

“*Mom!*” Levi called, as the front door slammed and two sets of young feet stomped across the linoleum floor.

“In my bedroom, Levi,” she replied, without looking up from her packing. She closed the suitcase and laid it on the pile at the side of the dresser, then moved to the bathroom to see what was left.

“Mom!” Levi said from the bathroom doorway, causing Brienne to look up and see the reflections of her twins’ faces in the mirror. Levi and Rebekah were thirteen, with Bekka about two inches taller than Levi, a result of her having started puberty. “Nick’s family just left. Is it time for us to go, too?”

“Will you two take these suitcases, and the ones from your bedrooms, down to the front door? Then your dad can load them in the trailer when he gets here.”

Bekka, named after her aunt, was calm and deliberate, in contrast to her younger brother’s impulsiveness. When Levi turned and hurried to the stack of luggage, Bekka stayed at the door, looking at her mom.

“Are we going to die?” she asked. Her mother stopped, the bottle of lotion in her hand halfway to the bag she was filling with cosmetics.

“No, dear,” she replied with a forced smile, trying to hide her own fear. “As soon as your dad arrives, we’re leaving, and we’ll be far away before the deadline.”

“The news said all the roads are bottlenecked, because everyone waited too long before they decided to leave.”

Bri went to her daughter, smiling reassuringly, and bent over slightly, so their faces were on the same level. *She’s getting so tall*, Bri thought. *She’ll be a woman soon.*

“We’ll be fine,” she said, putting an arm around Bekka’s shoulders.

“Bekka, come and help,” Levi called from the hallway. “I’m on my second load already, and you haven’t done anything yet.”

“Com-*ming*,” Bekka said, rolling her eyes. Bri patted her shoulder as she backed away and turned toward the bedroom door.

“Dad’s here,” Levi called up the stairs a few minutes later.

Bri hurried down the stairs and met her husband as he was entering the house. After a quick hug and kiss, she backed up and looked into his tired eyes.

“You’re late, Brady,” she said, worriedly. “What happened?”

“Traffic,” he said. “Drivers are ignoring traffic signals and blocking intersections. The police are trying to direct traffic at the major intersections, but everyone’s just ignoring them. And what are they going to do? They’re not going to hold up traffic by taking the time to write a ticket.”

“Okay, well, we’re packed and ready to go. You can check the bedroom while we start loading the trailer.”

“Forget the trailer. We’ll never get it through traffic. Put what you can in the car.”

“It won’t all fit in the car,” Bri complained.

“Then I’ll tie some to the ski rack. Or, we can have the twins sit on it.”

They loaded the car quickly and pulled into the street. Almost immediately, Bri discovered what Brady had meant. Trying to merge into traffic at Mt. Vernon Square, one impatient driver came within inches of hitting their car rather than let them in. When Brady hit his brakes to avoid a collision, several cars behind him started honking.

She noticed a policeman looking their way, but he seemed more concerned with keeping traffic moving than crossing through traffic to straighten out one driver. He even sent cars driving down the wrong side of the road, just to keep the stream of vehicles flowing, but it was still bumper-to-bumper.

While they inched forward, Bri couldn’t resist reminding Brady that they could have avoided this situation.

“I wish we’d accepted Terry’s offer to let us stay with them for a few days,” she said quietly.

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“We’ve been over this,” Brady said through clenched teeth. “My workload was too heavy to take the time off.”

“You know that was only an excuse. You just didn’t want to accept the possibility that Terry and his friends knew something you didn’t.”

“They only *suspected* the terrorists had a bomb. They believed what that idiot, President McCormick, told the UN, then tried to convince you that they were right.” Brady’s comment attracted the attention of the twins.

“Were they right, Dad?” Levi asked. “Do the terrorists have a bomb?”

“We don’t know, son, but the president’s decision to evacuate the city created this traffic nightmare.”

“So, they *might* have a bomb. Then, why did we wait so long to leave? They closed the schools right after the president threatened Russia at the UN, and the government’s been bussing people out of the city ever since.”

