

Riley Brennan

"Hey! Daddy, stop that!" Riley Brennan giggled as her dad "accidentally" flicked his pressure washer nozzle towards her for a third time, catching her in the edge of the cold mist and further dampening her red tank top.

Luke smirked at the six year old and turned his nozzle back towards his sudsy F-150 pickup truck. But a few moments later, he fired a stream of water at the pavement right in front of her feet, splashing her Crocs and her bare legs.

"Eek!" Riley shrieked, giggling even harder as she dropped her sponge. She attempted to dodge her dad's sprayer, causing her twin pigtail braids to flap in the air when she whipped around scrambled for cover.

Just then, Luke's pocket started chirping, and he switched off the pressure washer. He took his new Nokia out and hit the call button.

"Luke Brennan speaking...oh, hey Nathaniel...oh, not much, Riley and I are giving the truck a bath. Although I keep threatening to give *her* a bath, too. Anyway, what can I do for you?...the bill for last week's log delivery?...you shouldn't have gone up to the office on a Saturday just to write me a check. I thought I said I'd bring the bill up to the logging camp on Monday...oh, well, if you won't be there, then okay. I actually don't have the bill written up yet, because I had been planning to bring it on Monday. But if you can stay on the line for a few minutes, I'll go in and get it figured up for you."

Luke cupped his hand over the phone speaker and called over to his daughter. "I'll be right back, Reece. Don't wander too far. And don't get too close to the fire."

"Okay, Daddy!" Riley dried her hands on her denim shorts.

As Mr. Brennan disappeared into the house, Riley wandered towards the brush pile her dad had lit before washing his truck. It was mostly burned down now, but there was still a steady flame. Riley was always fascinated by the orange and yellow arms leaping about, licking the wood and reducing it to charcoal and ash. But heeding her dad's warnings, she only got close enough to start feeling its warmth and no closer.

She sat on the grass and kicked her Crocs off, stretching her toes towards the slowly dying blaze. They were just about all the way dry, when the wind started picking up, and a sudden gust blew

sparks and embers towards the woods. Just like that, the fire began crackling back to life--outside the fire ring.

Riley jumped to her feet. "Daddy! Daddy! The woods are on fire!" she screamed, but her small voice failed to carry all the way to the house. She glanced around frantically, wondering whether she should take her eyes off the fire and run to the house to alert her parents, or try to do something about it herself.

Her eyes landed on the pressure washer. In a split second, her mind flashed back to when her dad had taken her to the fire station, where he volunteered whenever he wasn't delivering logs from Nate Parker's forestry camps to the sawmill in town.

Firefighters use water. Water that sprays really hard...just like Daddy's washer.

Mr. Brennan's pressure washer was, of course, much smaller than a fire hose. But this was an emergency, so it had to be better than nothing.

Riley barreled over to the machine and twisted the key like she had seen her dad do lots of times. The washer coughed, sputtered, and roared to life. She picked up the nozzle, dragged it towards the edge of the woods, and squeezed the trigger.

"This...is harder...than it...looks!" She gasped, fighting to keep the spray pointed at the blaze. Minutes felt like forever. The fire seemed to be spreading just as fast as she was putting it out.

Finally, it looked like she was starting to win. But her arms were starting to hurt, and her aim started to wander. Tears began trickling down her cheeks, the byproduct of the pain in her arms and her fear of the uncontrolled fire.

"I can't do it! I can't do it!"

"Riley! Hang on, I'm coming!" Luke rushed from the house and wrapped his daughter in his brawny arms. "I got you, baby girl. I got you."

Riley exhaled with relief as her daddy's big strong hands closed over hers, and in no time, the fire was out.

Luke killed the pressure washer, then crouched in front of Riley, examining her. "Are you okay, Reece?"

Riley nodded, wiping the saltwater trickles from her face. "U-huh. I...I think so."

"I am so sorry, baby. I should've taken my paperwork into the kitchen so I could keep an eye out the window. What happened?"

"A big wind came and blew sparks everywhere!" Riley waved her arms around. "I was really scared! I tried yelling for you, but I thought that the fire might grow too big if I ran to get you."

"What made you think to use the pressure washer?"

"I remembered when we went to the firehouse, and you showed me how the hoses worked. It was kinda fun, till my arms hurt."

"I thought I heard the pressure washer start up again, but I thought for sure I was imagining things, till I got off the phone and then I saw you out here. But that was a really smart idea. And brave. Your name, Riley, means 'courageous and brave'. I'd say it fits you just right. I am so proud of you, Reece." Luke wrapped the six year old in a bear hug.

"You know, now that you're an expert firefighter, I think I know some new things we can do together for fun. After we finish rinsing this pickup truck, that is."

"Like what, Daddy?"

Luke fired up the pressure washer. "Like something called 'kids, don't try this at home.'"

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### **Cassidy Perry, Part One**

"Fat Cat to northbound bobtail. That you, Clutch Cowboy?"

Miranda Perry unhooked her CB mic and keyed up. She always enjoyed crossing paths with the friendly old flatbed driver who hooked her up with her first contract.

"I should say negative," Miranda needled. "You know I stopped using that handle, ya big coot. Over."

"Ten-four, Ankle Biter," Fat Cat laughed. "How's my favorite future trucker? Out of school for a few months, I'd guess?"

"Oh yeah. She's got second grade in her back pocket, and we've been rolling through summer in Georgia Overdrive. Wait one, let me pass ya."

Miranda handed the mic off to her daughter. After having spent four years on the Kenworth T-600, nine-year-old Cassidy was well versed in trucker lingo and often played the part of CB operator for her mom.

“Good to hear from ya, Fat Cat! I thought I recognized that southbound rooster cruiser. You’ve been staying shiny side up?”

“You know it! I think my old cabover Bulldog has a few more hauls in her. Just picked up this skateboard in Kalispell, headed for Wyoming. How’s the road down the way?”

“I saw double nickels all the way to Missoula, but watch for bears in town. That was our last twenty, so conditions are unknown past there. Sorry I can’t help more, Fat Cat. How’s our side of the comedian look? We’re picking up a dry box in Whitefish.”

“Last known conditions, you can drop the hammer clear to Whitefish. Got plenty of bear bait today. On that note, Ima key down. Bout to hit a ten-one. Maybe I’ll see ya on the flipflop? Over.”

“We’ll holler if we eyeball you, Fat Cat. Thanks for the info, preeshaydit. Ankle Biter, going 10-7.”

Cassidy unbuckled so she could reach to hang the radio mic back up on the ceiling.

“So Mom, how far out are we now?”

“About an hour. As long as the road is still wide open like Fat Cat said it—“

The truck lurched and shuddered to a rapid halt in the middle of the lane, sending Cassidy slamming into the dashboard. Miranda stared at her gauges, unable to believe the needles in front of her eyes or the buzzer in her ears. Cassidy blinked and rubbed her forehead.

“Ow... That was horrible timing.”

“You okay, baby?”

“I think so...yeah... I’m lucky my head is so hard. What happened?”

“According to the gauges, we just lost all our air pressure. No air, the brakes lock. But how... Cass, if you’re sure you’re okay, could you please slide under the truck and see where the air is leaking? Be careful getting out. This road doesn’t look too busy, but watch for traffic.”

“Sure. Be right back.”

Cassidy reached under her seat for the big flashlight and clambered to the ground. She was barely gone thirty seconds before she clambered back up.

“Mom, there’s a big hole in the air tank. Looks kinda rusty inside.”

“Great, just what I needed. I’m seriously on the verge of swearing right now, if I thought it would help anything. Alright, see if you can find the hazard triangle. I’m going to call a wrecker. Thank goodness I hadn’t picked up a trailer yet.”

Before Miranda could key up, a blue strobe lit up her mirror and the radio crackled with an incoming transmission.

“Northbound Kenworth, this is Morgan Connolly, Skye County Sheriff. You look like you could use a hand. How copy?”

“10-2, Sheriff. Our air tank just ruptured, we’re going to need a 10-37.”

“Affirmative, driver. I already called it in. Closest wrecker is from Wagner Diesel Barn, up the road. Eta 20 mikes. You and yours sit tight in the rig till he comes, and I’ll stay on your back door, over.”

“Preeshaydit, Sheriff. Keyin’ down.”

“So I guess we aren’t getting that dry box today, huh, Mom?”

“I don’t know, baby. It depends how fast we can get fixed. We might be able to make it.”

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Cassidy Perry, Part Two

It was twenty-one minutes and forty-seven seconds, by Cassidy’s reckoning, when the bright orange Freightliner wrecker backed up to the disabled truck. Miranda climbed out of the cab to greet the driver, a tall, thin, middle-aged man with an equally tall and thin nose.

“Allan Philips,” he said, removing one of his leather gloves and offering his hand.

“Miranda Perry. Thanks for coming so quick.” She motioned to Cassidy to dismount from the truck and join her on the curb.

“Perry, eh? I guess you’re the owner?” Allan nodded to the ‘Perry Trucking’ logo blazed on the side of the black T-600.

“I am. And the only employee. It’s kinda a small company right now.”

Allan dropped his tow bar and positioned it under the semi's axle.

"I figured as much, seeing as how I've never heard of you before. Where's your headquarters?"

"You're attaching it to your wrecker right now. I mean, on the legal papers, my HQ is a Denver address. But it's just my mother's house. All the actual business happens from behind the wheel."

