

DAVID BALDACCI

King
and
Maxwell

PAN BOOKS

1

Forty-eight hundred pounds.

That was roughly how much the cargo in the crate weighed. It was off-loaded from the tractor-trailer by forklift and placed in the back of the smaller box truck. The rear door was closed and secured with two different locks, one a key, the other a combo. Each lock was rated to be tamper-proof. The reality was, given time, any lock could be beaten and any door broken through.

The man climbed into the driver's seat of the truck, closed the door, locked it, started the engine, revved the motor, cranked the AC, and adjusted his seat. He had a long way to drive and not much time to get there. And it was hot as hell. Maybe hotter. Waves of visible heat shimmered, distorting the landscape. He didn't focus on that, because he might just start puking.

He would have preferred an armed escort. Perhaps an Abrams tank for good measure, but that was not in the budget or the mission plan. The ground was rocky and, in the distance, mountainous. The roads had more potholes than asphalt. He had guns and plenty

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of ammo. But he was only one man with only one trigger finger.

He no longer wore the uniform. He had taken it off for the last time about an hour ago. He fingered his “new” clothes. They were worn and not overly clean. He pulled out his map and spread it out on the front seat as the tractor-trailer pulled away.

He was now alone in the middle of nowhere in a country that was still largely entrenched in the ninth century.

As he stared out the windshield at the imposing terrain, he briefly thought about how he had ended up here. Back then it had seemed brave, even heroic. Right now he felt like the world’s biggest idiot for accepting a mission that held such a low chance of survival.

The reality was he was here. He was alone. He had a job to do and he had better get to it. And if he died, well, his mortal worries were over and he would have at least one person to mourn him.

In addition to the map, he had GPS. However, it was spotty out here, as though the satellites above didn’t know there was actually a country down here that required folks getting from point A to point B. Hence the old-fashioned paper version on the front seat.

He put the truck in drive and thought about what was in the crate. It was more than two tons of very special cargo. Without it he was certainly a dead man.

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Even with it, he might be a dead man, but his odds were far better by having it.

As he passed over the rough road, he calculated he had twenty hours' hard driving ahead of him. There were no highways here. The pace would be plodding and bumpy. And there might even be folks shooting at him.

There also would be people waiting for him at the end. The cargo would be transferred, and he would be transferred along with it. Communications had been made. Promises given. Alliances formed. Now it was just up to him to talk a good game and the others to keep their word.

That had all sounded good in the endless meetings with people in shirts and ties and with their smart-phones jangling nonstop. Out here alone with nothing around him except the bleakest landscape one could imagine, it all sounded delusional.

But he was still a soldier so he soldiered on.

He worked his way toward the mountains in the distance. He carried not one piece of personal information on him. Yet he did have papers that should allow him safe passage through the area.

Should, not would.

If he was stopped, he would have to talk his way out of it if the papers were deemed insufficient. If they asked to see what was in the truck, he had to refuse. If they insisted, he had a little metal box with a black matte finish. It had a switch on the side and one red

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button on top. When he engaged the switch and pushed down the button, everything would still be okay. If his finger came off the button while the device was still engaged, he and everything else within twenty square meters would disappear.

He drove for twelve straight hours and saw not a single living person. He glimpsed a camel and a donkey wandering around. He saw a dead snake. He observed a rotted human body, its carcass being reduced to bone by vultures. He was surprised there was only one dead body. Normally there would have been a lot more. This country had seen its share of slaughter. Every so often another country tried to invade it. They quickly won the war and then lost everything else and went home with their tanks tucked between their legs.

During the dozen hours, he saw the sun set and then rise again. He was heading east so he was driving right into it. He lowered the visor on the truck and kept going. He played CD after CD of rock music, blasting the truck cab. He listened to Meat Loaf's "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" twenty times in a row, as loud as his ears could stand. He smiled every time the baseball announcer's voice came on. It was a little bit of home out here.

Despite Meat Loaf screaming at him, his eyelids still drooped and he kept jolting back awake after his truck had strayed across the road. Luckily there was no other traffic. There weren't many people who would want

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to live around here. Foreboding would be one way to describe it. Insanely dangerous would be another, more accurate one.

