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HALLOWEEN HOSTAGES

by Carolyn Golledge

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Golden maple leaves fluttered across the car's windscreen, deserting the almost barren boughs overhead, adding to the multi-coloured carpet covering the dirt road. It was late October and brilliant sunshine lanced through the framework of skeletal branches. The day had been unnaturally warm, but as the sun lowered toward an horizon littered with forested hillsides, neat villages and corn-stubbed fields, it was scarred by a dark wall of cloud rolling down from the north. Noting that threat, John Book commented, "Could someone tell me why it always rains on weekends?" He shook his head in disgust, taking his eyes from the storm clouds to share a wry smile with his wife, who sat beside him.

Rachel shrugged. "It has been such a beautiful week. I'm glad I was able to finish all my cleaning or else we couldn't have left home."

Book's lips curled with a teasing smile. "We could have just locked up and left it in a mess!"

"John!" Rachel scolded.

"But," he continued, tilting his head toward the small boy who leaned forward from the back seat, "I'd have to get the big guy here to make a mess first! You two are neatness freaks!"

Samuel giggled. "That would be fun!" His mother gave him a look, and, hastily, he changed the subject. "I'm glad we could come too, Mama! It will be great to go to this camp with David!" He sighed as he added, "I hope it doesn't rain all weekend! They won't take us hiking if it rains."

"Maybe it'll snow," John consoled. "Then you can make forts and have snowball fights."

"Yeah?!" Samuel enthused.

Book laughed. "That's what we always did!"

Hearing the pleasure in her son's voice, Rachel smiled. "Is Rebecca still asleep, Samuel?" she asked, turning about to look over her shoulder at the baby strapped into the car seat. Samuel checked and replied in the affirmative, and Rachel relaxed back into her seat, her gaze going to the side window and the beautiful view as sunset's changing hues played across the hills. "Thank you, John," she said warmly. "It is a good idea. I'm sorry if I snapped at you before."

Book smiled and removed one hand from the steering wheel to squeeze her arm. "Hey, I'm the one who should apologise. I didn't give you much notice to get all our stuff packed."

"You didn't know until this morning either."

"Right!" Book laughed. "That's Andy for you! Strolls into work at ten thirty and tells me he and Jenny have changed their minds!"

"Well, it's all worked out for the best," Rachel decided. "They can go to the camp with David and Samuel, we can have a weekend away from home, and help out by feeding the animals for your friends."

"I'm glad they don't have any cows to milk!" Book snorted. Rachel and Samuel laughed. Book shifted to draw his wife closer. "Maybe we can make this a sort of honeymoon. We never did have one, y'know, and it's only a few weeks past our first anniversary."

"I know," Rachel said softly as she snuggled up against him. She remembered those dark days of last year: the hit-man's attack, how Daniel had saved Book's life when he had been wounded, how he had told John of her pregnancy. A Philadelphia hospital had been the setting for her reunion with the man she loved, they had been married there. Later came the horror of the trial and the moment she had feared him dead, but it had been Paul Schaeffer who lay broken and bleeding on the pavement before Philadelphia City Hall.

"Tired?" Book commented as the silence lengthened. "I guess I really had you running in circles after I called you this morning, huh?"

She lifted her head and kissed his cheek. "I'm not tired, John," she said. "I'm happy. It is still hard for me to believe that God has blessed me so much."

Book flicked her a quick but penetrating glance. "Me too. It's been the best year of my life." He looked back to his driving as they rounded another curve and headed down a steep hillside. "Well, here we are! That's Andy's place at the bottom on the rise."

Samuel craned to see over their shoulders, spotting a neat two-storey white-washed farmhouse almost hidden amid a grove of oak and birch trees. "There's David!" he announced joyfully.

A lanky, blond-haired boy came running up the circular drive, then jogged beside the car, grinning and waving as Book brought it to a halt behind his friend's van. Samuel immediately jumped out to greet David. Andrew Barnes appeared on the front porch, his arms laden with boxes. "Hello John, Rachel!" he called. "Glad you could make it!" As he came down the steps the uppermost box tilted and began to fall.

John hurried across to assist his friend. "You think you've got enough supplies here?" he teased as he placed the box behind the others in the back of the van.

Andrew snorted with amusement. "Jen's been baking all week!! Those kids won't go hungry!"

"Yeah?" Book said with interest, feeling empty after the long drive.

"Pumpkin pies!" Jennifer called from where she had arrived to help Rachel with Rebecca. "We had a bumper crop! If I never see another pumpkin it'll be too soon! I left some for you and Rachel."

"Thank you, Jennifer," Rachel smiled. "I have something for you too. Some preserves."

As the adults headed into the house, Samuel and David climbed onto the porch and made for the swing seat. Something in the window caught Samuel's attention and he stood and stared at the vivid orange, grinning face. "Did you make that?" he asked as David pulled him toward the swing.

"The Jack O Lantern?" David asked. "Yeah. Pretty good, huh?"

"Oh yes," Samuel complimented. "They look so scary all lit up at night! We were never allowed to have them. We're not supposed to celebrate Halloween."

"Why not?" David queried, his brows lowering into a puzzled frown.

Samuel only shrugged. "There are lots of rules like that when you're Amish." He sat beside David on the swing.

"But you're not Amish anymore, are you?"

"I still go to Amish school."

"I wish you could come to school with me."

"Maybe I can when it's time for High School. John says he wants me to go to a High School like the one he went to."

"Yeah!?" David smiled happily.