"You two get to be home very much?" He chained the tow bar down and raised the Kenworth off the ground."

"This *is* our home," Cassidy jumped in the conversation, "We have a double sleeper and Mom homeschools me on the road."

"Tough life, isn't it?"

Miranda shrugged. "We make do. Trucking is a job where I make more money by not having a house. No land tax, no mortgage, no utility bill—"

"No friends," Cassidy butted in. "Someday it would be nice to have some real, honest-to-goodness friends that aren't adults and also truck drivers."

"I know, baby," Miranda caressed her daughter's dark sandy-blond hair. "I get the same feeling sometimes. A real house, real friends, and enough truckers working for me that I can focus on managing, and we won't have to drive any more unless we want to. And we'll get there, someday. I promise."

Allan slammed the door on his toolbox.

"Chains on, air hooked up, I think she's ready to roll. Just gotta cage the brakes and we'll be done here. You can all wait in the wrecker if you want. Does your little lady need a hand climbing up?"

"No thank you," Cassidy retorted with a flick of her blond ponytail. "I've been mounting big rigs since I was five. I know what I'm doing."

Miranda watched as Cassidy mounted the back of the Freightliner's crew cab. She tilted her head to one side, intently studying the wrecker.

"Your truck...that's an Argosy Evolution, isn't it? I thought Freightliner stopped selling cabovers state-side a couple years back."

"They did. Actually, this was the last complete Argosy that they sold to a North American customer. And John Wagner, the guy that owns the Diesel Barn, ordered some major custom

work. Tandem steering axles, full crew cab, the long chassis for the wrecker bed. It was a serious upgrade for me. So, ready to get moving?”

“Hell yeah,” Miranda swung herself up the steps on the wrecker’s passenger side. Allan climbed in a moment later and reached for his radio.

“Base, this is Dragon Wagon four, package secured. I’m heading in, how copy?”

“Affirmative, Allan,” a disembodied voice replied. “See you when you get back. Base out.”

Allan changed channels.

“Morgan, Allan here. I’m rolling out now. Preeshayd the traffic assist, over.”

“Any time, Allan. I’ll see you around. Connolly out.”

Allan shifted into gear and the truck shuddered to a rolling start. Cassidy giggled from the backseat.

“I guess that’s why they’re called ‘freight-shakers’, huh, Mom?”

“I guess it is, Cassie... So Allan, what did you drive before this rig?”

“Peterbilt 378, triple rear axle. Wagner bought the beast new in ’89, so it had been around a while. Course, I didn’t start driving for John till around ’97, and he didn’t put me on the big truck till three years later. But six years on it, and I was thrilled when we sent it to retirement. The thing handled like an intoxicated rhino.”

“You’ve been towing for...eleven years then? At that rate, I’m surprised you don’t run your own operation.”

“Cause I only tow three months out of the year. I’m actually a grade school history teacher. This is my summer job.”

“Okay...that is a very unusual combination of careers.”

“That’s probably a fair assessment. You know, seeing your daughter traveling with you, brought back memories of running the wrecker with my boy, Danny.”

“He rode the wrecker with you?”

“Yeah. My wife died about five years ago, and at the time, Danny was only three years old. My daughter Aleisha was twelve, and she could fend for herself when I was working, but Danny couldn’t. And daycare wasn’t really working for him—although that’s kinda a long story. But at

any rate, I spent the next three years taking him to history class during the school year, and bringing him on the wrecker during the summer. Actually, he still rides the wrecker with me occasionally. But these days he's usually busy hanging out with his friends."

"I wanna try that someday," Cassidy mused. "Hanging out with friends sounds like fun."

She dug in her large box of colored pencils to find an orange close to the same color as the tow truck, so she could color the drawing she had just finished in her sketchbook.

"Maybe it's none of my business," Alan began, "but what was the primary deciding factor in—"

"Financial struggles," Miranda replied shortly. "That's the real reason we live like we do. I can't afford to hire more drivers, and I can't afford to not drive. Every time I think I'm close, something comes up and wipes whatever I managed to save. This breakdown is the next big thing. Just can't seem to get ahead of the curve."

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### **Cassidy Perry, Part Three**

The town wasn't far from where Cassie and her mom had broken down, and the wrecker soon pulled into the parking lot for Wagner's Diesel Barn. It really looked like a barn, too, with a gambrel roof and red metal siding. A half-dozen massive garage doors stood along the side, though only one stood open, with a chartreuse yellow fire engine sitting half in, half out.

Alan rolled the wrecker to a stop in front of the office.

"I gotta unchain the load. Go ahead inside, and John should be with you shortly."

Though the office was small, it wasn't terribly crowded. Right inside the door was a service desk, and there was a young African-American woman standing near it, looking at her smartphone. Her black hair was done up in cornrows, and her navy blue shirt read 'Lionsgate Fire & Rescue'.

There was a large coffee table in the middle of the room, with a sofa at either end, and a row of chairs along the back wall. Kneeling by the table, was a small girl who looked to be right around Cassidy's own age. Her long hair hung loose, somewhere between a light honey and a dark strawberry. Every so often, a few strands would fall in her face as she leaned over her coloring book, only to be brushed back over her shoulder.

The girl was in socks, but presumably the owner of the cowboy boots sitting beside her open backpack, their dark pink shanks standing tall. Just off to the side, sitting on one of the sofas, was

probably her mom. Deep auburn hair in a tight bun. Checkered brown button-up with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. Cowboy boots identical to the empty pink ones, but the shanks were black.

In the far corner, sat a man probably well into his fifties, judging by the slightly receded line of greying hair. He almost looked like some kind of police man, the way he was dressed in an all-black uniform. But the Celtic shield knot on his jacket's shoulder was no agency insignia Cassie had ever seen before, nor was the purple circle just below it, with a golden scorpion on the center. Cassidy was about to ask her mom if she knew what the insignias were, when the door to the shop swung open.

The man was identifiable enough, considering he had 'John Wagner' stitched on his drab green coveralls. He was neither tall nor short, but broad and brawny, and also very nearly bald. He first approached the young woman in cornrows.

"Alright, Lieutenant Raines, maintenance schedules are all up to date. Engine One is ready to get back to the station."

"Good deal. Anything impending I need to be aware of?"

"Not this time around. Everything looks good. Here's your key, you're all set."

"Thanks John. Oh, one other thing. Ladder Three has been having a couple of minor hydraulic issues. Chief Reagan wanted me to ask how soon we could schedule to have Lt Brainerd deliver it for an overhaul."

"I think I can fit it in as soon as Monday morning. If you gimme one minute, I need to touch bases with another customer, and then I can check the computer and give you an actual appointment."

Mr. Wagner turned to Miranda.

"You would be Mrs. Perry, correct?"

"*Miss* Perry. But yes, I'm the owner of the Kenworth your wrecker just brought in."

"I got the boys moving it into the bay now. I just need to get you signed into the system and we'll be good to go."

Miranda laid her hand on Cassie's shoulder.

"Go ahead and get yourself a seat, Cass. I'll be right over."

Cassie wandered over to the low table and sat on the floor, cross-legged, across from the other girl. Digging through her own backpack, she retrieved her colored pencils and her sketch journal.

Originally, it had been her mom's idea, as part of her school routine. Cassidy was a keen observer of the present, but sometimes struggled to remember details. So she would draw what she saw around her in as much detail as possible. Since she loved art so much, eventually journaling became a source of entertainment. Already, this was her fifteenth notebook since first grade.

She turned to the page she had just drawn earlier that morning, while sitting in the wrecker waiting for the driver to finish hooking up to the semi. She had the wrecker, her mom's Kenworth, and the sheriff's silver SUV all in a row. Now to continue the story by drawing all the people in the shop's waiting room.

Cassidy had just finished drawing the man with the scorpion patch, when the other girl suddenly moaned.

"Aww...when did that happen?"

Cassidy looked up from her sketchpad. "What's wrong?"

"One of our dogs must have gotten into my colored pencils," the girl replied, holding up a badly chewed stub of a golden orange pencil—or what was left of it.

"It was exactly the color I needed for Winnie the Pooh, and it was the only pencil I had of that color."

The girl's mother turned her attention from the paperwork on her lap.

"It's okay, Sam, You have lots of other yellows you can use."

"But they are all the wrong color, Mom. I can't have Pooh Bear looking like a ripe banana!"

Cassidy grinned. "You are absolutely right. Winnie the Pooh has to be colored properly. Here, borrow mine. I'm not sure if it's exactly the same, but it looks close."

The other girl, Sam apparently, tested the offered pencil in the corner of the page, and immediately her eyes lit up.

"It's close enough that I definitely can't tell the difference. Thanks!"

"Glad I could help! I'm Cassidy, by the way. I'm nine."

"Samantha. But everyone calls me Sam. I'm gonna be ten in October. Are you new in town?"

"Just passing through. Mom's truck broke down on the way to Whitefish."

“Oh. I didn’t think I had ever seen you before. So where are you from?” Sam began filling in the rounded head of her favorite cartoon character.

“Everywhere and nowhere. At least that’s what my mom likes to say. We don’t have a real house anywhere. We just live on the truck and travel anywhere that mom can get a cargo.” Cassidy returned to her sketchbook and started drawing Samantha.

“That sounds like it would be so much fun! For a little while. But no house to go home to? Ever?”

Cassidy shook her head. “Not unless you count visiting my grandma for a couple days twice a year.”

