes, though still over top of Jess, Jim ventured to look up and tried to see the gunmen through the gaps in the bushes. He didn't see them, so he looked around, trying to find his friends. He saw Trent and Sam behind a tree to his right and Wade and Mellissa behind some bushes to his left, but he didn't see Derrick.

Wade did. He watched Derrick crawling through some long grass in an attempt to get behind the gunmen. Wade couldn't see the men and had no idea how many, but every once in a while, he would get a glimpse of the reflection of a rifle barrel. Scooting closer to Mellissa, Wade put his arm around her and held her tight.

Jim, noticing Trent aiming his gun from behind the tree and then returning fire, he rolled off of Jess, pulled his gun from his holster, and began loading his clip. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of Jess starting to crawl away. "Jess!" he yell-whispered. She either didn't hear him or didn't listen. "Jess!" She crawled faster, hurrying through the long grass toward the hunting rifle on the ground a few feet in the clearing. Jim returned heavy

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fire, hoping to keep the gunmen occupied. Jim mentally prayed faster than he could talk when Jess reached the end of the long grass and quickly hopped into the clearing, reaching for the rifle. A shower of bullets spurted up dirt inches from the rifle, regardless Jess grabbed it, spun around, and dove for the grass. Being chased by bullets, she sprint-crawled as fast as she could, until she was back behind the bullet tattered bushes. "That tree!" Jim yelled, knowing these bushes were no longer good cover. Picking up Morgan, he ordered Jess, "Go!" Jumping up, she ran for the tree, and Jim ran behind her. Bullets chased them. Jim felt lead rip though the side of his pant leg, but it didn't make contact with his leg. They dove together behind the tree, just barely escaping the cascade of slugs.

Derrick who was using his forearms to pull himself through the long grass, belly crawled behind a fallen tree and stopped behind the giant tangle of uprooted roots and dirt from a fallen tree. Coming up to his knees, he peered above the log, looking around until he saw one of the gunmen. Watching the gunman take another clip from his vest and shove it into his gun, he tried to devise a plan. Glancing around, he couldn't see any of the other gunmen close by. He decided that if he stayed low, he might be able to crawl through the tall grass, and over to a large oak that stood adjacent to the maple the gunman hid behind. He gazed at the tree and the adjoining branches at the top. Letting out a deep breath, he decided he could probably climb up the oak, over to the maple, and then down to the gunman. He only wished he had a gun for when he got there, but he guessed he would have to make do somehow. Getting down on his stomach and beginning to crawl, he decided to give it a go. Pulling himself along the ground, he gritted his teeth against the pain of his still blistered side.

Wade, still frozen to the ground, one arm around Mellissa, able to see both the gunman and Derrick from his vantage point, silently watched the scene unfold.

Derrick pulled himself further and further through the long grass, until reaching the oak tree, he pulled himself behind it. Sitting up, he leaned back against the trunk and tried to catch his breath. Sweat dripped from his temples. His head was beginning to ache. The loud bangs of constant fire felt like they could split his skull.

Looking up, the array of branches blurred in and out of focus as he stared to the top of the giant tree. He tried to blink his vision clear, but instead the sky and tree began to spin. He stood up and faced the tree, still gazing up, but he felt even more dizzy. Falling forward he caught himself on the tree and blinked his eyes closed. Suddenly he saw Sam in his mind's eye, lifeless, then screaming, falling, burning. Startled, he blinked his eyes open. A dark fear overcame him, sending chills up and down his spine. His body began to quiver inside and he noticed his rapid breathing. Never was the knowledge so real as it was now. If Sam died... if she got shot at and died right now... if she didn't know Christ... if she didn't have Jesus to take her into heaven... she would not be entering heaven. Feeling a surge of energy, he gritted his teeth and grabbed a branch. He still held the guilt of letting his wife down years ago. He was not going to repeat history with Sam. *Lord, help me*, he prayed as he grabbed another branch and pulled himself up into the tree. Sweat dripped down his neck and soaked his collar as he jerked himself higher and higher, climbing from branch to branch as quietly as he could, pain seeping through his side and ribs at every swing of his body and stretch and strain of his arms.

Near the top, finally finding a branch that went across from the oak to the maple, he stepped from branch to branch until he was standing on it. Head throbbing, stomach churning, he felt dizzy when he looked down and began to sway backwards. Grabbing the branch above him, he held tight and closed his eyes, praying as he tried to steady himself. Finally, when he'd regained his balance and the nausea had lessened he reopened his eyes, glancing down at the firing madman beneath him but quickly returning his attention to the task at hand. *God, give me strength to make it. Please, give me strength.* He couldn't believe he was praying to Him and mad at Him at the same time. Holding the

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branch above him, he started across. His leg, nearly numb from pain threatened his safety as it quivered under his weight. *Lord, please make it stop shaking. Make it stop.* He had to lift it high to keep it from dragging and had to concentrate to put it in the right position.

Eyes wide, Kara Lee peered from her spot inside a small, excessively fluffy pine, grateful for the wonderful cover, but annoyed at all the pine needles in her vision that prevented her from taking pictures. Even with the annoying pine needles, she had decided this was the perfect vantage point. She could see nearly everybody: four of the five gunmen scattered about, Wade and Mellissa, huddled together, clinging to the ground, Jim and Jess both firing with rifles, Trent carefully choosing a target and firing at it with his hand gun, and Derrick, precariously climbing from one tree to the next, teetering over the head of a raging gunman.

Her attention drew to Derrick as she watched him wobble across the limb, nearly losing his balance three times. Kara Lee chewed her nail as she watched. *He sure knows how to give new meaning to the phrase, "out on a limb."* Watching him eagerly, she held her breath each time he nearly lost his balance. Crossing her fingers, she mentally rooted for him to make it. He was almost there when. *Uh oh.* Her eyes widened as she watched him sway to the right... too far to the right... back to the left... too far to the left... reach for a branch... reach... reach... but... not in time. *Ah-h-h!* She covered her eyes as he started to tumble, but spread her fingers a little to peak through. Down... down... down... straight for the gunman. Inches above him, Derrick reached out for the man just as he was starting to look up, but before the villain could react, they collided, both of them crashing to the ground. *BANG!* The gun went off. Kara Lee's heart froze and her jaw dropped as she stared at them both motionless on the ground. In her line of work, she had seen death many a time. She'd even grown kind of accustomed to it, but somehow with Derrick it was different. She admired him. He intrigued her. She wanted to unravel his mystery. She wanted to get to know him, but now.... Her face fell and sadness overcame her.

For the first time, Wade left the ground and jumped to his knees. *Derrick?* Was he dead? The gunmen stopped firing first. Then so did Trent, Jim, and Jess. The scene went ghostly quiet. Wade glanced at Jim and Jess, seeing the puzzled look on their face, knowing from their position they couldn't see what had just transpired. Seeing Mellissa glance up, he saw her eyes fill with horror and he knew what she was going to do. Grabbing her mouth, he tried to muffle the scream.

"What happened?" Sam stepped forward to peer around Trent, but he pushed her back. Her brow furrowed more in curiosity than in concern. "Why'd they stop?"

"Come on." Grabbing her arm, he pulled her to the ground. Crouching low, they hurried behind some shrubs until they came to a clearing. "Let's go!" He grabbed her arm as they jumped up and raced across a clearing to Jim and Jess. A couple of shots commenced as they dove for the bushes, but both missed.

"What's going on?!" Jess was the first to ask.

Trent was breathless as he spoke. "Their man and..." he gave a quick glance at Sam. "got shot. There's..." He gasped for breath. "We need to get to that cave!" He pointed toward it with his gun.

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“Where?” Jess didn’t see anything.

“I remember.” Jim said.

“We’ve got to get there during this lull. Sliding on his knees to the other end of the bushes, he motioned for Wade, speaking in a loud whisper. “There’s a cave.” He motioned in its direction. “Follow us!”

Mellissa got to her knees. “You go!” Wade pushed her away as the group started to run. She glanced back at him in horror, realizing he wasn’t coming, but didn’t pause either as she made a mad dash after the group.

When the remaining gunmen finally realized what was going on, they commenced firing, but the group was already out of range, all except Wade who was slowly and cautiously crawling behind the bushes and the fallen tree, trying to make his way to Derrick. Overwhelming feelings of monstrous guilt and fear overshadowed him. All he could do was pray a simple prayer of, *Let him be alive. God, let him be alive*, as he crawled.

Kneeling behind the tangle of roots from an uprooted pine where Derrick had been just minutes earlier, Wade stared at the two motionless bodies lying in a pool of blood, then noticing movement out of the corner of his eye, he glanced around to see the other four gunmen leaving their posts and running boldly into the brush after their enemies.

After a few minutes when Wade was sure it was clear, he ventured out, crawling toward the two bodies.

Jess dove into the cave after Jim and Sam and looked back to see Trent and Mellissa diving through the branches and piling in after her. “Where’s Wade?!”

“He...” Mellissa stood up and walked back to the mouth of the cave. “He didn’t come!” Her voice shook in a high pitched squeal. Trent got up and followed her. Taking her by the shoulders he guided her from the cave’s mouth, but she pulled away. “He’s out there!” She screamed. “Someone has to go get him!” Realizing it as a suicide mission, no one volunteered. “Someone has to get him!” She looked in desperation toward Jim. He answered her by looking to his own family. “He’ll get killed,” she cried. “Someone has to get him,” she gasped through sobs. Falling to her knees, she began to weep.

Almost afraid to find death, Wade walked carefully toward the bodies. His skin crawled the closer he got to the blood. He stared at Derrick face down on top of the gunman and considered running away... as fast and as far as he could, but then.... Startled by movement, Wade glued his eyes to Derrick’s midsection, finally concluding that he was breathing... breathing at a steady, normal pace. Relaxing, convinced that Derrick was faking, he put his hands in his pockets, slowly walked over, and nudged Derrick’s side with the toe of his shoe. “The coast is clear,” he declared and watched Derrick effortlessly roll off of the body. Standing up, Derrick clutched his wet, blood matted shoulder where the bullet had gone through him before passing into the gunman’s heart.

Kara Lee nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw Derrick get up, hitting her head on the branch above her. *Ouch*. Rubbing it, she stared at Derrick as he began talking to Wade. *That...* She mentally cursed him out for scaring her like that.

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After the shock had worn off and she watched the two men start heading in the other direction, she propped her elbow on the branch in front of her and rested her chin in her palm, hard-pressed to make the decision. Which story should she follow? The group pinned down in the cave or the two men setting off to get help and most likely trying to deliver the hard drive. She glanced from one direction to the other many times before deciding. Breaking out of the tree, she ran after Wade and Derrick. She had no idea how the group would fare in the cave, but somehow she just had a feeling that Derrick would somehow make it through.

Kneeling down near the mouth of the cave and sitting back on his heels, Jim peered out in between the branches of the brush that covered the cave's mouth. He looked over at Trent who was on the other side staring out, gun in hand. "See anything?"

"Yeah." Trent squinted, looking in the distance. "They're coming."

Jim looked back out, scanning the landscape carefully until movement caught his eye. He saw flashes through the trees of one coming down the hill on the right and another to the far left. Every once in a while, he caught a glimpse of movement in the middle. "They fanned out." It was simply an observation.

"Uh huh." Trent grunted then quietly added, "That probably means they know where we are." He paused. "We'll know in a few minutes."

Jim looked at him. "How?"

"When they reach the edge of the woods. They'll either cross the meadow, or they'll hunker down and try to keep us pinned. They won't go into open ground if they know we're right here in the cliff where we could knock them off."

Jim looked back out, realizing what Trent meant. "Why would they be fanned out if they were planning to cross the meadow?" Trent just nodded. Jim looked back at the girls huddled in a back dark corner. His gaze narrowed on Jess. He watched her clinging tightly to Morgan, rocking her back and forth nervously. Suddenly he felt very defensive, very protective, very angry. *If anyone, anyone, tried to hurt them...* He gritted his teeth.

BANG! Jim jumped backwards. Sam gasped. Mellissa screamed. Jess buried her head in her bent knees, covering her daughter, who started crying. Trent fired back once, immediately regretting it. Jim grabbed his rifle. "No!" Trent put up his hand. "Maybe they're still not sure where we..." *BANG! BANG! BA-A-A-ANG!* Bullets bounced off the hillside and cut through the brush. A few made it in the cave, going down the shaft. One rickshayed from side to side in the cave's mouth. Everyone but Trent and Jim fell to their faces and covered their heads. Jim began to return fire. Trent holstered his handgun and got a rifle for longer range and began returning fire in the general direction, unable to see any of the hidden gunmen.

After a few minutes the firing stopped. Jim looked back at the girls. Mellissa was crying. Morgan was screaming beneath Jess who was shaking and praying rapidly out loud. Sam was curled up in a small cavity in the cave's side. Jim heard Trent start to speak, but didn't look at him. "Don't fire back and waste ammo unless you see one of them coming. They can't advance toward us without crossing the meadow first, giving us an easy shot."

Jim looked back at Trent his voice strained. "How long can we hold out?"

"Without food or water?" Trent looked skeptical. "Not as long as them."

"Wait."

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Wade turned back to look at Derrick, who'd been lagging behind and watched him as, staggering, he fell to the ground. Wade walked back, stopped, and stood over top of him. "I don't think you're going to make it."

Derrick rolled onto his back, eyes closed, breathing hard. "This time you might be right."

Wade knelt down next to him, grabbed his wrist, and jerked his hand away from the wound. Ripping the fabric, he pulled back the blood-soaked shirt and examined the wound. The bullet had passed completely through. The point of entrance had stopped bleeding from the pressure. He turned Derrick over. The exit wound was still bleeding. He took out his handkerchief and put pressure on it. He had assumed from Derrick's demeanor that most of the blood soaking his side was the other guy's and not his. Now, he wasn't so sure. The wound was very close, too close to his collar bone. Wade tried to see its position better among the clotted, crusted, and liquid blood, wondering if it could have nicked the artery. Wade sighed. "What about your neighbor?"

"Jack?" Derrick's voice was weak, and he didn't open his eyes.

"Yeah." Wade stood up and reached down for Derrick. "He's not that far. Maybe he has a first aid kit." He pulled him up. "Come on." Putting his shoulder under Derrick's arm, he supported his weight... nearly all of his weight. "Come on. Help me out here." Putting his weight on his bad leg, Derrick's knee buckled and he fell back down taking Wade with him. Frowning, Wade crawled out from under Derrick and wiped his bloody hands on the grass. Usually, this much blood would have his head spinning. Somehow being Derrick, it didn't affect him that way, the realization of which only made him feel guiltier. "Come on." He pulled him back up, on the other side this time so he could put his weight on his good leg. "You can practically see the cabin from here," he grunted under Derrick's weight as they started to walk.

Jim paced back and forth inside the cave when there was a lull in the firing. The girls who were huddled in the corner watched him. "What are we going to do?" Jess asked. Trent, who was sitting near the cave's mouth rifle in hand looked back, and Jim looked at him, not knowing how to answer. "All we can do is play it by ear for now," Trent answered, "and pray."

"Wade and Derrick are out there somewhere," Sam added, hopefully. "Maybe they're getting help."

Trent caught a pained glance from Mellissa, and he didn't know if she was thinking about Wade or about Derrick. "Maybe," he nearly whispered, not knowing how he would ever break the news of Derrick's death to Sam.

"Oh, Derrick, come on," Wade whined as Derrick released his grasp and fell to the ground. "You can see the cabin from here." Wade nodded toward it, glancing at Derrick on the ground.

"Just give me a minute," Derrick said breathlessly, rolling onto his back, his face ghostly pale.

Wade knelt down next to him. Sighing, he clasped his hands on either side of Derrick's shoulder, putting pressure on the wound, but not particularly bothering to be gentle. Derrick jerked from the pain. "Sorry," Wade grunted, but he didn't mean it.

"Sure," Derrick muttered. Then, looking up at Wade with a pale, sweat-dropped face, he asked, "What's your problem with me?"

"You mean before or after you got it in your head to get me thrown off the force?"

FIRE BREAK

Derrick lifted his head. "You've caused some serious delays and almost made a few mistakes, and I've never reported you."

"You're always watching me... waiting."

"You only think I am."

Wade laughed. "Like you weren't trying to publicly humiliate me that day at Look Out Point."

Derrick closed his eyes again. "Believe it or not, I wasn't."

"Yeah, well, I don't believe it. You'd say anything as long as you need someone to..."

"I never asked for your help."

"Yeah, well, what was I supposed to do? Let you die?" he hissed.

Derrick looked at him, soberly. "But you wanted to. Didn't you?"

Wade did a double take at what he feared might be an honest reality. Standing, he pulled Derrick to his feet. "Come on. It's only like a hundred yards away."

Huffing and puffing from the exertion, Donald ran to where Brett was and slid down on his knees. "D' you get it?" Donald shook his head, breathlessly, and immediately, Brett's face reddened with anger. "Where's that drive?!"

Donald swallowed hard, gasping for air. "He's gone!"

"What do you mean, 'gone!' He's dead. He couldn't just get up and walk away!"

"Either he did or someone swiped him! Jake's there, but he's gone!"

Brett rolled his eyes as he changed the clip in his hand gun. "I'll go see for myself. You stay here." He started to crawl away and then looked back. "You think you can manage to keep them pinned down?"

World spinning, stomach churning, breathing shallow, heart speeding up, Derrick prayed for strength, just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other on the longest 100 yards of his life. He was so consumed with the next step that he was surprised when they stopped at the bottom of the porch. Looking up, he swayed backwards, the cabin blurring in and out of focus. He felt Wade grab the front of his shirt to hold him upright. "Hey!" Derrick grimaced at the shout from Wade that seemed powerful enough to crack his skull open. "Hey, Jack, are you there?"

After a few minutes, the older man came to the door, rifle at his side. "Wade?" he asked coming down the stairs, obviously puzzled by the figure of Derrick, nearly limp next to Wade. "Derrick? Is that you, Son?" he asked as he descended the stairs and came closer. "What happened to him?" He looked at Wade.

"He's been shot." Wade tried to reposition Derrick, struggling under his weight. "Can we go inside?"

"Sure." Jack got on the other side of Derrick and helped bring him up the stairs and into the cabin. "The bed's over there." Jack pointed to a cot by the wall, leaving Derrick, to turn up the kerosene lamp. "I was up last night hunting, so I was just trying to catch a few winks," he explained the darkness as he went to light another lamp. "How did this happen?" He came over to look at Derrick lying on the bed. "He doesn't look so good, does he?"

After kneeling beside Derrick, taking his pulse, Wade stood up. "Do you have a first aid kit?"

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“Yes.” The old man lead him over to a cabinet in the small rustic and rusted old kitchen. “My wife always makes sure that I’m all stocked up for first aid whenever I’m up here alone.” He opened the cabinet.

Wade raised his eyebrows at all the supplies. “Good for your wife.” He started turning around bottles to read the labels. He smiled. “You could be the mobile medical unit for up here.”

“I use to be a medic in the army in my younger days and, just from looking at him, I’d say I don’t have what that young fellow needs.” Wade stopped scanning the labels and looked at him, fearing that he understood what the old man meant. “Blood.” Wade nodded slowly, soberly looking back into the cabinet.

After being told that he couldn’t go in his sister’s room at the moment because the doctor was in with her, Mark made his way to the waiting room. Seeing his father reading a magazine, he contemplated whether to sit across from him or opt for the other side of the room. He decided to give close range a try.

Doctor Fredricks didn’t look up when his son sat down. “Where have you been?”

“Gotta eat supper sometime.” Flopping down in the chair, Mark roughly grabbed a magazine from the table next to him and opened it on his bent knee.

“They have a cafeteria here.” He still didn’t look up.

Mark huffed. “Only those with sour stomachs can subsist on that slop.” He began thumbing through the pages.

Doctor Fredricks resisted the urge to glance around and make sure none of his coworkers had been close enough to hear that remark. “Like me, huh?”

“I doubt your stomach’s any different from the rest of you.”

Dr. Fredricks ground his teeth, trying to quench the fire beginning to burn in his stomach. He distained disrespect. He wouldn’t take it from a nurse or an intern. He didn’t know if he could take it from his son. Staring down at an article about the golf championship, he tried to forget about it. He had more important things to occupy his mind anyway, like his daughter’s insistence she talk to the doctor *alone*. Taylor wasn’t like that. Sighing, he stared off into the distance. Given a choice, she didn’t like to do anything alone. Even if he *had* basically forced that lifestyle on her. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that she was the type that needed a lot of support. That he reasoned was her biggest need and that had been his biggest failure.

Jack watched Wade as finished cleaning Derrick’s wound and then tossed the bloody gauze in the trash. Looking at his bloody hands, Wade swallowed hard. Trying to avoid impending vomit, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back. He thought he was too angry with Derrick to get emotionally attached, but obviously that was not continuing to be the case. “You okay, son?”

“I’m fine.” He didn’t open his eyes.

“You don’t look fine.” Helping him out of the chair, Jack exchange spots with him and then picked up the sterile needle they were planning to use to stitch up the wound. “Not very good with blood, aye?” Bending over a nearly unconscious Derrick, he inserted the first stitch, glancing at Wade who was washing his hands.

“I’m a paramedic. I make my living around blood.” He called over his shoulder.

Jack couldn’t hold the surprise. “Burning out?” he questioned.

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Wade's first reaction was to deny it but instead decided not to respond as he finished washing his hands. After he was done, he walked over and plopped down in Jack's easy chair and sighed. "What if I am?"

Jack shrugged, knotting off the first stitch. "Nothing to be ashamed of. It happens to a lot of folks."

Wade huffed a bitter laugh. "Oh, I won't be ashamed. I'll proudly walk with my wife and baby into the soup kitchen."

Jack smiled. "I doubt it will come to that. You'll find other work."

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you are."

"In the meantime, remember, *my God shall supply all thy needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*"

Wade just glared at him. Why was everyone in his life, even complete strangers forcing the Bible down his throat? "You're a Christian?" *too.*

Jack nodded. "The Lord's been very good to me. What about you?"

"The Lord's not been very good to me, lately," Wade muttered under his breath.

Jack had to smile at Wade's tone. "Are you a Christian?" he requested, mid-stitch.

"Yeah, but I'm not real happy with Him right now." Wade had to double take at the anger and indignation that immediately filled the old man's face as he looked at him.

"What is it that you feel God *owes* you?"

"He doesn't have to take my job away."

"*He's* not taking it away. You are the one that can't handle it. You're quitting remember?" Wade looked the other way. "And even if you did lose your job, you are pretty bold to blame God for it."

"He could have stopped it if he wanted to, or He could give me something else. I've been looking for months, and there's nothing to replace it."

"Have you asked him to? *Ye have not because ye ask not.*"

Wade stuttered. "Yeah. Some. Besides these are just my needs, and like you said He promised to supply my needs."

"And what are your needs?" Jack went back to work.

"I don't drive a Corvette if that's what you mean," Wade hissed. "I have a minivan that I *need* to pay off. I have a house payment. I need to pay the electric, gas, and water, the post office box, the insurances, the phones, gas for the car, clothes. I need a new garage door opener, the security system needs fixing, the water softener needs repaired, and our vacuum is about to conk out, and those are just a few things. How do *you* presume I should survive without a job? Do you think all these things will pay themselves?"

"There's one need you didn't mention?" Jack spoke calmly.

"What?" Wade's voice still held exasperation.

"Food."

Wade rolled his eyes. "No kidding. That's a little obvious."

"Maybe not so obvious. I'm willing to bet you've been neglecting your spiritual food for a long time. Am I right?" Wade didn't answer. "The Bible has a way of putting things in perspective. I notice you didn't mention your wife. The Bible says, *husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.* Are you willing to die for your wife? Last night you seemed a little upset with her. I don't know why, but are you doing everything it takes to keep you two close together? Is she more important to you than the house and the car? You didn't mention your baby. The Bible says, *Children are an heritage of the Lord and the fruit of the womb is His reward.* Are you thanking God every day for a healthy child? You mentioned electric and gas and phones and a post office box. Can you even imagine the reaction of Moses or King David or King Solomon, Peter or the Apostle Paul to an air conditioned house, or running water or

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mail that got there in days instead of months, delivered by a truck instead of a runner? Can you imagine what they would think of a telephone, much less a portable one you can hold in one hand? What do you think they are thinking when we complain about a broken TV or a dysfunctional dishwasher?" Wade looked down. "What have you thanked God for recently? Your job? Your family? Your health? Your freedom? The Bible says, *In everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*" Jack stopped as if he was finished, but then he came back with one more thing. "What is it you think the KING OF KINGS owes you?"

"Nothing."

"You must already know that you are pregnant?" The lady doctor asked standing next to Taylor's bed.

Taylor looked the other way. "I kind of guessed." She glanced back at the doctor. "Is the baby alright?"

"From all the tests we've taken so far, it seems to be, but we can run a couple more to be sure. You are very young. You need to consider all your options carefully."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean are you ready to be a mother? Are you prepared to support a baby? Are you going to be able to handle all the responsibilities of raising a child? Will your parents be supportive and willing to help with the care of a child? Are you willing to give up your youth to be tied down to a family?"

Taylor felt like bursting into tears. "What else can I do?"

"There are other options... safer options for you then going ahead with this."

"You mean an abortion?"

"It would be better for you and the child than raising it in an unhappy and unwelcoming environment."

Taylor let her face show disagreement. "I don't see how that can be true."

