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“Yeah, Dad. I’m sure.” John K. checked the wedge blocking the trailer’s front tire. “I’d much rather stay out here where I can keep an eye on the cabin. You work on getting the insurance guy out here so I can get back inside as soon as possible.”

“My wife keeps the fridge and the pantry stocked up pretty well.” Mac stepped out of the door of the compact camper trailer. “She even added an extra dozen eggs and a loaf of bread before I pulled out of the driveway. You should be okay for a few days.”

“More than okay.” John K. shook Mac’s weathered hand. “Thanks again. I’ll have to figure out a way to repay the two of you after our place is livable again.”

“That’s what neighbors do around here. Guess I’d better get back and make sure everything at home is ready. That sky is looking kinda mean.” Mac opened the door of his massive pickup truck. “See you, Davis, O.D. Tell Felicia we’re still praying for Cody.” He closed the driver’s door and started the

engine in one quick motion. Gravel crunched as he turned around to head toward the highway.

“You’d best head home too, Dad. Mom will be standing on her ear.” John K. waved at Mac.

The gray clouds overhead grew darker and began to boil. There hadn’t been any tornado warnings issued, but at the very least, it looked like they were in for quite a bit of wind and rain.

“You’re right, son.” Dad removed his baseball cap and ran his gloved fingers through his sandy hair. “I think I heard the first clap of thunder a minute ago. We could use a little rain, but this may be more than that.”

“Grandpa Dee would say we’re in for a doozy!” John K. smiled. They all looked up to that old man. None of them were ready for the adjustment that would come when their patriarch moved from the local nursing home to heaven. “O.D., this will be a test of that new roof of yours.”

“Right. I hope we don’t have any leaks. I don’t think buckets in the floor would match Hope’s décor very well.” O.D. laughed.

“Okay, son. You just keep your head where your feet are during all this. I need to get home before your mom decides to hunker down with Cody at the hospital. She needs to trust those nurses a little more.” Dad opened the door of his truck. “Use the storm cellar if you need to.”

John K. glanced at the heavy metal door marking the shelter half buried behind the cabin. They’d only had to use the tiny room covered in dirt and rocks once or twice. Dad made sure it was free of dampness and snakes but just thinking about spending more than a minute or two inside made him claustrophobic. Maybe it wouldn’t come to that.

“Yeah. You can always use the ‘fraidy hole’” O.D. waved at him from his own black behemoth of a truck. “Should be fun!”

“You’re a barrel of laughs. Just worry about yourself, Squirt.” He waved at his brother, who tapped on his phone. O.D. should remember how poor the signal was up here. But, after all, it had been over an hour since he’d talked to Hope. Poor guy.

With only his undriveable pickup left in the yard, John K. realized how stranded he was out here. He heaved a huge sigh and closed his eyes. *Thanks, God. No. I mean it. I can use some quiet after all of this. Being alone is the whole idea. I know You have got this. Just help me to remember that.* His prayers hardly ever ended with *Amen*. Best to keep the conversation going.

The poor truck. He walked closer hoping to get to the driver’s side door under the trunk of the massive pine tree. The windshield was shattered, and the roof of the cab was mostly caved in. Maybe he could throw a tarp over it to keep the rain from ruining that new upholstery he had just paid for. There were a couple of large tarps in the little storage building out behind the cabin. The key to that shed was where? On his key ring, in the ignition of the truck. Okay, then.

Squatting to just the right position to open the door, he pushed aside wet, prickly pine branches. With his right hand, he found the keys and pulled them to him. Would the claims adjuster come out here during this storm? Fixing the cabin could wait, but the truck felt like his only lifeline right now.

He jogged to the shed, jumping over pieces of pine trees along the way. He laughed at the irony of this situation. Even before the storm they had trees down. Who knew a water heater explosion could do so much damage? His life was nothing if not interesting.

As he secured the tarp over the cab of the truck, the wind picked up, and howled through the branches of the remaining trees over his head. This was probably just so much busy work, but it would occupy him for a little bit. Soon, there would be

no venturing out of the little camper. He tied a knot around the door handle and pulled the rope taut. Thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed in the north. Grandpa Dee's doozy of a storm was here.

Inside the camper, the walls threatened to close in. Rain pelted the roof and the wind howled. He located the remote control for the television above the refrigerator. Maybe he could find something mindless to watch, at least until the power went out.

Seated on the cushioned bench at the dining table, his hands trembled. What a day. Being by himself was what he said he wanted. But it might not be enjoyable for an extended time. He closed his eyes, remembering that long day on the other side of the world. After the explosion he'd run as far as his feet would carry him. Then the awful quiet set in. That afternoon he'd ended up alone too. Tonight, he planned to keep his eyes open as long as possible, to remind himself that he was in a much better spot.

Channels changed idly, moving quickly past the weather forecasts that seemed to dominate everyone's mind. There was nothing else he could do to prepare right now. No use being reminded how bad things might be.