Brady made eye contact with his wife before answering, wondering if she had prompted him to say that.

“There’s no proof that they have a bomb, Levi, and I had a lot of work. You can see that a lot of other people believed the same way we did.”

“The same way *you* did,” Bri corrected quietly, so that only Brady could hear her bitter rebuttal. “Well, we’re about to find out.”

The twins played on their tablets while Brady and Bri listened to the radio, which played quietly in the background, giving them reports of traffic jams for miles on every road out of the city. Each time they were about to merge onto a new street, Brady would claim that this was where traffic would start moving faster—then he’d get quiet again, as they continued to creep along.

“A snail could move faster than this,” he finally complained, knowing his comment gave Bri one more opportunity to accuse him, and fully expecting it.

“Where are we going?” Bekka asked. “Mom?” she added when neither parent answered.

“First objective is to get at least twenty miles away from the National Mall,” Bri finally said. “We’re almost across the city. Once we cross the Potomac River, we’ll be able to get on the Interstate, then traffic should move faster. We’ll figure out where to go... after that. Probably toward the southwest.”

When they merged onto the Potomac Highway, traffic did, in fact, move faster. *Finally*, Brady thought. Then they were over the river and onto the Interstate, where it accelerated quickly. He found himself releasing a breath he’d been holding, as he pressed down on the gas pedal to keep up with the cars ahead of them.

On the radio, the announcer said that military forces had been ordered to leave the downtown area.

“Dad!” Levi called excitedly. “There’s a helicopter. Look! Out your window.”

Brady took a quick look and confirmed that a military helicopter appeared to be leaving the downtown area, flying parallel to them into Virginia at high speed. He wished they were moving that fast.

“Mom,” Bekka said, her fear evident in her voice, “It’s ten minutes to three. Have we gone far enough?”

“We’re fine, dear,” Bri said.

Brady looked at her out of the corner of his eye and noticed her concerned expression. They hadn’t gone nearly far enough to avoid damage from a nuclear explosion—if there *was* an explosion. He clenched his jaw and thought furiously about how and where they could find shelter.

His anxiety level increased quickly as they continued for several more minutes at freeway speed. He realized how close they were to the deadline, and that if he was wrong, if there really was a bomb, he had put his greatest treasure—his family—in deadly danger.

He wondered why he had let his pride get in the way. They could have taken that trip to Utah to be with Bri’s family for a few days. His mind was reeling and he was losing hope, until their high-speed race to safety reminded him of a TV program he’d seen of storm chasers, who’d hidden under an overpass to avoid the worst of a tornado as it passed overhead. Was it possible that they could do the same thing? He realized that the thought had been prompted by a highway sign that identified an off-ramp just ahead. He could see that there was little cross-traffic passing under the freeway on the two-lane road. He checked his side-view mirror and plunged into the right-hand lane, cutting off a car that was in his blind spot and continued onto the off-ramp. At the bottom of the ramp, he cut through the lighter traffic, not bothering to use a turn signal, and slammed on his brakes, stopping on the side of the road under the bridge.

“Everyone, get down,” he said, “and cover your head.” Bri lay down across the center console without removing her seatbelt, then Brady threw himself on top of her, just as the earth shook beneath their feet.

“Dad!” Levi said.

“Get down! Stay down until I tell you to get up!”

It was as if the world around them had come to life, as if a giant had picked up everything in its path and thrown it at them—trees, fences, chunks of houses and garages, even cars filled

with people crushed almost beyond recognition—flew past them, and into them, while the wind shrieked.

The ground bucked, picking up their car and throwing it against the concrete underside of the bridge, smashing it and dropping it back into the jumble of rubble. The last thing Brady remembered was the car being thrown backward and smashed by heavy objects, then rolling, over and over.

Two thousand miles away, in a hidden bunker near Logan, Utah, Terry Stephens thought about his sister, Bri, and prayed that she and her family had gotten away in time.