"Honey, are you ready... really ready to raise a baby?"

Taylor looked away. "No."

"If you have this baby, it means you will no longer be a child. You will be a mother with all the responsibilities and limitations of a mother. It will be very difficult for you to finish high school, attend college, go to parties with friends, even have romantic relationships."

"It was a romantic relationship that got me into this mess to begin with."

"You do have to be careful, but you weren't the only one involved, and you do not need to be carrying that guilt right now. This was not your fault, and there are things we can do to fix it."

Taylor turned back to the doctor, tears running down her face. "Like kill the baby?"

"It's not a baby until it's born."

"My friend's ultrasound sure looked like one."

The doctor shrugged like, *whatever*, and walked toward the door. "Carry it full term if you want to, but I hope you have a very understanding mother who won't mind taking care of it." As soon as the door shut Taylor burst into tears.

Brett stood over the dead body next to the tree and looked around, cursing Derrick out in his mind. He was angry that he lost one of his men, and still Derrick didn't die. He wasn't angry over the death itself or even the drive, but an unquenchable fire burned in the pit of his stomach from the gall of that pipsqueak with the drive... like a flea that

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couldn't be squashed... like a constant inch... like a dog yapping at his heels. *He won't die.* Brett ground his teeth. His stomach burned from the realization that a no account, down and out, firefighter had knocked off one of his best men. Clenching his teeth and tightening his grip with white knuckle force around his weapon, he determined when he caught that pompous worm, he would make him pay. *He WILL die!*

After washing his hands off and changing his bloody shirt to one Jack offered him, Wade walked back over. "How's he doing?" Wade asked, rolling up the sleeves on his plaid flannel shirt.

Jack, still sitting in the chair next to Derrick, shrugged. "At least, it isn't very infected."

Wade plopped down in the chair next to Jack and sighed. "He needs blood."

Jack nodded. "That he does."

Wade stared down at the ground. "We're the same type," he mumbled.

"Huh?" Jack glanced over at him.

Wade sighed and stretched, leaning back in the chair. "We are the same blood type. Still... we don't have any way to transfer it," his voice held a tinge of relief.

"I've got a syringe." Wade shot him a *you've got to be kidding me* glance. "I'm serious. I got it to give my horse some medicine when I use to bring him up." Jack got up quickly and headed for the cabinet. "The horse died before I could use it. It's brand new."

"NO!" Wade shouted.

"You just said..."

"I'm not using a horse syringe to transfer my blood to him! With my luck, I'd get air in my veins."

"If it will work for a horse..."

"I'm not a horse!"

Jack opened the medicine cabinet. "I have a dog one, too, come to think of it, but the horse one holds more."

Naturally. Wade rolled his eyes. He could only imagine the size of the needle. There was no way he was letting himself get cornswaggled into this.

Jack pulled the package from the cabinet. "It holds 12ccs."

Wade laughed sarcastically. "Do you know how many of those it will take to get a pint. What like 40?"

"Maybe he won't need a whole pint." Jack came back over.

"And maybe I'm not going along with this!"

Jack stopped next to Derrick. "Look at him. Do you really..."

"Actually, I like him a lot better asleep than awake." Jack just gave him a look and let the silence work on him. Sighing loudly and rolling his eyes, Wade slapped the arms of the chair as he stood up. Mumbling something inaudible, he kicked the wooden chair over next to Derrick as he pulled up his sleeve. "You're gonna have to do it," he said sitting down and propping his elbow on his knee, resting his face in his hand, covering it.

Jack chuckled as he sat down. "Are you sure you use to be a paramedic?"

"Just shut up and get going."

Jack took off his belt and tied it around Wade's arm to help him find a vein. "I might need both arms."

"Nat-ur-ally," Wade mocked. "My entire vascular system is at your disposal."

Temporarily leaving their posts, the three gunmen came together to discuss their options. "This isn't getting us anywhere," Donald complained.

Mitch nodded. "I have to agree. We can't just keep them pinned down forever. We have to get rid of them and go find that drive."

Sitting next to them, Stan leaned on his rifle for support. "We can't get to them except over open ground."

"Unless..." They all looked at Mitch. "That cave must be pretty deep. Our bullets would hit them if it was just a shallow dug out. If it has a shaft," he paused, thoughtfully. "it probably comes out somewhere."

"A back door," Stan agreed.

Mitch nodded at him. "You and me will stay here and keep them pinned down while Donald circles around the slope."

"I'm not doing it!" Both men glared at him, threatening. "That will take hours... and miles of walking."

"Don't come back until you find a way in," Stan threatened. Mitch nodded.

"Give me the flashlight," Donald relented. "It'll probably be dark before I get back."

Jack walked out of the front door of the cabin and looked around for Wade. Dusk was just beginning to fall over the landscape. He noticed a couple deer bounding through the forest. Then he spotted Wade leaning his shoulder against a tree and staring out into the woods. Jack walked toward him. "I think he's going to be alright," he announced as he approached Wade.

Wade turned to look at him, a soft smile on his face. "That's good." He turned back. "I guess."

"He woke up about an hour ago, and I got some supper into him." He slapped his arm down on Wade's shoulder when he reached him. "You've sure been out here a long time."

"Yea-ah." Wade sucked in a deep breath of the crisp evening air. "It's a beautiful night."

"Sure." Jack wasn't buying it. "Have some things you're trying to work out?"

Wade had to smile at the old man's perceptiveness. "Yeah, well, I have a lot of things to work out... especially where *he's* concerned." He nodded back toward the cabin.

"You don't like him too well, do you?"

"We don't get along."

"I don't think that's true." Wade raised his eyebrows and looked at him. "From what I've seen, it looks like he gets along with you fine... but you don't like him."

Wade stared back off into the distance. "I have reason."

"Maybe it's something you should work out," Jack suggested. "I'm gonna be out here a while workin' on the deer I caught earlier. Maybe this would be a good time to mend some fences."

Wade looked back toward the cabin. "Some fences are beyond repair."

Jack shrugged as he left, heading for his deer. "You'll never know 'till you try."

Shivering, Kara Lee pulled her knees closer to her chest. If she'd known she was going to be spending the night *out on the range* she would have brought a coat... and

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some food. She listened to her stomach rumble and wished she could pacify the ache inside. She could almost convince herself to go down to that nice cozy cabin in the distance with the fireplace smoke plumbing from the chimney and invite herself in. She longed to be inside and toasty warm, huddled next to the crackling fire, *however...* she sighed. That could very possibly ruin her story or at the very least weaken it considerably. She *was* very grateful for her current, fly on the wall, bird's eye view, and she reasoned, getting any closer to the battlefield might get herself killed, especially when the gunmen showed up and started firing. Mostly, she just wanted to remain invisible to all parties and observe... even if that meant battling hypothermia all night.

Pulling her lightweight jacket closer around her, she wondered what lengths she wouldn't go to to get a good story. Trying desperately to redirect her thoughts to something other than warmth and food, she found herself hoping that at least she could find a raspberry patch in the morning. Soon she was unable to get the image of large, plump, juicy berries out of her mind.

After staring at the cabin for a long while, Wade decided to go in and talk with Derrick. Ever since Rick's death, Wade's resentment for Derrick had only grown stronger and stronger. He was sure Derrick had been responsible, no matter what the review board had said. In his mind Derrick was as close as someone could get to being a murderer. He was a deserter. He left Rick... left him there to die.

Walking through the front door, Wade determined he wasn't going to change his mind about Derrick... but... he supposed he could listen to his side... just for curiosity's sake.

Stopping next to Derrick, he stared down at him, wondering if he was asleep. He decided he didn't care. "Hey." He knocked Derrick's head to the side with his knuckles. "Wake up." He shook his shoulder.

Reluctantly, Derrick opened his eyes. "What?"

Wade screeched the wooden chair next to the bed and plopped down in it. "I want to know what happened exactly when you and Rick were inside that apartment."

Derrick stared at him a moment then said, "Oh," and rolled over on his side, facing the wall to go back to sleep.

Wade smacked him, accidentally on his bad shoulder, but it definitely got his attention... and got him to sit up... instantly. "I a..." Wade rubbed his nose. "didn't mean to do that."

"Sure you didn't."

"I do need to know what happened that day." Derrick just stared at him. "Don't you figure you owe me?" Wade rubbed his "pin cushion" arm.

"You read the report."

"Yeah. Now, I want to hear it from you."

"Why? You're not going to believe me anyway."

"Yeah, but you might as well give it a go anyway."

Derrick frowned, but Wade's eyes didn't relent. Looking away, Derrick mumbled, "The report says we were separated."

"I know what the report says. Now elaborate. I knew Rick... a lot better than you did, and I can tell you right now he did not go off on his own. If you were *separated* it's because you left him." Wade cocked his head when he saw Derrick grimace and look away. "Hit a nerve? You did leave him, didn't you?" Wade's voice grew so low it was nearly a growl. "He was in trouble, and you left him!" Wade jumped to his feet.

"He told me to," Derrick whispered.

"What?"

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Derrick looked away and then looked back, deciding he needed to tell Wade what he could. "A beam fell on us." Wade sat back down. "I was able to roll out before it settled, but Rick was trapped. I tried to pull him out, but..." He shook his head.

"So you left him."

"We could hear the baby crying in the room next to us. The traffic on the radio made us know the roof was about to go. Rick said if I didn't go and get the baby out when I could, we would both die murderers," Derrick paused, "and I didn't want to die." He shrugged. "There wasn't any more time. I either had to go after the baby and run or stay there and die." Wade's expression softened. "When I got to the baby, I found the mother lying next to him. All I could do was grab them and jump." He paused again. "As you know it was too late for Rick."

Wade rubbed his face for a few moments then looked back at Derrick. "Why did you wait so long to go in? Why did you go in so late?"

"McMillian wouldn't clear us. We tried to go in earlier and three guys stopped us. We had to fight our way through when we did."

Wade looked suspicious. "I didn't know you cared so much... about total strangers."

"Yeah, well, it was Rick's idea."

That sounded even more suspicious to Wade. Rick was always the logical, sensible type. "Rick wasn't the type to put himself *or* his squad in danger."

"From the way he talked, I think he knew the mother and baby." ...*actually, very well*, Derrick thought to himself, thinking of Rick's child and wondering whatever became of it. He would never tell anyone of the relationship Rick had with the mother because of a promise and simply because he wouldn't smear a dead man's name, but still... he figured one day he might try to track them down, just to see whatever came of them. He never cared before, but now....

Wade stared thoughtfully toward the wall. "I'll always wonder about McMillian's real motive. Why he wouldn't let you go in when it was still safe."

Derrick looked away from Wade, his face hardening. He knew. He knew the night of the fire and he knew now. *He wanted a potato chip factory...* The thought left a bad taste in his mouth. ...*and he didn't care how he got it. Sure the fire was an accident, but the fact that he was more concerned about saving his potential building next door than he was about the possible lives inside the apartment wasn't. He's the one that killed Rick... and the others.* Derrick looked back at Wade, wanting to spit out McMillian's name and story like venom from his mouth, angry enough to curse the man and mean it, but he didn't. Something inside stopped him, something new, something he didn't have before he accepted Christ. He realized it wasn't his place to curse. *God's the judge.* And maybe... it wasn't good to give Wade someone new to hate. He decided to leave Wade's question unanswered.

Squinting in the dim light of dusk, Donald stared down at the ground, kicking sticks and limbs out of the way as he walked. *Back door. What does a back door look like?* Earlier he had conceded it was possible to have more than one entrance into the cave, and that logically if it was a tunnel, it should come out somewhere, but now that he was actually looking for it... he had no idea what he was looking for. Staring into the distance, he sighed. There was no back side to the cliff. It just sloped gently and melded with the rest of the landscape. *How am I...* Hearing a difference in the ground beneath him, he stopped abruptly. Stomping on it, he allowed a smile as he realized it was hollow.

Cursing out his potential victims, he knelt down and began digging up the earth with his hand. His smile widened as his fingers felt wood and he knew he had found the back door, and the cave was just beneath him.

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"I can hardly see anymore," Mellissa complained, fearfully. Jim looked back at her, but nobody answered her. Feeling the ground around her, she crumpled some dried leaves and pine needles in her hand. "Can't we figure out how to build a small fire?"

"No." Trent answered firmly. "They might be able to distinguish our positions from the shadows."

"With all that brush in front?" she whined.

"You never know."

"I'm scared." Her voice was quiet but high-pitched.

"Me too," Jess muttered. Jim looked at her, barely able to make out her outline and the outline of baby Morgan in her lap.

"It'll be light before long." Sam tried to be positive.

"It'll be all night long." Mellissa's voice was even higher pitched.

"Mommy, I scared," Morgan whimpered, clinging to Jess.

Jim scooted over to his girls. "Here." He took his flashlight from his belt, turned it on, and handed it to Morgan, who took it and hugged it close to her chest.

"Jim!" Trent rebuked.

"You still have one." He looked back at Jess. "We do need to save the batteries," then to Morgan, lighting her little chin, "so just turn it on if you get scared."

Morgan nodded, whispering, "Thank you, Daddy," then pressed the button, turning off the light she clutched close to her heart.

Donald motioned for Stan to come over too as he crawled toward Mitch. When they were all three together Donald informed them breathlessly, "I found it."

"Another way in?" Mitch sounded skeptical.

Donald nodded vigorously, trying to catch his breath. "It almost looks like an old well, but I'm sure it's attached to the cave."

"How?" Mitch growled.

Anger clouded Donald's face. "I. Could. See. It." He spoke each word deliberately. "It goes down into a large circular room and off of that is a large tunnel." The two men stared each other down, their stern faces illuminated by the moonlight.

"Good." Stan tried to quell some of the anger. "So we go down, come up behind them, and cap 'em."

"More than likely get in a gun battle," Mitch grumbled. "Even in the day light it's going to be hard to see, and we're gonna have to get all the way down the tunnel without being heard or seen."

"It's too far down without a rope, anyway," Donald added.

Mitch rolled his eyes. Stan threw up his hands. "Any better ideas?"

"I know it might be a shock to some," Donald shot Mitch a dirty look. "but I am actually capable of coming up with an intelligent idea." Both men simply stared, sternly. "Burn them out." Donald smiled. "There's plenty of dried brush and bushes. Just break 'em up and toss them down there. Maybe some green to add smoke. In the morning, light it. The only way out is through the front. So we just wait," He laughed. "And as they run out, we cap 'em." Glee filled his face, and it seemed to spread to the other two as they laughed nodding their heads in agreement.

"Okay. You two go gather the brush," Mitch said, lying back down on his belly, rifle extended in front of him pointed at the cave. "and I'll stand watch." Stan and Donald nodded, grumbling as they left.

Rolling over on the cot and blinking his eyes open, Derrick stared out the dirty, little cabin widow at a new day just barely breaking into dawn. *It's morning.* With that realization came a great sense of urgency. This was the day. Today was the trial. Justice depended on him. Either he got this drive through to the court house or likely a deadly murderer would go free, free to destroy and snuff out lives, free to corrupt and ruin.

Standing up too fast, he suddenly felt lightheaded, but rather than sit back down, he fell forward, catching himself on the table and waited for the feeling to pass.

"Derrick?" Wade jumped up from the cot on the other side of the room. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving." He straightened, grabbing the gun. "We have to get that drive through." He spoke with determination in his voice yet with even more on his face.

"We're not going anywhere!"

"Suit yourself." Derrick headed for the door.

"Hey!" Jack tossed Derrick his jean jacket. "Take this. It's chilly in the mornings." He got up from the cot.

"Thanks." Derrick went out.

"You're letting him go!" Wade looked in disbelief from the open door to Jack.

"I'd hate to be the one to stop him."

"He's going to kill himself!" Wade threw up his hands. Jack replied with a quick shrug. Shaking his head, Wade ran after him. "He's going to kill both of us!"

Noticing his stack of canned goods, Jack suddenly got an idea. "Wait!" Swiping some cans of chicken and fruit and a bag of jerky, Jack quickly stuffed them in a knapsack and ran out the door. Wade was waiting a couple hundred feet away at the edge of the woods, shifting his weight nervously as if he was afraid he was going to lose Derrick. Jack ran toward him as fast as he could. "Here!" He held out the bag.

"Thanks!" Wade snatched it and took off after Derrick. "Thanks for all your help!" Jack stood there a minute praying as he watched them go.

Kara Lee dashed through the bushes toward the back of the cabin. All night and morning since she had woken up a couple hours ago from stomach pains, she had been watching the little cabin, waiting for them to leave. Now she was in a mad dash to get there before the old man came back. She needed food, and she knew for a fact that this old man was living high on the hog, snug as a bug in a blanky... all three of them... snuggled cozy by a toasty cabin fire while she froze herself stiff as an iceberg, merely catnapping all night long, under a pile of pine needles *just* to keep from getting hypothermia.

Reaching the back of the cabin, she barely paused for a breath before smashing the window with a stick and jumping in. First, she raced to the front window. Seeing the man still standing next to the woods staring after the guys, she breathed a short sigh of relief and then searched feverishly for some sort of a ... *a grocery sack!* She pulled it from the bucket beneath the sink and started dumping canned goods in it, filling it so full... that it broke, scattering the cans everywhere. "No-o-o-o!" She stamped her foot in frustration then grabbed another grocery sack and began collecting the cans. As she bent down, she saw out of the corner of her eye, the old man turning around and heading back. With a great sense of urgency, she picked up as many as she could without breaking the bag, and then hoisted herself out the window, landed on all fours and took off like a flash just as she heard the squeak of the cabin door opening behind her.

FIRE BREAK

Stan stepped on another brittle pine branch, breaking it in half and then tossed both halves down the shaft. Heading toward another branch, he stopped abruptly to stare at Donald who had just plopped down on the ground. "This was your idea. Get up and get with the program!"

"We have to have enough pretty soon." Donald rubbed his face wearily. "We have been dumping big branches and limbs down there all night long."

"So get up and finish the job! I'm not doing this all on my own!"

Donald reluctantly stood up and headed for a dead bush, swearing under his breath.

Sitting next to Jess on the cold floor of the cave, Jim bounced his baby girl on his knee, giving her a "pony" ride. Glancing over at Jess, Jim noticed her face didn't lighten as it usually did by Morgan's giggles. *Then again, why should it.* Ending the "horsey" ride, Jim gave his laughing little one a kiss and then handed her back to Jess, kissing her too before sliding his way toward the morning light, shining through the mouth of the cave. Stopping behind the rock wall on the opposite side from Trent who was still staring out as the day brightened into dawn after standing watch all night. Jim had volunteered to watch half the night, but Trent had insisted he wasn't going to sleep anyway. Now it hardly had seemed necessary to stay up at all. The firing had stopped at dusk and nothing had happened since. "What do you think they are waiting for?"

Trent shrugged. "Probably planning to starve us out. We may be the ones that have to make the move."

"What move?" Jim was surprised to hear they had one.

"All this brush." Trent pointed with his gun at the brush covering the entrance to the cave. "It runs all the way across the bottom of the cliff. If I stay hidden behind it..."

"Until you get to the end of the cliff then it's pretty much open ground."

"Not totally. There's trees."

"Not with any bottom branches."

Trent nodded. "If you keep them distracted by firing, I think I can get around behind them without them noticing."

Jim raised his eyebrows. "Quite a risk."

Trent glanced back at the girls shivering in the corner. "One I think I have to take." Jim nodded.

Handing Jim the rifle and picking up the hand gun, Trent slapped Jim on the shoulder before ducking out of the cave. Quickly dropping to his belly, Trent kept himself plastered as close to the cliff as possible trying not to disturb the brush and jostle the branches. "Don't fire 'till I get to the end," he whispered over his shoulder as he crawled away. Jim nodded an acknowledgement, and watched him go.

"What is that?" Mellissa turned her head toward the dark tunnel.

"What?" Jess looked at her.

"That noise. Listen."

"Just sounds like water dropping to me."

Mellissa shook her head. "I first heard it when I was sleeping last night, like a far away thumping then this morning it grew fainter, but every once in a while, I'll hear a thump again. Almost like someone dropping something. The longer she stared at the tunnel the more fear grew in her eyes. The feelings started spreading to Jess. The next

thump caused her to jump to her knees, her eyebrows furrowing in fear. "Jim!" They both yelled together.

Jim looked back at them. "There's someone down there!" Mellissa squealed.

"What?" Jim looked concerned and confused. "I can't leave..."

Jess handed Morgan to Mellissa, jumped up and went over to Jim reaching for his gun. "I'll cover Trent. You can go see what the noise is."

"Jess, it's probably nothing."

"It could be..." They both sucked in a long sniff and exchanged glances. That smell was a smell that could never be mistaken. It was a smell Jim had smelled a thousand times. It was a smell he made his living off of. It was smoke. He handed Jess the gun and scooted toward the tunnel. "I'll be right back." Grabbing the flashlight and standing up, he ventured down the hazy tunnel.

Jess turned back and watched Trent crawling alongside the cliff and began praying urgently, in definite panic mode, so consumed in her thoughts and prayers she didn't even notice Sam sneak off after Jim.

Entering into the deep darkness, Jim decided not to turn on the flashlight fearing that if someone was down there they might see it. He ran his right hand along the side of the cave to guide himself, and with his left hand, he reached into his pocket, grabbed his knife, and opened the blade, preparing to use it if need be.

Sam couldn't see a thing in the darkness, but she didn't let that frighten her. She had learned what it meant to be tough, and she, for one, wasn't staying behind with the two she had dubbed, "the trembling housewives." Whether that was an accurate assessment or not, it made her feel stronger to believe it, to believe she was stronger and more courageous. Running her hand along the left side, she followed the tunnel as it curved around, feeling a little uneasy with the turn, but shrugging it off, knowing that caves often twisted and turned. She was so consumed with her own thoughts that she didn't even notice the thumping sounds getting fainter and the haze getting thinner.

The farther Jim went down the tunnel, the thicker the haze became. He walked faster then began to jog, wanting to get to the source before he turned back. Suddenly, the haze started turning orange. Through the haze, he could see the massive flames jumping and hear the fire crackling. As he neared, his mouth dropped at the biggest bonfire he had ever seen, blazing in a circular room up toward a hole in the cave's ceiling. The hole served as a vent, but not a large enough one to let all of the smoke escape. He knew it would be a matter of minutes before the smoke would fill the tunnel and the culvert asphyxiating all of them. Gazing at the rocky side leading up to the hole in the ceiling, he knew they had to try and climb it. He knew this would be their only way out. Spinning around, he raced back down the tunnel toward his family.

When Jim reached the culvert, he met Jess and Mellissa standing by the tunnel waiting for him. "What..."

Jim didn't let his wife finish. "There's a huge fire down there!"

Gasping Mellissa spun around toward the cave's mouth, but Jim reached out and grabbed her arm, stopping her. "They are trying to smoke us out. Our only chance is if we go this way." He pulled her toward the tunnel with one hand and Jess with the other.

"Toward the fire?!" Mellissa screeched.

"Is there a way out this way?" Morgan began to scream. Jess grabbed her from Mellissa, handing Jim the rifle. Slinging the rifle's strap over his shoulder, he grabbed her hand again.

Trying to keep her baby's head buried in her shirt, praying she wouldn't get too much smoke, Jess began running, her own eyes and lungs beginning to sting the further they went into the smoke. She tried to hold her breath, but found it nearly impossible while running. Halfway down the tunnel she couldn't hold her breath anymore, and she didn't know how to get Jim to stop. All she knew to do was fall, gasping for ground air as

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she hit the floor, she felt Jim and Mellissa fall next to her, but after a few tainted breaths, Jim had pulled them forward and they all began crawling toward an orange glow, toward a loud ominous crackle, toward the heat and the flame. She didn't understand. She couldn't think. She wondered if they were all going to die. All she could do was follow... follow and pray, repeating the only phrase her mind could muster. *Lord, help us! Please, God, help us! Help us, Lord! Please Lord, help us.*

Her eyes widened as they entered the room, feet from the blazing inferno. All she could do was stare, stare at the dancing flames... the dancing flames of death.

Coming to the end of the hillside, Trent glanced back at the cave expecting to hear gun fire, readying himself to sprint toward the nearest tree, but what he saw startled him, causing him to take another glance. *Smoke?* He stared until he saw another puff and soon a steady cloud wafting from the cave's mouth.

Urgently pushing himself back around, he sprint-crawled back for the cave, worry engulfing his heart as the smoky cloud thickened.

"JESS!" Jim yelled over the deafening crackle, but Jess didn't hear him. Mustering the excessive amount of energy he needed just to move in the smothering heat, he slapped her on the arm, getting her to open her eyes and look at him. Due to the lessened smoke at this corner near the cave's wall, she could keep them open.

Jim slapped the rocky side they needed to climb to get out and pointed up. Jess shook her head, but Jim nodded emphatically. Jumping up, he quickly climbed the wall, nearly to the top and tossed his rifle through the hole so he wouldn't have to worry about it. Then he scrambled back down. Kneeling between the girls he joined their hands so they formed a chain. Then he gathered up Morgan. Standing up with Morgan in one arm and holding onto Jess with his other hand, he stepped onto the first rock, pulling Jess and Mellissa after him as he stepped from one to the next. Swaying with no hands to steady himself, he could only hope and pray. *God, don't let me fall. Get us through this.*

Lost in his intense concentration, Jim didn't even notice himself coughing until he was a third of the way up when he also heard Jess and Mellissa coughing. Suddenly his eyes began to water and his lungs began to burn as the smoke became thicker and thicker the higher they got.

