



I turned up the stereo, smiling at how the static and pop of the old record player accentuated Hank Williams' voice. I browsed the liquor cabinet, settling on an interesting Scotch, but as I reached for a glass, a knock sounded at the front door. I grimaced, remembering the family that had stopped by a year before thinking a few carols would give me the Christmas spirit I needed. The only thing in my cabin that hinted at the holidays was the package a special courier had delivered the day before. It sat untouched by the door, with its paper whiter than the snow drifting outside and blood red ribbon tied in a tidy bow. I couldn't remember the last time there'd been a present in the cabin; holidays were always more of Evie's thing.

The knock repeated, drawing me out of my thoughts, and I headed to the door, prepared to let whoever was there know that I was perfectly fine on my own and that the mountain had been better before AirBnB came along and invited strangers to come and go from what would otherwise be vacant properties.

To my surprise, my neighbor Joe stood on the front porch. He wore a pair of mustard-colored Carhartt coveralls and had a black beanie snug around his head, almost covering his eyes. He shouldered a pack and carried a heavy-duty Maglite in his hand.

“Hey, Joe,” I said, giving him my version of a neighborly nod.

“Tom, I could use some help,” he said, his voice full of gravel. Joe always got straight to business, and I liked that about him. “A couple of kids have gone missing.”

“Anyone we know?” I asked, thinking about our neighbors. I didn’t think any of them had kids at home, but at that time of year, there could be grandkids.

“Naw,” he said. “Vacationers staying at the Atkins’ place. You know it?”

I nodded. The Atkins had lived on the mountain before Evie and I moved in. When Loraine died, Chuck lived alone for a while before moving in with a son. Last I heard, he was in an assisted living place somewhere in Florida, and his son had started renting out the cabin.

“Family of five staying there for the holidays,” Joe went on. “Mother, father, three boys. The two younger boys were playing hide and seek with their older brother, and no one can find them. The family’s worried.”

I smirked. “Maybe they’re just good at hiding.”

“It’s been an hour and a half, Tom,” Joe said. I looked past him at the rugged landscape. Darkness came early at that time of year and brought myriad dangers, even for an experienced mountaineer. It was no place for kids to be alone. With the weather, they stood a good chance of freezing to death before falling into a ravine or encountering any wildlife.

I left the door open while I turned off the stereo and gathered my things. “How old are the kids?” I asked as I rummaged through the closet. I selected a wool trench coat with my warmest gloves and a wool beanie.

“Oldest is 15,” Joe said. “The two missing boys are 12 and 9.”

I left him on the porch and found my flashlight, similar to Joe’s, in the kitchen. I slipped it into a messenger bag and grabbed a headlamp, too. I found a bag of hand warmers in a drawer and shoved it into the bag, along with a couple of granola bars. Finally, I checked my coffee carafe. It

was still warm, so I filled a thermos, and joined Joe. He pointed to the road, where his wife, Sandra, waited in their SUV.

“I thought we could follow a game trail from here up to the Atkins’ place,” Joe said. “See if we see or hear anything. Sandra’s going to drive the road, and she’ll run radio comms for us.” He approached the truck and took a chunky device from her and thrust it at me.

“Hey, Tom,” Sandra said in her smoker’s voice. “I’ll be on channel 3.1.”

I nodded and dialed in before shoving the radio into my coat pocket. Joe pulled a shotgun from the truck bed. Smart move. We were unlikely to come across a bear at that time of year, but other animals could pose a threat.

Joe bid his wife goodbye and we stomped through the snow around my cabin and into the woods. The pines gave us some protection from the snow and wind. Joe gestured at the game trail he wanted to follow.

“They should get search and rescue out here,” I said.

“They’re trying,” Joe said. “Christmas Eve, so it’s tough to find a crew of volunteers who are in town and sober. Sheriff’s got a skeleton crew out looking, and he asked me if I could help. Best bet is the boys show up back at the cabin with a bit of a chill and wondering what all the fuss is about.”