“What about your dad? Where is he?”

Cassidy shrugged. “No idea, I never met him. I’ve asked mom about him before, but she doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Oh,” Sam’s cheeks turned rosy. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about, really. It’s fun traveling all over the country with Mom. We’ve had all sorts of adventures.” Cassidy dug through her pencil box, trying to decide which color would best represent Samantha’s hair. “But what about you? Do you live around here?”

“Yep. We’ve only been here one year though.”

“Any brothers or sisters?” Cassidy held up a burnt orange and a yellow-orange, trying to decide if either color was anywhere close.

“Four brothers, all older than me. Sometimes they’re fun, sometimes I wish I was the only kid.”

“I’d love to have a big brother. I do get a little lonely sometimes, no dad, no brothers or sisters, no friends.”

“Well, you have one friend, now!” Sam grinned. She happened to glance down at Cassie’s sketchbook, pausing and tilting her head to examine the picture.

“Wow! Where’d you learn to draw so well? That’s me, isn’t it? The hair is tricky, I know. Try pumpkin orange with terra-cotta in the darker spots and cream in the lighter spots. My mom looked it up once.”

“Pumpkin, terra cotta, and cream...huh. I never would have thought of that.”

“Me either. I first tried a rose on top of light orange. It was way too red. Hey, I like your sketch of Mr. Logan. You totally nailed the scorpion on his jacket.”

“Thanks, I--wait...you know him?”

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Cassidy Perry, Part Four

“Our daughters seem to be getting along well,” Miranda noted. She extended a hand towards the other girl’s mom. “Miranda Perry. Most folks call me Randy.”

“Hannah Steele,” the other woman responded with a firm handshake. “Sam usually keeps to herself, but she can be quite the social chatterbox when she wants to be.”

“Honestly, I’m extremely relieved to know my Cassie can hold her own with social interaction. She’s never had any friends her own age before. Just other truck drivers that I’m friends with.”

“She rides with you on your hauls a lot?”

“Every single trip. The truck is our house. I homeschool her on the road, and we do sight-seeing between loads. I know it’s gotta be rough on her, but I really didn’t have any other options, other than my mom, who had to give up her driver’s license, and has a hard enough time taking care of herself. I keep telling myself I’ll settle down someday when I finally get ahead of things. But just breaking even, it’s always one more load, and one more after that. I just can’t stay on top of things.”

“So, Cassidy’s father...I assume he’s no longer in the picture?”

“He’s not. But I’d rather not go there, personally. There’s a lot of...old memories that I’d rather forget. Too much pain, ya know?”

“I think I do, actually. Deep wounds that just refuse to heal with time, feelings of bitter resentment, perhaps a sense of righteous indignation. And the scars just re-open every time your memory gets the slightest little jog in the wrong direction. Am I right?”

“How—“

“I used to have old wounds of my own, Randy. I told you I know how it feels.”

“You used to? How did you manage to get better?”

“Honestly? Getting it off my chest. Sharing what was going through my head. It didn’t completely heal the pain, but that’s what started the process. But maybe you’re not quite ready for that, and that’s fine. But that’s the best advice I can give you.”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks. Hey, I just thought, I should probably call my next client and let them know what’s going on. Make sure I can still get the load even if I’m delayed a couple hours. I will be back in just a moment.”

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“So what are your older brothers like?” Cassie continued her conversation.

“Well, Jeremy is the oldest. He’s gonna be seventeen soon, and he’s gonna get his restricted driver’s license soon. But even though he’s the oldest and I’m the youngest, we’re really good friends. He’s always looking out for me, always there to help me with homework, or teach me how to do new things, or just be around when I need somebody to talk to.”

“He sounds nice.”

“U-huh. After him, there’s Benjamin, who just turned twelve in July. He’s adopted, but I don’t remember life without him, cause I was only two when he came. I really like him, too, cause we’re a lot alike. And when we moved here last year, he fought a bunch of mean bullies that were picking on me.”

“Oh wow. So he knows martial arts? You know, like karate, judo, kickboxing, stuff like that?”

“He does something called Krav Maga. All my brothers do. And after the bullies last year, Mom finally let me start learning, too.”

Cassie’s eyes opened wide and her smile grew broader. “I know all about Krav Maga! Mom made me learn it cause she says truck stops can be dangerous for little girls like me, and I needed to know how to defend myself.” She lowered her voice to a whisper, “and I actually had to, once, when a couple creepy guys tried to make me leave with them.”

Samantha shuddered. “That’s scary! I’m glad you got away.”

“Me, too. Mom doesn’t like me thinking about it too much, though. She says ‘it happened, I defended myself really good, it’s over now, and now I know exactly why she made me learn how to fight, and that’s all there is to it.’ So what about your other brothers? You said you had four, right?”

“Right. After Benjamin, there’s Caleb and Josh. They’re twins, and they will be twelve next week. They’re both really smart, but they’re a bit harder to get along with, cause they like to

tease me sometimes. And they don't really seem to have any feelings. Oh, and they bicker with each other a lot, too."

"Well that's not very nice of them to tease you," Cassie declared.

Samantha shrugged. "I don't mind it that much. It's playful teasing, not like the mean bullies that were picking on me at school. And sometimes, I get them back for it by beating them when we play games."

"It's always fun to win," Cassie nodded. So what about pets? Do you have any pets?" She asked as she started drawing her mom having a conversation with Samantha's mom.

"I do!" Sam replied. "I have a dog named 'Wolf', he's a Husky-Lab mix. He's really big, and white, and he loves swimming in our pond. And I also have a goshawk, named 'Phoenix'."

"You have a pet hawk?" Cassie's eyes grew wide.

"Yep! I found him on our farm one day. We think a hunter accidentally injured him with a shotgun. I don't like seeing animals die, so I asked Mom to help me nurse him back to health. She told me we couldn't keep a wild hawk, and we would have to release him after he got better. But he came back again, and we couldn't get rid of him."

"That's so cool! And you live on a farm? Do you have lots of animals?"

Samantha nodded her head. "We have horses, and some cows, and chickens, and a couple pigs, and a couple goats, and all my big brothers each have a dog of their own, too. I guess you don't have anywhere to keep a pet?"

"Nope," Cassie shook her head. "I found a salamander in a creek once, and tried to keep him for a pet. But you can't really play with a salamander, so I eventually got bored and released him."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Samantha stifled a giggle. "So, if you're traveling all the time, do you go to a different church every Sunday?"

"Church?" Cassidy drew back a little. "Um, well, we don't go to church very much. Only when we stop at Grandma's house twice a year. She likes us to go to church with her. But it's kinda boring, and her church is mostly other old people."

"Oh. Hmm, I think you are the first person I ever met that doesn't go to church," Sam noted.

"Does that mean we can't be friends?"

"Of course it doesn't mean that! We are friends just because we said so!"

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Cassidy Perry, Part Five

“So what did they say?” Hannah asked, as Miranda returned to her seat.

“Well, they weren’t exactly happy to hear that I’m momentarily stranded, but if I can get there by 3:30, I can keep the contract. I have to call them by 2:30 to confirm I’m back on the road. So hopefully they’re able to get my rig back together pretty quick.”

“Alright, Mrs. Steele, your pickup is ready.” Mr. Wagner re-entered from the shop area, drying his damp hands on his coveralls. “The new stainless steel muffler should have a much longer lifespan than the old one.” “And Miss Perry? We finished running diagnostics on the Kenworth.”

“How bad is it? Can you get it fixed quickly?”

“The good news is, your tank is the only thing that broke. All the lines are still intact. The bad news is, given the state of the tank, we really can’t fix it. If it was a fuel tank, or something else unpressurized, that would be a different story. But because it’s a pressure tank, in the state it’s in, if we tried to patch it, you could very probably have a second rupture further down the road. Even at the patch itself.”

“Can you put a new tank on?”

“Definitely. If I can *get* one. I don’t have air storage tanks sitting around here. So I have to make a few calls and see if I can get my hands on one for a reasonable price.”

“And how long is that going to take?” Miranda asked. “I really need to be back on the road by 2:30.” Her voice remained steady and calm, but her face betrayed her impatience.

“I understand, ma’am. But it depends how many places I have to call. Could be five minutes, could be an hour. But the actual labor shouldn’t be more than a half hour, so in the worst case scenario, if the closest part I can find is an hour away, and I don’t find it till 1:00, you should still be able to meet your deadline.”

“Okay, thank you,” Miranda resigned. She checked her watch. “But if I gotta wait a while, are there any places to get food around here?”

“Absolutely. If you take a right out of the parking lot, like you’re headed towards the lake, that’s Black Lake Road. It forms a ‘Y’ with Ronan Pike, and just past that, Ronan intersects Main Street. Guerra’s Diner is there on the corner. It’s only a quarter-mile. I already got your number off of you, so if you decide to head that way, I will give you a call as soon as I know something.”

“Thank you so much,” Miranda replied. She called over to Cassidy. “Cassie, get ready to roll. I think we’re gonna grab some lunch while we wait for the truck.”

“Okay, Mom.” Cassidy closed her sketchbook and stashed it in her backpack. “Bye, Sam. It was really great to meet you!”

“You too! And thanks for letting me borrow your pencil,” the other girl handed the colored pencil back to Cassie, who tucked it back in her box. “It was the perfect color.”

“Glad I could help out! I hope I see you again some time!”

Miranda offered a hand to Sam’s mom.