About halfway, the boulders were getting too far apart for Jim to climb without his arms. Bringing Jess up next him, he handed her Morgan and, straining, pulled himself up to the next ledge. Then, quick as he could, he reached down and grabbed Morgan, who seemed unusually still... but he couldn't even stop for an extra thought before reaching down for Jess and slinging her up and then for Mellissa.

Landing on the rock next to Jim, eyes closed, Jess crawled to the side to make room for Mellissa. *Please, God get us out of here! Please God get us out!* She prayed as lungs burning she slumped forward into another coughing fit.

Landing on the rock between Jim and Jess, shaking inside and out, Mellissa, breathing into her shirt sleeve, crawled to the cave wall and buried her face in a crevice, trying to suck clean air from the rocks as Jim crawled up to the next landing. She was so frightened she felt nothing, not even the heat. Every nerve in her body twitched with panic.

Asking for every ounce of strength, Jim pulled himself up on the next boulder, the crackling fire behind him, deafening, the blistering heat burning his back, the smoke burning his eyes, the life of his wife and baby resting on his shoulders. He reached down

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for Morgan and lifted her up. Noticing complete stillness this time, he realized the worst... she had stopped breathing. With urgency he had never felt before, he reached down flung Jess up and then Mellissa and looked up ... another horrible twenty feet. He knew he had to get Morgan out of this smoke, now... yesterday.... It was her only chance.

Without either the time or means to explain, he grabbed Morgan, flung her over his shoulder, holding her on with his head, and leaving the girls, made a mad dash for the top, climbing like a cave man, swinging like a monkey, taking on gravity and death itself, he climbed, pulled, and jumped his way up the shortest route.

Reaching the top rock, he leaped, catching the mouth of the opening with his fingertips. For a moment he just hung there, dangling over the inferno, nearly losing his grip. Asking for every ounce of strength, he contracted his arms and jerked his body up with one hand. Reaching through the opening with the other, he dug his nails into the dirt, straining every muscle in his arms, until he was up, through, and on solid ground. Gasping for clean air, squinting from the blinding sun, swaying in a spinning world, he bent forward dumping Morgan off his shoulders and into his hands and gently laid her on the ground, he didn't have time to resuscitate her. He didn't have time for anything, but setting her down in the grass and praying as he leapt back down into the cave.

Nearly tripping over himself as he bounded down, he could see Jess and Mellissa huddled against the cave's wall breathing into an air vent. *Thank you, Lord*, he prayed as he reached them. Slapping Jess's shoulder to get their attention, he started back up then reached down his hand.

Jess quivered as she grabbed Jim's hand. All her thoughts on her baby's lifelessly still body. *Please, God, please make my baby breathe! Make her breathe, God! Please, make her breathe*, she silently yet fervently begged as Jim pulled her up. She had just noticed Morgan's stillness when Jim had snatched her and took off running to the top, but only now did she feel the presence of death so strong... stronger than ever before.

Lifting, climbing, jumping, they navigated the last leg, the trickiest part. Eyes, lungs, and muscles burning, shaking, crying, gasping, they frantically grappled to the top.

When they reached the top rock, Jim, shaking with weakness, jumping trying to grab the edge of the opening but couldn't get it. He hopped again but didn't make it. His knee buckled on landing, he fell to the ledge and nearly over the side. Hands clinging to the edge, upper body leaning over it, he felt Jess grab the back of his shirt, but he didn't move. Staring into the hungry flames, face burning with the heat, he slowly pushed himself back toward the wall. Legs shaking, he pulled himself to his feet. Staring up at the opening that seemed a million miles away, he jumped again and missed, his knee buckled again, but this time he didn't fall. *God, what do I do?* He coughed on the smoke. Seeing Jess doubled over, coughing, his heart wrenched with urgency. Asking his body for a surge of strength, he leaned forward, grabbed her by her legs, and hoisted her up above his head. Arms burning, he could barely hold out for what seemed like hours before Jess got hold of the earth and pulled herself out. Then, praying for strength, arms shaking, he grabbed Mellissa and hoisted her up, locking his elbows as soon as he got his arms over his head. Jess helped pull Mellissa out.

Coughing, praying, staring in horror at the enclosing flames, Jim asked for every ounce of strength and made one final and valiant leap. Life slowed in motion for Jim as but his fingers stopped inches from the top, and his body began to fall back down. As he fell his body went limp from the knowledge of the impending doom. He barely felt himself hit the ledge. Rising to his knees, he stared mesmerized into the evil hungry flames that seemed as if they were laughing at him as they came to consume him. He closed his eyes, *Lord... I guess, I'll see you soon*. "Jim!" He looked up toward the faint scream and saw Jess leaning through the opening, hand reached out. He smiled recalling how much he loved her. *Bye, baby*. "Jim!" Suddenly not caring about anything, he

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pushed off the rock, hand stretched toward Jess, jumping up and out, prepared to fall to his death upon descent. Instead, at the top, he felt his hand connect with Jess's. Fear flooded his heart, and he tried to let go and not bring her with him, but she wouldn't let go, yet in that instant before inevitable doom, he felt another pair of hands clutch his collar. *Mellissa?* Jess's other hand grasped around his wrist, and together they pulled him up. Halfway up, he was able to grab onto a root and help pull himself up. Crawling away a few feet, he collapsed onto the ground. *Thank you, God. Thank you.* Leaning forward on his forearms, he tried to catch his breath and let his shaking body settle. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jess dart past and he knew where she was going. *Morgan.* He tried to get up, but gasping for air, he fell back down. Suddenly the worst flashed through his mind and panic flooded his soul. *No!* He couldn't take any more. He certainly couldn't take that. He tried to open his eyes, but he couldn't. He couldn't bare it to see his little daughter... his baby girl... He squeezed his eyes tighter. His stomach was even tighter. He barely allowed himself to breathe. *I have to....* He felt a shadow pass over him. His stomach got tighter. Lifting his head, he slowly looked up, preparing himself for.... His eyes didn't reach Jess's face. They stopped at the little one in her arms... his little baby, smoke-stained, coughing, scared, and clinging to her mommy, but alive... very much alive. *Thank you! Oh, Lord, thank you!*

Jumping up, he forced his rubbery legs to hold him, falling toward his crying wife, he clasped his arms around his family letting his own tears loose as he fell with his family to his knees. "Thank you, God!" He could feel Jess shaking with tears and joy. He buried his face in her neck. "Thank you!"

Sam was beginning to think she had turned the wrong direction somewhere. Concluding that the absence of any indicators of intelligent life for the past... what seemed like forever and a half, must have meant one of those many curves she had curved must have curved the wrong way without her realizing it.

Turning around, she made sure to run her hand along the same wall and retrace her steps exactly. She let out a long sigh. *Why does my curiosity always get the better of me? Maybe I should have just stayed with the housewives. Would have been safer even if it was boring.*

Feeling a spider scamper across her hand, she squealed, quickly flicking it. "Ewww." Rubbing her hands together, she suddenly wondered what other critters lurked back here in the darkness. Suddenly she was afraid of being so far away from the light. *Should have fought him for the flashlight.* She swallowed hard. Her mind started running wild... bats... bears... bobcats... tarantulas... black widows... brown recluses... snakes... wolves... and who knew what else. She started walking faster, fearing each step might plunge her to an early grave... one-hundred feet below. *Knock, it, off, Samantha,* she instructed herself in a singsong brain voice, determining to stay calm. The resolution worked for a few brief moments... until... a flying bat screeched right over her head, causing her nearly to jump out of her skin and into a dead run.

Soon after, a distinctive smell stopped her dead in her tracks. *Smoke... again.* She wondered where it was coming from, if Jim had found out, and if he was back yet. She continued forward, but much slower and more cautiously.

The further she went the stronger the smoke smell got. When it got too strong, burning her lungs and causing her to cough, she decided to back up, reluctantly. Terror tugged at her heart as she realized she was trapped.

Close as he dared to get to the plume of smoke wafting from the cave's mouth, Trent waited, every second hopefully expecting them to emerge from the cave, waiting for a chance to shove them into the brush before the gunmen had a chance to take fire.

As more and more seconds passed, he became increasingly aware that they weren't coming out. Panic quickened his heart. *Why didn't they at least try to run out? Why didn't they at least take a chance with the gunmen?* He wouldn't... he couldn't accept that they were all dead. *They can't all be dead. They can't.*

Sam, who had backed up until she was away from the smoke, decided to wait until the smoke smell reached her. Then she decided to back up again and keep backing up until either the smoke smell dissipated or she ran out of tunnel. She hoped beyond hope for the former instead of the latter.

She wondered where Derrick was. It was times like these that she had always depended on him the most. As a child, she had trusted him to get her out of anything... and there had been plenty of things to get out of. She wondered how she had managed without him for so many years... but then again, she couldn't think of even one incident where she had needed him to rescue her. Crossing her arms and chuckling to herself, she concluded she only ever really needed him to rescue her when she was with him... because when he wasn't around none of this stuff ever happened to her. She smiled, but then her smile faded. This was the first time... he wasn't here. She felt abandon... abandoned and alone.

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Rifle in one hand, hanging down by his side, Jim walked toward Jess, who was sitting under a tree, rocking Morgan back and forth, trying to calm her crying, frightened baby girl... her precious baby girl... her living baby girl. Silent tears of joy and relief still formed a steady stream down Jess's face. Stopping in front of her, Jim knelt down just gazing at her a few moments then gently touching her arm. "You gonna be okay?" Sniffing, she answered with a quick nod, not able to speak through the tears. Jim nodded back. "Okay. We need to go then." Standing, he offered her his hand. When she took it, he pulled her up, and together they headed out.

Sam backed up some more, fear tugging at her heart. *What if the whole tunnel fills up?* Knowing she still had plenty of tunnel left, she dismissed the thought, deciding to save it for later if and when the fear substantiated. Staring into the utter darkness, she wished she could see. Maybe there way out right next to her, and she couldn't see it. She couldn't even see the creeping smoke that threatened to suffocate her.

For some reason her mind just kept going back to Derrick. He had a million and one antidotes for scary situations when she was a kid... *half of them didn't work, bu-u-ut...* even if they didn't work, they often made her laugh and that was nearly as good. Another part of her was still mad at Derrick. She gritted her teeth and crossed her arms, leaning back against the cave's wall. His new religion was seriously getting in the way of their relationship. The Derrick she knew would have been proud her, trying to better herself as a model. Now he was too goody-two-shoes for that. Now, he was *meekly* following his religion and going against her because some pastor had probably told him somewhere that this was wrong. *Maybe Derrick has changed. Maybe he's weak. Maybe he's lost that steel he used to have in his backbone.*

Surprised at his own fast pace, Wade slowed down and glanced back at Derrick, who was lagging, but doing remarkably well for someone in his condition. Wade tried to dismiss a sudden wave of jealousy that made him realize that if it had been him who'd been shot, he wouldn't have been walking anywhere. He stopped and waited for Derrick to catch up. "You gonna make it?"

"Yeah," Derrick gasped, sweat running down the sides of his face and soaking the front of his shirt.

Wade looked for a spot to sit down on the ground. "Let's take a minute." He suggested for Derrick's sake. Nodding his head, Derrick plopped down right where he was, scooted back against a tree, and leaned on the trunk, closing his eyes and tilting his head back. "You sure you're okay?"

Derrick nodded, not opening his eyes. "Thanks to you." He gazed at the multiple needle marks on Wade's arms.

Catching Derrick's gaze, Wade rubbed his pincushion arm and smiled, but his smiled faded as he realized he wasn't ready to declare a friendship. "I don't like to see any living thing die." He looked the other way and muttered, "That's my problem."

Derrick nodded slowly, knowing that in his case, "any living thing" in Wade's mind likely meant *like a skunk or a grizzly or a rattle snake... or even you*. Smiling to himself, Derrick didn't even care. "We need to keep going," he said, trying to pull himself up on shaky legs. He was almost up when his knee buckled, causing him to sit back down.

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Wade's reply held a "told you so" tone. "Yeah. I think we need to wait a little while."

Cradling cans of food in her arms, Kara Lee trudged up a small hill and plopped down on the ground. *I thought they'd never stop.* She glared at the two men she was following, sitting under a tree. Pulling out her Swiss Army knife and picking up a can she began ravenously opening it. She was so hungry. Once she got the lid off, she picked out a big hunk of chicken and tossed it in her mouth. Closing her eyes, she chewed slowly, relishing the flavor. Then she began eating in turbo speed.

Once she got over the initial starvation mode, she began chewing more slowly and stared down at the two guys she was following, wondering what they were all about. *What is their story? How did they get mixed up with the mob?* She couldn't help feeling like they were nice people... Maybe it's because she'd always thought that of Jim and Jessica, but she was beginning to second guess herself now that she knew they were tied to the mafia. Grinning with nervous energy, her body tingled and she rocked back and forth as she ate. She was dying of curiosity. She wanted to go down right now and question them.

Grabbing a peach slice from her second can, she forced herself to relax and not jump the gun. She knew better than to trust people... or to take them at face value. She'd been kicked in the gut too many times. Too many people had put up a kind front and then taken advantage of her.

Staring the other direction, she determined to remain totally objective and not take sides. Noticing someone in the distance walking, she cocked her head, brow furrowed. Squinting, she tried to focus in on the man. Suddenly realization set in. *One of the gunmen.* She glanced back at the two sitting under trees on her other side for a brief second wondering if she should warn them, but she quickly dismissed the thought. Fingering her camera, she jumped up. Quickly gathering up her cans, she headed for better cover, somewhere where she would have a good vantage point to watch the ensuing battle when the gunman caught up.

As the smoke thinned, Trent inched forward on his belly, still concealed in the brush next to the cliff and peered into the blackness of the cave. He didn't see anything ... or anyone. He inched closer to the cave's mouth, squinting into the darkness, staring for many moments. Then startled by footsteps, he quickly scooted back into hiding. Peering between the leaves he could see two of the gunmen approaching the cave.

"Be careful," one said to the other.

"Why? There's no way they can be alive in there."

"There's some reason they didn't come out."

Trent silently scooted back further and then stayed perfectly still as the two pushed through the brush and into the cave. Once they were in, he crawled forward again, trying to see, but what he saw was the same as the gunmen... nothing.

Donald shone his flashlight all around the room. "They're not here."

Stan was shining his down the tunnel. "They probably died down here, looking for a way out."

"You gonna go down there?"

"Brett won't be satisfied with anything less than the bodies."

"Hey, look." Donald went over to a corner and picked up an empty water bottle.

"So what?" Stan stared at him.

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Donald's smile faded, and he dropped it. "We'll it proves they were here anyway."
"Where'd you think they were, Saint Lucia? Let's go." Turning back around, he shone the light down the tunnel, illuminating an emerging Sam, who stopped abruptly, standing there like a deer in the headlights.

Oh, no. Trent groaned within himself, not sure what emotion this situation called for.

The gunmen simultaneously raised their guns.

Sam jumped back behind the tunnels edge.

BANG! The bullet just barely missed her.

Trent pulled out his gun, aimed, and *BANG!* Donald twisted and fell. Stan spun around and returned fire before Trent could get another shot off. Trent ducked and scooted back, but returned with a shot every time there was a pause. "Run down the tunnel!" Trent yelled over the gunfire.

Sam, disoriented and scared, blindly obeyed, taking off and running into the darkness.

BANG! Trent shot into the cave. *BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!* The gunmen returned fire. Trent covered his head, plastering himself to the dirt. Shots began coming from the remaining gunman on the hill. Branches splintered and leaves scattered above him. He knew his only chance was to get inside the cave.

Soon as the firing let up a little, he lunged forward and rolled into the cave, aiming his gun in the direction of the gunman, but he was gone. Heavy fire was still coming from outside. An occasional bullet made its way through, rick-a-shaying off the cave's walls.

Jumping up, Trent raced for the tunnel, hurdling over Donald's body on the way. Grabbing his flashlight from off his belt, he shone it down the tunnel as he ran, moving it back and forth, trying to see behind the jugged rocks in case the gunman was hiding. Coming to a fork in the cave, he skidded to a stop. *Which way? Which way, Lord?* Following a strong feeling, Trent took the right fork.

Sam ran faster than she had in her entire life, her heart racing, her lungs burning, her hands tingling. In between gasps, she coughed on the lingering smoke irritating her lungs, but was too scared to even notice. She stopped briefly as she entered the smoky room, illuminated by sunlight coming down from a hole in the ceiling. Glancing over her shoulder at the approaching footsteps, her heart skipped a beat, and she darted around the pile of smoking cinders, ducking behind a column of rocks. Scrunching low behind them, she buried her face in her shirt, forcing her breathing quieter and refusing to cough.

Stan tried to run faster, but even the light from his flashlight wasn't helping him run straight. He kept jumping at the shadows, thinking he was running into a wall or not jumping at them and actually hitting the wall when the cave curved. All this stopping and starting, crashing and swerving was getting on his nerves and causing the fire in his belly to burn hotter and hotter. He was mad, and he wanted to kill.

Trent slowed to a walk, hearing the gunman in front of him. He sighed, relieved knowing that he wasn't too late. He flipped off his flashlight as he curved with the tunnel and let the gunman's loud breathing and coughing be his guide. Knowing that confronting the gunman, now, could be hazardous to his health, he tried to formulate a plan. Two armed men engaged in mortal combat inside a narrow, pitch black tunnel didn't seem to him like a good recipe for longevity. On the other hand, he had no idea where Sam was, and the last thing he wanted was for this to turn into a hostage situation. *Maybe...* Noticing, the approaching light, he squinted toward it, wondering where it was coming from.

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Gun drawn, pointing forward, Stan walked slowly into the illuminated room. Stopping at the pile of cinders, he scowled at them, knowing the fire hadn't done its job. Slowly, he began walking around the parameter of the room, looking behind each boulder and rock column.

Trent crept from the darkness of the tunnel just far enough to see the gunman searching behind the rocks on the sides of the cave, suddenly realizing that Sam and maybe the others had to be hiding somewhere in there. Then without pausing to devise a plan, he jumped out and aimed. "Freeze!"

Stan, his back turned toward Trent, raised both hands above his head. Releasing the handle of his pistol, he held it by the trigger.

Trent relaxed a little. "Now, get down on the ground!" Stan hesitated. "Down on the ground, now!"

Flipping the pistol in an instant and catching it by the handle, Stan spun around, threw down his hands, aimed, and fired all before Trent could react.

Trent jumped to the side a nanosecond before impacted. The bullet hit the wall and rick-a-shayed. *Pash-ping-ping-ping. BANG!* Stan tried again. Trent dove behind a rock. *Pash-ping-ping-ping.* Trent collapsed against the wall, inhaling a couple of deep breaths before coughing on them. *God, help! I need a plan.*

Jess jogged next to Jim, who was carrying Morgan, nearly matching his steps, afraid to fall behind, wanting to get out of this wilderness, now... no, wanting to get out of this wilderness yesterday. She glanced up at Jim, amazed he wasn't even breathing hard when she was about done in. Tired or not, she was counting on running as fast and as hard as she could until she was out of this horrible place.

"Wait!" Mellissa gasped. "Stop!" Jim and Jess both stopped and turned around, waiting as Mellissa, bent over and gasping, tried to catch her breath. "I need a minute." She grabbed her aching side with one hand and leaned against a tree with the other. "I can't go this fast.

Jim glanced from Jess to Mellissa, flexing his grip around the rifle barrel he held, stomping his foot impatiently. Every nerve in his body jumping with urgency, great urgency to stay one step ahead of their assailants, not out of fear, but rather a fierce protective instinct for his wife and baby. In his stomach anger burned, illogical anger, anger at everyone and everything... anger at anyone that would slow them down or hinder them. He clenched his grip tighter, clutching then releasing then repeating, not even trying to calm himself down.... just getting more and more agitated. Just then a little touch did everything he couldn't. It doused the fire in his stomach, soothed his nerves, and softened his heart. Morgan, who had been sleeping on his shoulder, woke up and slipped her little arm around his neck. Holding onto his collar she cuddled close to his neck and yawned into it. Somehow the gentle touch of her tiny head against his tight strung neck melted some of the tension away, softening his eyes and his heart. He tried to get the urgency back, but then she stretched and yawned again and his heart softened even more. Turning his head, he halfway glared at the sleeping little girl, who was robbing him of all fury. Handing her down to Jess who was sitting on the ground next to Mellissa, he left to walk around. "Five minutes."

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Trent barely had time to peek around the corner before ducking back. *BANG! Pash-ping-ping-ping.* He had just enough time to see Stan, who wasn't completely covered by the rock he was behind, instead he held his gun out in front of him, his upper body exposed. All it would take was one good shot... one kill shot...

Closing his eyes and taking a long deep breath, he spun out, aimed, and....

BANG!

OUCH! Pa-ping. Taking a bullet, Trent's gun flew out of his hands before he could fire. He ducked back and holding his hand, stomped his foot. His hand stung, but nothing like the anger that burned inside of him, anger at himself, anger at the killer, anger at God. *Why didn't you let me get him?* Bending down, he picked up the totaled gun. He thrust it toward the ground, but didn't let go. He wanted to shatter it. He wanted to bend it into a horseshoe. He wanted to hurt something. He felt like screaming. He banged his head back against the wall.

Huddled against the damp walls of the cave inside the cleft, shivering like a rabbit, Sam carefully peered around the edge after a few minutes had gone by without firing. Just as she looked out, her eyes widened as she saw Stan stand up. She stared at his face. It was cold, heartless, void of feeling, an executioner. She swallowed hard watching him get up, and with gun drawn, begin walking slowly and deliberately in Trent's direction.

"Okay. It's time to go." Reaching down, Jim clasped Jess's arm and pulled her up. She was still moist with sweat, but she looked refreshed enough to him.

Mellissa didn't as she struggled to her feet. "I need water," she whined.

Jim shook the water bottle hooked to his belt. It only had a quarter left. He glanced at Jess and Morgan, wanting to give it to them. "You'll be fine a while longer."

"I can't go another step without water." She demanded, sitting back down.

Jim was just about ready to say, "Fine. Stay here then," and leave. He glanced back at Jess and Morgan.

"Maybe she can have half and Morgan can have half." Jess suggested.

Annoyance filled Jim's face, but he handed Jess the water, who gave some to Morgan and handed it back. Obviously irritated, he trudged over to Mellissa and dropped the bottle in her lap. She didn't react, just quickly popped the lid up and ravenously drank the remaining water. Part of Jim's heart ached at the fact, that they didn't have the food and water they needed, but he stopped short of sympathy for Mellissa when he saw his beloved Jess going without and suddenly he wanted the water back, but it was too late. *God, I need water for my wife.*

Trent stood flat against the rock wall, trying to hide in the shadows. Something was about to happen. He could feel it. He fingered the broken weapon, feeling helpless. *How...* He stiffened at the sight of a man's shadow appearing on the opposite wall. *He's coming.* Trent's heart sped up. He inched out to the edge of the rock formation, flipping the gun so he was holding it by the barrel.

The shadow got bigger and bigger. Trent gripped the gun harder. His heart beat faster. He waited for just the right moment... until Stan was almost there. Then he swung out inches in front of him and BAM! He slammed the handle into the man's head.

Stan fell limply to the ground, twisting like a rag doll. Trent kicked the gun away, and then knelt down to check for a pulse, flinching at the blood pooling from the man's bashed in head. He felt his carotid... nothing.

FIRE BREAK

Derrick pulled himself to his feet, feeling much stronger after the short break. "We need to get going," his voice was strained but not shaky.

Wade's expression agreed. "You gonna make it this time?"

BANG!

Wade jumped then froze, looking in all directions. His eyes widened as he saw Derrick lunging at him, but he didn't move as Derrick tackled him to the ground just as a bullet whizzed past his head and into the tree behind him. Bark splintered into the air and fell on top of them. Staring entranced at the bullet hole, Wade barely noticed Derrick on top of him.

Derrick rolled off. "Come on!" he yelled, jumping up and making a mad dash for better cover as a shower of bullets from an automatic came whizzing toward them.

After a moment, Wade got up and took off after him, bullets flying everywhere. His legs felt so weak as he ran that he thought he was going to collapse. He forced himself forward despite the fact that his body felt numb.

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG...! Bullets chopped the ground around their feet, spurting up dirt, twigs, leaves, and bits of rock.

The hair on the back of Wade's neck bristled as a bullet came within millimeters of his neck. He begged his legs for more speed, determined to get to those bushes. Derrick was nearly there. Wade pushed past his limits, gaze unbreakable from his destination... until... tripping on a root, "DERR-RICK!" he screamed as he fell.

Just reaching the brush, Derrick spun around and headed back, racing for Wade who lay flat on the ground covering his head, bullets flying all around him. *BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!* The bullets came practically nonstop. Derrick had to wonder how large a clip that guy had. Trying to go under the bullets, Derrick did a baseball slide toward Wade. Grabbing him by the top of his shirt then around his chest, he turned and crawled, quickly dragging him toward the bush, trying to stay low, in the grass, below the bullets. "Wade, help me out!" Derrick yelled. Wade remained petrified, dead weight. "Wade!" He didn't respond. The bullets started coming lower, chopping up the ground behind them. Standing, Derrick flung Wade over his shoulder and made a mad dash for cover, bullets whizzing. *BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!* They were almost there when... *Ahhh!* ...a bullet tore through Derrick's already wounded shoulder. Derrick lunged forward, collapsing behind the bush, Wade rolling onto his head and then over top of it and off onto the ground. Holding his shoulder, Derrick rolled onto his back and groaned.