We walked on. The light faded fast, especially in the trees, and I switched on my headlamp.

“Noah,” Joe called in a strong voice. “Caden. We’ve come to help you.”

“I bet the parents are frantic,” I said. “But they should know better than to let their kids hide in unfamiliar woods in the winter.”

“Most people don’t understand how easy it is to take a wrong turn up here,” Joe said. “I’m guessing the older brother isn’t in great shape right now. Probably blames himself, but they’re all just kids having fun. Freak things happen.”

We continued walking, our boots crunching on the frozen ground. I thought about the oldest brother and freak accidents, and, inevitably, my mind turned to the white package with the

red bow sitting by my door. The tag just said, “To Tom,” with no mention of who it was from, but I knew the blocky letters as if the handwriting had been my own. It looked like he’d held the pen tight in his fist, like he was still writing with a fat crayon in an elementary school tablet.

“Noah, Caden,” I called out, mostly to pull myself back into the moment and focus on the problem at hand. The cold had already seeped into my gloves and boots, and I took a swig of coffee, relishing the warmth as it spread to my extremities. Hypothermia and frostbite were real concerns if the boys had been out in the elements for as long as Joe said.

We came to a clearing where the slope flattened. A creek bubbled nearby; it would be frozen in another month. A flash of movement to my right grabbed my attention, and I turned toward it.

My heart pounded. It had been too fast to be a human. Too graceful. I squinted into the tree line, tapping Joe on the arm. We hadn’t had a mountain lion sighting in ages, but we were far from the beaten path now, and I knew they were out there.

I let out my breath and chuckled. “Just a deer,” I said, pointing. A doe nibbled from a tree before bounding off.

I surveyed the area again. Our best course was to go west, to our left, and follow the creek. There was a shorter route in the direction the deer had gone, but it looked steeper and the foliage denser. The boys may have hidden among the trees, but they would have been drawn to a more open area where they could see further. I started in that direction; Joe followed, calling out the boys’ names again.

“It’s a long shot we’ll find them,” I said as we trudged on. “We need a full crew here, so we can run lines and cover the whole territory.”

“No disagreement here,” Joe said. “Boys could freeze to death by then. We’re out here to facilitate a Christmas miracle.” I snorted. “What?”

“Not a big believer in miracles,” I said. “Christmas or otherwise.”

“Well, all I know is if it were my family, I’d want people out here looking, no matter how small the chance they’d find them.”

I continued on in silence. He made a fair point, but he'd only lived on the mountain for five years. He didn't know my story.

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I pulled up to our cabin seven years earlier, fresh off helping a friend a couple towns over fix the heater in his truck. I parked next to Evie's SUV and puzzled over the cabin being dark inside. Opening the front door, I called out her name, checking our bedroom, the kitchen, and the living room. When she didn't materialize, I checked the kitchen again to see if she'd left a note. It didn't make sense that she'd be gone with her car still out front.

The phone rang, startling me in the silence. I snatched the handset from the cradle. I heard the words, but I couldn't process them. Something about my brother, my wife, a deer, the hospital, and critical condition. The last words registered, and I rushed back to my truck, not bothering to put on my coat.

I took the road as fast as the tight turns and freezing rain would allow. Flashing lights halfway down the mountain slowed my progress. I pulled as far left as I could and saw an SUV wrapped around a tree. A police officer and tow truck driver held an animated conversation, trying to figure out the best way to extract the vehicle from the forest.

I blew out a breath, tightened my grip on the wheel, and continued down the slope. When I reached the bottom and turned onto the paved road leading into town, I floored the accelerator, weaving past cars all the way to the hospital.

A police officer met me at the door and explained what had happened as we rushed to Evie's room. Evie and my brother, Chad, planned a surprise visit for the holidays. While I was off working on the truck, Chad had arrived, and he and Evie went into town to buy steaks for dinner. Chad drove; on the way back, a deer rushed into the road. Chad swerved to avoid it, but the tires spun out on the slick gravel, and he flew off the road, shearing off saplings until an ancient oak stopped his momentum.