Past the tiny bathroom with its sit-down shower and a passable commode was a bed covered with a cheery comforter, and even a throw pillow or two. Mac was lucky to have a woman's influence in his life. He'd like to meet Mrs. Mac some time. Funny how just when he was enjoying being by himself, he began to appreciate having someone else around.

The tiny closet in the bedroom was empty, except for the clothes O.D. brought. His jogging shorts and T-shirts were in the cabin. And his army boots. With all the rain coming, these shoes O.D. brought wouldn't be much help. No telling what

was left of his good running shoes since they had been in the mud room before the explosion.

Mac had warned him not to go inside the damaged cabin. Probably out of an abundance of caution. After his time in the army, he was definitely a rule-follower, but he didn't buy in to the over-abundance theories. The rain had slacked off a bit. If he climbed in the window of the second bedroom, he could stuff some clothes into his backpack and come back before the real storm started. It was always good to have a mission.

Random branches from the fallen pine trees threatened to trip him as he bounded past his truck, rounded the corner of the damaged porch and approached the back of the house. Water blew off the roof as he stopped to survey the situation. That window was higher than he remembered. Luckily, he knew it wasn't locked, because he had opened it just last night to get some fresh air before he went to sleep. May was one of the few months when humidity levels were not unbearable. Except during these blow-up storms.

He jogged to the shed behind the house and found a home-made wooden bench the previous owners had left. The perfect height for a boost into the window.

A long, slow rumble rattled above him, and the tip-tops of the pines swayed as the wind increased. A damp breeze brushed his cheek. *Thanks, God. No need to make this easy.*

He picked up the wooden bench and took three long strides to the side of the house, clambering up to raise the window. He propped both hands on the sill and hoisted himself in and through, landing on the floor with a thump.

It would be tempting to stay inside during the storm. But what if Mac came back by to check on him? It would be dark and drafty in here. Just outside the bedroom door, most of the roof was gone. Okay, back to the camper.

With rolled up socks, some boxers and T-shirts stuffed into

his backpack, he tied the laces of his army boots together and draped them over his shoulders. On his way back to the window, he picked up his Bible off the nightstand. Should he venture to the bathroom for his shaving cream? A bang from the direction of the porch jolted him. Another pine branch falling? No use worrying about shaving. He'd just find out how fast his beard grew.

He shoved the backpack through the window where it thudded to the muddy ground. As he backed out, his foot found the security of the wooden bench. Rain pelted his head as he picked up his backpack, readjusted his boots and made a beeline for the camper. Time to hunker down.

Inside, the camper rocked with the steadily increasing winds. He located a canister of coffee in an overhead cabinet and grabbed the old-school aluminum coffee pot on the stove burner. Exactly what they used when hunting. He laughed to think of some of his friends who thought coffee was always made one cup at a time by a barista.

Ding. A notification from his phone surprised him. He leaned back against the kitchen sink to read a string of messages that had just arrived.

Hope you're staying dry.

That was Mom.

If you see this, let us know you're okay.

Dad chimed in.

Checked on Grandpa Dee and Cody. They both have generators if the power goes out. Now I'm holed up above the garage.

O.D. knew he would want to know about their favorite old timer and their little brother.

John K. typed a quick text to all three.

Still have power here. Plugging phone in to save battery.

No matter what time of year, they always prepared for power outages. Being isolated from city living had its pluses and minuses.

Hail pinged on the metal roof of the camper. The howling winds resumed. He dropped into the chair that must be Mac's and reached for the remote control. A certain smiling blonde crossed his mind. Nice to know Faith Caldwell had cared enough to want to know how he was earlier. He hoped she and Hope were safe at home by now.

Closing his eyes, he sighed. He'd always functioned better with a goal of some kind. For now, fixing up the truck and then the house would occupy him. But then, what?

At least O.D. was the one helping Dad with the family's truck dealership. That was too much project management. Better to be the guy building fences on the ranch than the one making sure the workers had enough wire and posts to finish the job.

So, ranch work? Maybe. But he wanted to make a difference for people, not just cattle and horses, or even pickup trucks. That's why he'd come out here. To get ideas to the surface and see where his life would lead. Before the water heater launched itself into space, he had been enjoying this new life. *Okay, God, a pretty extreme way to get my attention. And this wind storm? Maybe a little overdramatic.*

A huge crack was followed by a rushing noise as the top of another tree crashed through other branches on the way to the ground. The mighty thump as the pine hit the ground jolted

John K. to his feet. His forehead broke out in tiny beads of sweat as he peered out the window. Was it safe to stay in this tiny mobile home?

He sat down on the couch, tightening the laces on his army boots. There would be more protection from the storm in the cellar behind the cabin. He grabbed Mac's oversized flashlight from the top of the refrigerator, shrugged into a hoodie and opened the door of the camper. A gust of wind threatened to yank the door out of his hand. What was that Dad said earlier about looking for excitement?