Thirteen hours into the trip he grew so tired that he decided to pull off the road to take a quick nap. He had made good progress and had a little time to spare. But as he was about to stop he looked down the road and saw what was coming. His weariness vanished. His nap would have to wait.

The open-bed truck was speeding directly at him. The truck was driving squarely in the center of the road, blocking passage in either direction.

Two men sat in front, three stood in the bed, all holding subguns. They were the Welcome Wagon, Afghan-style.

He pulled partially off the road, rolled down the window, let the heat waves push in, and waited. He turned off the CD player, and Meat Loaf's baritone vanished. These men would not appreciate the rocker's prodigious pipes or lustful lyrics.

The smaller truck stopped beside his. While two of the turbaned men with subguns pointed their weapons at him, the man in the truck's passenger seat climbed out and walked to the cab door of the other vehicle. He also wore a turban; the bands of sweat soaked into the material spoke of the prolonged intensity of the heat.

The driver looked at the man as he approached.

He reached for the sheaf of papers on the front seat. They sat next to his fully loaded Glock with one

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round already in the chamber. He hoped he didn't have to use it, because a pistol against a subgun would only have one outcome—his death.

“Papers?” the man said in Pashto.

He handed them through. They were appropriately signed and distinctively sealed by each of the tribal chieftains who controlled these stretches of land. He was counting on it that they would be honored. He was encouraged by the fact that in this part of the world, not abiding by a chieftain's orders often resulted in the death of those who disobeyed. And death here was nearly always brutal and almost never immediate. They liked for you to feel yourself die, as they said around here.

The turbaned man was drenched in sweat, his eyes red and his clothes as dirty as his face. He read through the papers, blinking rapidly when he saw the august signatories.

He looked up at the driver and appraised him keenly, then he handed back the papers. The man's gaze went to the back of the truck, his look a curious one. The driver's hand closed around the small black box and he pressed the switch on the side, engaging it. The man spoke again in Pashto. The driver shook his head and said that opening the truck was not possible. It was locked and he did not have a key or the combo required.

The man pointed to his gun and said that that was his key.

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The driver's finger pressed down on the red button. If they shot him, his finger would release and this "idiot switch" feature would detonate the explosives and kill them all.

He said in Pashto, "The tribal leaders were clear. The cargo could not be revealed until its final destination. Very clear," he added for emphasis. "If you have a problem, you need to take it up with them."

The man considered this and slid his hand down to his holstered sidearm.

The driver tried to keep his breathing normal and his limbs from twitching, but being seconds from getting blown into oblivion did certain physiological things to the body that he could not control.

Five tense seconds passed during which it was not clear if the turban would stand down or not.

The man finally withdrew, climbed back into the truck, and said something to the driver. Moments later the truck sped off, kicking up a cloud of dust behind its rear wheels.

The driver disengaged the detonator and waited until they were nearly out of sight before putting the truck back in gear. He drove off slowly at first, and then punched the gas. His weariness was gone.

He didn't need the music anymore. He lowered the AC because he suddenly felt rather cold. He followed his directions, keeping to the exact route. It did not pay to stray out here. He scanned the horizon for any other pickup trucks with armed men coming his way,

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but saw none. He hoped that word had been communicated along the route that the cargo truck was to be given safe passage.

Nearly eight hours later he arrived at his final destination. The dusk was starting to gather and the wind was picking up. The sky was streaked with clouds, and the rain looked to be a few minutes from bucketing down.

When he arrived here, he had expected one precise thing to happen.

It didn't.

2

The first thing to go wrong was his running out of gas as he pulled through the stone building's open overhead door. He had extra fuel tanks, but apparently someone had miscalculated.

The second thing to go wrong was the gun being shoved in his face.

This was no turban toting a subgun. It was a white man like him with a .357 pistol, its hammer already pulled back.

"Is there a problem?" the driver said.

"Not for us," said the man, who was heavysset and jowly and looked closer to forty than thirty.

"Us?" He looked around and saw other white guys creeping out of the shadows. They were all armed, and every gun they had was pointing at him.

This many white faces here stuck out like a planet going out of its orbit.

"This is not part of the plan," the driver said.

The other man held out a cred pack. "There's been a change in plan."