“Hannah, it’s been good talking to you. Thanks for your advice, and I will definitely give it some thought.”

“Not a problem, Randy. It was good to meet you. Good luck with getting your rig fixed, and have a safe trip.”

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Cassidy and her mom hadn’t walked far. They had barely even walked as far as the small gun shop that occupied the lot next to Wagner’s, when the low rumble of an old Powerstroke diesel approached from behind. Miranda turned to see Hannah and Sam roll to a stop, along the curb, in a red and white F-250.

“If you’re headed to Guerra’s, we’re traveling in the same direction. Would you two care for a lift?”

“Well thanks, that’s very generous of you, but I don’t want to impose,” Miranda contested.

“Nonsense,” Hannah waved her hand dismissively. “Sam and I decided we wanted to grab lunch over there ourselves. So you might as well jump in and save us all some time, cause if you don’t, you’ll find I’m stubborn enough to sit here till you ride along.”

“You don’t take no for an answer very often, do you?” Miranda stepped around to the shotgun seat, while Cassidy mounted the driver’s side backseat, beside Samantha.

Hannah laughed. “When my mind is made up about something, I rarely unmake it.”

“Beautiful truck you’ve got,” Miranda complemented. “These old Powerstrokes are worth hanging onto. Way better than the garbage engines Ford is running now.”

“I hear you!” Hannah chuckled. “This rig was actually a gift from my husband’s best friend. He was a Green Beret, died a hero about four years ago. But before his deployment, he gave us his truck cause he didn’t it sitting around without a driver. It served us well on our farm in Pittsburgh, then moved us all the way out here, and she’s still rolling beautifully.”

“So you aren’t native to Montana?”

“Peter is, he’s my husband. But I’m actually native to Pittsburgh.”

“So how did you two meet?” Miranda asked.

“My older brother Casey attended college in Missoula to study forestry management and wildfire control,” Hannah responded, turning into Guerra’s parking lot. “His third year in, he met an Air Force ROTC named Peter Steele. Then Casey graduated and became a wildfire parajumper for Lionsgate’s department. Peter graduated and became a fighter pilot in the middle east, flying missions during Desert Storm.”

“Did you know him at the time?”

“Nope. After I got out of school I attended college in Kalispell, and lived with my brother here in Lionsgate. Two years after that, I transferred to a university in Colorado, where I later graduated veterinary school. I moved *back* here to take an apprenticeship with a local vet. And *that* is when Peter returned from the Middle East, took a job for a local farmer, and I met him during a herd immunization. If you think I’m stubborn, Pete was an egotistical, determined, decorated fighter pilot who acted like he didn’t know the meaning of the word no. That was over sixteen years ago.”

“Oh wow. That’s some serious dedication. Where all have you lived during that time?”

“We started right here, for about three years. Then Pete’s inactive reserve status got upgraded, and we had to move onto the base where he was stationed. Two years after that, his service contract ended and we bought my childhood home from my parents. So, shall we eat inside, or outside? Girls, what do you think?”

“Outside,” Sam and Cassidy spoke, almost in unison. They looked at each other and laughed. “Jinx!”

The foursome took seats at a round table under the awning that created the diner’s front porch.

“How long were you in Pittsburgh?” Miranda prompted, taking a menu from the holder in the middle of the table.

“Seven years, up till Pete decided to return to flying, and he took a job with Delta Airlines. And then four years after that, he was offered a sizeable raise to move to Montana and fly out of Glacier. And that’s when we moved here. That was just last year.”

“Do you like it here?”

“It’s not too bad. Gets a bit dry sometimes. But I don’t miss Pennsylvania’s annual car inspections.”

“I guess I wouldn’t, either. Although it would’ve been nice if I’d have caught my pressure tank corrosion before it blew a leak. It’s what I deserve for never slowing down.”

The conversation came to a short pause as a waitress came to their table, a young Hispanic girl--no older than fourteen or fifteen—dressed in a navy blue retro-style uniform.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Steele! Hello, Sam. Who are your visitors today?”

“Good afternoon, Juliana. These are some new friends of ours that are just passing through town, Miss Miranda Perry and her daughter, Cassidy.”

“Very nice to meet you. Welcome to Lionsgate—or more specifically, welcome to Guerra’s. Are you ready to order, or would you like to wait?”

“I’m ready,” Hannah replied. “I’ll take the Reuben sub special, with waffle fries.”

“Excelente! And to drink?”

“Water is fine.”

“Alright. Samantha, you would like your usual?”

“Yes, please.”

“And you, señora?” Juliana asked Miranda.

“El pescado es fresco?” Miranda replied in perfect Spanish.

Juliana’s eyes lit up as she replied with a broad smile, “Sí señora, muy fresco. Our supplier brought a catch of lake trout off of Flathead not two hours ago. Today’s pescado special is grilled, and served with a lemon and garlic sauce.”

“I’ll take it, with home fries and a side of coleslaw. And I will also take a water.”

“Muy buena elección. And for you, Señorita?”

“I can’t decide if I want a cheeseburger, or a hot dog,” Cassidy griped. She thought over the menu for a moment longer before electing for the cheeseburger, with waffle fries, red beets, and a lemonade.

“Gracias,” Juliana finished writing the orders on her notepad and tucked it in her apron pocket. “And will that be one check, or two?”

“Two,” Miranda answered.

“One,” Hannah simultaneously countered. “Miranda, you have a big enough repair bill coming up. Treating you to lunch is the least I can do. I insist.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Sure you can. You can return the favor next time.”

“What next time?” Miranda mumbled.

Hannah nodded to Juliana. “One check.”

“Muy Bien. Mia will be right out with your drinks, and we will have your lunch out as quickly as we can.”

Juliana disappeared back inside the diner.

“She’s young,” Miranda remarked.

Hannah nodded. “Only fourteen,” she acknowledged. “And Mia, her little sister, is only eight. Their mom died about two years ago, so they take over her role in the family business when they aren’t in school.”

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Cassidy Perry, Part Six

Lunch was just about over when Miranda’s phone rang. She excused herself from the table and stepped around the corner of the diner before answering.

“Miranda Perry.”

“Miss Perry, this is John Wagner, from Wagner Diesel Barn.”

“Yes. Did you find a tank?”

“We did, but I’m afraid there’s some less than desirable news.”

“Yeah, yeah. This is the part where you tell me you found something else that needs fixed and it’s going to jack the price up. I don’t care how it’s done, but I need my truck in the next hour and a half. Can you or can you not do that?”

“I can assure you that we don’t do price-jacking here, Miss Perry. The bad news is that the soonest we can get the part is first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Tommorrow!” Miranda shouted. “I need to be in Whitefish in less than three hours!”

“I understand your frustration, Ma’am. I’ve looked everywhere, including salvage. Believe me, I want your truck fixed as fast as you do. A disabled vehicle hogging up one of my pits is bad for business. But tomorrow morning is the soonest we can get it, and your truck will be ready to roll shortly thereafter.”

“Look, forget it. If you can’t do the job, I’ll have it towed to a different shop.”

“You don’t understand. *Nobody* in the vicinity can get it fixed any faster. Air tanks almost never rupture like that, so nobody stocks them. I will continue to look, and if we can get one any sooner, we will. But at this point, it’s unlikely. I promise though, once we have it, we’ll get on installing it first thing, and we will call as soon as it’s ready. And let me say again how very sorry I am that we can’t do better.”

Miranda exhaled hard.

“Look, I’m sorry for blowing up at you like that, Mr. Wagner. It’s been a rough morning. Still, I have no excuse, it was extremely unprofessional of me. Do what you have to do, and...I guess I’ll figure something out. Thanks for letting me know.”

Miranda pocketed her cellphone and returned to the table where Hannah was showing the girls how to make napkin origami.

“Bad news, I guess?” Hannah asked quietly. Miranda nodded and took a deep breath.

“Hannah, I almost never ask anyone for favors, and I *really* appreciate you treating Cass and me to lunch like this. Wagner Diesel said they won’t have the truck fixed till tomorrow, so it looks like we’re going to be stuck here tonight. So what I was wondering is—“

“Of course you can stay at our house overnight, Miranda. We have plenty of room.”

Miranda’s eyes widened, taking on an almost horrified expression.

“What? No, that’s not at all what I was going to ask. I wouldn’t dream of imposing myself on your hospitality like that. All I was going to ask is if you would be able to give us a lift back to

Wagner's to get our things out of the truck, and then drop us off wherever the nearest hotel is, and I'd pay you for the time. And the fuel. Lord knows diesel is expensive."

"Okay, listen. For starters, if you think diesel is expensive, you haven't been past the local pump. One of Lionsgate's biggest local employers is a fracking and refining outfit just west of here. Locally sourced fuel is actually pretty cheap. But that aside, if we take you home with us, we won't be going out of our way, you won't be spending more money than you are already going to be spending on your repairs, and—"

Samantha interrupted, "And we won't even be going out of our way to drop you off at Wagner's tomorrow, cause I have a soccer game in the morning. We really do have lots of space! We'd love to have you stay with us!"

"Exactly," Hannah chuckled.

"You really *do* like trying to make people's minds up for them, don't you, Hannah?"

"Well, gotta be good at something. I mean, *if* you would rather have the privacy of a hotel room, we won't force our hospitality on you, and I'd be happy to give you a lift. But otherwise, there's no sense in paying for a hotel when we have plenty of guest room."