Regaining some of his senses, Wade sat up, his whole body shaking. He looked over at Derrick who was sitting up, holding pressure on his shoulder. Wade gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry." Derrick didn't answer and kept his face free of any emotional response making Wade wonder what he was thinking. Eyes closed, teeth gritted, Derrick leaned back hard against the tree behind him, breathing deeply to try and combat the pain. Wade felt bad for Derrick... really bad, but more than that, he was in a state of panic. "What are we going to do?!" Wade yelled over the gunfire.

"Relax." Derrick's voice was low, and he didn't open his eyes.

"He's going to kill us! We need help! You need help!" Lifting his palms passionately, he looked up toward heaven. "We need help!"

"Taylor?" Dr. Fredricks shook his daughter's shoulder gently until she woke up and turned over.

Yawning, she blinked her eyes clear. "What time is it?" She looked around for a clock.

"Time for you to wake up for a bit."

Glancing back at him, her eyes stopped on a beautifully wrapped rectangular package with a big, fluffy pink bow, and her smile widened. "Is that for me?" Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at her dad.

He nodded handing her the package. "Something to keep you occupied until you get out of here."

After elevating her bed, and biting her lip on an exuberant smile, she took the package and began opening it. Dr. Fredricks just stared at that smile and the light in her eyes, overlooking the tinge of reservation he detected. It seemed like years since he'd seen that sparkle in her face, and he figured it probably had been. He'd been running to and fro so fast, he hadn't stopped long enough to even notice, much less cherish his youngest daughter. With a glistening smile, she glanced back up at her father one more time before pulling the phone from the package. Taking it out, her mouth dropped in amazement. "Where'd you get this? I didn't think they were even out yet."

"Just came on the market today." He said, standing a little straighter at the pride of his accomplishment.

Taylor looked playfully skeptical. "And *you* got one?"

He nodded, slowly. "Took some doin' but..."

Giggling, she gave him a nod for his accomplishment and then began looking at the device, turning it on. "It's already connected?"

"All set to go." Dr. Fredricks pulled a chair up and sat down. "With unlimited access to downloading games and apps." She looked at him questioningly, knowing he didn't usually part with his money so freely. "Within reason, of course."

She laughed. "Two? Or three?" she joked. Playfully, he tossed a small pillow at her that had been on the chair. Chuckling, she set it aside. "What's put you in such a good mood?" she hesitated as if afraid to ask. "I haven't seen you this happy in years."

His face grew serious, apologetic. "I'm sorry for that." He accidentally choked on his words. Scooting his chair closer to her bed, he took her hand and stared into her face, preparing for a conversation he figured was long overdue. "I haven't been there for you when you needed me, and I'm sorry."

She looked shocked at his apology, but then gave a teary smile. "At least you're here now."

He shook his head. "It's too late. I should have been here sooner." He held her hand tighter. "I just want you to know..."

Mark burst in the room. "Hey, Taylor. You awake girl?" He came over. "How ya feelin'?"

She nodded. "Better."

"Good. How's the little junior? Okay?"

Dr. Fredricks brow furrowed. He looked at Taylor, hoping Mark hadn't said what he thought he did, but from Taylor's shocked expression, he was sure his worst fear had become a reality. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. She was pregnant. He knew it was bound to happen.

Fear entering Taylor's eyes, she looked into her Dad's face. "I was going to tell you."

"When? On the child's first birthday?"

Not knowing what to say, Taylor just stared at her father a few moments. She could see his face burning. "Dad, I'm..." She felt so guilty. She started to cry. "I'm sorry. I..." Dr. Fredricks plopped down in the chair, rubbing his face with his hands, nearly groaning.

FIRE BREAK

"You don't have to be sorry to him. You haven't done anything wrong," Mark demanded.

"Haven't done anything wrong?! I'm going to be a mother," she sobbed, "a mother." She was so overwhelmed she nearly screamed it.

Mark threw up his hands and rolled his eyes. "Abort it! Duh." Dr. Fredricks stood up, obviously annoyed with his son's interference, but Mark remained unhindered. "And don't worry about him." He thumbed toward his father. "I'm working on it. You won't have to live in fear of him much longer."

"What?" Taylor jerked her attention toward him, fear in her face from what she thought he said.

"What are you talking about?" Dr. Fredricks voice was very serious.

"She deserves better than you. She shouldn't have to live in fear of her parents."

Taylor jerked her face back and forth between the two. "I'm not..." She barely got the words out before her father reacted.

"You get out of here!" He pointed toward the door.

Mark laughed. "You can't kick me out of here."

Dr. Fredricks started toward him. Taylor reached for him, "Dad, don't!" but she didn't get him. "You get out of here!" He walked right up to him.

"I've got a better idea. "Mark wagged his head, letting his father invade his space, refusing to step back. "Why don't you leave?"

Dr. Fredricks grabbed his shirt. Mark shoved him back, but Dr. Fredricks didn't let go. He yanked him toward the door. Mark kicked him in the shin. Though bending forward, Dr. Fredricks refused to let go and kept yanking toward the door. "Stop! Please stop!" Taylor yelled.

Lunging sideways, Mark jammed his shoulder into his father's stomach, pushing him backwards off his feet. They both slammed into the wall, Mark on top of his father pushing his father's shoulder through the wall. Tripping over each other, they both fell to the ground in a heap, just as Melinda came walking in. "What's going on in here?" she demanded, hands on her hips, two younger nurses staring behind her, peering over her shoulder. Both men stood up, Mark looking guilty, Dr. Fredricks still looking angry. Melinda glanced back and forth between the men. "Mark, I think you'd better leave... for now."

"Me?! Why not him?"

"Please leave. Take some time to cool off." She was doing her utmost to stay diplomatic, but her patience was running short.

"I...!"

"You need to leave."

"I think..."

"Now, or I'm calling security."

"Oh sure." He laughed sarcastically, looking from her to his father. "I see how it is." Looking from one stern face to the next, he muttered something indistinguishable, turned, and brushing off his pants, headed for the door. "You'll be hearing from a social worker," he called over his shoulder on his way out.

Dr. Fredricks jerked his face toward Taylor to see her reaction. Her mouth dropped open and then her face clouded with fear. He glanced back at Melinda, whose eyes were full of question marks. Rather than saying anything, he just turned toward the wall, leaned his elbows against it, and rubbed his face with his hand, trying to process how his life was about to change. He heard Taylor start to sob and felt Melinda rest her hand on his shoulder. Stiffening from her touch, he turned around, leaning back against the wall. "I'll pay for it."

"Huh?"

"The wall."

FIRE BREAK

Melinda glanced at the shattered chunks of drywall on the floor then back at him. “You okay?” Dr. Fredricks looked at the two young nurses. Following his gaze, Melinda looked over her shoulder, surprised to see them there. “Out!” She pointed toward the door. Exchanging glances, they left. Melinda looked from Dr. Fredricks to Taylor and back. “I’ll be here all day if you need to talk,” she whispered to him. He nodded, and she turned and left.

Walking over to Taylor, he noticed her still softly crying. He reached out to touch her arm. “Taylor, I...”

Letting out a burst of sobs, she rolled onto her side, turning her back on him, crinkling the pretty wrapping paper and causing the fluffy pink bow to tumble to the ground, landing on his shoe. Bending down, he picked it up off the tile and smoothed it in his hands. “Please, go away,” she sobbed. “Please, just go.”

Walking out, Dr. Fredricks stopped, bent down, and picked up the pretty wrapping that fell from the other side of the bed, staring at it, realizing most his hopes and plans were as crinkled, torn, and ruined as that pretty paper. He tossed it in the garbage. In that back drop of sobs, he wondered if that was the way the rest of his life would end up... or if... maybe he was already there.

Derrick blinked open his eyes and stared at Wade who sat a few feet away, face buried in his knees, arms covering his head. He glanced at their thick cover of shrubs and little trees that wasn’t so thick any more. The multiple bullets from the gunman were cutting through the branches like tiny saws, whittling them down, and every so often letting a stray bullet through. Derrick knew they had to find better cover... and fast.

Thinking about Wade’s desperate cry toward heaven, he felt guilty for not praying sooner. All this that was happening, this big life and death struggle, and he hadn’t even spoken with his Lord yet today. Praying was a relatively new concept to him. He was used to being self-reliant. Often, he wasn’t even sure how to do it or if he was saying the right thing, but the more often he did it, the more he enjoyed it. He thought it was weird how he could get the same thrill he got from danger from reading and learning the Scripture, finding out why he was here and what God wanted from him, how he as a stained, cursed sinner could work for and even please the Most High, Almighty GOD. He’d get excited when he prayed to Him, and it was getting more and more natural just to speak with Him throughout the day just as he would a close friend or family member that was around which made him feel even more ashamed for not including Him today, not including the only one with the power to help. All his life he had been depending on his own wisdom and his own strength and constantly found himself lacking, his knowledge insufficient, his strength limited, and his love all but quenched. He could beat himself half dead and still fail. He’d hurt others by his stubborn self-reliance leading to devastation and near devastation. He now realized his thinking had been prideful, belligerent, disrespectful, foolish, and dangerous, but now he’d given his life to God. Now, he understood that *~The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do His commandments. (Ps. 111:10) ~* and that *~The Lord is my strength and shield. (Ps. 28:7)*

Noticing Wade jump back two feet as a bullet grazed the ground next to him, Derrick began looking around as he prayed. *Lord, we need...* His eyes fell on a massive downed tree. *Thank you.* He could feel Wade’s stare. *But how do we get there?* He first asked himself and then directed the question to a higher source. *Lord, how....* The firing stopped. Derrick exchanged glances with Wade, got up, and took off. Wade followed. Darting across the clearing, they were barely behind the safety of the tree before the firing resumed.

FIRE BREAK

Out of breath Wade gave a half smile of relief, obviously feeling much safer. "You figure his gun backfired... or he couldn't get his clip changed?"

Derrick, looking in all directions, shrugged with his good arm. "Don't know." *Thank you, Lord.* Peace flooded over him and he knew they were going to get out alright. He knew it.

Brett cursed under his breath and quit firing, knowing he couldn't chop through that log like he had been trying to do with the bushes, and knowing firing would only waste ammunition. He couldn't believe he had started out with four large leg-pocket full, and now he was down to two and a half... *still plenty to get the job done, or it better be.* He couldn't believe that this little... annoying young pup was giving him so much trouble, and it gnawed at him. *Die! Just die!*

"Now what?" Wade looked over at Derrick, who, eyes closed, was holding his shoulder leaning back against the tree. "Bleeding stopped?"

Derrick took his hand away and looked at the wound. "Yeah. I think so. It isn't that bad."

Sure, and it's also twenty degrees below zero. "Here." Wade handed Derrick that handkerchief that he had used earlier when Derrick got lost the first time.

Derrick smiled as he accepted it. "Thanks."

"Good thing I brought it." Wade smiled apologetically, still feeling bad that Derrick got shot because of him.

"At least you had a chance to wash it from last time." Derrick half grinned as he tied it around the wound.

"At least you keep getting shot in the shoulder instead of in the heart or something."

Derrick paused and gave him a thanks-a-lot look. "There's a bright side to everything."

Wade sighed within himself. Maybe he didn't like Derrick, but if he was going to be stranded out in the woods all alone with him and a killer, miles away from civilization or anyone else, he wished he could at least be healthy. Wade started looking around. "There's got to be something we can do."

"Pray."

Wade accidentally glared at Derrick. He had been depending on Derrick to be strong to come up with some outrageous idea like he always did when all the chips were down. He had the reputation around the station as the one that always made it out. One of the young firefighter liked to tell the story about when he was trapped in a forest fire with no way out and he saw Derrick in the distance. With the rest of the squad yelling for him to come back, he took off running after him. He'd never stuck around to hear the whole story because hearing it always annoyed him, but the gist of the story was that they eventually made it out when no one else did. That's what he wanted now, but somehow Derrick's answer sounded like a death sentence, like 'Sorry, there's nothing more we can do.' Leave it to fate. It struck fear in his heart and he wasn't ready to accept it.

FIRE BREAK

“Wait a minute.” Jim stopped running and put his hand out to block Jess and Mellissa. Breathless, Mellissa relished the opportunity. Falling sideways against a tree, holding her aching side, she gasped for air.

Jess bent forward as she tried to catch her breath. Between breaths she managed to get out, “What’s the matter?” She studied her husband’s face as he gazed intently down the hill.

“There’s someone down there.” He raised his other hand, pointing with his rifle.

Jess tried to follow his gaze, but all she saw was an endless sea of brown pine trunks. Then turning her head, her attention turned to something else... the gentle ripple of a softly rushing stream. “Jim?”

“What?”

“Do you hear that?”

He looked around. “What?”

Her smile widened. “Water.”

“Water?!” Mellissa straightened, immediately.

Walking over next to Jess, Jim listened more intently. “Yeah, it is.”

“Can we go get some?” Jess’s eyes were hopeful.

Jim nodded, handing Morgan to Jess. “You three go. I’ll watch and try to figure out what our next best move is.” He took the empty water bottle from his belt and handed it to her.

Huddled against the rock inside her little cubby hole, Sam couldn’t stop shaking. She felt like a quivering little rabbit. She hated the feeling but was too scared to do anything about it. She could hear noises, but she couldn’t see what was going on... or who was winning. She wanted to peek out but didn’t. Suddenly, seeing a giant shadow approaching, she thought the worst and began to panic. She tried to coax herself to look out, but she was too scared to move. Her heart began pumping in overdrive. She looked around, feeling very trapped. She didn’t know where to go, what to think, what to do. Hearing her rapid breathing, feeling lightheaded, starting to shake, she was afraid she was going to pass out until...

“Sam?” a soft voice came from the shadow. Sam, shaking violently, tried to force herself to look up. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw someone crouch down in front of her and sit back on his heels. “Sam?” Glancing up, she saw Trent. For a minute, she just stared and then dropping her face in her hands, she began to weep.

Returning from the stream, Jess stopped and looked for Jim. She found him sitting at the edge of the hill, staring down it. Giving Morgan's hand to Mellissa, she headed over to Jim, sitting down next to him when she arrived. For a minute, she didn't say anything but just stared in the direction of his gaze trying to see what he did. "I need to get closer." She heard Jim say it just as she spotted the gunman, lying on his stomach behind a log, rifle in his hands pointed, yet not firing.

"What's he doing?"

Jim shrugged. "Looks to me like he's keeping someone pinned down."

"You think Wade got through to help and that's them?" Her voice held hope.

Jim looked skeptical. "I doubt one guy could effectively keep a whole group of people pinned down, without even firing."

"Maybe they're just taking a break."

"Possible. Either way," Jim sighed as he got up, and grabbed his rifle. "I need to go find out."

Jess's relenting smile didn't reach her eyes as she got up, too. Standing on her toes, she reached her arms around his neck. "Be careful." She hugged him. Claspings his hands securely around her waist, he found her mouth and returned her hug with a kiss that lasted nearly a minute.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Sniffing and wiping her eyes with the back of her hands, Sam got up and followed Trent as he walked over to the other side of the cave. She followed his gaze up the rocky side and to the hole in the top, suddenly realizing what he was thinking. "I'm not going up there," she demanded, hands on her hips.

Trent knelt down when he reached the first boulder and fingered the dirt and pebbles. "This is how the others go out."

"What?" She looked over his shoulder.

"The dirt's been disturbed." He got up and started pointing at other rocks that had obviously been disturbed recently, one even having a partial shoe print.

Sam followed his gaze. "How many of them do you think got out?" She was afraid to be too optimistic.

"Well," He kept studying the rocks. "considering that they aren't here," he circled his finger to indicate the room they were in, "or back there," he pointed over his shoulder. "or in either of the two tunnels..."

"They could have gone down my tunnel, and I just didn't know it. I couldn't see a thing."

Trent shook his head. "I think they all made it out," he mumbled, staring up the wall. "I'm sure of it."

Running quietly yet swiftly down the hillside, holding his rifle tightly in his right hand, Jim weaved in and out between the scattered pine trunks until he got as close as he dared to the gunman. Then he stopped behind the trunk of a large maple and peered around it, trying to devise a plan. He wished he knew who was being pinned down. He had a feeling it was Wade. In fact, he had a feeling it was Wade and Derrick, even if Trent had been sure he had been shot. *He could have been wrong.* Still, he didn't trust his feelings, not enough to kill, and that's just what he figured he'd have to do. He knew he

FIRE BREAK

could never justify shooting the guy in the back, but he could justify getting his attention so he turned and pointed his rifle. He might even let him get the first shot off. Either way, even if it was a fair fight, he would have to kill him. He would have to send a soul to hell. He would kill without hesitation, even give his life, to protect his family. He would even kill to protect Derrick and Wade if their life was in immediate danger, *but are they in immediate danger or is there a better way? Is it even Derrick and Wade? Lord, what should I do?*

Derrick grimaced as he leaned forward away from the log and checked his shoulder. He was thankful that it had stopped bleeding. Glancing over top the log he tried to catch a glimpse of the gunman, but he couldn't. Noticing Wade staring at him, he looked at him questioningly.

"Do you have a plan?" Wade asked hopefully.

Not answering a moment, Derrick began replacing the empty rounds in his revolver. "See that clearing over there?" Derrick pointed in the distance then resumed filling his pistol.

Wade looked over his shoulder. "Yeah."

"I can get there without being seen. He'll see me when I cross the clearing, but I'll be out of gun range. Hopefully, he'll figure you're with me and come after me. Except you'll be here."

"And he'll never come past here," Wade finished, thoughtfully. Then he shook his head. "You can't play decoy and face him alone while I'm 'headin' for the hills."

"I'm not counting on facing him... but whatever happens, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"I'd feel like a coward." He said it more to himself than to Derrick.

"It's just common sense." Derrick returned the firearm to his holster. "We still have two objectives. We've got to get help for the others, and we have to get that drive to the hearing."

Wade rolled his eyes. "Forget the drive!" If looks could kill... Wade had to double take at the fierce expression Derrick shot him. "It's not worth our lives."

"If you had any integrity you'd know it is." Derrick paused. "We have the means to stop a murderer. If we don't do it, more people will die... innocent people."

"There's plenty on that drive. So he claims double jeopardy on this one, so what? Charge him with another crime... *another murd-der*, and this time let the police handle it."

"Sure. He'd be out of the country faster than any charges could be brought against him. Soon as he's cleared at this trial, he's free to go anywhere."

Wade sighed, rubbing his face wearily then holding out his hand. "Give me the drive." To his surprise, Derrick was shaking his head, no. "What? So you are going to try to get the drive there, and you want me to go for help for the others?"

"No. We both need to do both." Wade's reluctance was evident, but Derrick figured he had no other choice. "Here's the post office key." He took it from his pocket and handed it to Wade. "The original drive's there. I have a copy. If we both end up making it to the court house, great, but at least one of us needs to."

Wade snatched the key. "Don't count on it being me."

Derrick's heart sank, but after a final glance at Wade, he took off belly crawling through the long grass and behind the brush toward a clearing. His heart longed for someone he could count on. He felt battered and weak, not strong enough to carry the lives of all his friends on his shoulders, the lives of all those innocent victims on his back. He didn't think he was strong enough to carry the load... not strong enough. His stomach

FIRE BREAK

knotted as he pulled himself forward. Quitting is not an option. I have to get through. ... get through this or die. *God, help me.* He pulled himself forward, pain searing through his shoulder. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore it. *~Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. (1 Peter 5:7)~* His burned leg scraped against a rock in the dirt. He grimaced, but continued pulling himself forward. *God, give me strength.* The bicep of his bad arm felt like it was on fire. *~But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)~* He gritted his teeth. *Get me through this, God. Get me there. Get me there on time.*

Soon as Derrick was out of sight, Wade peered around the log, trying to spot the gunman. After a few moments, he started to see flashes of light reflecting off his gun, but he wasn't moving, which made Wade figure he hadn't spotted Derrick yet. Quickly, he ducked back down as the gunman started firing at him. Wade waited. Suddenly, the firing diverted toward Derrick. Wade grimaced, wondering if Derrick was out of range yet, or if his guts were splattered all over the forest. Quickly popping his head up, Wade peeked, trying to spot Derrick. A strange relief he never thought he would feel about Derrick came over him when he saw that he was fine. Shaking his head, turning around, arms crossed, Wade plopped back against the log. *That kid's gonna get himself killed.*

Jim decided instead of trying to startle the gunman into firing at him, he would get as close as he could and hope the man would rather surrender than challenge a rifle that was only a few feet away. He knew the plan wasn't fool-proof, but praying as he went that the gunman wouldn't hear him, he cautiously sprinted from his tree to a closer one, then waited to see if there was a reaction from the gunman. There wasn't one, so he did it again, getting even closer, but this time when he got there he saw movement of the gunman and quickly ducked behind the tree, standing still as a statue. After a few moments, he looked out, surprised to see... nothing. *Where'd he go.* Coming out further than he figured was safe, he looked all around until he spotted the man running down the hill... toward something... *toward him.* Though too far away to identify the person, Jim figured it was probably Wade, since there was only one. Without pausing to consider strategy, Jim took off full speed, following them, but was stopped by a faraway voice. It was just then that he remembered Jess and Morgan all alone and knew he couldn't follow them. Hearing the strange voice again, he turned and began walking toward it. As he neared it, he recognized it as the familiar loud whisper of one of his best friends. "What are you...?" At Wade's hand motions, Jim ducked down behind the log. "What's going on?" He returned in a loud whisper.

"Is Mellissa alright?" Wade's voice was urgent.

Jim nodded. "She's fine. Her Jess and Morgan are at the top of the hill."

"Good." Wade sighed, obvious relief on his face. "What about Trent and Sam?"

Jim gave an exaggerated shrug. "We got split up. Who's...?" He pointed over his shoulder.

"Derrick."

Jim felt relief flood over him. "He's alright then. I was afraid he got shot."

Wade's face clouded with guilt. "Twice."

"Twice?!"

FIRE BREAK

Wade's nod was slow and defined. "He's still got that drive, and he's headed for that trial." Wade opened his hand to reveal the key. "He wants me to get the original and take it in case he doesn't make it."

"Are you going to do it?"

Taking a deep breath, Wade closed his eyes and laid his head back against the bark, obviously weary. "No."

Jim nodded slowly, knowing how he felt. They were all nearly done in. All he wanted to do in the world was get his family to safety and hide with them until this thing was over, but at the same time, his mind kept reviewing the drive, battling between the craving for peace and the necessity of justice, the pull of justice, the right of justice, the need for justice for those families. Even more than that, he knew that his own family could never be safe until these guys were put away. Mansenie would and could never rest until the drive and everyone that had seen it were obliterated from off the face of the earth. "Give it to me."

Surprise filled Wade's eyes as he blinked them open. "You're gonna do it?" He held out the key.

Jim took it. "You promise me you'll get my wife and baby to safety."

Wade hesitated. "I'll try my best."

Jim stared at him a minute. That was a pretty shaky commitment for him to leave the life of his wife and baby in his hands. He wasn't sure if he could do it, but then he was struck with the reality that his own hands were shaky, even the most elite soldiers at their best were... shaky. Anyone could make a mistake. Anything could happen. Maybe Wade wasn't his first choice to protect his wife, but then again it wasn't up to Wade. He left them in God's hands, and he would pray for them every step he took. As he prayed, he was reminded that he couldn't sell Jess short when it came to self-defense. He handed Wade the rifle, and got up. "They're at the top hill."

Wade nodded standing up. "I'll find 'em."

Jim turned and started running in the direction of Derrick and the gunman. Please, protect them, Lord. Lord, I'm trusting you to take care of them. Please, put your hedge of protection 'round about them. Your word says, ~ *The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them (Ps. 34:7)*~. I'm claiming that verse for my family. Please, Lord, please take care of them. I need them. You know I need them. You know how much I need them.

Lying on her stomach underneath a bush, Kara Lee watched the interaction between Wade and Jim. She'd been dying to go after Derrick, to see if there was any way he could outrun the killer. She was dying to know if he could do it... if he could really get the drive through... but here she sat. She propped her chin on her hand and sighed within herself. There was no way to get past without Wade seeing her. She wished he would leave. Now, with Jim going after Wade and the gunman, her curiosity, adrenaline, and excitement were peeked. She wanted to go too. She cursed Wade in her mind, wanting him to get up and go somewhere, wanting him to move. She wanted out of here. If she missed the action, she'd... she'd...she'd think of something to do to Wade... some way to get even. *Now, move!*

Glancing over his shoulder, Derrick could see Brett catching up. He ran harder. His legs were burning, but he asked for more. His bad leg threatened to slow him, but he wouldn't allow it... he couldn't allow it. His shoulder muscle felt like it was getting

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shredded. He could only imagine what the bullets inside him were doing to the tissue as he pumped his arms back and forth, but he refused to care. He refused to slow down. He refused to give in. He utilized every storehouse of strength he had, yet the gunman was only getting closer.

Jim could see the gunman was gaining on Derrick. He, himself, was gaining on the gunman rather rapidly, but he'd need a few more minutes to catch him, and anything could happen during that time. He also hadn't any idea what to do once he reached him, since he'd given his rifle to Wade.