The driver studied the ID card and badge. It showed

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that the man's name was Tim Simons and identified him as being an agent with the CIA. He said, "If we're on the same side, why the gun in my face?"

"In this part of the world I've learned not to trust anybody. Out, now!"

The driver slung his fully loaded knapsack over his shoulder and stepped down onto the dirt floor holding two things.

One was his Glock, which was useless with so many guns centered on him.

The second item was the black box. That was entirely useful. In fact, it was the only real bargaining chip he had. He engaged the detonator and pressed down the button.

He held it up to Simons.

"Fail-safe," he said. "Red button gets released, we all get vaporized. Truck is wired all the way around with cakes of Semtex. Enough to make this just a hole in the ground."

"Bullshit," countered Simons.

"Guess you weren't entirely wired in on the op."

"I think I was."

"Then think again. Look under the wheel wells."

Simons nodded at a colleague, who drew a flashlight and ducked under the truck's right rear wheel well.

He backed out and turned. His expression said it all.

The armed men looked back at the driver. Their superior numbers had just been rendered irrelevant.

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He knew it, but he also knew this advantage was precarious. A game of chicken could only have, at best, one winner. But it could likely also have two losers. And he was running out of time. He could sense this in the fingers gliding to triggers, in the backward steps the men were trying to make surreptitiously. He could read their minds in every movement.

Get out of the Semtex's explosive radius and either let him detonate and kill himself or take him out with a kill shot and hopefully save the cargo. Either way they would live, which would be their primary objective. There would be other cargo to hijack, but they could not conjure additional lives.

"Unless you can run a lot faster than Usain Bolt, you'll never get outside the blast zone in time," he said. He held the box higher. "And we'll have an eternity to think about our sins."

Simons said, "We want what's in the truck. You give us that, you go free."

"I'm not sure how that would work."

Simons nervously eyed the box. "There're two pickup trucks parked in the far corner over there. Both are fully fueled with extra cans in the back and each has a GPS. They were our rides getting here, but you take one of them. Your choice."

The driver eyed the black truck. Next to it was a green pickup.

"And where exactly do I take it?" he asked.

"I'm assuming out of this shithole."

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“I have a job to do.”

“That job has changed.”

“Why don’t we just end this?” He started to lessen the pressure on the button.

“Wait,” said Simons. “Wait.” He held up his hand.

“I’m waiting.”

“Just take a truck and get out of here. Your cargo is not worth dying for, is it?”

“Maybe it is.”

“You’ve got a family back in the States.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just do. And I have to believe you want to get back to them.”

“And how do I explain losing the cargo?”

“You won’t have to, trust me,” replied Simons.

“That’s the problem, I don’t trust you.”

“Then we’re all going to die right here. It’s that simple.”

The driver eyed the pickup trucks. He didn’t believe anything he had been told. But he desperately wanted to get out of this alive, if only to make things right later.

Simons said, “Look, we’re obviously not the Taliban. Hell, I’m from Nebraska. My creds are the real deal. We’re on the same side here, okay? Why else would I be here?”

The driver finally said, “So you want me to just withdraw quietly from the field?”

“That was my offer.”

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“How do you propose doing this?”

“First thing, don’t release the button,” advised Simons.

“Then don’t pull your triggers.” He edged toward the pickup trucks. The men parted to allow him passage.

“I’ll be taking the green truck,” he said abruptly. He saw Simons give a nearly imperceptible flinch, which was good. He’d made the right decision. The black truck was obviously booby-trapped.

He reached the green truck and eyed the ignition. The keys were in there. There was also a GPS mounted on the dash.

Simons called out, “What’s the range on the detonator?”

“I’ll keep that to myself.”

He threw his knapsack on the front seat, climbed into the truck, and started the engine. He eyed the gas gauge. Full. He kept his free hand ready with the detonator.

Simons said, “How can we trust you not to detonate when you’re well away?”

“It’s a question of range,” he replied.

“Which you haven’t told us.”

“So you just have to trust me, Nebraska. Just like I have to trust you that this truck isn’t wired to blow up as soon as I’m out of here. Or maybe it was the other one that was.”

He pushed the gas pedal to the floor and the truck

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roared out of the stone building. He expected shots to be fired at him. None came.