“Another driver about a hundred yards behind them said they were going way too fast for the road and conditions,” the officer said. That confirmed my brother had been driving. He liked living on the edge, regardless of the consequences.

The elevator dinged, and I started toward Evie’s room. A doctor exited the room as I arrived and asked if I was the husband. He led me down the hall to an empty room.

“Mr. Gathers,” he said, taking off his glasses. “The car wrapped around the tree trunk on Evie’s side. She sustained numerous complex injuries, both internal and external. We did everything we could.” I knew what his next words would be; he seemed not to want to say them, but I couldn’t believe the outcome if I didn’t hear them.

“Go on,” I said, my voice faint.

“Evie didn’t pull through,” he said. More words followed, but I couldn’t process them. A few minutes later, I stood next to my wife, lying dead in a hospital bed, and kissed her cheek for the last time.

An hour after that, I stood at the foot of my brother’s bed. He looked at me with red eyes sunken into his bruised and swollen face. “They told me about Evie,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

I looked above his head at the bank of monitors that constantly beeped and spit out numbers. “Did you leave anything at the cabin?” I glanced back down at him, and he slowly nodded. “I’ll have someone send them over.”

“I thought I’d come back with you,” he said. “Stay at least until the funeral. Help you out as much as I can.”

I turned toward the door. “I’ll have someone bring your things.”

*

The radio squawked from my pocket, bringing me back to the present. “Tom, Joe, you there?”

“We’re both here, Sandra,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Just checking in to see how you’re doing.”

“We’re cold,” I said. “No sign of the boys yet. We should reach the Atkins’ place in another twenty minutes or so.”

“Sounds good,” Sandra answered. “One of the deputies took a spill and twisted a knee and an ankle. Sounds pretty bad. The sheriff and other volunteers are packing him up for the ER. You two are the only searchers left, but there’s a helicopter coming soon.”

I bid her goodbye and looked at Joe. “Helicopter won’t help much if they’re in the trees.”

“Better than nothing,” Joe answered, and we walked on.

A few minutes later, I looked over my shoulder to see I was walking alone. Joe had stopped several yards back. “I thought this place was abandoned,” he said.

I stood next to him, and he pointed through the evergreens. On the other side of the trees, the outline of a cabin stood out against the gray twilight. A sliver of light appeared at the edge of a window. I took advantage of the break to take another drink of coffee, the bitter aroma a stark contrast to the pines.

“Could be a squatter,” I said. “I haven’t heard of anyone moving in here. Maybe we should call this in.”

Joe shook his head. “You heard Sandy. Sheriff’s taking his guy to the hospital. Let’s go check this out and see if anyone’s actually there. Give the sheriff all the information we can.”

He led the way, and I followed, pushing branches aside and keeping my eyes on the cabin. Joe held his hand up for us to stop as we neared the building. It was getting hard to see in the light, but it looked like someone had hung up black garbage bags inside the window. The sliver of light we saw peeked from a seam between two bags.

“What’s the play?” Joe whispered. “Go up and knock on the door?”

“Let’s take a look around first. Whoever is in there doesn’t want us to see them.”

We approached the cabin, the crunch of the snow under our feet spoiling our attempts to remain quiet. We reached the back of the structure. I paused next to a window and could see the wrinkle of the plastic bag hung over it. I listened but did not hear any sounds coming from inside.

I turned to see Joe had proceeded around the corner. I hurried after him. I turned the corner as a tall figure swung a broom handle at Joe. It caught him in the mouth, and his head snapped back. I rushed at his attacker, who threw the handle to the ground. I heard an electrical zapping and a shockwave of current rushed through my body. I barely registered the taser in the man's hand as I crumpled to the ground. He kicked my temple with his boot, and my world went dark.

I heard crying as I came to. I opened my eyes and strained to see through the gauzy haze of my vision returning. I tried to stand but couldn't. As my head cleared, I saw Joe across the room in a metal folding chair. A strip of duct tape covered his mouth. His legs were taped to the chair, and duct tape secured his hands behind his back. The attacker had bound me in similar fashion.