Derrick looked back every few seconds. The gunman was closing in, and he knew it would be only a matter of seconds before he tried for an accurate kill shot. *Just a couple of seconds, God. That's all I need.* Eyes fixed straight ahead, Derrick stared at the cliff's edge. If only he could make it there and jump, the river beneath would be out of gun range... if he survived the jump, if the drive survived the water inside its hard-shelled yet unsealed sunglasses case. He wished he had a better option, but he knew he didn't. He knew this was his only chance.

Jim sprinted till his heart was about to burst. The gunman was still yards in front of him. He could see him lift his gun and begin to drop to his knee.

Out of the corner of his eye, Derrick saw the gunman drop to his knee and raise his rifle to his eye. Coming to the ledge, with one final stride and a giant leap, he flung himself bodily over the edge. He heard the earsplitting gunshot as he fell, but didn't think he'd been hit. He closed his eyes tight as the water neared. *God, get this drive through. If not by me then by someone else. Please, get it through.*

Soon as the gun fired, Jim, without breaking stride, tackled Brett from behind with such force that he dropped the gun and fell forward on his chest. Unfortunately, he didn't stay there long. Getting up on his knees, he thrust his arm back elbowing Jim in the cheekbone, causing him to fall backwards.

Jim rolled over, got up on one knee and kicked to the side with his other leg, delivering a smashing blow to Brett's chest.

Coughing Brett grabbed the rifle. Jim grabbed it, too, and they both fought for it. After a moment Brett weakened his grip, prompting the same reaction from Jim. Then he thrust the gun at Jim, trying to thrust the side of the barrel into his larynx. Jim turned his head, just in the nick of time, sending the gun smashing into the side of his neck instead. Then standing, with great force, he jerked the gun up, but Brett didn't let go. Instead, he stood, too.

They both wrestled for the weapon. Jim kicked Brett in the knees. Brett reacted in pain, dropping to his knees, but not lessening his grip on the gun. While down, he clenched his jaw and bit into Jim's thigh. Jim tried to bring the gun down hard across

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Brett's skull, but before he could Brett butted Jim's legs with his head, causing him to fall. Neither let go of the gun. Rolling on top of Jim, Brett forced the rifle up to Jim's neck and then tried to force it down across his throat. Jim's arm's burned, nearly shaking as he worked to keep the rifle up. After a few moments of pushing against each other, Brett cursed and fell backwards, Jim got on top of him. Brett thrust his knees up, trying to thrust Jim off, but only succeeded in rolling him over. They both rolled over twice until they were right on the edge of the cliff. Jim on the bottom, Brett again with all his fury tried to get the gun barrel down across Jim's neck. Jim, asking for every ounce of strength, tried to keep it up, and then in a strange surge of energy, Jim thrust up, quick and hard, thrusting Brett up, causing him to lose his balance and fall to the side, off Jim, and screaming, over the edge. After the deafening yell as he fell, there was a splash and then all was quiet.

Weak and shaking, Jim rolled over onto his knees. On all fours, he stared at the ground a moment, waiting for the world to stop spinning. Getting up, and nearly falling down again on weak legs, Jim caught himself on a nearby branch. Then wiping off some of the stream of blood running down his forehead into his eye, he took a step forward and peered over the edge. All he saw was one body floating on top of the water. He couldn't tell who. Licking the blood from his split lip, he scanned the river banks and saw nothing. He strained his eyes to see as far down the river as he could until the peaceful water flowed around the bend with a cliff on either side, obstructing any further view.

He took the key from his pocket and looked at it, and then looked at the river, not knowing what to do – go after Derrick – go back to his family – or try to get the drive to the trial. Staring down at the gentle water, he clenched his fist around the key. He owed Derrick that much. Realizing Derrick had felt it was important enough to die for, he determined to get the drive through, no matter what.

Jess paced back and forth at the top of the hill gazing down the slope and glancing over her shoulder every few seconds, stopping to listen occasionally.

Mellissa, who was sitting in the grass nervously plucking the blades and halfway watching Morgan who was beside her arranging little acorns, willingly let her fear dominate her. "Maybe we should hide."

Not breaking stride, Jess threw her hands up. "Who knows what's going on."

"Maybe nothing bad," Mellissa's voice was tentative and shaky, yet hopeful.

"There was a gunshot." Jess paced faster.

"I know."

"I can't see him. I just can't see him anymore!"

"Maybe he got shot!" Mellissa's voice cracked. Not knowing what else to say, she put her head in her hands.

"Hey!" Wade came running toward them, carrying Jim's rifle at his side.

"Wade!" Mellissa jumped up and ran to him, falling into his arms. Wade pulled her into a kiss, kissing her like he hadn't in months.

Fear entered Jess's eyes as she looked down at the gun and back up at Wade. "Where's Jim?"

Finishing the kiss, Wade looked at Jess. "He gave me his gun and took off after the shooter and Derrick."

"Derrick's alright?" Mellissa looked up at Wade, still in his arms, and Wade nodded.

"What about Jim? What about the gunshot?"

"I don't know." Wade gave a quick shrug. "I couldn't see it." He saw her face turn very concerned. "The gunman was chasing Derrick. He probably shot at him."

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Somehow that didn't make Jess feel any better. Stopping, she gazed down the slope and into the distance. *Jim, where are you? Lord, is he okay? He's is? He's not...?* She didn't know. *You wouldn't let anything happen to him, would you? Oh, Lord, protect him. Please protect him. Please, God keep him safe. Please, I need him.* Instead of panic, she felt peace. She knew he was fine. Whether on heaven or earth, she didn't know, but she had a feeling he was still here.

Derrick breathed hard and slow, eyes closed, as he lay on his side half on the muddy river's edge and half in the water. He didn't know what to do. He didn't think he could go on. He didn't think he could stay awake. He just wanted to pass out. Opening his foggy eyes, he tried to blink them clear as he stared off into the woods. He felt too beaten down and too weary to go on. Suddenly, he realized what was happening. He was slowly convincing himself to quit. He realized what would happen if he did, and he didn't think if he could live with that. He didn't want this hanging over him, his entire life. He decided he'd rather die than give up. Slowly pulling himself up onto the river bank, he brought himself to his knees. The world spun a moment and his stomach felt sick. He stared into the distance until the feeling past. He didn't want to live his life in defeat. He didn't want this hanging over him. He didn't want the guilt of those souls that would die. He would fight. He would fight to the death. Using a tree, he pulled himself to his feet. Swaying, he took a wide stance and tried to steady himself, but one step forward and he collapsed to the ground. His head was aching, and he had chills from the slight infection just starting to set in in his shoulder. The world spun again, and he gagged, even though there was nothing in his stomach to throw up. *What do I do?* He asked himself more than he prayed it. Staring at the river, he concluded that was the only way. He couldn't walk out. He would have to ride the river. It was calm here. It was probably calm where it ran parallel to where they'd parked, but it was the stretch they'd had to cross hiking in that worried him. That stretch always seemed to have rapids. He crawled down toward the water, hesitating a moment before pulling himself in. As he got in, the cold water stimulated him, and he found a new source of strength. He was grateful. He just hoped it would be enough to get him through.

Out of breath, Jim slowed to a walk as he came to the river crossing. Trying to catch his breath, he walked over to the log. Before pulling himself onto it, he stared down at the churning water soberly. His mind went back to Derrick, and his heart ached. He was a good friend, an admirable man, and Jim could see a lot of potential for his future. He didn't want him to be gone. *God, don't let him be gone.*

Taking hold of the log, he pulled himself up, but this time, he didn't get an adrenaline rush from the experience. He just felt melancholy as he slowly walked across it. He didn't even sway once. He was too relaxed, too much like he didn't care.

Climbing down on the other side, he walked a few yards, and then began jogging again.

"What are we going to do now?" Mellissa looked over at her husband.

"We need to go after them!" Jess answered before Wade could.

Wade shook his head. "I promised Jim, I'd get us back to town."

"We can't just leave him."

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“We’d never catch up. Besides, Jim’s not expecting us. We could just foul things up and make it more dangerous for him.” He glanced at Morgan. “Besides what about her? You don’t want to put her in danger.”

Jess glanced at Morgan and nodded, that last statement causing her to relent.

Melissa glanced at Morgan, too, and stared a few moments. She knew Davy was back with his Grandparents, probably safe and sound, but she couldn’t help worrying about him. She couldn’t stop wishing he was with her. She couldn’t help longing to hold him again. She just felt worried. She had to keep reminding herself that soon everything would be back to normal.

Derrick braced himself as the water began to speed up, and he knew soon he was going to have to fight to stay above the frothy mixture. He felt like a bobber as the raging water began pulling him down and then, releasing him, thrust him forward. He held his breath as an undertow pulled him under a few seconds and then released him. Soon as he came to the surface, a wave gave him a hefty shove downstream, thankfully right between to large boulders and not into them. He breathed a sigh of relief, too long of one because he didn’t have his mouth shut before a large wave splashed into his face. He turned his head, but not before he got some water. Coughing violently, he tried to clear his lungs when mid-cough the current pulled him under. Every cell in his lungs was screaming for air. His muscles tried to force him to finish the cough. He knew if he did, he would drown. Finally, after what seemed to him like forever and a half, the current released him and forced him back up. He had to gasp for air, rather than finish the cough and just hoped he didn’t end up with pneumonia from the water in his lungs. Finally, through blurred, water irritated eyes he saw the log. The log they had crossed coming up, but then he gazed at a forgotten horror just past it, a garden of giant rocks and boulders sticking out of the water. All of a sudden he was sure, he’d never make it through those rocks.

Soon as he was close enough, he reached for the log and managed to snag a chunk of loose bark that had peeled off and was hanging down. Grabbing it with both hands, he hung on tight, trying to devise a plan to get to shore and then walk the rest of the way out. If he was gonna pray, he figured now would be good time. *HELP!* It was short and to the point. He tried to yank himself up, but his bad arm was having none of it. In fact, it was the first time he had noticed it being partially numb. A large wave thrust into him, made him loose his grip, and tossed him down the river. His eyes widened as another wave came thrust him straight for a giant boulder. He didn’t know whether to pray again or not. He felt a little betrayed that God hadn’t answered him earlier. Before he could make up his mind, he went sailing past it, missing it by inches, then in between two more jagged rocks, back and forth between some small ones and into slower and then calm water. Looking back at the churning water, he stared a few moments as he drifted downstream, amazed he made it through the rocks without crashing once... and glad he didn’t have to figure out how to walk. Glancing toward shore and the approaching road in the distance, he realized how much shorter and easier this route was than if he had walked from the log. Feeling a little guilty, he looked up toward the blue-bird, cotton-cloud sky and whispered a prayer, “Thanks.”

Coming to a fallen log, Jim slowed and walked toward it. Putting his hand down on it, he climbed over. He figured if he had a dollar for each of the logs he had crossed, he’d be a millionaire.

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He tried to jog again, but quickly melted back to a walk. Tired, achy, dehydrated and drenched in sweat, he figured walking the rest of the way wouldn't hurt anything. He only hoped that Derrick had left the car doors unlocked. He highly doubted he did. Derrick didn't have a careless bone in his body. That would mean he would have to break something to get in and then pray that Derrick had an extra set of keys hidden somewhere in his truck, because if there was one thing he didn't know how to do, it was hotwire a vehicle.

Seeing a glimmer of light through the trees, Derrick could tell it was the sun reflecting off his truck. Asking his bad arm to move, he slowly doggy-paddled over to the side off the river, grimacing at the pain in his shoulder.

Reaching shallow water, it took him a couple of tries to stand up on his rubbery legs, but he finally made it. Stumbling up the river bank, he collapsed on the soft, lush grass. Breathing deeply, he tried to get his bearings in a spinning world.

The world still hadn't stopped spinning yet when he pulled himself to his feet with a tree. After leaning against it a few moments, he shoved himself away and stumbled to the next one, falling against it, and then stumbling to the next.

Nearly to the road, he took a minute at the last tree. Closing his eyes and taking deep breaths, he tried to calm his shaking body. Opening his eyes, the world was still foggy and moving. He shivered even though he was sweating. His stomach churned. Letting go of the tree, he stumbled toward the road. Both his legs started shaking violently then his whole body did. He only made it a few steps before falling to the grass near the edge. Gazing at the truck through blurred eyes, he grabbed a rut in the dirt and pulled himself forward, then a root, then a rock, inching his way toward it. Reaching the driver's side door, he rolled on his back, grimacing in pain. Gritting his teeth, he reached up for the handle, grabbed it, pulled himself a few inches up, then fell back to the ground, losing consciousness.

Jim took a deep breath, then let out a long sigh. He could see glimmers of the road in the distance, and he knew he was almost there, yet far from done. In fact, he felt like when he reached that truck he would just be beginning.

Staring at the ground as he walked, he weaved in between the last few trees and stepped onto the road. Seeing a glimmer of red, he went toward it, kneeling and staring at the bright red splotches on the road. Turning his head and lifting his eyes, they first fell on Kara Lee's jeep then over on a black SUV, then on Derrick's silver truck, then down to Derrick, who lay sprawled out on his chest, arm on the running board. *Derrick!* Jumping up, he ran toward him. "Derrick!" His body was lifelessly still. "Derrick?" He knelt down next to him and pulled him over onto his back and shook him gently, not having the nerve to check for a pulse.

Derrick blinked his eyes open and a couple more times, trying to clear his vision. Once he recognized Jim, he cleared his throat and tried to speak. "Poc-ket." He swallowed hard. "It's... take...."

"Just relax a minute, okay." Taking his water bottle from his belt, Jim unscrewed the lid and gave some to Derrick.

Derrick drank it, not bothering to mention, water was the last thing he needed right now. He would have thought Jim could have taken a hint from his drenched clothes, but he didn't really care. Just the realization of Jim being there, gave him strength and hope. "The..." He closed his eyes. "It's in my pocket."

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Staring at Derrick's blood pooling shoulder, Jim reached in his pocket and pulled out the hard shell glasses case. Opening it, he saw the drive inside and looked up at Derrick.

"Is it dry?"

Jim nodded. "It's dry."

"Get it..."

"But it can wait... a few minutes anyway." Reaching in Derrick's other pocket, he found his car keys and got up to unlock the doors. If there was one thing he knew about Derrick, it was that he always kept an excessively well-stocked emergency kit, complete with all the supplies needed in case of a hunting accident. Pushing forward the back seat, Jim began searching behind it, until he came up with the first aid duffel bag. Taking it back, he set it next to Derrick's shoulder and began unbuttoning his shirt, revealing the two festering wounds. Grimacing at the sight, Jim quickly and roughly unzipped the bag.

Inside the cave, standing on the top rock near the opening, Sam lifted her hand up for Trent to grab hold of. He did and lifted her out.

Getting up from the ground, she brushed herself off. "Now what?"

"Well," Trent sighed, staring off into the distance. "I've got to get you to town, and," he sighed again. "if we don't meet up with the others, I'll have to get search and rescue out here for them..."

"But you don't have to be with 'em." Sam suggested.

"Huh?" He looked back at her. "What?"

She looked down and played with her hand. "Seems a shame to give up on justice, now."

He shook his head. "It's too late for that drive... for this trial, anyway."

She started walking. "Too late for justice? Too late for all those who were murdered? Too late to do the right thing?" She crossed her arms. "Confirms my opinion of cops."

He followed her. "If it's too late, it's too late."

"Where there's a will..."

He shook his head. "There's no way we can make it in time," he mumbled, starting to jog after Sam who had begun running. His brow furrowed as he recalled the drive, especially Brett, his old partner... his old friend. The thought left a bad taste in his mouth. How could he have trusted him? *Is there a way?* He looked toward the sky. *Is there a way?*

Stuck under a bush again, which seemed to be quickly becoming her custom, Kara Lee twitched her nose as a couple of dusty pine needles threatened to make her sneeze. Pinching her nose tight, she continued staring at Jim and Derrick. She had arrived in the middle of irrigating the wound and now, was watching the bandaging process.

Something inside of her was glad that Derrick was still alive. She didn't usually get sentimental about human life. She figured most people basically got what they deserved, but there was just something she respected, maybe even admired about Derrick. She insisted to herself that his staggering good looks had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Tapping her fingers absentmindedly, she secretly hoped they would hurry up, that they hadn't given up, that maybe, by some miracle, they would pull it off. What a story that would make, if they could actually do it, and she would be right there with her camera. The story would be hers, all hers.

"Can't we hurry up!" Jess, hefted Morgan higher in her arms and yelled back at Wade and Mellissa who were lagging behind.

"We're doing our best," Mellissa snapped, nearly slipping while crawling over a log.

"It's been a long morning for everyone," Wade tried to diffuse the discussion as he climbed over it.

Jess shot them each a dirty look and continued to scan the landscape for any signs of Jim or Derrick. She wanted to be running, running to find her husband safe and sound,

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running to protect her baby, running to safety. She glanced back at them. . . . not walking, but then again, the last thing she wanted was to be by herself. So, if they would only walk, that's what'd she have to do, too.

Sam's lungs burned as she ran behind Trent. Despite all the complaining she'd done during her grueling cross county class, she was sure thankful for it now. She knew without it, she'd never be keeping up with Trent's pace right now. She gave herself a nod. Actually, she was pretty proud of herself. She figured she was doing pretty good. *Wait until the kids hear... Wham.* Not paying any attention to Trent, she ran right into him when he stopped abruptly. Getting off of him, she backed up. "What's the matter?"

"I think I know how we can do it!" He wiped the dripping sweat from his forehead with his forearm.

"Do what?" He just shot her a look. "The hard drive?"

"When we get to town we can rent a plane. I remember seeing a sign to a private airport when we...."

"You know how to fly?" Sam interrupted, surprised by the suggestion.

"Ye-es. I don't think it'd be a very safe trip if I didn't."

Sam crossed her arms and put her nose in the air. "You could hire a pilot." A large drop of sweat dripped in her eye, stinging it.

In a new fit of upbeat determination, Trent spun around, "Let's go!" and began running.

Sam took a moment, putting her face in her shirt to wipe it dry, then with a hop, darted after him, weary but eager at the possibility they might be able to do this.

Filled with nervous energy, watching Jim intently as he helped Derrick into the passenger's side, Kara Lee waited. Down on her knees, behind her bush, she waited for the right moment. She knew that if she wanted to have this story, she would have to stay glued to the source. She glanced at her jeep. The last time she tried following her source in her own car, *they* ended up getting away, and *she* ended up behind bars for speeding, resisting arrest, assault, and possession of heroin. This time she wasn't taking any chances.

She rose to a squat as she watched Jim close Derrick's door and head over to the driver's side. Then, just as he was getting in, she jumped partway up. Annoyed at a branch ripping her pocket, she cursed but didn't break stride as she dashed toward the back of the truck, still crouched low. When she got there, she peeked around the corner, seeing in the mirror that Derrick's eyes were closed, but she needed a time when Jim wasn't looking. *Reach down for something!* Instead, he buckled his belt and looked back over his shoulder. She ducked just in time. Her heart sank as she felt the truck jump into gear, but she was not going to give up, not by a long shot. Bent forward, she jumped up. Both knees barely fit on the back running board. Ducked low to stay hidden behind the hatch, she managed to squeeze the fingertips of her one hand in a gap between the truck and the brake light and her other hand in a small gap between the truck and the trunk door. She used every ounce of strength in her fingers to hang on as the truck backed up, went forward, then backed off the road, then bounced forward, turning around, and spurted forward. Losing her grip when it spurted, she had to reach up and grab the top of the trunk. Realizing he could see her hand if he looked, she jumped in the back as quick as a flash, and then peeked up. Seeing him with his eyes fixed forward, she breathed a sigh of relief and concluded with all the bouncing and banging from ruts and potholes, he

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probably didn't notice her. Trying not to cough on the cloud of dust being kicked up by the tires, she grabbed onto a square hole in the back of the cab, trying desperately not to bounce up (or out) while jouncing through every rut on the planet.

Jess glanced over her shoulder again. She'd had this same strange feeling for about a half an hour, this feeling she was being watched. The feeling was only intensifying, making her very nervous, and giving her a feeling of urgency, but she didn't know what to do about it. If they were being followed, by who and how many, and where was he? She looked but tried not to move her head too much to make it too obvious she was looking around.

Coming to the log and the river crossing, they all stopped and looked from one to another. "Not this again," Mellissa whined.

Wade glanced at her sympathetically, then at Jess. "We'll take a break here and get some water before we cross." Mellissa plopped down in the grass next to the edge and splashed some cool water on her face. Holding Morgan's hand, Jess stared off into the distance up the slope that went up from their position, creating a cliff next to the river. She wondered if from the top, she could see who was following them. She debated with herself, whether to try or stay with the others. She prayed about it, but she still wasn't sure what to do. Feeling Morgan staring up at her, she slowly walked with her over to the river to get a drink. Telling Morgan to stay there when she was still a safe distance away, Jess went all the way to the river's edge and filled up her bottle for them to share, but she kept staring toward the slope, wondering, praying, contemplating a plan.

Walking over and handing the bottle down to Morgan, who was sitting by Mellissa, staring up at her, she quietly told Wade, "I want to go up river and check something."

"What?" He took a swig of water then rested his forearm on his bent knee.

She sat down next to him. "Can I have the pistol?"

"Why?" He slipped it to her secretly.

"I think there may be someone following us. I just want to check." She stood up.

Wade hesitated, then whispered, "Be careful," as she got up. Jess nodded. "Yell or shoot if you need help." Jess nodded.

Mellissa, not hearing the whole conversation looked puzzled as she glanced from Jess to Wade. "What?"

"Shhh," Wade told her.

"Just watch Morgan for me," Jess whispered. Nodding but still puzzled, Mellissa took Morgan's hand and pulled her into her lap. Jess smiled (almost a pained smile) at Morgan and then left.

"Mommy?" Morgan jerked her head toward Jess and started to get up, but Mellissa pulled her back down. Eyes wide, Morgan looked inquisitively at Mellissa. "Where Mommy going?"

Mellissa pulled her back onto her lap. "Don't you worry." She rocked her. "Mommy will be back in a minute."

Feeling the direction of the gunman's stare, Jess walked parallel to him, next to the river, staring into the water, hoping he didn't become suspicious. When she reached a tangle of bushes, dead branches, and trees that she was pretty sure obstructed by the gunman's view, she casually stepped behind it and sat down at a log on the edge, so he could see her feet and know she was sitting down. After a few moments, after she figured the gunman had probably lost interest in her, she scooted back out of view, but stuck her feet out occasionally so he could see she was still there. Then she scooted totally back and after sneaking to the edge of the brush, dashed from it to a nearby tree and then another and another until she figured she was behind the gunman about a hundred feet to

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the right. Then she started making her way over until she was directly behind him. When she was, she stopped and peered out at him from behind her tree until she spotted the gunman crouched behind a log, staring at Wade and Mellissa, his rifle beside him on the ground. She wondered what he was thinking and what he was waiting for. She flexed her sweaty fingers and then tightened them around the handle of her gun. Suddenly, she didn't know what to do. She didn't think she should shoot him when he wasn't holding his gun, even though his intentions were clear, but then again, when he made his move, it might be too late. She stared at the vague outline of Wade and Mellissa, shrouded by trees and knew that her baby sat right in front of Mellissa. She couldn't risk her baby's life. She glanced back at the gunman, but should she shoot a relatively unarmed man in the back. *Lord, what should I...* The gunman spotted her, grabbed his rifle and jerked it up. Jess jerked her gun up, aimed, and *BANG!* Fire flared from the barrel of the .38 and her ears tingled from the blast. Lowering the pistol, she stared at the body on the ground, and gun still ready, began to walk toward it.

Sam could barely will herself to keep going. She knew at this point she was slowing Trent down because he'd have to stop periodically and wait for her. She kept getting tinged of fear that he was going to leave her behind. The first time she had gone jogging with her dad and he left her behind. It had really scared her. After that, she made sure to always take her cell phone, but cell phones didn't work up here and.... She pushed herself harder. Her shirt was soaked with sweat and her lungs were starting to burn, but not as much as her legs. Her one leg burned so much, it was nearly numb. "Wait!" The word came out a breathless squeal. "Wait a minute, please." She waited until Trent stopped and turned around before collapsing on the ground, breathlessly.

"Were almost there." He walked toward her. "Maybe a mile. Maybe less."

Leaning forward, her elbows on her bent knees, she drew in deep breaths. "I need a minute." Trent didn't stand still. He kept stepping forward and back, intermittently stomping his foot impatiently. She knew he was thinking about the gunshot they had heard a few minutes ago. She could feel the energy of his urgency. Slowly, she pulled herself up. Her legs felt like lead as she took a step toward Trent.

"Okay. Let's go." Spinning around, he took off at a fast walk that she was sure was for her benefit, for which she was very grateful. She followed him at a slow jog.

Wade and Mellissa both jumped to their knees from their stomach behind the log where they were hiding, startled at the shadow of someone standing above them, but then relaxed when they saw it was Jess.

Jess eye-balled the rifle lying on the ground on the other side, obviously not taken with them when they dove for cover at the gunshot.

Putting her hand to her chest, Mellissa let out a breath of relief. "I thought you were..."

Jess shook her head. She glanced at Morgan, but her face was hard. "He's dead."

Mellissa's mouth dropped. "You killed him?"

"Self-defense."

"Oh," Mellissa's voice was breathy with relief. "I'm so glad. Thank you, Lord. You go, girl. Oh. Oh, wow." She put her hand up to her chest again. Then she looked at Wade. "Maybe you should go check him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Isn't that what paramedics do?"