He imagined they believed that would lead to their deaths when he released the button in retaliation.

When he was far enough away, he looked at the black box. If the guys back there were CIA, there was a lot more going on here than he cared to think about right now. But he wanted to see it through. And the only way to do that was to let this play out. And stay alive.

He disengaged the detonator and tossed it on the front seat.

Now he just had to get the hell out of here.

He hoped that was possible. Most people came to this part of the world simply to kill or be killed.

3

Sean King drove while Michelle Maxwell rode shotgun.

This was the reverse of what the pair normally did. She usually drove the car, like she was piloting a ride at Daytona. And Sean hung on for dear life and mumbled his prayers, but without much confidence that they would be answered.

There was a good reason for his driving tonight, and for the last twenty-one nights. Michelle was simply not herself, at least not yet. She was getting there, only more slowly than she wanted.

He looked at her. "How you doing?"

She stared straight ahead. "I am armed. So you ask me that one more time and I *will* shoot you, Sean."

"I'm just concerned, okay?"

"I know that, Sean. And I appreciate it. But I've been out of rehab for three weeks. I think I'm good to go. And that's what your concern can do: *Go*."

"Your injuries were life threatening, Michelle. You almost didn't make it. You nearly bled out. Trust me, I was there for every second of it. So three weeks out

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of rehab after something like that is actually not very long.”

Michelle touched her lower back and then her upper thigh. There were scars there. There would always be scars there. The memory of how she had come by these injuries was as vivid as the initial knife thrust into her back. It had been done by someone she thought was an ally.

Yet she was alive. And Sean *had* been with her every step of the way. Only now his hovering was starting to annoy her.

“I know. But it was two full months of rehab. And I’m a fast healer. You of all people should understand that by now.”

“It was just close, Michelle. Way too close.”

“How many times have I almost lost you?” she said, shooting him a glance. “It’s part of what we do. It comes with the territory. If we want safe, we have to get into another line of work.”

Sean looked out through the windshield as the rain continued bucketing down. The night was cold, gloomy, the clouds shifty as a coyote. They were driving through a particularly lonely area of northern Virginia on their way back from meeting with a former client, Edgar Roy. They had saved him from a death sentence. He had been as suitably appreciative as any high-functioning autistic savant with severely limited social skills could be.

“Edgar looked good,” said Michelle.

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“He looked really good considering the alternative of lethal injection,” replied Sean, who seemed relieved by the change in topic.

Sean took a turn too fast on the rain-slicked, curvy road and Michelle grabbed her armrest for support.

“Slow it down,” she warned.

He feigned astonishment. “Words I never thought I would hear leave your mouth.”

“I drive fast because I know how to.”

“I’ve got the injuries and therapy bills to prove otherwise,” he shot back.

She gave him a scowl. “So, what now, since we’ve finished all the work on Edgar Roy’s matter?”

“We continue our careers as private investigators. Both Peter Bunting and the U.S. government were very generous with their payments to us, but we’re socking that away to either retire on or spend on a rainy day.”

Michelle looked to the stormy sky. “Rainy day? Then let’s go buy a boat. We might need it to get home.”

Sean would have said something back, but he was suddenly preoccupied.

“Damn!”

He cut the wheel hard to the left and the Land Cruiser spun sideways across the slick roadway.

“Turn into it,” advised Michelle calmly.

Sean turned into the spin and quickly regained control of the vehicle. He applied the brakes and brought them to a stop on the shoulder.

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“What the hell was that?” he snapped.

“You mean *who* was that,” answered Michelle.

She opened the door and leaned out into the rain.

“Michelle, wait,” said Sean.

“Point the lights to the right. Quick!”

She slammed the door shut, and Sean drove the vehicle back onto the road.

“Hit your brights,” she told him.

He did so. The lights swelled in intensity, letting them see farther in front of them with as much clarity as the darkness and rain would allow.

“There,” said Michelle, pointing to the right. “Go, go.”

Sean hit the gas and the Land Cruiser sped forward.

The person running down the right shoulder of the road looked back only once. But it was enough.

“It’s a kid,” said Sean in amazement.

“It’s a teenager,” corrected Michelle.