"What do you think we should do, Cassie?"

"Really, Mom?" Cassidy rolled her eyes. "At this point, if you seriously need to ask *me* for *my* opinion, I guess you really do need Mrs. Hannah to make your mind up for you."

"Alright then, I'll concede. We'll take you up on your offer, Hannah. And thanks."

"Hey, this is just the way we roll around here, Randy."

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### **Cassidy Perry, Part Seven**

Cassidy rolled her window down and stuck her head out, gawking at the small farmyard as the truck rolled up the winding gravel driveway.

"Wow! Samantha, is that your house?" She exclaimed, pointing to the simple, yet elegant stone and log structure at the driveway's terminus. "That is so awesome!"

"It gets better than that," Sam contested as they pulled into the three-car garage. "So, what would you like to do first?"

"Uh...what are the options?"

“Well, I could take you out to the barnyard to see the animals, or there’s lots of games we can play in the house, or we can go out into the woods and I can teach you how to do archery, or we can go swimming in the pond, or—“

“Oh, swimming sounds like a brilliant idea!” Cassie started to dismount from the truck. Let’s do—oh wait, no I can’t.” Her big grin shifted to a grimace of frustration.

“What’s wrong?”

“My swimsuit is back with the rest of my stuff in Mom’s truck,” Cassidy explained. “I know you mentioned having a pond, but I completely didn’t even think that you might invite me to go swimming.”

“If that’s your only problem, I can fix it, easy!” Samantha bounced her shoulders.

“You can?”

“Mom keeps all my old clothes in the storage closet in the basement, and you look like you’re just a little smaller than me. So if I find my old swimshorts and rashguard from last year, I bet they’d fit you perfect. Come on, let’s go find them!”

The two girls raced through the breezeway ahead of their moms. But Samantha stopped short at the door going into the mudroom.

“Well snap,” she grouched, picking up a note that was taped to the door. “Looks like the boys and Liberty decided to go wakeboarding at the lake, and they didn’t wait for me to get home.”

“Aww, that’s too bad,” Cassidy apologized. “Wakeboarding is lots of fun. I’ve tried it a few times. But who is Liberty?”

“Our cousin,” Sam explained. “She’s the same age as the twins. But it’s not a big deal. I can go with them any other day. What I can’t do every day is bring home a new friend.” She handed the note to Hannah. “Hey Mom, the boys are at the lake with Liberty. They’ll be home in a few hours.”

“Okay, Sam. Thanks.”

The girls raced off to get ready for their swim. Hannah raised an eyebrow at Miranda.

“You in the mood to join them, Randy? The pond will be nice and cool on a warm day like today.”

“Any other day, I just might be,” Miranda laughed. “But I think I’ve had enough excitement for one day. To be totally honest, I’m ready to just sit and do nothing for a while.”

“That can be arranged. How about cold sweet tea and a lawn chair in shade of the back patio?”

“Now *that* I could definitely go for.”

“Go ahead around back and make yourself comfortable. I’ll grab the tea and a couple glasses and I’ll be right out.”

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Cassidy Perry, Part Eight

“It’s a beautiful place you have out here, Hannah.” Miranda gazed out over the back lawn towards the pond. She took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. “It’s just so...I don’t know...tranquil, for a lack of better words.”

“I know what you mean, Randy,” Hannah nodded, filling a glass with sweet tea, “It’s about the closest to Heaven on Earth as I’ve ever been.”

The serenity of the moment was abruptly interrupted when the girls burst through the patio door and charged down the hill towards the water. Samantha’s dog, Wolf, came barreling around the corner of the house to join them.

Taking a hefty lead, Cassidy ran out on the dock, not even stopping to kick her Crocs off, and launched off the end, Wolf right by her side. Samantha launched into a front tuck right behind them.

Miranda smiled. “I am starting to be glad I got the chance to come here. I didn’t realize just how much both me and Cass needed a break from the constant rush. Even whenever we tried to take breaks and get some rest in, it never felt restful, cause as long as the truck *could* run, I felt the pressure to keep it running.”

“But now that it’s broke, and you have to stop, and there’s nothing you can do about it...”

“Right,” Miranda snickered, sipping at her tea, “it’s actually kinda relaxing. And right now, I can almost forget all my problems.”

“Almost?” Hannah raised an eyebrow.

Miranda didn’t answer right away. The pair sat quietly for a few minutes, watching the girls frolic in the murky turquoise-green water.

“His name was Daniel West,” Miranda abruptly broke the silence.

“Who?” Hannah turned her head.

“Cassidy’s father. His dad owned the company I worked for before going independant. When I first started there, I was twenty-three, Daniel was four years older, and had been a driver for five years. He was my trainer only because of his experience, but otherwise, he was just one of the drivers. He never used his right as the boss’s kid to try and act like he ruled the place, and he was just so...inviting, I guess.”

“How did the relationship start?”

“Well, it wasn’t right away. When I first started the job, boyfriends were the last things on my list of priorities. I devoted myself to my work, and my efforts did manage to impress Mr. West, Senior. I started earning raises and better routes. Daniel noticed me, too, but he was less interested in my driving and more in me as a person. Two years in, he took me to lunch for my twenty-fifth birthday. And shortly after that, we were dating. At work, we kept it professional and all, and his dad didn’t even know we were seeing each other.”

“Hmm.”

“Yeah, I know,” Miranda reasoned, “I should’ve known better. And I did. I just...I thought I was beating the system. But anyway, after a few dinner dates, Daniel proposed I should move in with him.”

“How come?”

“We both rented apartments in the same complex, but his was a two bedroom, mine was a studio, and he thought that splitting his with me would save money for both of us.”

“And you took the offer,” Hannah speculated.

“Not right away. I did have a little common sense left in me. But after a while, Daniel’s logic started sounding like common sense. I moved in with him ten months after our first date. And it did save both of us a lot of money. And we had similar schedules, we liked the same foods, and we had more time to hang out. Even then, it was strictly a professional relationship. But one night, about eight months after I moved in, we were watching TV, and I had just gotten back from a long drive. I accidentally fell asleep. On Daniel’s shoulder.”

“How did he react?”

“He didn’t. You should’ve asked how *I* reacted. When I woke up and realized what I had done, I panicked and apologized frantically. He just sat there, smiling, and assuring me that he wasn’t offended. Within weeks, it was a new normal. And within the next eight months, he talked me into sharing the same room, and five months after that, it was more than just a room. Things just went downhill from there over the next seven months.”

“Enter Cassidy...” Hannah surmised.

“Yeah...”

“So what happened?”

“I kept it a secret as long as I could, but I asked Daniel if maybe we should get married in the near future, after sharing an apartment for two and a half years and a bedroom for one year. He agreed. But a week before the wedding, the evidence became impossible to hide any longer.”

Hannah exhaled loudly. “I take it that conversation didn’t go so well.”

“It could’ve been better. Daniel told me to abort the pregnancy, and we could still carry out the wedding. I said no, but promised he would not be financially responsible. Then his dad found out I was carrying, and our whole history came to the light.”

“Ouch.”

“Pretty much. He was enraged with me as one of his employees, for getting involved with his son. And he was equally enraged at Daniel, as his son, for having a kid with one of his employees. But he knew we were two of his most profitable drivers, and he was willing to deal. He said abort the baby, call off the wedding, stop living together, and he’d let the thing slide. Otherwise, there’d be hell to pay.”

“And you told him no?”

“My exact words were, ‘I’m really, really sorry about what happened, but I’m gonna keep the child no matter what’. Next morning, Daniel was gone. He just packed his stuff and left. Even his dad didn’t know what had become of him, and I got blamed for it. He handed me a pink slip and said he never wanted to see my face again.”

“Didn’t he realize you were carrying his grandchild?”

“I tried to use that as leverage for the slightest bit of mercy. He denied she was kin. So there I was, stuck in Reno, with an apartment I couldn’t afford, no job, and a baby on the way.”

“What did you do?”

“I called my parents, confessed what I had done, and begged them to take me in. And they did. After I spent almost everything I had, just to get home from Reno to Denver. Mom took care of me till Cassidy was born, and I stayed at home till she was weaned on bottles. I found a job driving local delivery routes, which I really should’ve done right after graduating, instead of running off to drive long-hauls and come back as a single mom.”

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## Cassidy Perry, Part Nine

“So how long did you stay in Denver till you started your own company?” Hannah was no longer reclined in the patio chair, but sitting straight up, thoroughly invested in Miranda’s story.

“About four years. My dad passed in 2004, leaving both me and my mom with a reasonable inheritance. I decided to buy my own truck and be an owner-operator. Mom agreed to co-sign on a loan, and I bought my Kenworth T-600. And a year after that, on Cassidy’s fifth birthday, I started letting her ride with me occasionally. A way of being able to spend more time with her and all. She loved it so much, I got the idea to just have her travel with me full time and I’d homeschool her on the truck. Four years later, here we are.”

“Wow,” Hannah leaned back in her chair and took a long swallow of sweet tea. “You’ve taken some hard knocks on your journey, Randy. It took some serious courage and grit to do what you did. And did you ever find out what happened to Daniel?”

Miranda snorted. “No. And frankly, I couldn’t care less, the way he ran out on me like a coward,” she retorted. “I just hope he got what he deserved.”

“Have you considered forgiveness?” Hannah proposed.

“Why would I do that, after what he did to me?”

“Because if you don’t, you’re never going to get over this.”