FIRE BREAK

"Did you check him?" he addressed Jess.

"Yes."

"And he was dead?"

"Yes." Her face was very serious.

"Then I don't need to check him." He glanced back at Mellissa.

Mellissa started to look annoyed. "You should have been the one to go, not Jess."

"How was I supposed to know what she was doing?" he yelled, suddenly feeling very defensive.

"You gave her the gun."

"So what?!"

Holding up her hand, Jess walked by them. "Just quit. We have enough people to fight without fighting each other." Taking Morgan's hand, she began walking toward the log that crossed over the water. "Can we make it over the river with just Wade's belt?"

Mellissa sighed as she came. "Let's just walk over the log."

"I don't think I can make it carrying Morgan," Jess mumbled, staring into the water as if almost in a trance.

"She can walk in between us. We'll both take one of her hands. If she slips, she's not heavy enough to pull us in."

Jess looked up from the water. "Could one of you go check the gunman, just so I have a witness that he died right here and now? Just in case."

Mellissa looked at Wade. Wade didn't react. "Are you *going* to go?"

"You can do it as well as I can."

"No I can't!"

"Why not?"

"I'm not going to look at a dead man!"

"But you want me to!"

"You *are* a man."

Wade just glared. Jess put her hand to her forehead. She was starting to get a head ache.

"HEY!" They all turned and looked at Trent who was running toward them, Sam tagging behind. He stopped in front of them out of breath. "Are you all alright?" Sam came up beside him and plopped down on the ground.

"We are," Jess mumbled.

"Where's Jim?" Jess shrugged. Wade and Mellissa didn't react. "What was the gunshot?"

Jess glanced at Mellissa. Mellissa glared at Wade. "A gunman. I had to kill him."

"You killed someone?" Trent's face betrayed surprise. Jess nodded. "Show me where?"

Reluctantly handing over Morgan to Mellissa, Jess headed in the direction of the body, not particularly enthusiastic about having to see it again herself.

Reclining in the passenger's seat as Jim drove, Derrick jerked awake. Choking, he rolled on his side, coughing and gasping. He didn't know where he was. He felt like he was on a fast rollercoaster. He couldn't think. "Der-er-er-rick." He didn't know what to make of the echoing, mystic voice beside him. "Der-der-der-ick-ck." He gasped, sucking and sucking for air, unable to catch his breath. He felt the rollercoaster jolt to a stop. He heard the skid of gravel, but didn't comprehend it. All he could understand was his heart racing then pausing then racing again.

FIRE BREAK

“Derrick?” Jim unbuckled and turned toward his friend. “Derrick, what’s wrong?” Reaching for his shoulder, he grabbed it, attempting to roll him over so he could see him, but Derrick jerked away, opening the car door and falling from the truck into the ditch. Jim jumped out his side and raced around the back of the truck, momentarily surprised at Kara Lee’s presence, but not taking time to acknowledge it.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked leaning over the side.

Jim slid down next to him, putting his hand on him, but not sure what to do in the obvious crisis as Derrick, coughing, hacking, and gasping rolled from his knees to his back and back to his knees again.

“Der-er-er-ick.” Confused and agitated, Derrick fought for his life. Suddenly, he felt calm... calm but not peace. He wasn’t aware of what his body was doing. *God, I don’t want to die.* He felt the presence of light. He remembered Monica’s face, but he didn’t feel peace. He felt urgency. *God, I don’t want to die, yet. God, use me on this earth. Make me a warrior here for you.*

Jim vehemently dialed 911. It rang once... *call ended*. No service flashed on his screen. He moved the phone around. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kara Lee jump out of the back of the pickup. No service flashed off. He tried again. *No service*. He felt Kara Lee hovering over him. Jumping up he urgently walked around, until the no service sign went off. Immediately, he punched 9-... *Ding... dong... powering off*. He slammed the phone down into the grass, and slid back to Derrick’s side, who lay on his back, staring at the sky, white as a ghost, laboring to breathe. On his knees, Jim stiffened, adrenaline shot through his veins, and his heart shot to racing as he saw Derrick suddenly start gasping for air as fast as he could, his eyes vacant. “God, help!” Looking up, palms open, his prayer was nearly a shout. “What do I do?!” His eyes went down to bloody bandage covering Derrick’s shoulder. Suddenly, he wondered if the bullet could be causing the reaction. Noticing, Derrick’s breathing stabilize momentarily, he wondered if maybe there was still time. Maybe if he got the bullet out... Quickly unbuttoning Derrick shirt, he ripped off the bandage and pulled out his pocket knife. “Get the first aid kit out of the back!” he yelled at Kara Lee as he felt around the wound trying to figure out where the bullet was. Feeling it, he yelled at her to hurry up as she ran back with the kit. “Get the antiseptic!” Flinging open the box, Kara Lee stirred the contents till she came up with the antiseptic. She poured it on both sides of Jim’s knife before he could ask. Then she grasped her hands around Derrick’s wrists doing her best to hold them down. Jim gave her a sideways glance, knowing there was no way she would be strong enough to hold down his little finger if he didn’t want her to. Keeping his finger and his eyes on the sight of the bullet, he straddled Derrick, planting a knee firmly on each arm, trying to keep him down. He lifted the knife over the spot. *Lord, help me do this right. Please, keep him still. Help me do it right.*

Staring at the uneven, root-gnarled path, Jess quietly trudged along behind the rest of the group. Physically and emotionally she was drained. All she wanted to do was go to bed for a week. Part of her brain couldn’t help worrying about Jim, but most of her brain was at peace he was fine. She figured something inside of her would know if he wasn’t.

FIRE BREAK

She glanced up at Trent, who spun around toward the group behind him, encouraging them to hurry up. Sam was the only one who responded to his words. Everyone else just looked down. Mentally, Jess would have loved to accommodate him, but her body would have no part of it. She was doing good just to keep one foot in front of the other.

"There it is!" Sam piped up, pointing.

"What?" Wade grunted, not looking up.

"The road! We're almost there!"

Nobody said anything so Trent decided to. "When we get to the road, hopefully there will be a car there we can use. I'll drop you guys off at the police station in town to inform them of what's been going on up here and of the bodies, but I'll go to Chicago to get that drive and try to make it on time to submit it in the trial."

"I'm going with you!" Sam insisted.

Trent shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

"Well," she tossed her head, "then there's no reason for you to go."

He looked at her but didn't stop walking. "Why?"

"There's no way you can find the post office he mailed it to in time, much less get it out."

"I've got connections," he mumbled. "I could probably..."

"You can't let anyone know where you are till after you've delivered the drive because by now you're definitely reported as missing and pos-si-bly wanted."

"And you just happen to know where it's at. Good. You can tell me."

"I don't know. Derrick didn't tell me, but I could probably figure it out once I got there."

Trent rolled his eyes. "Well, that's convenient."

Approaching the road, Wade spoke up. "It doesn't look like any of us are going anywhere." They all looked up as they walked into the ditch and on the road. Kara Lee's jeep was there, and the drug dealer's SUV was there, but the truck was gone. Relief swept over Jess. That meant Jim had gotten through. "I've got a key for the truck, but unless someone here knows how to hotwire one of these..." He pointed as they walked toward them. Jess and Mellissa glanced at Trent, hopefully.

"That's one skill I never learned," he grumbled as he walked around the nearly windowless jeep.

"Maybe she keeps an extra set somewhere," Jess chimed in, hopefully as she swung open the driver's door and began searching under and between the seats. Trent opened the other side and began looking, too.

Tears streamed down Mellissa's face and she couldn't hold back a sob. "Lord, please. I want to go home." She began to cry. "I want to go home."

Jess glanced over her shoulder, expecting Wade to come and hold his wife. Instead, he walked over to a log, lightly kicked it, and sat down, putting his head in his hands. Jess resumed her frantic search. *Lord, please, give us some keys. Please Lord, get us out of here.* Feeling Morgan grab around her leg, she lifted her in the jeep and then crawled in herself to search the back.

Closing the glove compartment, convinced there were no keys, Trent got out and went over to the drug dealer's car. Once she was satisfied there were no keys, Jess got out, too. She looked around. *Lord, what do we do?* Suddenly her eyes caught a glimpse of something shiny. She walked toward it, nonchalantly and cautiously, Morgan by her side, until she was sure... Excitement leaped inside of her as she reached down into the bushes and snatched the set of keys. *Thank you!* She clutched them against her chest. *Thank you, Lord!*

FIRE BREAK

Pulling the bullet out of Derrick's shoulder, Jim allowed himself to feel proud that he had done it so quickly. Setting down the bullet with one hand and dumping some water in the wound with the other, he looked from the wound to Derrick's face, "Hey, Derr..." and realized he was unconscious. "Derrick?" Suddenly afraid he had killed him, he glanced down at his chest, concentrating a moment to see the rise and fall of breathing. Seeing it, he let out a sigh of relief, sitting back on his heels.

"Now what?" Kara Lee's voice boomed over his shoulder, nearly startling him after the long period of silence.

He glanced over his shoulder at her and grumbled, "How did you get here?"

"It's a long story, and even longer when I tell it. Time's wasting. Are you still going to take the drive to the trial?"

Jim had to double take, surprised at her seemingly limitless knowledge of the situation. "No." Collecting the empty water bottles and first aid wrappers, he sighed as he stood up.

"NO!"

"Next town we come to, I'm taking him to a hospital." He thumbed over his shoulder at Derrick then dumped the stuff on the floor of the back seat.

Kara Lee's mouth dropped. "But he was willing to die for this!"

"But he doesn't have to." He walked back to Derrick.

Kara Lee followed on his heels. "You can't give up now!" She practically screamed it in his ear.

Stopping at Derrick, he turned back and gave her a look. "We'll see what happens after I get him to the hospital." He bent down and picked Derrick up, flinging him over his shoulders and walking back to the truck. "And you're not coming."

Shocked, she turned from where she was standing and ran to catch up with him. "I am so! You can't leave me here!"

"This is a main road." He dumped Derrick in the passenger's seat and closed the door. "Someone will come by before long."

"Nothing doing!" Spinning around on her toe, she grabbed the side of the truck bed and with a leap, swung up into it, then stood with her hands on her hips. "I'm going!"

Angry at her defiance, Jim contemplated physically forcing her from the truck, but then he thought better of it and decided he'd find a way to lose her at the hospital. Though irritated, he tried to convince himself she wasn't doing any harm as he walked around to the driver's side and got in.

Glancing down at his speedometer, Trent noticed he was going close to fifty in town, but he decided he didn't care, at least not enough to step on the brake. He was on a mission, and it was a race against the clock. He did manage to slow a little as they neared the police station. Stopping in front, he ordered, "Out!" Jess, Wade, and Mellissa got out. Sam didn't. "Sam, out!"

"You need me to get the drive!"

"I do not!"

"Yes, you dooo! You won't be able to find the place and even if you do, you won't be able to get it. They'll give it to me because I'm his sister!"

"No, they won't!"

"They wi-i-ill!"

"Too impatient to continue arguing, Trent stepped on the gas and took off with Sam in tow."

When they got to the private airport, Trent parked and jumped from the jeep before it had quit rolling and ran for the office. Sam got out and started running after him but

FIRE BREAK

then stopped and turned toward the airfield. Since Jess had prearranged everything on Kara Lee's cell phone, she knew exactly what plane they were getting and where. Concluding it would be harder for Trent to ditch her if she was already in and ready to go, she took off toward the plane.

After getting all set in the plane, Sam ducked down when she saw Trent coming. She could tell he hadn't seen her by the expression on his face when, entering the plane, he did. Anger clouded his face. "I thought I said..."

She scooted back up in her seat. "We really don't have time to say anything." She tried to sound defiant.

Trent was going to retaliate, but he decided not to waste the energy. "Fine." He sat down in the pilot's seat and handed her the cell phone. "You can do the phone calling." He buckled his safety harness.

"What calling?" She looked down at the phone.

"Try to figure out which post office has the drive, have a taxi meet us at the airport, make sure Mansenie doesn't get lost on his way to the trial..." He flipped some switches and ignited the plane's engine.

Behind the wheel, swerving back into his own lane after passing three cars at upwards of ninety miles an hour, Jim glanced at Derrick reclining in the passenger's seat, noticing him blink open his eyes. "How ya doing?" He nodded toward him, but kept one eye on the road, very surprised that he was coherent again already.

"Fine." Releasing the seat, he sat back up. Staring out the window then glancing down, he said, "Thanks."

Considering that had possibly been the first or close to the first time he had heard Derrick say that, Jim took it as quite high gratitude. He still wanted a truthful answer of how Derrick was doing, but conceded that, "Fine," was probably all he was going to get. "Next town we get to, I'm gonna drop you off at a hospital. Then I'll try to get the drive to the trial."

Derrick glared at him. "Next time you get hurt, I'll make *sure* you end up in a hospital." He held the glare.

Jim had to double take at the pointed statement. Glancing sideways at Derrick, he wondered how he even knew about his own lifelong, obsessive fear of doctors. A little annoyed Jim cracked his neck, not sure how to respond. After all, he had good reason to be afraid of doctors, Derrick didn't. How could he? He was a paramedic, after all. Jim finally concluded he didn't, it was just Derrick's way of getting his way... and somehow he always did. Somehow Derrick always got his way... at least it seemed like it. Jim conceded he probably would today, too... if he didn't kill himself first... but that was Derrick's way. When his mind was set, he didn't debate the issue. He determined to do it, even if it meant going through anyone that tried to hinder him. What Jim hadn't known was that it could extend to threats of getting even later. "What do you want to do, then?" He slowed a little as the houses started getting closer together, and he could tell they were approaching a town.

"Just get us to the courthouse." Derrick stared out the window.

Jim eyed the sign pointing toward the hospital, arguing with himself the whole way as he slowly drove past, finally concluding, "Fine... if that's what you want," but his voice betrayed annoyance.

FIRE BREAK

“Come in. Here.” A police officer directed Jess, Wade, and Mellissa into a conference room. They all walked in and stood behind the table. “The sergeant will be in shortly.

“Um.” Mellissa stopped the officer before he left.

“Yes, Ma’am?” The officer turned back around.

“The policeman back there said that I had a missing person’s report filed on me. It was probably by my parents. Could I call them and tell them I’m alright?”

“We can probably arrange that... after you talk with the sergeant.” She nodded slowly, and he turned and left, locking the door on his way out.

Jess cringed. She always hated doors that only locked from one way. “You get the feeling they don’t know if we are good guys or bad guys, yet?”

“Uh huh.” Mellissa mumbled, staring at the door.

“At least, they left us coffee.” Wade walked toward the coffee maker and grabbed a Styrofoam cup. Jess and Mellissa just glared at him.

"He's not coming." Sam paced back and forth in front of Trent who was standing between the two open airport gates, staring at the street.

"Sometimes taxis take a little while."

Sam threw her hands up. "They shouldn't have made the mistake in the first place. We had it prearranged! Even then, you'd think they'd do their best to get one out here right away!"

"Give me the phone, and I'll call them again."

She took the phone from her pocket and flipped it open to see the time. She saw it, but with it got a flashing "powering down" message. "It's going dead." She flipped it shut.

Trent groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Then looking up, his eyes caught a UPS truck stopping at the office. "Come on!" he shouted and took off running. Soon as it registered, Sam took off after him. They got there just as the UPS man was getting back in. "Wait!" Trent shouted, running around to the driver's side. Sam stopped at the doorless passenger's side and peered in.

"What'd you two want?" The man looked from Trent to Sam and back to Trent.

"I'm a police officer." Trent showed his badge. "Our transportation is taking longer than we figured, and we need to get to a certain post office right away. It's very urgent. If..."

"Sorry, Buddy, wrong division of the mail. I don't work for the government." He grabbed the shifter.

Trent jumped up on the running board and grabbed his arm. "Look! I'm the law, and I'm commandeering this vehicle!"

"You can't do that! This is private property."

Suddenly, Trent wasn't sure if he could or not. This had never come up before. *Then again*, he figured, *how many other laws have I broken in the past few days?* "Too bad." Jumping up into the cab and shoving the man over with his shoulder, he took control of the wheel.

Hesitantly, Sam got in the other side, not wanting to be left alone but also not sure they weren't all gonna end up in the slammer. She eyed the man in the middle who was eyeing her open door. She could tell he was weighing the risks of jumping, while Trent gunned it and squealed down the drive. He seemed to decide against it. Trent swung the truck onto the road and Sam had to grab the dash to avoid flying out.

Reclined, Derrick opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. "What?" Jim asked, eyeing him as he sat up.

"The back of the truck is squeaking." He turned and looked over his shoulder, but couldn't see anything because the window was too dirty."

"It always squeaks."

"No, it doesn't. Only if something heavy's back there."

"It was squeaking on the way up here." Jim tried to find a way to keep Kara Lee out of the picture. They didn't need to be dealing with her right now.

Derrick shot him a look. "We were in it on the way up here."

Strike one.

"Stop a minute. We need to look back there."

"Derrick, I really think we..."

"Would you just stop?"

FIRE BREAK

Rolling his eyes, Jim pulled over. He didn't need to look back there. He knew. He doubted Derrick could walk that far. And all he wanted right now was another confrontation with Kara Lee. Jim followed Derrick with his eyes and then in the mirror as he got out and walked back. To his surprise, Derrick walked fine, all the way back to an outraged Kara Lee.

Jim got out. This he had to see. He got back just at the point that Derrick was opening the hatch, and Kara Lee, standing up, hands on her hips, was yelling something about all the perils she had suffered chasing this story... cold, hunger, bug bites, gunshots, and nearly death! Leaning against the side of the truck bed, Jim smiled as he watched the barnburner from the two most stubborn people he knew, break out into full warfare, Kara Lee speed-blurting all the reasons she should stay, and Derrick demanding she get out. Suddenly, in her ever-animated style, Kara Lee stepped too close to the edge. Jim knew it even before Derrick reacted. Quickly snatching her ankle, he pulled it out from under her, causing her to land with a thud. Jim smile-grimaced, *Ouch*. He felt guilty for enjoying that, and to his amazement, she did shut up... briefly. Derrick didn't wait for her to recover before backing up and slowly sliding her off the edge.

Kara Lee found her voice just in time to scream and grab the sides before her top half went off. "Wait!" Derrick dropped her foot, and let her lower herself the last couple of inches.

Soon as she was down, Derrick reached above her, closed the hatch, and headed for his door. After taking a moment for it to register, Jim spun around and ran for his, hoping to be off before Kara Lee got up.

"Okay," Trent said as they pulled into the post office parking lot. "You two, *stay* here. I'll be back in a minute." His words meant little as Sam was out and heading for the office before Trent had the truck in park. "Sa-am?!" Jumping out, he had to jog around the truck to catch up with her. "What do you think you are doing?" He grabbed her arm to stop her.

She turned to face him, jerking her arm away. "There's no way they are going to give you his mail. I'm a young, innocent girl picking up her brother's mail, but forgot my key. If I get the right person, they'll give it to me. What's your story?"

Trent hesitated, trying to think of one.

"This scene out here might be what's ruining *my* chances. Besides," She gazed past him. "Our transportation's leaving."

Spinning around to see the truck backing up, Trent made a dash for it. Sam continued inside. He reached the truck just as the man was shifting it from reverse to drive. Grabbing the mirror, he swung up onto the running board and into the truck. Grabbing the man by the collar, he pulled him away from the controls. Then one eye on the man, he brought the truck back into the space and parked it. "Don't do that again!" The man spun around and tried to make a break for the door. Trent snatched the back of his coat and pulled him back in. "I told you this is federal business!"

"Then, why won't you let me go."

Because you are going to get me arrested. Staring at the post office, Trent didn't answer. *Lord, please make them give it to her.* Noticing out of the corner of his eye, the man's mouth opening to yell, Trent thrust his elbow back smashing it into the man's face. Unconscious, the man crumbled to the floor. Closing his eyes and then briefly covering them with his hand, Trent wished he hadn't done that. Reaching down, he checked his pulse, relieved he hadn't hurt him. Just then seeing Sam strutting out of the post office, package in hand, a relived smile crossed his face. *She got it.*

FIRE BREAK

Triple passing again, Jim tightened his grip on the wheel, and glanced down at the clock. There was only about an hour until the trial started, and by normal speeds, they were still two hours from Chicago. When they did get there, they would still have to try to find the courthouse. Jim had no idea how long a trial usually lasted. He knew they weren't going to make it on time, but he also knew they weren't stopping, now.

After tearing open the package and unbubblewrapping the drive, Trent stared at it a moment, realizing the seriousness of the documents contained in its memory. Rewrapping it, he put it in his pocket and took the wheel again.

"Where are we going?" Sam looked at him.

"Back to the airport. Hopefully the cab is there by now. We can't keep driving this. It's probably already been reported missing."

She nodded.

"Mr. Mansenie!" A large, muscle-bound man burst into his office.

Mansenie, who was walking back and forth, smoking and talking on his cordless phone, held up his hand. "I want that stuff disposed of now! There may not be much time. You hear me! I want nothing of that operation left... not a trace that can connect it to me! Get it done, now!" He hung up the phone and turned his attention to the muscle man. "Has Brett called in, yet?"

"No, and we are getting reports that something maybe up with the cops. We've got a jet ready, and I have arranged for a chopper to..." They both looked up at the sound of a chopper flying over to land.

Mansenie hurried back to his desk to grab his briefcase and laptop. "All the computers have been cleared?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Including this?" He held up his laptop case.

"They're all clear."

"Okay. Let's go." Mansenie headed out the door, down the hallway and toward the stairs. As he approached the stairs, he could hear a commotion at the front door and walked faster.

Soon as he descended the stairs, he heard his name called out by a familiar plain-clothed detective with a pack of uniformed officers. "Mansenie!" They were heading toward him.

Turning his back on them, he spoke to his muscle man. "I don't care what you have to do or who you have to kill. You make sure that that drive does not make it into evidence," he growled and then with a smile turned back to the police. "Good to see you again, John." He offered his hand to the plain-clothed detective. "Is there a problem?"

"I have orders to escort you to the trial," He took out a paper. "as well as a warrant to search this property and your estate in Indiana."

Mansenie lifted his palms. "Gentlemen, I have nothing to hide."

FIRE BREAK

Sam scanned the area with her eyes as they approached the small airport. A little yellow cab was just parking as they pulled in. "Perfect timing," she said, nodding toward him.

"Yeah, it is," Trent replied, following her gaze and turning the truck in that direction.

"Wait a minute! Park where we hijacked him." She nodded toward the unconscious man on the floor. "Maybe they'll think he just fainted, conked his head, and dreamed it all up."

Trent gave her a look, "I don't think so," but he went and parked where she suggested anyway.

Once parked, they both jumped out and sprinted for the cab. The driver, who was leaning on the side of his cab, looked surprised when they got there. "Trent?"

Trent returned the surprise. "Marc?!"

Sam, who, out of breath, was leaning against the hood gasping for air looked from one man to the other. "You two know each other?"

Trent nodded enthusiastically. "From way back. Man," he offered his hand, "it's been years."

Nodding and taking his hand Marc pulled him into a quick guy hug, slapping his back. "Good to see ya again, amigo."

"You two." Trent let his urgency return. "Look, I've got to get to the courthouse downtown right away."

Marc chuckled. "Nothin' about downtown comes right away, Man. You ought ta remember that."

"This has to. It's a very important legal matter."

Marc nodded, soberly. "Still, cops and banditos, ahh?" He referenced one of their childhood games.

Trent allowed a quick laugh. "Yeah, but this is serious. We've got to get moving." He climbed in the back seat.

"Not in there, Hombre'."

"What?"

Marc headed for the trunk. Trent got back out. "They're lookin' for you, man. Got road blocks set up all 'round town." He opened the trunk.

"For what?!"

"Don't you know?" Marc looked surprised.

"NO!"

Marc put his hands up. "Well, don't look at me."

Still in shock, Trent glanced at Sam then did a double take and looked back at her apparent total disinterest. She lifted her palms. "What do you expect with dirty cops?"

Trent clamped his eyes shut, groaning inwardly. He hadn't thought they would try to get to him that way. They probably had warrants out for Wade and Jim, too. He didn't know for what, but it didn't matter. It didn't even matter that they proved it or made the accusation stick, just as long as it kept them out of circulation until the trial was over.

Trent gazed down into the trunk. "I'm not getting in there?"

"Got a better way to get to the courthouse without bein' seen?"

"What about her?" He pointed at Sam.

"At the road block, they weren't looking for women... just three men."

Wade shook his head. Suddenly, he wondered if he could even trust Marc. He could be lying. He could be working for them. After all, they were cops. Marc must have seen it in his eyes because he promptly suggested. "There's a blanket in there. Put it on top the latch so it won't go shut."

FIRE BREAK

Nodding, Trent grabbed the blanket, put it over the latch, and got in. Marc slapped his shoulder. "Just hold it down, my friend. It would not look good for a taxi to be rollin' downtown with its trunk flyin' open and a body in back."

"Derrick! Wake up." Jim slapped him on the arm.

Jerking awake, Derrick sat up and pulled the lever so the seat came up. "Almost there?"

"Yeah." Jim whizzed around two semis then slowed to seventy as the traffic closed in. "Which exit do we want?"

"First, you'd better get in the right lane. This one's gonna split."

"Now?!" Jim looked over both shoulders, realizing he was boxed in on all sides. "There's no room to get over!"