“Well, he was almost a dead teenager,” added Sean sternly.

“Sean, he’s got a gun.”

Sean leaned closer to the windshield and saw the weapon in the boy’s right hand. “This does not look good,” he said.

“He looks terrified.”

“He’s running in the middle of a thunderstorm with a metal object in his hand. He should be scared. And on top of that I almost hit him and then he wouldn’t be scared, just dead.”

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“Get closer.”

“What?”

“Get closer.”

“Why would I do that? He’s got a gun, Michelle.”

“We have guns too. Just get closer.”

He sped up while Michelle rolled down the window.

A spear of lightning lit the sky with a billion-candlepower burst of energy followed by a crack of thunder so loud it sounded like a skyscraper imploding.

“Hey,” Michelle yelled at the boy. “Hey!”

The teen looked back again, his face whitewashed in the glare of the headlights.

“What happened?” yelled Michelle. “Are you okay?”

The boy’s answer was to point the gun at them. But he didn’t fire. He left the road and cut across a field, his feet slipping and sliding over the wet grass.

“I’m calling the cops,” said Sean.

“Just wait,” she replied. “Stop the truck.”

Sean slowed the Land Cruiser and pulled to a stop a few feet later.

Michelle hopped out of the vehicle.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sean cried out.

“He’s obviously in trouble. I’m going to find out why.”

“Did it occur to you that he might be in trouble because he just shot somebody and is running from the scene of the crime?”

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“Don’t think so.”

He looked at her incredulously. “You don’t think so? Based on what?”

“I’ll be back.”

“What? Michelle, wait.”

He made a grab for her arm, but missed.

The next instant she was sprinting across the field. In a few seconds she was soaked to the skin in the driving rain.

Sean slapped his palm against the steering wheel in disbelief. He yelled at the window. “Do you *have* a death wish?” But Michelle was long since out of ear-shot.

He calmed, studied the lay of the land for a few moments, and sped off, hanging a right at the next intersection and punching the gas so hard the rear of the truck spun out. He righted it and drove off, cursing his partner loudly with every turn of the wheel.

4

Michelle had chased many things in her life. As a track star and later Olympic rower, she had constantly pitted herself against others in races. As a cop in Tennessee she had run down her share of felons fleeing the scenes of their crimes. As a Secret Service agent she had been fleet of foot next to limos carrying important leaders.

Tonight, though, she was competing against a long-legged teenager with the boundless energy and fresh knees of youth who had a substantial head start and was running as if the devil were on his heels. And her feet kept slipping with every stride over the wet terrain.

“Wait,” she called out as she caught a glimpse of him before he changed direction and disappeared down a path through some trees.

He didn’t wait. He simply sped up.

Michelle, despite her protestations to Sean, was not 100 percent. Her back hurt. Her leg hurt. Her lungs were burning. And it didn’t help that the wind and rain were blinding her.

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She raced down the path and just in case drew her gun. She always felt better with her Sig in hand. She redoubled her efforts, fought through the pain and fatigue that were coursing through her, and markedly closed the gap between them. A lightning strike followed by a crack of thunder momentarily distracted her. A tree on the side of the path, punished by stiff winds, started to topple; she found an extra burst of speed and flashed past it. The shallow-rooted tree slammed into the dirt about ten feet behind her but its thick branches missed her by only a few inches. Any of them could have crushed her skull.

That had been close.

The teen had fallen when the tree crashed, yet now he was up and running once more. But the gap between them was narrower.

Calling on reserves she wasn't sure she possessed anymore, she propelled herself forward as if she had been shot out of a mortar. She leapt and hit him in the back of the legs. He sprawled forward into the dirt while Michelle pitched sideways and then rose, her lungs burning, her breath coming in gulps. She bent over but kept her gaze on him, her gun ready, because she could see he still had his, although one glance confirmed that she didn't have to worry about him firing it.

He turned over, his butt in the dirt, his knees bent to his chest.

“Who the hell are you? Why are you chasing me?”

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“Why are you running around with a gun in the middle of a storm?” she countered.

He looked very young, maybe fifteen. His auburn hair was plastered to his freckled face.

“Just leave me alone,” he cried out.