“How would you know?” Miranda growled, her voice suddenly taking on an indignant edge. “No offense Hannah, I really do appreciate everything you’ve done for me and Cass, but you can not sit there and tell me you know how to fix my life. You don’t know what it’s like to carry around the guilt and shame for the choices I made, or the frustration over the way that jerk beguiled me into making those choices, or the anger over how his father treated me. Some things don’t deserve forgiveness!”

Hannah sat up and turned to look her companion in the eye. “I know more than you think I do, Miranda. Remember earlier this morning, when I told you I used to suffer from old scars that wouldn’t go away? My high school boyfriend violated me without consent. Three times, before anybody caught him.”

“Oh...” Miranda’s firm, determined expression suddenly melted into one of sympathy as she realized hers was not the bigger scar. “But...you forgave him for it? How?”

“It was a long time before I got there, I can tell you that much. But I had to make that conscious choice in my own mind. Even though it was just a small action, it was still action, and it started restoring my sense of control, and fighting my sense of powerlessness.”

“But why did you have to forgive him for it? Wasn’t there any other way?”

“I couldn’t love again till I healed from my mental and emotional pain. I couldn’t heal from my pain, till I healed from my anger and bitterness. And I couldn’t heal from my anger and bitterness, till I mentally released the one I had been bitter towards.”

“But like I mentioned before, I don’t even know where Daniel is right now, or if he’s even still alive,” Miranda admitted, shifting in her seat. “Even if I wanted to forgive him...how can I?”

“It’s a matter of forgiving in your heart,” Hannah replied. “After what happened to me, the individual that wronged me got sentenced to a life in prison, and I never heard anything from or about him since. But even if you never ever see Daniel again, you need to let go of the anger and resentment you’ve stored up. You have to make the conscious choice to forgive him, or your scars will never heal. Your emotional life will be stuck in the same spot forever, and it will affect other areas of your life.”

“Are you saying that the reason I’m struggling to keep my company afloat is all because I’m holding a grudge?” Miranda proposed.

Hannah hesitated before answering with a thoughtful frown. “Not necessarily. But it’s always possible. I can’t guarantee that forgiving him will suddenly turn your life around and you’ll be successful and make all your dreams come true. But I can tell you that when you learn to forgive those who wrong you, God can finally work in your life in ways that just weren’t possible before.”

“God? You’re religious?” Miranda scoffed, taking a sideways look at her friend.

Hannah was unfazed. “If, by ‘religious’, you mean I have an intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe, than yes, I suppose I am. I take it you wouldn’t define yourself in the same way?”

“Not really,” Miranda disclosed with a shrug. “I mean, my parents took me to church every once in a while. And these days, I go maybe once or twice a year, cause my mom likes us to take her when we visit. Other than that, I really don’t have time for some stern old man in the sky who seems to have no interest in making my life any less miserable.”

“Miranda, God isn’t some stern old man in the sky just waiting to rain punishment on you. He loves you like...” Hannah searched for words, “like a child—like you love Cassidy. He wants to be a part of your life if you just let him, and his plans for his children are always good.”

“But if God were good and loving, why did he let Cassidy grow up without a dad? I know I made some bad choices in my life, but I’m not a bad person, so why did he let me be fired from my job without mercy? Why would he let me struggle to keep my company from going under for over three years? What has he ever done in my favor?”

Hannah nodded her head towards the pond, where the girls were paddling around on inner tubes.

“You have one gift right over there. Knowing everything you know now, if you could go back to the day you found out you were pregnant, would you choose life without her in it?”

“No...I guess not. I couldn’t even imagine a life without her in it.”

“What if you went back in time so far that you could avoid even meeting Daniel in the first place? Would that change how you love Cassidy?”

“Ack. Tough call. But... No,” Miranda’s firm resolve suddenly returned. “Absolutely not. Cassie means the world to me. But she still deserves to have a dad and a normal life. Why did God allow Daniel to run off?”

“Would he have been a good dad?”

“He ran from his kid before she was born. Obviously not.”

“Okay, but setting that aside. Imagine he had stayed. Just based on his personality, his reputation as a person, would he have been a good dad?”

“Are you trying to get me to say no, Hannah?”

“I don’t know, Randy. I’m not telling you one way or the other. I never met the guy. I’m just asking you for your honest assessment.”

“He was pretty irresponsible, sometimes reckless. There were some occasions where he did piggyback on his status as son of the owner. Actually, the more I think about it, he was a privileged, spoiled grown-up child who always got his way through manipulation. Now I’m starting to wonder how I ended up falling for him in the first place. Augh...maybe I *was* a total idiot.”

“In other words, raising Cassidy on you own, you would say was way better for the both of you than having Daniel still in your life.”

“Yes, I guess it was. But a good responsible dad would’ve been even better.”

“I hate to say it, Randy, but you did make a lot of very poor choices back then. And bad decisions have natural consequences. God never promised to spare us from the aftermath of using our free will in foolish ways.”

“Okay, you’ve made some fair points so far, but any time I went to church, as soon as people found out I was a single mom who never even married, all I got was judgment and criticism. That’s one of the big reasons I stopped going. Where was God’s love and forgiveness then?”

“Unfortunately, not everyone who claims to follow God actually lives in line with his word. It hurts him to see you mistreated by his people, even more than it hurt you. I would encourage you to give church another chance. And no matter how you’re treated by other people, remember that church isn’t about them. It’s about you growing closer to God.”

“When you put everything into that perspective, I guess next you’re going to say that my truck breaking down was a blessing in disguise, too. Seeing as how it led up to this conversation.”

“Well, you said it first. Really though, it does depend a little bit on what you choose to do with the conversation. If you choose to benefit from it, then having the conversation would be a blessing, yes.”

Miranda exhaled. “You’ve definitely given me a ton of stuff to think about. I really appreciate it, Hannah.”

“Any time,” Hannah nodded, and stood up from her chair. “Well, I’m gonna get started on supper. You relax as long as you like.”

“Can I help you cook?”

“You don’t need to do that. I got it under control.”

“I know. But I want to help. I think better when I’m doing something with my hands, and it’s been too long since I last did any real cooking. It’s just the thing to help me relax.”

“Alrighty then, lets cook up a storm!” Hannah stepped to the edge of the patio and called out to the girls, who had gotten out of the pond and were playing on the swingset.

“Sam! Cassie! We’re going to head in and start on supper! You two enjoy yourselves, and I’ll ring the bell when it's ready!”

“Okay, Mom!” Sam waved from the swing.

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Cassidy Perry, Part Ten

Judging by the amount of sunlight creeping in through the curtains, and hitting her in the face, Miranda figured the sun had already been up for quite a while before it finally woke her. She cracked one eye open towards the bed on the other side of the room, and for a split second, nearly panicked when she realized it was unoccupied. Then she remembered where she was.

Calm down Randy, everything is okay. This isn't a hotel. This is the Steele family's basement guest room, and Cassie isn't here, cause she had a sleepover in Samantha's room.

Satisfied that all was as it should be, she glanced next at the alarm clock at the night stand.

“Almost seven o'clock on the dot. I wonder if the girls are up yet?”

Trekking upstairs to the kitchen, she found Hannah sliding a sweet potato veggie casserole into the oven. She rapped softly on the wall.

“Oh, good morning, Randy,” Hannah turned away from the oven and tossed her mitts on the counter. “Breakfast will be ready in about a half hour. How did you sleep last night?”

“Much better than I have been lately, thanks. Is Cassie up yet, do you know?”

“Oh goodness yes!” Hannah chuckled, drawing water to wash her mixing bowls. “She's been up for two hours. She wanted to go help Sam with her morning chores, and I told her she could. I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all...” Miranda yawned. She wandered over to the window overlooking the farm. “Wagner hasn't called me about the truck yet, so it's not like we're in a big hurry. Two hours, huh? How long does Samantha usually take to do her morning chores?”

“Not nearly that long. They're probably long done, and just playing somewhere.”

“Oh yeah, I think that might be them out in the field, playing around the haybales. That's not dangerous...right?”

“Nope,” Hannah shook her head. “Not unless the girls are strong enough to accidentally move a static object that weighs nearly twelve-hundred pounds. But I can call them back to the house if you want.”

“No, it's fine. Let them have their fun. Cassidy has a playmate her own age for the first time in her life. Might as well enjoy it while she can.”

“It's not that hard to get on the bale. You just grab on here, put your foot up like this...and kinda just...umph. There! Ya see?”

“Here I come...almost.” Cassidy got up halfway, but her foot slipped and she slid to the ground.

“Okay, I think I got it now,” she said, grasping the band of twine. “I think I—don’t got it.”

“Want to give me your hand and I’ll try to help pull you up?”

“Nah, not yet. I’m gonna try a running jump.”

Cassidy backed up several steps and ran at the bale, jumping as high as she could and grabbing onto the twine, higher than she had gotten before.

“Third...times...the charm!” she declared, pulling herself up on the bale and positioning herself facing Samantha.

“You got it! Nice jump you made.”

“Thanks. I’ve had a little practice. Had to do that a few times to get up in Mom’s truck when I was smaller.”

“So what do you think of farm life?”

“Oh, it’s a blast. I’ve had so much fun! I wish we could stay a little longer. But I’m glad we got to stay as long as we did. And I’m so glad I got to meet you, Sam.”