"You have to get over, or we are finished with the trial."

Jim kept looking over his right shoulder. The traffic in his lane and to his left was slowing down with congestion. The traffic to the right was thinning a little. The cars were whizzing past, but there was barely a second in between each. He could see the split in the road up ahead. He wished he could make his blinker flash brighter or somehow make it scream, "Emergency! Emergency!" No one would let him over. The split was coming closer. Looking in all his mirrors and seeing a brief moment of opportunity, he took it. Jerking the wheel to the right, he squealed over and stomped the gas to the floor. The truck tried it's best to speed up. The car behind him laid on the horn. The bumpers touched. Jim blinked his eyes closed. He could feel the truck being pushed forward. *Lord, help. O-o-o-onk!* Quieting, the horn faded away. Jim's tense, tight shoulders and neck relaxed a little as he realized they weren't dead. He heard himself breathing hard.

"Exit after this one." Derrick's voice was so steady Jim had to shoot him a look... a look that said, how in the world can you be so calm? Derrick didn't acknowledge it. He did however take excessive interest in the first exit as they passed.

"What?"

"The traffic was backed up."

"So?"

"So was the one before." Jim shot him another look, unable to believe that during their moment of peril... peril of life and death that he was checking out the traffic on the exit. "So's that one." Derrick mumbled, staring out the window. "Maybe you shouldn't..." Jim merged, and Derrick stopped talking, his face spelling concern.

"What?" Jim glanced at him.

"I've got a bad feeling." They slowed to turtle speed on the ramp. Unbuckling, Derrick craned to see around the cars until his eye caught a flash of red and blue. "Cops?"

"Police?"

Derrick nodded. "Probably a road block."

"How long do you think it will take?" Derrick shot him a demeaning look, and Jim understood the meaning. They were looking... for them. "What do we do?" He could see Derrick thinking.

After a moment, Derrick began. "They are looking in the cars at the stop sign. Just don't stop. Go around on the shoulder, and book it out of here." Jim gave him a 'you've got to be kidding' look, but Derrick just shrugged. "It's the only way."

They were about three cars back from the sign when Jim noticed a police officer staring at them, then walking toward them, then unbuckling the safety strap on his side arm. After saying something into his walkie talkie, two more policemen turned and started over. "They made us." Before Derrick could speak, Jim stomped the accelerator, turning the wheel and screeched past on the shoulder. Jim saw the police draw their arms

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and heard faint shouting, but they didn't shoot because of the other cars. Dirt spurted up as he rounded the stop sign on the grass and pulled out, barely between two oncoming cars.

Sirens blaring, lights flashing, two police cars pulled out after them. Jim stomped the gas. The back end of the truck swung onto the shoulder as he made a sharp turn. "Any ideas?" Jim shouted over the noise.

"When we get close to the courthouse, find an ally! Circle a block to slow the cops down! Then go through the ally, and I'll jump out behind something!"

"And the cops will jump out and cuff you!"

"Not if they don't see me!"

Jim shook his head as he barreled through a red light. "It's not gonna work!"

"It's our only chance!"

Jim couldn't argue with that. Nearing the courthouse, Jim started looking for a likely street. He didn't see one until, "There!" Derrick pointed to a narrow junk-cluttered ally that Jim wasn't sure he could get through, but without pausing to consider, Jim cranked the wheel and screeched into the ally at the last possible second. He skipped circling the block, but turned so abruptly the police behind him couldn't stop and went right on past.

Without a moment of hesitation, Derrick immediately threw open the door and leapt from the truck, rolling a couple of times then running behind a dumpster and crouching down just as he saw blue light flash in the corner of his eye.

The police car barreled through the ally without pausing for breath, oblivious of Derrick's presence.

Soon as the sirens were a safe distance away, Derrick jumped from his hiding place and began running for the courthouse.

Cramped inside the trunk, Trent felt the taxi come to a stop and park. Not having felt them turn into a parking lot, he wondered why they were parking alongside the street. After a few moments, the trunk door came open, and squinting from the light, Trent stared at Mark and Sam. "Where are we?" He sat up.

"Couple blocks from the courthouse. We can't get any closer because of an accident."

"Sure it's not another road block?"

"No. It's got fire trucks, too. We're gonna have to walk around it to get to the courthouse."

Trent looked down and then up, stating the question on everyone's mind. He mumbled, "I could no sooner get into the courthouse than past those cops at the accident." He looked at Sam. "You'll have to take it."

"Me!" Her face held shock. "I mean, *alone*?"

Trent looked at Marc. Marc nodded. "I'll go with her."

Trent nodded his gratitude. "Can you shut off a fire alarm from the outside?" Marc was a boy of many questionable talents like knowing how to hotwire stuff when they were kids, but he didn't know if...

"Yeah. Probably. Why?"

"You might cut the risk of being caught by going through the fire exit to the jury's deliberation room that connects to the courtroom." Trent handed Sam the drive. Gravity, concern, and fear showed on her face all at once. "You can do it." Trent forced a smile. Seeing a pedestrian starting to turn the corner toward them, Trent ducked back down bringing the trunk lid with him. "Good luck." He closed the lid on the blanket. "I'll be praying for you."

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At that statement, Sam and Marc exchanged glances, neither understanding what good that would do. "Let's go." Marc tapped Sam's arm as he passed and headed down the sidewalk. Sam followed. As they walked, Sam mainly stared at the ground trying to collect her thoughts, trying to figure out what she was going to say.

"What a mess." Marc said as they neared the accident enough to see the crumpled vehicles.

Sam looked up glancing at all the... Suddenly, she stopped dead in her tracks, her face turning to terror.

Marc stopped and looked back at her. "What?" He turned around. "What's the matter?"

"Derrick?" She stared at the truck dazed.

Marc followed her gaze. "Derrick, who?"

"My brother. That's his truck." Her voice was soft and shaky.

"Nah." Mark shook his head. "Too much of a coincidence."

"He was going to get the drive here, too." She didn't break her gaze from the truck.

"I've got to go see." She began walking toward it in a daze.

Gently grabbing her arm, Marc stopped her. She looked back at him. "You have to decide first." Tears were rolling down her face. "Your brother is all banged up in there because of this drive. Are you sure you want to give it up?"

She stared at him a long moment, thinking. "They won't know who I am."

"They know you're interested in a wanted man. That's all the storm troopers need to take you in for questioning."

Sam looked back at the wreck. "I've gotta know if he's dead or alive."

"Why? You figure you can change that, do you?"

Thinking, Sam continued to stare at the truck and the unrecognizable figure slumped over the steering wheel. Reaching in her pocket, she clutched the drive. She didn't feel like Derrick was dead... and like Marc said the only thing she could do was... She clenched the drive tighter. ... carry out his last wish. Turning back to Marc, she nodded and then began following him as he started walking. As they got a few yards away, Sam saw an ambulance and a rescue squad coming blaring and barreling around the corner. Every fiber of her being wanted to turn and wait to see if they went to the truck on a mission of "rescue" or "recovery," but she forced herself not to. She refused to turn around.

Jumping over a pile of broken flower pots, Derrick turned right in midair and weaved in and out of scattered trashcans before skidding to a stop behind a tall wooden fence at least twice his height. For a moment, he just stared at it, feeling overwhelmed. Then he looked around for other options but found no timely ones. So, gritting his teeth, he jumped, but his hand reached nowhere near the top. Backing up, he took a running start and jumped again this time getting his good hand on the top of the fence. His arm burned. Grimacing, he tried to pull himself up but collapsed back against the fence. Dangling, he refused to let go. Bringing his other arm up, dealing with the pain, gritting his teeth, he clutched the top of the pointed boards and heaved himself over, feeling an excruciating tearing pain in his shoulder as he flew over. Landing, he clutched his arm, seeing the blood begin to pool on his shoulder sleeve. He'd ripped the stitches. Digging the palm of his hand into his wound to try to stop the blood, he stood up wavering a little on his feet. He gritted his teeth. He was NOT quitting, now. He started forward, stumbling, then looking up with even greater determination began to run... as hard and as fast as before. He was NOT going to quit.

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Reaching the back of the courthouse, Sam ran and jumped on top of an upside down recycling bin, vaulting. With a flying leap, she grabbed hold of the bottom rung of the fire escape ladder and let her weight pull it down. Stepping on it to hold it down, she turned around to look at Marc who was earnestly coming – huffing and puffing – but still coming. “Hurry up!” She circled her hand in a fast wheel motion.

Barely pausing to catch his breath, Marc followed her up the ladder, full speed the whole way until they came to the fire exit. Roughly wiping the sweat from his forehead, he looked up and down the door, sizing up the situation.

“Can you disalarm it?”

For a moment, he didn’t answer. Then he muttered, “I’m not sure.” He stared a few more moments, wiping his face again with his sleeve. “Can you find something I can use to bore through the door with?”

Sam began looking around, over the edge, down in the alley, not sure what she was looking for or why he wanted to make a hole in the door.

Seeing the court house less than a block in front of him, Derrick ran faster. He cocked his head in interest at the red and blue flashing lights in the distance beyond the courthouse. He hoped it was just another roadblock and not that they had captured Jim. If they had, he figured it was all the more reason to get the drive through so they could clear themselves... or at least plead for amnesty.

Coming to the large cement steps, he jumped up them two at a time, still nearly sprinting. He heard a loud gasp and saw a lady nearly faint, out of the corner of his eye. She was far from the only one staring at him. Dirty, bloody, and bruised, he could only imagine what he looked like.

Bursting through the front doors, he didn’t break stride. Neither him nor the drive had a chance of a peaceful entrance through security or metal detectors. So, he decided to go unpeacefully. Sprinting through the detectors, into and over top one guard, and breaking the hold from another, he made a mad dash down the hall, concluding this was the hardest, fastest, most stupid thing he had ever done.

Alarms were screeching behind him. Guards were yelling, calling in the incident, and running after him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one pull his gun and heard the command to freeze. Instead, he spun around and burst through the door to the stairwell. He glanced at the door leading outside, knowing it was his own possible means of escape. Instead, without hesitation, he began sprinting up the stairs. He was to the second floor when the guards were just reaching the first. He forced his body faster as he rounded the corner to the next flight. Nearing the top of the flight, he saw the door above him begin to open and assumed it was more guards. Asking his legs for every ounce of strength, he vaulted up the top step, landed on one foot, and delivered a powerful sidekick to the door, slamming it and whoever was behind it back inside. Then he sprinted up the next flight. He was nearly to the top when the guards were reaching the bottom and the door in front of him was swinging open. For a moment, he froze like a deer in the headlights. Then he saw who was coming out of the door... a secretary carrying a mammoth stack of papers. “FREEZE!” the guard below yelled, beginning to lower his gun. Quick as a flash, Derrick smacked the bottom of the stack of papers, sending them flying... on top of everyone and partially concealing him as he sprinted through the door.

Once on the other side, he quickly ripped his shoelace out and tied the door handle to the handle of a nearby open door, and then started down the hallway, walking more

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slowly trying to regain his composure on wobbly legs as well as trying not to draw any more attention than your ordinary wobbly, mud-splattered, blood-matted guy would.

Stomping her foot impatiently, Sam stared up at Marc who was using a hanger to fish through a small hole, trying to get a hold of a particular wire on the other side.

“Hurry! Or we’re not going to make it.”

“Almost...” He jerked back, and Sam heard a wire slap against the door. “... there.”

“Got it?”

“Got it.”

Without waiting for him to climb down, Sam pulled open the door and darted. Coming to the middle of the empty room, she stopped and looked around, finding the drive in her pocket, she clutched it and stared at the huge, heavy wooden doors, the doors that led to a trial now in session. She swallowed hard and decided to wait for Marc.

There it is. Derrick paused a moment, taking a deep breath and staring a moment at the large ominous cherry wood double doors with two, even more ominous guards in front of it, talking. He reached in his pocket and took out the drive, clutching it tight. They hadn’t spotted him yet, but Derrick knew that in less than five seconds that would be subject to change.

“Hey, you!” The yell came from behind. The two guards in front looked at him. Derrick jumped into a sprint. “Stop!” Derrick ran faster, right for the guards. One jumped out of the way. The other grabbed for his gun. Clutching it, just as Derrick with a flying leap tackled him, opening the wooden doors as they fell through, crashing to the floor on the other side.

Rolling off the guard, Derrick grabbed his gun and released the clip, scattering the bullets. Standing on unsteady legs with blurry vision, Derrick headed forward down the aisle. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the guard behind him draw his gun and level the barrel even with his heart. Another guard ran up beside the first then started following Derrick down the aisle.

Reaching the end of the aisle, Derrick stopped and stared at the judge, who along with everyone else was staring at him. Staggering forward, he loosened his grip on the drive, not breaking eye contact with the judge. Stopping at the desk and reaching his cracked and bloody hand up on it, he released the drive, stared at the judge a moment longer and then collapsed to the ground. The court room erupted in a collective gasp. Half of them stood up. The guard that was following him, gun drawn, knelt down and checked for a pulse. Just then they all turned as Sam came bursting through the side door. “I have evidence that has to be submitted to this trial!” She held up the drive. Marc walked in behind her. Catching Mansenie’s evil glare, she swallowed hard. “It’s got evidence and directions to find evidence to support a number of murders. Her heartbeats were nearly one on top of each other. Eyes reaching the judge’s desk they first fell on...” “Derrick!” He was coming to and trying to sit up. She knew no one would understand the joy in her voice because no one but Marc knew what she had thought happened to him. Ignoring the bailiff coming toward her, she ran over to Derrick, dropping the drive off on the judge’s desk before kneeling down next to him.

Elbows on the table in front of her, Mellissa rubbed her face with her hands. She was tired of answering questions, tired of explaining and analyzing. She knew by now the lieutenant had to know the story frontwards and backwards and from every other angle possible. "I told you I don't know what happened in the warehouse. I wasn't there." She spoke into her hands. "Please can I call my mother, now? She must be sick with worry." Putting her hands down, she looked at the door as Wade and Jess came walking back in from talking to separate police officers.

The lieutenant got up, stretching slightly. "We can take a break... and you can call your mother, he handed her his cell phone. I'll be back in a few minutes." He locked the door on his way out. Mellissa rolled her eyes and sighed at the sound of the lock.

Jess shrugged and smiled. "At least they are beginning to believe us."

"I want to go home," Mellissa whined, opening the phone.

"If we didn't have to go over and over the same thing fifteen jillion times, maybe we could." Wade plopped down at the head of the table.

"Or at least... Mom?" Mellissa spoke louder into the phone. "Mom, it's me Mellissa."

"Oh, Mellissa." Her mom broke into crying.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm fine." She only cried harder. "Mom, I'm fine." Suddenly fear overwhelmed Mellissa. Fear that something else was wrong. "Is something wrong?" Mellissa stood. "Mom! What's the matter?"

"Davy." Her voice quivered.

"Davy?" Mellissa froze with fear. "Did something happen?" Wade stood, too. "Is he sick? He didn't hurt himself?"

"He's..."

"What? What happened?"

"He's... been kidnapped."

"What? No! How?" Mellissa burst into desperate sobs. "How? ... How? ... Why?"

"I don't know. I... I..."

"Oh, God," It was a prayer of desperation. "Help!" She fell to her knees. "Help us!"

Jim halfway woke, yet not enough to understand what was going on. His throat burned with something in it, and he felt unable to swallow. The rhythmic *beep... beep* of the heart monitor brought him back to when he was a little kid... kneeling next to his mother's bedside... tubes, IVs, BP cuff, that same familiar beeping.

Pale, eyes closed, eerily still, nearly lifeless, she laid there, struggling to breathe, struggling to hang on. Eight years old. He'd been kneeling there for hours, all alone – no family... except a father... who was obviously off drinking somewhere... while he sat, holding his Mom's hand, trying desperately to will her to live.

It was supposed to be a routine operation. "Nothing to worry about," the doctor had said. "She'll be back in an hour," he had said. An hour passed... two hours... three... four. He had leapt from his seat in the waiting room when the doctor finally came... all hope held in his eyes... until the doctor said those word... those words that haunted his memories... his nightmares... his darkest nights. "Your mother is dying. She wants to see you." It was like a freight train, no surprise before or after that ever hit him so hard. It knocked the breath out of him. He couldn't speak. He couldn't move.

Kneeling beside her bed, tears streaming, clutching her hand, praying over and over that she would live, that God wouldn't take her, yet ever feeling like the answer was "No," until finally he caught a glimmer of hope, and his heart leapt with joy. She opened

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her eyes and smiling, looked at him. *"Jimmy, I love you. You'll never know how much I love you."* Her voice was slow, hoarse, and weak.

"You're gonna be okay, Mom."

Her weak hand clutched his back, but she shook her head. "It's time for me to go now."

"No, Mom! No!"

"I'm going to see Jesus."

"No!"

"You live for Him, Jimmy. Don't you blame him for this... I'll be watching you, Jimmy. I want to be proud when we meet again. Make me proud, Jimmy." Her eyes began to close.

"No! Mom! Please! No!" He jumped up.

"I'll see you again." Her eyes closed. *"I love you."*

Scre-e-e-e-ech! The heart monitor began to scream.

Suddenly, Jim realized where he was and fear overwhelmed him. Jerking awake, every muscle in his body tensed. He saw a nurse above him. His heart jumped into turbo speed. Sitting up, he pulled the esophageal airway from his throat and rolled partway off the bed. He felt the nurse grab him by the shoulders. "Relax. Lay back down!" He pulled away from her, standing abruptly then falling unsupported by his lame ankle. The IV holder and bag fell to the bed then clattered to the ground. As he got up, he felt the nurse rip off the tape and pull the IV from his arm all the while yelling for help. She grabbed him, but he jerked away. Wheezing, he stumbled for the door. The nurse came after him, trying to stop him, but he shook her off. A few feet from the door he ran into three macho male techs. Not thinking clear enough to devise a plan or even speak, he tried to break through the middle of them.

They all three grabbed him. He effectively tossed one against the wall and kicked another out of commission, but more were coming. After punching the third down to the ground, he made it a few feet before five men descended on him. He kicked and punched, elbowed and grabbed, but was still taken down. Unable to catch his breath, he pushed against them and fought as they tried to hold him down. He fought a few more seconds until, not being able to get enough air, the room went blurry and he lost consciousness.

Arm in a makeshift sling, Derrick stepped out of the hospital elevator and headed down the hallway. He had talked to Jess, Wade, and Mellissa about fifteen minutes ago and promised Jess to try to locate Jim. Regrettably, his search had led him here. Guilt tugged at Derrick's heart. He'd gotten Jim into this. Jim had done so much, and this is what he got for it. He felt guilty walking down the hall when Jim couldn't. He almost couldn't get in to see Jim since he wasn't a blood relation, and it was past visiting hours. However, he was finally able to convince the doctor that in the interests of maintaining peace and order, he should make an exception.

Derrick turned the corner, stepping to the side to let a nurse with a portable x-ray machine by. He couldn't deny it was late. He had made sure he didn't leave the courthouse until all the charges against him and everyone that had gotten roped into helping him had been dropped, and he had certain assurances about the drive. The trial was in recess until tomorrow, but as things stood now, he didn't see any way Mansensie would be able to escape at least one murder conviction and probably many.

Seeing Jim's room number, he turned and pushed the door open and walked in. Stopping, he stared at Jim, sorry for his condition. He'd never seen Jim look sick before, but lying there drugged, unconscious, hooked to IVs, a heart monitor, and oxygen, held in

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restraint.... The guilt threatened to tear his heart out. Out of the corner of his eye, seeing a new doctor walk in, he turned and looked at him.

"You know him?"

"I thought the other guy was his doctor."

"He is." He walked over to the bed. "What this guy needs a doctor can't give. Do you know about him?"

Relaxing his stance, Derrick rested the thumb of his free hand in his pocket. "Lifelong fear of hospitals."

The doctor nodded. "Why?"

"Don't know."

The doctor shrugged as he walked back past and toward the door. "It's not good for him to stay drugged up like that..."

Derrick turned around abruptly. "Then undrug him."

"It's not that simple." The doctor stood with one hand on the door. "First, he's got to prove that he's not a danger to himself or the staff."

"You got him tied down."

"He's still a danger to himself as upset as he is." The doctor left.

Derrick turned back toward Jim, not sure what to do, with no idea what he was going to tell Jess.

Arms crossed, Taylor stared up at the hospital ceiling, annoyed. "Would you just lay off, Dad. It's my body and my decision!"

"Who gave that 'body' to you?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're taking credit for that, too?"

"Partially. If your mother and I had decided to abort *you*, we wouldn't be having this discussion right now." He threw his hands up, turning around in frustration. "We shouldn't be having it anyway." He turned back and spoke dogmatically. "This family does not do abortions."

She looked back at him sharply, a stray tear sounding in her voice. "This *family* doesn't do anything! You could write a dictionary about all this *family* doesn't do! I don't even know if this is a *family* at all!" She turned away.

"Well, get this through your thick head!" He leaned forward on the bed rails in anger. "This *fā-mi-ly* doesn't kill innocent babies!"

She burst into tears. "It's not alive till it's born."

"When you feel it kick, you'll know it is alive."

"But it can't kick yet!"

"It's alive!"

"No, it's not!"

Before Dr. Fredricks could respond, his attention was caught by the door swinging open and Melinda cheerfully springing in, holding a paper medicine cup. "Hel-lo!" She walked over, her glowing smile not even dimming with the icy reception. She set the meds down on the nightstand, then stopped to stare at Taylor. "You're looking much better," she cheeped, only to be met with a demeaning glare. Melinda passed it off and looked up at Dr. Fredricks. "You too. A few hours of sleep does a lot for your profile." He forced a quarter of a smile. *But not necessarily your disposition.* Finally, her smile faded. "You both look l-like... you just found out the world is ending in twenty minutes." No one responded so she turned to go. Reaching the door, she stopped, "Oh," and turned around. "I almost forgot." She dug in her pocket. "You have a message to call a Derrick." She handed him a sticky note. "He said it was urgent."

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“Thank you.” Dr. Fredricks took it and stared at it a minute, wondering what in the world could be urgent with Derrick. Derrick wasn’t the urgent sort of guy... even when he should be. Taking out his cell phone, he sat down and began to dial.

Jess paced back and forth in her hotel room... alone... wanting more than anything not to be alone. She almost preferred the police station to this. She looked over her shoulder sharply at a thud coming from the adjacent room, knowing that tonight she would be jumping at everything. She almost felt like running to Wade and Mellissa’s room. She would’ve too if she didn’t know how much they needed to be alone right now, if it wasn’t for the fear and sorrow that engulfed them. She glanced over at her sleeping Morgan so grateful... so grateful, she was safe. What she really felt like doing was scooping her up into her arms and running to find Jim... if only she knew where to run. Now, that was a worry that was engulfing her, one she didn’t want to think about. She felt so helpless, so powerless to do anything, to even find out where he was. All night, she had this feeling, this horrible nagging feeling that something was wrong, but what? Had something happened? She couldn’t even entertain the thought that something had happened to Jim. It scared her too much. She had been so relieved to finally talk to Derrick... the one person who should know about Jim, and yet he knew nothing. He said he would call when he found out, and that was hours and hours ago. What was going on? She needed to know.

Leaning against the hospital wall in the hallway, Derrick looked down at Jim lying unconscious on the gurney beside him. Sure, he’d seen thousands of people in that condition, but there was something about it being Jim that made him feel uncomfortable. He concluded that he had definitely passed over the threshold of becoming emotionally involved. He couldn’t get Jess and Morgan, even Wade, out of his mind. How it would devastate them if anything happened to him, and right now, Jim wasn’t doing the greatest. Derrick stared at him. His injuries shouldn’t be life threatening, not for someone as young and as physically fit as Jim, not for someone who had so much to live for. He was a protector. It wasn’t his nature not to fight to protect his family... in this case from being alone and abandoned, but somehow he didn’t seem to be fighting. He was acting defeated... defeated and fearful... even in his unconscious state. *If...* Derrick broke off his thought process and looked up toward the ceiling as he heard the sound of the helicopter approaching. He glanced over at the nurses as they started rolling Jim’s gurney down the hall, then followed them. He had reserved himself a seat on this flight. He promised himself he was stickin’ by Jim until he started to improve. After hearing how Jim had acted when he woke up the first time, Derrick’s only thought had been to get him back *home*... to some place familiar... somewhere where he knew the people. He figured he wouldn’t just wake up and start punching his friends. Some might argue that he wouldn’t know who they were, but Derrick thought sure he would. People just didn’t slug Dr. Fredricks... *well, not without getting slugged back, anyway.* Walking behind the nurses, through the doors and onto the roof, Derrick let a half smile cross his face when thinking of Dr. Fredricks... the man that would walk two miles out of his way to appear unfriendly, yet those that really knew about him, knew that beyond that steel wall, there really was a good heart. He stopped as they loaded Jim in the copter. He had to give Dr. Fredricks credit for this. He knew for a fact it hadn’t been easy to get Jim transported home in his current condition and with the short duration of time he had been admitted, but somehow he had managed it, and Derrick would not be fooled into thinking that he

did it without risk. If anything happened to Jim during this transport, that responsibility would fall squarely on Dr. Fredricks shoulders. Derrick looked down at his watch as he climbed into the chopper. It was nearly 11:30 pm. He knew Jess was probably getting real worried, but he didn't want to call her and tell her this. It would only make her more upset. He decided he would call after they got to the hospital and Jim was all set... and hopefully improving.