Above us, a battery-powered camping lantern hung from a hook in the ceiling. It cast a sickly glow throughout the room. I caught Joe's eye again, and he gave a sideways glance. I followed it and found the source of the crying.

Two boys huddled against a wall. Neither was in restraints. They were both shirtless. The smaller one shivered and cried, tears streaming down his cheeks. The older boy sat next to him, motionless, his face blank. I wondered if he had gone catatonic.

I felt the winter chill inside the unheated cabin. I spotted a pile of coats by the front door. A gangly man leaned against the wall opposite the boys, spindly arms folded over his chest. He stared at me with sunken eyes, a crazed grin on his face. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down in his throat. He flicked his tongue across his lips, and his eyes danced from side to side.

The kitchen was to his left, and he took three long strides into it. He picked up a leather sheath and withdrew a hunting knife. He held it up and turned it slowly, the lantern's light bouncing off it. He flicked out his tongue again and ran the flat side of the knife along it, the blade coming dangerously close to his lips.

He lowered the knife and glared at each of us. "We're about to have some fun," he said, his voice raspy. "We'll go youngest to oldest. I'll have to guess which one of you is the oldest." He sneered at Joe and me.

He beckoned toward the smaller of the boys, who shrank further against the wall. The man crossed the room, grabbed the boy by the elbow, and hauled him to his feet. The man flung the boy across the room, toward the kitchen, following closely behind him.

The man held the knife up again, turning it side to side. Bile rose in my throat, and I strained against the duct tape. I tried once again to stand, but it was useless with the restraints. I planted my right foot firmly and used it as a pivot, lifting my left foot an inch off the ground and swinging it forward as far as I could. I switched feet and repeated the process, walking my way toward the man. It would take half an hour at that pace.

The man laughed at my feebleness before turning his attention back to the young boy, whose shoulders shook with silent sobs. The man looked him up and down before raising his knife arm.

“Noah,” shouted the other boy, snapping out of his trance. He rushed at the man, who turned and swatted him away. The older boy, Caden, slid backward before regaining his balance. He lunged at the man once again.

I put both feet on the ground and pushed myself forward in a frog hop, desperate to get to our captor. The man moved the knife to his left hand and delivered a backhand to Caden with his right. The sound of flesh striking flesh filled the cabin, and Caden fell to the floor in a heap, clutching his chest and struggling to regain his wind.

Across the room, Joe mimicked my actions and frog-hopped toward the man. The man rushed at me, planted his boot on my shoulder, and knocked me onto my back with a vicious kick. He still clutched the knife in his left hand as he bounded across the room and knocked Joe on his back, too.

I tried to right myself, but there was no hope of getting back up while I was bound that way. The man started back toward Noah, the younger boy. Before he arrived, Noah scampered out of his reach. The man laughed. “Now we’re getting some sport,” he said. He transferred the knife back to his right hand and ran after Noah.

Noah tried rushing from corner to corner, but the small cabin didn't offer any places to hide. I willed him to come toward me, to put me in between him and his attacker, but the boy stuck to the perimeter. The man caught him and pinned him to the wall with his left forearm shoved against Noah's throat.

I rolled toward them, using my shoulders to create rotation. The chair legs thumped against the sagging floorboards. There was no way I could reach them in time, but I took a deep breath, summoned my will, and flipped again.

The man glanced at me, the sneer returning to his face, before putting all his attention on Noah. He lifted the knife, holding it in an overhand grip. He brought the knife down in a vicious arc aimed at Noah.

Caden bellowed an unintelligible war cry, finding his feet again. He grabbed the man's arm, interrupting his downward motion, and screamed, "That's my brother."

The man turned and slashed with the knife. A crimson line blossomed across Caden's pale cheek. He lunged at the man again, and the man stabbed at him. Caden hopped out of the way, and the man took a large step and thrust the knife forward, the blade sinking into the boy's shoulder. Caden cried out in pain.