“Aw, Thanks, Cassie!” Samantha’s cheeks grew three shades closer to her hair color. “You’re pretty awesome, too.”

“But you’re extra special, Sam, cause I’ve never had a real friend before. So thanks for being my first. It’s too bad we didn’t get to be friends very long, though.” Cassidy loosed a long sigh.

“What do you mean, Cassie? We aren’t gonna stop being friends just cuz you have to leave.”

“But we might never see each other again.”

“Maybe we won’t, but who cares?” Samantha flaunted her signature shoulder bounce. “We’ll still be friends, just by saying so. And hey, you’re always welcome to come back and visit.”

“Really?”

“Of course! Once a friend, always a friend.”

“Thanks, Sam. You’re an awesome friend. And ya know what? I have a little present to give you.”

Cassidy reached for her back pocket and retrieved a small roll of paper. It was wrapped around something long, narrow, and hard, and tied with a string. Samantha pulled the knot on the string and carefully unrolled the paper.

“Hey, it’s a drawing of you and me meeting each other at Wagner’s yesterday! And you got my hair perfect! Oh, I love it! And what’s this?” Sam unrolled the rest of the paper to reveal the object it was wrapped around.

“A colored pencil. You’re giving me your colored pencil?”

“Yep! You got a *lot* of pages left in that coloring book of yours. I figured you needed it more than I do, after Wolf chewed your old one. I can always get a new one if I think I need that color.”

“That was a perfect present, Cass.” Sam dropped her head and stared at the hay bale, deep in thought. “I just wish I had a present for you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t give you a present to get one back. I just noticed you needed something that I had, and I decided to fix it.”

“Yeah, but I still want to give you a present. There’s gotta be something that you need and—oh...oh!” Sam’s eyes lit up, and she hopped down from the bale and ran back towards the house.

“I do have a present for you. Come on!”

Cassidy followed Sam up the back balcony steps, over to where the swimsuits and towels were still hanging on the railing from day before.

“Remember how you said your old suit was getting too small?”

“Yeah...”

“But you said *my* old one fit perfectly. So you need something I have, and that means I can give you a present.” Sam handed the clothes to Cassidy. “Yours to keep, for as long as they still fit.”

“That’s it, you’re getting a hug.”

“Okay. Hugs are good.”

The two young friends embraced, just as Hannah poked her head out the door.

“Breakfast is ready, you two. Come and get it while it’s hot. And then Sam, you better get ready for your soccer game.”

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### **Cassidy Perry, Part Eleven**

Within twenty-two hours of breaking down, Miranda and Cassidy found themselves ready to leave the small, charming city of Lionsgate. And so much had happened in that short time.

Before yesterday, Miranda had been a ticking time bomb, sitting on years of un-vented anger, resentment, and shame. Now, though her station in life had not changed, she felt alive and free for the first time in a long time.

Before yesterday, Cassidy had been lonely and alone, capable of fending for herself, but frustrated for a lack of companionship.

They had never meant to be delayed in the eccentric little autonomous republic, but destiny had its own plans in mind—a reset, to provide each of them with that thing they most lacked.

But good things never last. Samantha and the boys all had soccer games to be at, and Miranda found another trailer to pick up. So when the call came from Wagner’s that the truck was ready, there was no time to lose...

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“Alright, got the repair bill settled,” Miranda reluctantly conceded, returning to the group standing by Hannah’s minivan. “And I got the truck running so the air can build up. So...I guess that means we’re done here.”

“Where are yinz headed from here?” Hannah asked.

“You know, of course, I lost the contract I had in Whitefish. But I found another one, back down in Missoula, that needs to go to Billings. Then tomorrow, I think I *might* take your suggestion, Hannah, and give church at least one more try. Then spend the afternoon in Yellowstone.”

“Now that sounds like a Sunday well spent, Randy. Any plans after that?”

“Yep. Bright and early Monday morning, I have a trailer from Billings all the way down to Phoenix.”

“Oh wow. Well, safe travels to both of yinz,” Hannah extended her hand. “It’s been a real pleasure getting to know you. Please, stop in and see us, next time you pass through.”

“Thank you so much, Hannah, for everything.” Miranda gave a firm handshake. “Of course,” she noted with a grim smile, “in this line of work, you never know where you’re gonna end up, so there’s no telling if or when we’ll be back this way. But I will definitely keep that in mind.” She turned to the kids.

“Good luck with your soccer games today, everybody! Jeremy, if you still want to be a truck driver when you get out of school, look me up. I can get you connections. And as for you, Sam, make sure you keep your brothers in line, you hear?” Miranda winked at the boys.

Samantha giggled. “I’ll try!”

“See to it. Well, I’m gonna head to the rig and finish getting ready to go. Cass, you got a couple minutes for your last goodbyes.” Miranda ambled towards the rig.

“Oh, I wish this didn’t have to be over so soon!” Cassidy wrapped her friend in a big hug. “Thanks for showing me an amazing time, Sam, and thanks for being my friend. I’m gonna miss you so much!”

“I’m glad you got to come! Let’s do it again when you can stay longer!”

“Gladly! Bye, Mrs. Steele. Bye, boys. Ben, sorry about the...you know...sparring incident. I know you were trying to go easy on me cause you didn’t know how good I was and you didn’t want to hurt me. I should’ve been a bit easier on you, too.”

“Eh, no worries,” Ben smirked. “Now I know how good you are. And if you ever come again, we can have a rematch.”

“Sounds good. Well, we’ve got a trailer to move. Bye everybody!”

Cassidy deftly mounted the passenger side steps, and with a few blasts of the air horn, Miranda crawled the Kenworth out onto the road and started spooling up the engine.

As they rolled down the road, Cassidy glanced at her mom with a pondering gaze.

“Mom, do you think we’ll ever get to go back?”

“I don’t know, baby. I just don’t know. The highways ahead could have anything in store for us. But I have just the smallest little feeling that Lionsgate hasn’t seen the last of us yet. Only time can tell.”

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## **Cassidy Perry, Part Twelve**

A lot of things happened in the months following the parting of Cassidy Perry and Samantha Steele. Enough things that neither girl thought about the other very often.

In Samantha’s case, so many things happened that by the time a year had passed, she barely thought about her friend from everywhere and nowhere. Then, after services one Sunday in early August, she was standing on the balcony of the church narthex, looking for her best friend, Rebecca Connolly.

“Excuse me,” a voice came from behind her and just to the left. “I don’t know if you’d remember me, but—“

“Cassidy Perry?” Sam gasped, whipping around. “Cassie! You’re back! You came back!” She moved in for a hug.

Cassidy was a bit taller than she had been a year ago, but she was still just a bit shorter than Samantha. And her hair, once a dark sandy blond, had darkened a shade or two, now more of a light golden brown.

“It’s so awesome to see you again, Sam!” Cassie declared. “I can’t believe you remembered me, though!”

“Didn’t I tell you we would always be friends? Are you around for a couple days, or just passing through?”

Before Cassidy could answer, Samantha’s mom spotted the two girls.

“Cassidy Perry! It’s been a while! How have you been?”

“Oh, really, really good, actually! Hey, Mom!” Cassidy called over to Miranda, who had run into Allan Philips, the tow truck driver who had rescued them that destined day. “Come look who I found!”

“Well if it isn’t Hannah and Samantha! Hello, hello! I was just sayin’ to Cass this morning, I wondered if we would run into you here, cause I wasn’t sure where you went to church. How are things on the farm?”

“Things aren’t doing too badly, all things considered,” Hannah replied. “How is the trucking world?”

“Do I ever have news for you!” Miranda broke out in a huge grin. “So, when we were here last time, I got a contract to go to Billings, then to go to Phoenix.”

“Oh yes, I think I do remember you telling me that,” Hannah nodded.

“Well, after I got down there, I got a contract from Honeywell, a plant that builds aircraft engines. And a couple weeks after I pulled that load, Honeywell asked if I could do regular hauls for them. And then, job offers started pouring in. The Honeywell contract paid really well, and I got another truck and a driver.”

“Good for you! The company is finally growing! Before long, you’ll have a third truck, eh?”

Miranda laughed. “No, Hannah, things are a bit crazier than that. Everything I just told you, it happened within *one month* of breaking down in Lionsgate. At this point, I have *five* other trucks working for me now.”

“Randy! That’s incredible! So what’s the next step? Gonna find a place to settle down?”

“Still a step ahead of you,” Miranda smirked. “I decided a couple months ago that I finally had the money to settle down. And the two of us knew exactly where we wanted to go. I closed on a house just a few days ago, and I put in a bid for a piece of commercial land so I can finally have a real headquarters.”

“Where at?”

“That’s the best part!” Cassidy exulted, suddenly falling prey to a fit of uncontrollable giggles as her mom produced a business card and handed it to Hannah.

“Crossroads Trucking Incorporated,” Hannah read. She looked up from the card. “You re-branded?”

Miranda explained, “I can’t come up with any logical explanation for what happened to my company after I left this town a year ago. All I know is, I tried your advice, Hannah. I made the choice to forgive Daniel. I started taking Cassie to church. The second Sunday after the breakdown, we ended up in a church in a tiny town in northern Missouri.”

“God became real to me, Hannah,” Miranda professed. “But it never would’ve happened if you hadn’t brought me to a crossroads with myself. So I renamed the company, so I would never forget how I got there. But turn the card over. Check out my new location.”