"Okay." Walking down the hallway, Dr. Fredricks closed his phone and put it back in its case on his belt, when he noticed Melinda come up behind him. "Everything going alright?"

"Fine." He looked straight ahead as he walked.

"They get him off alright?" She asked curiously.

"They'll be transporting him in a couple of minutes."

"You're taking a pretty big risk."

His natural instinct was to shoot her a dirty look and inform her that he didn't need some two-bit nurse to tell him that, but for some reason, tonight, he didn't want to scare her off. He actually appreciated her presence and for the first time in years really didn't want to just be left alone. "Yeah, well, as long as *someone* in this world has a happy home, it seems a shame to let him die so he can't enjoy it."

She gave him a half smile. "You could have a happy home."

"Ri-i-ight." He turned the corner. "There's no chance of that any more. My family is too messed up." He walked into the lounge.

"Maybe," She followed him. "They need their dad to bring things back together."

Dr. Fredricks huffed a sarcastic laugh as he grabbed a coffee mug. "According to them, their *dad* has been the problem all along."

She grabbed a mug, too. "I doubt it's been all one person's fault," she said softly as she watched him fill his with coffee.

"I don't know," he mumbled as he went to the table and sat down in one of the comfortable leather chairs. "When Sandra was around, everyone seemed magically happy. "Since her death, everything about our family has fallen apart." He stared down into his coffee. Seeing her come over out of the corner of his eye, he decided to allow it. "The only one I have left in the world is Taylor, and now, I've even alienated her."

"I didn't think you wanted anyone." She sat down across from him, setting her coffee and sugar packets in front of her. He just grunted and looked away. "Change your mind." She ripped open three packets at once and poured them into the coffee. "What makes you so against abortion anyway?" She asked, not because she supported it, but because she was surprised he didn't.

He looked back at her. "How'd you know about that?"

"I talked to Taylor." She took a sip.

"There's a sanctity about life." He stared at the little Tigger Winnie the Pooh sticker wrapped around her stethoscope, knowing what little boy had put it there – the sweetest little guy a person could know... lying in a bed... dying of cancer. "Because that little boy needs to live." She looked down at the sticker and followed his meaning. "Because his parents, and his grandparents, and his sisters and his baby brother need him, because he needs life," He looked up into her eyes, his own turning cold. "but God's not going to let him live is He?"

Melinda almost did a double take from the intense hatred she saw in his eyes. First, she wondered at him initiating the conversation toward God, but then she remembered that her reputation as a Christian had a way of bringing people with questions to her. She

sent up a quick prayer that she would say the right thing. “I don’t know. I don’t know if he’s a Christian or not.”

Dr. Fredricks tilted his head back, lightly laughing. “You’re saying if he was a *Christian* he wouldn’t die. My wife was a *Christian* and she...”

“Christians are promised eternal life. They simply fall asleep and wake up in heaven.”

“Well, that’s convenient. That’s a nice little blanket to cover reality.”

“You don’t believe in heaven?”

Looking away, he gritted his teeth and didn’t answer a moment. When he did, his voice was a low grumble, “I don’t know.”

“Why did you start making Taylor go to church?”

Dr. Fredricks looked back at her, sneering. “Because that’s what her mother always did. I thought *maybe* it would help get her act back together.”

“Could help you, too.” She took another sip.

“I don’t need church.” He gulped his coffee.

“You need something.” Expecting him to slam his coffee mug down, she wasn’t surprised by the loud thud when he did. “If you don’t believe in God, how do you explain the difference between your wife’s happy life and your messed up one?”

He sneered again. “My *wife* is *dead*,” he growled.

“Yo-ur *wife*,” She tossed her head in defiance. “is up there,” She looked up. “laughing and singing, while you are down here yelling and stewing.”

“I needed her.”

“Well, maybe there were more people involved than just you.”

“We all needed her!”

She made eye contact. “Maybe *she* needed God.”

After a few moments, he broke off eye contact and stared off into the distance, leaving a silence that magnified the soft hum of the under counter cooler he stared at, but then was brought back by Melinda’s now soft voice. “I’m sorry. We shouldn’t be arguing. I’m sure that’s not what you need right now.”

He looked back down into his coffee. “I don’t know what I need. You’re right. I *do* need something.”

“You need God. Everyone does.”

There was a few moments of silence as he contemplated that. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“What?”

“The Bible. When I was a *kid*, I read it cover to cover. It *didn’t* make sense.”

“That’s because you were reading it in the dark.”

“What?” His question was blunt. His voice was gruff, and his eyes were hard as he looked up at her.

She just smiled. “When Jesus was talking about the unsaved, he would often refer to them as blind. The Bible always equates sin with blackness and darkness while it refers to God and Jesus as light. It says, *men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil*. It says, *their foolish hearts were darkened*. Jesus calls the unsaved blind, but he says, *I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life*. The Bible says, *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*. In other places, salvation is referred to as a mystery. I’ve heard lots of unsaved people say they read the Bible and didn’t understand it, but once they got saved, it all made sense... because Jesus revealed it to them. When someone accepts Christ, He sends his Spirit to them to live inside of them. We call Him the Holy Spirit or the Holy Ghost.”

There was another long pause as, holding his mug in front of him, he stared into the distance contemplating her words. “I don’t believe that.”

“Believe what?”

"That if you accept Christ, life will somehow become magically better."

"Well, neither do I." She took sip of coffee.

"I've seen sweet Christian ladies die horrible deaths and wicked sinners live long and prosperous lives."

"We all have." She took another sip.

He initiated eye contact. "So, how do you explain *that*?"

"Being a Christian isn't as much about physical circumstances as it is attitude.

When a sweet Christian lady dies, she dies a sweet death because she knows Jesus, because she's excited to see Him, because He's there with her every moment giving her peace, comfort, and even joy in the worst of circumstances. The gift of Christ is not to be dumped on with riches in this life, but to have a relationship with Jesus and trust Him. *My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. I have not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread. He hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.*

"Yeah, well my wife *needed* to live."

"According to you. If you really understood heaven, you wouldn't think of it as a punishment. She is away from sin and corruption, sickness and crying, loss and dying."

"So, you're saying for a person to be happy, they have to die." He scowled at her.

"Nooo." She paused. Talking with this guy could give anyone a headache. "I'm saying Believers live in this world. This world has problems, namely sin, namely the devil who hates Christians. Therefore, Christians have problems like anyone else, but those problems don't destroy them because if they are walking close to the Lord they reap the fruits of His Spirit which are *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance.*"

"Temperance... meaning you don't drink?"

"No-o. Temperance, meaning you have a temperate spirit. You don't fly off from one extreme to another. It's used to refer to alcohol because a person that gets drunk isn't temperate."

Dr. Fredricks paused as he took a long swig of his lukewarm coffee. "I don't know. I still think if God were really *love*, he wouldn't allow all the pain and suffering that's in the world today."

"God is perfect. He made this world perfect. He made man perfect. Man sinned. Man brought sin to his race. Sin is suffering. Sin is death. It's because of sin that people kill and murder, that countries war... killing each other over land or possessions. Death is a natural by-product of sin, whether from disease, from a cursed world, or from the hand of another sinner. No matter the circumstances if sinner A works for 50 years to get something he loves and sinner B steals it, sinner A is gonna be out for blood. That's how sin works. The human race self-destructs itself. God's gift is that he overcame the power of sin. *The wages of sin are death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord...* and while we are here on this earth, he gives us the wisdom and discernment and a conscience to live a happy, pure, and righteous life, but again it's up to us to act on his advice because a person can be saved and still be living like the world."

Holding onto the handle of his mug, he stared off toward a picture on the wall, thinking before sighing and turning back to her as he raised his coffee. "Yeah, I guess... Maybe you're right." He sighed. "I can try to do better, start living a better life. Maybe I'll even start going to church."

"That won't work," she stated bluntly. Looking back at her in surprise, he put his mug down with a thud. She smiled. "Half the world tries to do what's right. That doesn't mean they are part of God's family. People can't earn heaven no matter how good they are. The Bible calls our good works *filthy rags*. It says, *'Not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to God's mercy he saved.'* *'By grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves it is a gift of God, not of works least any man*

should boast.” “Jesus sayeth unto them, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me.*” He just stared at her, unimpressed. She smiled back. “Kinda like going to a ballgame. It doesn’t matter how good you have been that day; you can’t get in without a ticket.”

“So how do you get *this* ticket?” His voice was *very* skeptical.

“Jesus is the only One good enough to get to heaven. Because he died on the cross, he can pay for the sins of anyone that comes to Him. He said that anyone that comes to Him *He will in no wise cast out.* He said He is *not willing that any should perish but that all shall come to repentance.*”

“You can’t come to Him. He’s dead.”

“No. He’s not.” Her voice was slow and sounded offended. “That’s why we celebrate Easter. He rose from the dead. That’s what gave Him victory over sin and death. He conquered death.”

“You know what I mean. He’s not here.”

“It’s true. He’s in heaven, but He hears prayers. He saved me when I asked Him.”

“Yeah. How do you know that?”

Drinking her coffee, she thought a moment. “I know Him. My life has changed. Not because I suddenly was able to do a better job, but because he changed me, changed my desires, showed me truth, and showed me He’s here and interested in my life by answering prayers. Once you accept Him, He sends His Spirit to you to live inside of you.”

“I believe in God,” he said quietly, trying to suggest he knew all this and was already saved.

“Then tell Him. Tell Jesus that you believe in Him. That you believe he died on the cross and rose from the dead and has the power to take your sins. Tell Him that you are sorry for your sins, and you want Him to save you. Tell Him you want to be part of his family. The Bible says, *If thou wilt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. Call on the name of the Lord and thou shalt be saved. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. Ye must be born again...* born into God’s family.”

Dr. Fredricks stared at her a moment, trying to process everything. She had a habit of speed talking when she got excited, and he wasn’t sure he had gotten everything. Once it made sense, he simply said, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Melinda wished her tone hadn’t held so much surprise, but she was about overcome by shock that, first of all, they were even having this conversation. After all, Dr. Matt Fredricks had to be the last person she would ever imagine giving his life to Christ. “Do you just want to pray, or-r... do you want me to pray first?”

Not having intended to do it right now, Dr. Fredricks glanced around the room and down the hall, just to make sure no one was around. “You can go first.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“Okay. Let’s pray.” Melinda had to smile to herself as she bowed her head, *the perfect picture of an enthusiastic convert.* She wondered if she should whisper to make him feel more comfortable. She met him halfway and spoke softly. “Dear Lord, thank You for this opportunity. Thank You for giving Matt this opportunity to know You. I don’t know what my life would be like without You. It would seem so empty and pointless... and alone. Thank You for showing me that life’s not all about me because I disappoint myself. I’m not good enough for me, nor can I be. Thank you for giving me You and Your joy and purpose and peace. Thank You that I have You. Thank you that in a few minutes Matt will, too. In Jesus name, I pray. Amen.”

Matt glanced up at her to see her eyes still closed, glanced around the room and saw a nurse standing outside, listening. His first thought was to stop, but then he didn’t

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want to. Suddenly, he didn't care about her, her gossip, or his reputation. This was too important. He understood it. He believed it, and he wasn't going to give it up for anything. He closed his eyes. "Uh, God, I know I haven't been much of a saint. I know I have done many wrong things. Most of all, I spent most of my life knowing You were there, but not wanting You or anything to do with You, even mistreating Sandra when she mentioned You. When she died, I used that as an excuse to hate You. I've never wanted to live the way You say people should, but maybe that's the only way to make life work. I guess I'm with Melinda, now. I'm not everything I thought I was, and living for me isn't going so well. I want to live for You. I believe that you died on the cross and rose again to conquer sin... and death. Please give me your gift of eternal life. Please..." He choked. "let me see Sandra again. Please, let me tell her I'm sorry. Please, forgive my sins and save me."

Matt and Melinda opened their eyes at the same time, joy gleaming on both of their faces. Melinda looked at him, but Matt gazed down at his coffee, thinking. Melinda couldn't help staring at him. He looked so different. The deep grouchy lines... the lines of anger and discontent and forcefulness deeply carved in his profile seemed to be lifted... lifted into a happy face... a face she had never seen before... a handsome face. She tried to think of something to say, but just then his cell phone rang. He reached to his belt to get it. "Yes?" He answered it and then followed that with a couple "Okays," and ended it with, "I'll be there in a minute." He stood up, then so did Melinda. Looking at her, he said, "They're bringing Jim in now. I got to go."

She smiled, touching his arm. "I'll be praying for you."

Still pacing and praying, Jess looked at the clock on the nightstand – 3:15am. *Why hasn't he called yet!* Stopping midstep to grab her cell phone, she commenced walking again as she began to dial. *Please, make him answer, Lord, please. Please make him answer.* She continued to pray as it rang.

Derrick took out his cell phone. He had had it off because he knew Jess would be wanting news, but now that Jim was safely out of surgery in a recovery room, he decided to turn it back on. He preferred not to talk to her till he was awake, but he figured if she called, he would answer it. "Yeah, Derrick," he spoke into it.

"Derrick! What is the matter with you! Why has your phone been off?! Why didn't you call me?! Is Jim alright?! Where are you?!"

"Hope Community Hospital in Spring Valley."

There was a moment of silence and then, "How'd you get back there?! Where's Jim?!"

"He's with me. ... There was a car accident. He's going to be fine. He just had surgery. He's in the recovery room now. I was going to call you when he woke up."

"Surgery! What? What happened?!" Her voice was half shock, half urgency, and half fury. "How long have you known this? How could you leave me in the dark about this so long?!" Derrick shrugged. "What's the matter with you?" *That's still yet to be determined.* "I need to be with him. I got to get there." Derrick nodded sleepily in agreement. "Are you sure he's alright? How can I get there? Derrick!"

"I can borrow a truck and come up to get all of you in..."

"Now?!"

Derrick fell backwards, thudding against the wall, nearly faint from that suggestion. "I was thinking about in the morning."

"Oh." She paused. "I guess you probably do need some sleep before such a long drive."

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He didn't respond verbally, but eyes closed, still leaning against the wall, he nodded his head.

"Too bad we don't have any money with us. We passed a car rental place when the sergeant drove us over here."

"What's the name?" He mumbled, barely audible.

"Huh?"

"What's the name?!" He accidentally yelled it, causing Jess to jump. There was silence on the other end so, he continued, "I'll call them when they open, pay over the phone, and you can pay me back."

"Oh. Thank... you. Thank you! That'll be great!"

Eyes closed, Derrick nodded continuously, but didn't waste the energy speaking.

"I think it was called Deals on Wheels. Jim isn't alone, is he?"

"I think Dr. Fredricks said something about calling the Pastor."

"So Pastor's there?" Derrick nodded his head. "Derrick?"

"Yeah." He opened his eyes. "Yes. I think so." He closed them again as the world began to spin.

"Can you call me when he wakes up?" Derrick nodded again. "Derrick?"

"I'll try. Bye." He snapped his phone closed but didn't open his eyes as he contemplated if he was capable of standing away from the wall without falling.

"Somebody look at that arm yet?" Derrick recognized Dr. Fredricks voice and shook his head, too tired to speak. "Can you walk to a room or do you need someone to carry you?"

Derrick mentally rolled his eyes. *Car-ry me*. Blinking them open, he tried to walk, but only stumbled forward into Matt who caught him. Supporting his weight, Matt helped him into the closest vacant room, rolling his eyes as he tossed him down on the bed. He didn't bother to be gentle... after all, it *was* Derrick.

Sitting beside his bed, staring at Jim, Pastor Thomas silently prayed. Then becoming more intense in his prayer, he closed his eyes and leaned forward, propping his forehead on his clasped hands, resting his elbows on the bedrail. "Pastor?" In the midst of his fervent prayer, he heard the faint call of his name, and wondering if someone came in, looked up. His eyes met Jim's, and thankfulness overwhelmed him. He was awake. For a couple moments neither spoke. The intense pleading within the pastor's heart turned to immense joy at the answered prayer; so much so, that he could not contain the emotion. Standing, unable to hold back the tears of joy, he reached down and pulled him into a man hug, even more grateful to feel Jim's strength rapidly returning.

Rolling over, Wade suddenly realized that he had the bed all to himself and with a start sat up and hit the button to the lamp. "Mellissa?" Seeing her sitting in the recliner, he allowed himself a deep breath and tried to get his heart rate to stabilize.

She just looked at him.

"What are you doing up?" He got up, and walked toward her, noticing her tearstained face as he approached. "What's the matter?"

"How can you ask that?" she wept. "I just lost a child my only child." Her body shook with crying as she put her face in her hands.

"He's not lost. They'll find him."

"They took him the day after we left. He could be anywhere by now. Maybe..." She wept again. "Maybe he's not even in the country."

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Wade sat down next to her on the arm of the chair and put his arm around her. “He’s here. They’ll find him. I know they’ll find him.” Throat tightening, silent tears rolled down his face.

Still sobbing, she grabbed the front of his shirt and leaned her face into his side crying into it.

Jess looked both ways as she pulled their car to a stop at the end of the hospital parking lot, then pulled onto the street right after the last oncoming car. She smiled at Jim in the passenger's seat. "Glad to finally be goin' home?"

Staring out the window, nearly permanent lines of concern set in his face, he just nodded. Jess would have given anything to know what he was thinking. He'd been so serious since the accident, and time wasn't lightening his disposition. She'd never really seen him afraid before. It wasn't part of his character... but now... now she wondered... Was he afraid or just deeply troubled... and about what? The only thing she could figure was the accident... the hospital. She began wondering if his concerns about hospitals and doctors were truly as irrational as he let on, or if there was something deeper... something he had never shared. Stopping at a red light, she momentarily stared at him. Was he keeping something from her? Did he have a secret... a secret he had hidden from her all these years? She had no secrets from him. The thought scared her. How well did she really know him?

Pain seared through Jim's side as he twisted to look behind the car as Jess merged to the right lane. He rubbed the spot next to the incision point to try to relieve the pain. He felt Jess looking at him, but he didn't look back. He just wanted to be left alone right now.

He was thankful that his injuries weren't real major. He was thankful that he was expected to make a full recovery. He was thankful to be going home with Jess and little Morgan in the back seat. He was grateful to be alive for his family, and he had told the Lord so... but he also felt let down... let down and afraid... afraid because all these years after his mom had died, he had been trusting the Lord to never put him at the mercy of doctors like his mom had been.

True, he'd been in a hospital once before, but he had been awake and coherent and free. It was his decision to leave or stay. This time he was tied down, drugged, helpless, unable to fight or move or even breathe. He was forced into total reliance on the people he feared the most.

Why didn't you hear me? He stared out at the passing telephone poles. *What did I do wrong? Why didn't you hear me? Why didn't you answer me? What'd I do wrong?*

His throat tightened. All his life he had had trouble depending on people. He just didn't. He knew people were fallible, but God wasn't. He had depended on Him. He had trusted Him. *Why... Isn't no an answer?... Why would you say no? Why did I have to be put through that? What'd I do wrong that You... What happened?*

Jim's mind went back over the incident. Nothing had happened. He had been afraid something would, but nothing had... nothing bad.

But why'd you let them drug me... and tie me down? His mind went back to Derrick. He had been barely coherent, but he remembered Derrick walking into the hospital room in Chicago. He remembered crying out to him in his mind though he couldn't speak, crying out for him to rescue him... and he did... but was it really Derrick's idea? How had he found him so fast? How had he turned up right when he needed him? What made him think of getting him transferred home? What made him confident to take that risk?

Suddenly, he realized the lesson. All these years he had been trusting God to do things his way. He was trusting God to not let certain things happen in his life because as long as these certain things didn't happen, he could pretty much deal with life on his own... with help from God ... at times a great deal of help..., but he wouldn't feel like he was drowning in quicksand as long as these certain things didn't happen.

One did, and he literally felt like he was being smothered. He was helpless, chained by people, restricted by circumstances, unable to do... anything.

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That's when God Himself reached down from heaven and rescued him. He'd been depending on himself to keep himself safe and found out his abilities were limited... but God's abilities weren't.

His mind went back to the fight with the hospital staff. If his first reaction would have been to pray instead of reacting in fear, he wouldn't have been restrained.

Staring at the cornfields as they headed out of town, Jim mentally crossed his arms, unsure if he wanted to be mad at God for making him go through that just to teach him something or not. He decided to decide later.

A few minutes later as he gazed out at the scenery, he noticed his countenance had lightened and he realized that regardless of his intentions, some of the hurt and distrust he had felt a few minutes earlier had already melted away.

He let a half smile cross his face as they reached the end of their property, and he could see their small herd of his horses rearing up and chasing each other as they played. Danny, noticing their car, came galloping toward the fence then ran full speed, mane and tail flying, next to the car all the way to the end of his pasture.

Jess chuckled as she turned into the driveway. "Guess that's what you call a welcoming committee." Jim smiled again, still looking at Danny, who prancing, neck curved and tail high, snorted loudly twice, then spinning around on his heels, galloped full speed toward the barn. Jim let out a huff of a laugh. Noticing Derrick's new truck parked by the barn, he asked, "Let me off at the barn?"

Jess gave him a disapproving glance. "You are supposed to go straight to bed. Remember?"

"I want to talk to Derrick."

Jess stopped the car in front of the barn. "I'll wait for you."

"I can walk to the house," Jim mumbled as he got out. Jess didn't answer, and she didn't leave either.

Halfway to the barn door, Derrick came out, walking his own curve-necked prancing stallion. Jim stayed a safe distance away, not trusting the high-spirited creature not to just hall off and kick him, simply for the fun of it. He had trouble hiding the surprise that Derrick was actually in control and leading the monster. "Looks like you two have come to an understanding." Jim approached them, cautiously.

"Yeah." Derrick put his hand up to the horse's chest, and the stallion actually backed up a step. "I've had some time to work with him since the department kicked me out on sick leave."

"How long have you been out of the hospital?"

"I was never officially admitted."

Jim gave a halfhearted laugh. "You got shot twice!"

"Yeah, well... there *were* a couple of guys that needed... convincing," He jokingly punched his fist into his other hand. "but I got them to see things my way."

"Yeah, right." Jim smiled, doubting that Derrick got physical with anyone. All he had to do was stare... and all would flee. Sometimes his reputation alone was enough to do it.

Derrick just smiled, running his hand through the horse's mane. Spooking at a distant sound, the stallion jerked his head up, stiffening and pointing his ears in the direction of the sound. Derrick just roughly patted the stallion's neck, reassuring him.

"Name him, yet?"

"No."

"How 'bout Piglet?" Jess piped up from inside the car. "He's timid enough," she joked. Jim smiled back at her, noticing she had rolled down the windows. Derrick shot her a "yeah right" glance.

"I was just going to take him for a ride." Derrick loosened the reins and headed toward the animal's midsection. It was just then that Jim noticed the saddle.

"Hey, you got the saddle on him!"

Derrick gave him a look. "Yeah." He put his foot in the stirrup.

"And you can ride him now?"

Grabbing the saddle horn, Derrick swung up. "We try."

"Hey, man," Jim spoke more quietly, walking up next to him and slapping the top of his leg. "Just wanted to say thanks."

Derrick shrugged it off. "No problem. Shorten the distance I have to go to make us even." He smiled.

Jim shook his head once. "You never owed me anything."

Derrick stared straight ahead. "Owe you a lot." Without waiting for response he nudged the stallion, and they headed for the trails.

Glancing at the roaring jeep coming down the road, Jim watched Derrick stop and try to steady the prancing stallion, conceding to ride him in tight, fast circles until he calmed down. The pink jeep came zipping in the drive, then obviously noticing Derrick, bypassed the barn and skidded to a stop next to him, spinning up gravel with the tires and causing Derrick's horse to rear.

"What's the matter with you?" Derrick called out to an approaching Kara Lee as soon as he got the stallion semi-calm.

After marching toward him, Kara Lee stopped directly in front of the terrified stallion, fire in her eyes. "You are an irresponsible, inconsiderate, self-important, stiff-necked, egotistical... MALE!" With that, she ripped off her leather cowgirl hat and slapped it as hard as she could against the horse's rump, causing the stallion to whiny, rear up, and take off full speed for the woods in utter disregard of Derrick's attempts at control.

With a nod of self-satisfaction, Kara Lee marched back to her jeep, jumped in, slammed the door, and spinning up gravel again, took off.

Jim and Jess exchanged glances as Jim got back in. Jess couldn't hide the smile of amusement. "You think he'll be alright?"

"Derrick?" He leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. "Oh, yeah."

After pulling in front of the garage, Jess piped up, "I picked a half a bushel of raspberries this morning. How 'bout some raspberries and homemade ice cream for lunch?"

Jim looked at her with a smile of anticipation. "Sounds great." She smiled back, leaned over and kissed him. Then they both got out.

It took Jim a little longer, so Jess had plenty of time to get an excited Morgan out of her car seat. "Raspberries, Mommy! Ummy!" Morgan clapped as Jess lifted her out of the car seat. Coming around the back of the truck, Jim smiled at his little girl's enthusiasm. Reaching her, he took one hand as Jess took the other, and together they all walked toward the house. Both lifted Morgan by the arm when they came to the wood-stained porch steps as she, giggling, tucked her legs under and let them swing her till they reached the top. "We should eat outside," Jess suggested. "It sure is a gorgeous day."

"Let's do it," Jim agreed as he opened the pretty oak door, and together, they all went inside.