He rose and Michelle straightened. They were barely three feet apart. At five foot ten Michelle was at least three inches taller than he was, although his long legs and size twelve feet promised that he would probably zip right through the six-foot mark before he was done growing.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

He started to back up. “Just please leave me alone.”

“I’m trying to help you. My partner and I almost hit you back there.”

“Your partner?”

Michelle decided a lie was better than the truth right now. “I’m a cop.”

“A cop?” He looked at her suspiciously. “Let me see some ID.”

She put her hand inside her jacket and withdrew her PI license. In the dark she hoped it would look legit enough. She flashed it.

“Now will you tell me what this is about? Maybe I can help you.”

He looked down, his thin chest rising and falling quickly with each of his uneven breaths.

“Nobody can help me.”

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“That’s a big statement to make. Things can’t be that bad.”

His lips started trembling. “Look, I...I need to get back home.”

“Is that where you ran away from?”

He nodded.

“And where you got the gun?”

“It belonged to my dad.”

Michelle pulled her wet hair out of her eyes. “We can give you a ride there. Just tell us where it is.”

“No, I’ll walk.”

“That’s not a good idea. Not in a storm like this. You might get hit by a car or have a tree fall on you, both of which have already almost happened. What’s your name?”

He said nothing.

She said, “My name is Michelle. Michelle Maxwell.”

“Are you really a cop?”

“I used to be one. After that I was a Secret Service agent.”

“For real?” Now he sounded like a teenager. An awed teenager.

“Yep. I’m a private investigator now. But I still act like a cop sometimes. Now what’s your name?”

“Tyler, Tyler Wingo,” he said.

“Okay, Tyler Wingo, that’s a good start. Now let’s go to my car and...” She glanced behind him but had no time to say anything.

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Sean grabbed Tyler from behind, knocked the pistol from his grip, kicked it away, and twirled him around.

Staggered, Tyler started to run off again, but Sean clamped a hand around his wrist. At six-two and over two hundred pounds, he had the size to keep the kid from going anywhere.

“Let me go!” yelled Tyler.

“Sean, it’s okay,” said Michelle. “Let him go.”

Sean reluctantly released his grip, then bent down and picked up the gun. He looked at it. “What the hell is this?”

“A German Mauser,” said Tyler, scowling up at him.

“Without a trigger,” pointed out Michelle. “Saw that in the headlights. Makes it a little hard to use as a weapon unless you throw it at somebody.”

“Right,” said Sean.

“Tyler was just going to tell me where he lives so we can drive him there,” said Michelle.

“Tyler?” said Sean.

“Tyler Wingo,” said Tyler sulkily. “And you better not have damaged my dad’s gun. It’s a collectible.”

Sean slipped the gun into his waistband. “Which made it pretty dumb to run around in the rain with it,” he pointed out.

Tyler looked at Michelle. “Can you just give me a lift home?”

“Yes,” she said. “And maybe on the way you can tell us what happened.”

“I already told you, there’s nothing you can do.”

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“You’re right, there is absolutely nothing we can do if you don’t tell us anything,” replied Michelle.

“Can we go get in the truck?” said Sean. “Or the only place we’ll be going is a hospital where they can treat us for pneumonia. Unless the lightning kills us first,” he added as another bolt precipitated a deafening crack of thunder.

They got back to the Land Cruiser where Sean had parked it off the road. There were some blankets in the back cargo area. Michelle grabbed three of these and handed one to Tyler, who draped it around his shoulders. She handed another to Sean and wrapped the last around herself.

“Thanks,” Tyler mumbled.

He climbed into the back while Michelle sat next to him. Sean drove.

“Where to?” he asked.

Tyler told him.

“Directions from here?” said Sean. “I’m not familiar with this area.”

Tyler gave him turn-by-turn directions until he hung a left down a street where there were a few older homes located at the end of a cul-de-sac.

“Which house?” asked Sean.

Tyler pointed to one on the right. It was ablaze in light.

Michelle and Sean exchanged a glance. Parked in the driveway of the house was a dull green Ford with U.S. Army plates. As they turned into the drive a

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woman and two uniformed Army officers came outside on the covered porch.

“Why are they here?” she asked Tyler.

“To tell me my dad was killed in Afghanistan,” said Tyler.