“New location. Sixteen-forty Ronan Pike...Randy...that lot on the corner that used to be an abandoned arcade and video store? That’s where you’re building?”

“Cassidy!” Samantha squealed, grabbing her friend’s hands and dancing in a circle. “You’re here to stay? You’re actually here to stay? This is so exciting!”

“I am! Well, sort of. I *will* be!”

“Right,” Miranda nodded. “We’re here long enough to get things laid out for the new HQ, but while it’s getting built, I got a truck that needs to be on the road as much as possible all summer. Come the school year, I’m hopefully gonna have somebody else to drive my truck for me so Cassie can go to school. I’m getting to the point where I can’t manage the company *and* keep up with her schoolwork.”

“She’s always welcome to stay with us when you’re driving,” Samantha announced. “I get tired of being the only girl in the house sometimes.”

“I agree as far as Cassie staying with us as needed,” Hannah confirmed. “However, Sam, I gotta protest the idea that you’re the only girl.”

“No offense, Mom, but you’re not a girl,” Sam ribbed, “you’re a lady. It’s not the same thing.”

“Oh, thanks, you little sassitude!” Hannah snickered, playfully back-handing Samantha’s arm.

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Cassidy Perry, Part Thirteen

It’s the end of September, 2023. Thirteen years have gone by since Miranda and Cassidy made their new home in Lionsgate. And a lot of things happened in that time.

For starters, Allan Philips invited Miranda and Cassidy to dinner with him and his kids, soon after they moved into the city. Things happened, and in August 2011, only eleven months after Crossroads Trucking officially settled in Lionsgate, Miranda had a new last name, and

11-year-old Cassidy had a new dad and two siblings: twenty-year-old Aleisha, and twelve-year-old Danny.

Aleisha became Miranda's transportation manager, essentially overseeing all the company deskwork and freeing Miranda to drive routes, as well as train new drivers.

In 2013, Samantha's oldest brother, Jeremy, became one of those new drivers, and quickly became one of the best in the fleet.

In 2023, the USA split into a second Civil War, and the Confederated Republics of Scotia, the small autonomous nation to which Lionsgate belonged, found itself aligning, for the purpose of self preservation, with one of the multiple factions which formed.

Over the course of this war, Miranda and her fleet served as part of the critical logistics chain. But the biggest event of all was yet to come.

September 2023, Lionsgate came under direct assault by an enemy force. Though they were repelled, they managed to capture several high-profile individuals, including one Samantha Steele, sister to one of the army's most notorious leaders, Benjamin. She, and the other prisoners, were incarcerated in the Utah State Penitentiary, well behind the enemy lines.

During the rescue operation, all the prisoners were extracted to Scotian territory, including those imprisoned long before the war. Some were released to freedom from unjust sentences, others sent back to a deserving incarceration in Republic prisons. And among the prisoners, was a man in his mid-fifties, named Daniel West...

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"Miranda, Cassidy, thank you for coming so quickly. Aleisha, Danny, you too." Benjamin entered the jail's visitor waiting room. "Please, follow me to the warden's office. He loaned it to me while my Army boys re-evaluate everybody's sentences. Some are fit for release, some will be re-incarcerated, but under a modified sentence. Cass, while you're here, how is your defense force training coming?"

"It was great till they started the hand combat training. I fell asleep. I don't think I need to tell you how effective I am in that area," Cassidy smirked. The young military officer's pale cheeks flushed to a light rosy pink as he remembered the day when, as children, he had challenged the girl to a sparring match.

"To my credit, you're the only person who has ever managed to accidentally knock me out cold. But aye, given that you did actually pull that off, I can understand why the training would be boring now."

The five entered the warden's office, and Ben tossed a folder onto the large oak desk.

"One of the prisoners we pulled from Utah State. Samantha said his name might ring a bell. Possibly..." Ben sucked in a deep breath. "...possibly dig up some painful memories."

"Who—" Miranda opened the folder and her heart skipped a beat.

"Daniel West, age fifty-five, serving a life sentence for DUI homicide since 2003. Just four years after...well, never mind that. But...while I may have wondered a few times what happened to him, why bring Danny and Aleisha into this?"

"Did Allan ever tell you the story about his first wife?" Ben asked. Miranda nodded her head.

"Jemma Philips, professional dirt track racer. Had a fatal crash back in two-thousand...three..." Miranda's voice faltered as it occurred to her what Ben was getting at.

"That fatal crash was caused by one of the other racers. None other than Daniel West—former truck driver, turned race car driver and alcoholic."

"Randy's ex-boyfriend was the driver that killed Mom?" Danny's eyes grew wide with wonder. "And somehow... Randy and Dad ended up together, years and years later. That's insane."

"Wild, but true," Ben nodded. "But I asked the four of you to come for more than just this story. The deeper purpose is that all four of you are connected to him in some way. He already spent twenty years behind iron. And in that time, he sobered up. But as you saw, the records we pulled say he was in for life."

"So...what do you want with us?" Randy asked. "I already forgave him and moved on. You have Scotian law to refer to. Do whatever you think is best."

"Well, see, that's where my problem lies. By Scotian law, I could technically let him walk because he only had one criminal charge and he has been sober ever since. Except that the four of you were the ones he wronged, and none of you were involved in his first sentencing. So by Scotian law, you get a say in the verdict, and you have the option to put him away for as long as another twenty years."

"Can...can we meet him?" Aleisha asked. Ben nodded, pulling a key from the wall behind him.

"You can. I've told him bits and pieces, so he knows Miranda is here, and he knows she married the husband of the late Jemma Philips. But that's all."

“Does he know I’m here?” Cassidy asked.

Ben shook his head. “He doesn’t know you even exist.”

The walk to the cell was a quiet one. Perhaps the members of the group were simply too shocked at the road where destiny lead. Or perhaps they were contemplating what exactly to say upon meeting the man who had altered all of their lives so drastically.

Not that anyone really knew what to expect when Benjamin unlocked the cell door. As they walked in, they found a tall, but frail figure, sitting at a table in the center of the room. His hair and beard were fully grey, and his skin already bore a few wrinkles. Overall, he bore the appearance of a man ten years older.

“Daniel?”

The man lifted his head. “Miranda? It’s been a while.”

A hundred memories flooded Miranda’s mind. Those eyes. Those deep, mysterious, dark brown eyes. Though now marred with the fading of time, age, and sorrow, They were the same enchantingly dark eyes that she had fallen for so long ago. The same eyes she saw every day since then, for twenty-three years.

“Our daughter has your eyes, Daniel. I thought about you every single time I looked at her, and I hated myself for falling for you.”

Daniel seemed overcome with emotion. He buried his face in his arms and sobbed.

I’m sorry...I’m so sorry...”

Cassidy removed her tactical gloves and made her way around the table. She placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Dad,” she softly whispered.

The sobbing faded. Daniel slowly lifted his head and turned to look at Cassidy. His eyes filled with a sense of wonder as they shifted from the girl, over to her mother.

“You stuck it out and kept her...”

“I did,” Miranda replied quietly. “Her name is Cassidy.”

“Such a beautiful name,” Daniel whispered, turning to look at his daughter again. “For years, I tormented myself for ever suggesting you get rid of her. I deserve anything other than to be her father.”

“You’re right,” Cassidy suddenly wrapped her arms around Daniel. “But I forgive you for not wanting to keep me. And from now on, you’re my dad, and nothing else matters.”

Miranda stepped forward and placed her hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “And I forgive you for abandoning me.”

Now Danny and Aleisha joined them. “We, too, forgive you for what happened to our mom.”

Daniel buried his face in his hands. “But how?” He asked, “How could you forgive me for all the things I’ve done? Especially you, Miranda?”

“I resented you for a long time. But I learned to forgive you almost thirteen years ago,” Miranda replied, sitting down in a chair on the other side of the table. “It’s the grace and mercy of God, Daniel. He gave me the strength to forgive you. And if you let him, he can give you the strength to forgive yourself.”

Standing again, Miranda turned to Benjamin, who stood by the door.

“I think we’re done here, Ben. This man walks free today. Right now, if you’ll let him. If he’s willing to retrain for his CDL, I could use another driver. And Daniel, you can live with us and I’ll front your training costs.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Daniel whispered hoarsely. “Not after what I’ve done to you. Releasing me is more than I deserve. Life treated you alright, giving you a husband, a solid career, and beautiful children. I don’t want to impose myself on you. Just drop me off at the Army base. I’ll enlist in the war and stay out of your life for the rest of mine.”

“Daniel!” Miranda sharply quipped, startling the man, “Do you want to leave because you genuinely think it will make our lives better? Or are you still just running away from responsibility the way you were doing before you ended up in prison?”

“Running? No... Miranda, if there’s something you want me to do to try and make up for what I’ve done, tell me and I’ll do it. Anything. All I want now is whatever will make you happy.”

“Then come home, Daniel. I’m fifty-two and my husband of the past thirteen years was just killed in action a few weeks ago. I have three children, and though all of them are adults, only one was married, and she lost her soulmate on the same battlefield. At your age, I don’t think you’re gonna be much use on the battlefield. But you were an expert truck driver, and I need more drivers if the Army doesn’t want their supply chain to crack.”

“And not only that,” Cassidy added, “but you have a chance to try and be the dad you were too scared to be twenty-some years ago. Nothing can undo the fact that I’m your daughter.

So let's start over from scratch. From now on, it can be like you never ran away, and I never resented you for it. So, Dad, will you come?"