Whether intentionally or not, Caden had drawn the man close to me. As our attacker looked for Noah once more, I focused my energy into my left shoulder and flipped myself toward him.

The chair collided with the man's knees and brought him to the ground in a heap. The knife clattered across the floor. I was now on my knees. I didn't have mobility, but I had established leverage. The man turned toward me as he sat up. I cut off his movement with a head butt, driving my forehead into his face.

His nose crumpled with a sickening crunch, and he thudded to the floor. I rolled myself on top of him to keep him from going anywhere as I surveyed the room.

Noah now had the knife and sawed at the tape around Joe's wrists. Once his hands were free, Joe grabbed the weapon and sliced through the tape around each foot. He ripped the tape from his mouth and handed the knife back to Noah. "Cut Tom free." He pointed at me.

While Noah worked on my bonds, Joe rushed outside. He came back seconds later with his backpack, throwing aside items until he found his first aid kit. By the time Noah had me free, Joe had bandaged Caden's shoulder and face. He held a pad of gauze against the shoulder dressing.

"I don't think it's serious, but we need to get him to the hospital," he said.

I nodded, eyes darting around the room. I spotted the radio on a kitchen counter, next to the roll of duct tape.

"Sandra, this is Tom. Come in," I panted. I grabbed the tape, and while I waited for her response, I rolled our captor to his stomach and taped his wrists together behind his back.

"Tom, what do you need? Everything okay?"

"Here, tape his ankles together," I told Noah, shoving the roll at him. I pushed the talk button on the radio, "We have the boys, but one's been injured. We need an ambulance and the sheriff here ASAP." I explained our position as best as I could. While we talked, I ran around the cabin, yanking the garbage bags from the windows. "We'll be lit up," I said.

I put the radio down and turned to see Noah curl up against his brother's side. He hadn't stopped crying since I'd been awake. Caden wrapped his good arm around the younger boy. "It's okay now," he said.

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A week later, I bid Joe and Sandra farewell at the front door of their cabin. "You sure you don't want to stay another couple hours?" Sandra asked.

"I'm too old for that," I said. "I can welcome the new year in the morning." I shook Joe's hand and gave Sandra a hug before making the short drive to my place. Despite what I told them, I didn't plan to go to bed right away. I put a Jimmy Buffett record on and poured myself a drink.

As I listened to the familiar lyrics, I thought about the past week. Our attacker's name was Justin Finley; he lived about an hour away. The police found a diary in his apartment with records of kids he'd taken, tortured, and killed, a half dozen known victims. I had no doubt that he would have added four to his tally that night, if Caden hadn't acted when he did.

I thought about Caden and Noah, about Caden's arm wrapped around his younger brother and how they didn't let go of each other, even in the ambulance. I thought about the two of them in the same hospital room and the nurses finally giving up on keeping Noah from Caden's bed.

I thought about meeting their older brother, Beau, at the hospital. He apologized nonstop and thanked me and Joe for saving his brothers, despite our assurances that his brothers held their own.

"It's okay, Beau," Caden told him. "It wasn't your fault."

Beau wiped his nose with his sleeve and said, "I should have stayed with you."

Noah hugged him. With his arms wrapped around the oldest boy's waist, he said, "We forgive you." Silence had descended on the room with nothing more to say as Beau returned his brother's hug.

The record ended, and I turned the television on. They were replaying the Times Square celebration, synchronized for the ball drop to happen as the new year began in our time zone. I brought the Christmas present into the living room, touching it for the first time since it had been delivered more than a week earlier.

As the crowd counted down toward zero, I thought about brothers, forgiveness, old years dying, and new years being born. With a trembling hand, I tugged on the crimson ribbon.

I found a plane ticket inside the box, a flight booked for the next day. I had rebuffed any gesture of kindness from Chad for more than seven years. He still wanted to see me.

I poured another drink and put another record on. With the volume up, I wandered to my bedroom, found a suitcase, and started packing.

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