Samuel grinned. "I'd like that! But we have to wait and see what Mama and my Grossfather think."

"Oh." David's smile faded. "You're allowed to come to camp with me though, aren't you?"

"Oh sure! That was John's idea, but Mama likes it too!" Samuel turned about to admire the Jack O Lantern once more. "Is it hard to make one of those?"

"No," David said. "You just have to be careful with the knife. I could show you."

"Well ..." Samuel hesitated. "I would have to ask permission."

"Permission for what, Sam?" Book asked as he came back out of the house, on his way to get the suitcase from the car.

"Oh," Samuel flushed. "I was just looking at the Jack O Lantern."

Book frowned, wondering at the boy's discomfit. Then, remembering the Amish view of Halloween, he understood. He crossed to his step-son's side, and careful of his stiff leg, lowered himself to look directly into his eyes. "Would you like to make one, Sam?" he asked softly. The boy nodded, his eyes somewhat shamed. Book reached up and tousled the boy's fine brown hair. "There's nothing wrong with that. I've made dozens! Of course, I'll have to ask your mother if it's all right, but I don't think she'll mind."

Samuel's face came alight with joy. "Then we can make one together!"

"Well, maybe later," Book said. "Andy and Jenny are in a hurry to leave before that storm hits. In fact, they asked me to tell you two to get a move on and stow your gear in the van."

"Oh," Samuel said disappointedly.

"Geez, Sam," David intervened. "If you're gonna make a Jack O Lantern you'll have to do it this weekend! It's Halloween on Monday. We've got plenty of pumpkins. There's a whole stack of them out behind the shed, the ones Mom used for the pies. They're all scraped clean and ready to go! We could take one with us!"

"David!" Andrew called. "Move it! We're leaving in ten minutes!"

The boy got to his feet, but paused to ask, "Dad, can we take a pumpkin with us? Samuel wants to make a Jack O Lantern."

"Sure," Barnes agreed readily. "Looks like it's gonna rain all weekend. It'll give you something to do." He bent to put his load in the van and the boys raced off to choose their pumpkin.

"I haven't asked Rachel yet!" Book called after them, then grinned, shook his head and collected the suitcase.

"Anything I can carry?" Andrew offered.

"Yeah, thanks. That box of preserves," Book answered. He looked up as the sun disappeared behind the clouds. "Damn shame about that storm. I wouldn't want to be in your boots with twenty kids to entertain over a wet weekend."

Andrew sighed. "Yeah." He snapped his fingers as an idea occurred to him. "Hey! They all carve pumpkins! We'll make it a competition!"

"Good idea," Book agreed.

"Can you give me a hand to load them into the van, please? They're out behind the shed."

"Sure," Book said, placing the suitcase on the porch. "Lead on. Where's Tommy?" Tommy was the older of the Barnes' sons, and totally unlike David in temperament, but Book decided that was probably due to the impact of adolescence. Tommy would be fifteen now.

"Oh, he left an hour ago," Andy replied. "He's staying with a friend of his in town."

"He still giving you problems?" Book probed.

"Some," Barnes admitted. "He's so damned quiet, y'know? I just can't get him to open up. I know he hates it out here. Blames me for bringing him into what he calls the boondocks! He wants to go back to the city."

Book snorted. "Well, he can have it."

"I never thought I'd see the day you'd say that!"

"Well," Book smiled almost shyly. "I found something very special out here."

Barnes clapped his friend's shoulder. "She's a wonderful woman, John. I'm happy for you both." He nodded at the pile of pumpkins. There must have been more than two dozen hollowed out and left in neat stacks.

Book shook his head in amazement. "Now I know why Jenny never wants to see another pumpkin! That's a lot of pies! She cleaned all these?"

"David and I helped," Andrew replied. "C'mon, let's get 'em loaded before they get wet!"

* * *

"Look at this, Rachel!" John Book called excitedly from where he was seated on the floor beside his baby daughter. "She's standing up!"

Rachel turned from unpacking the clothing from the suitcase into the provided chest. Chubby-faced, smiling and gurgling, Rebecca stood on wobbly legs. She took one eager step toward her father, then lost her balance. John immediately propped her up. Delighted with this new game, Rebecca chuckled, reached out and grabbed at Daddy's hair, giving it a good hard tug. "Ow!" John called, trying unsuccessfully to duck away from her as the other hand grabbed for his ear. Rachel giggled. "Fine!" Book teased, talking to his daughter, "I'm being tortured and your mother laughs! You females are all the same!"

Laughing all the harder, Rachel nevertheless came to her husband's rescue. Gently, she disengaged Rebecca's tiny fists from her father's hair, lifted the child into her embrace and hugged her warmly. John got to his feet, took one of Rebecca's waving feet in his hand and began tickling it. "Now it's my turn!" he said with a wicked grin. He let go as the baby kicked. He looked at Rachel and said proudly, "Did you see what she did?"

"Yes," Rachel replied with a sly smile. "You have a bald spot now, dear!"

"Very funny!" John smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "I meant the way she stood up all by herself! And she nearly walked to me!"

"Uh-huh." Rachel leaned forward to give him a kiss. "It won't be long now and she'll be wrecking the house!"

Laughing, John returned the kiss, his gaze becoming soft and intense as he looked long into his wife's merry eyes. "I'm a lucky man. Now I have two lovely ladies who want to make my life fun!" He nodded toward the four poster bed that stood waiting invitingly at the back of their assigned guest room. "I think that's a goose feather mattress. Want to try it out?"

Rachel freed one hand to reach out and run her fingers along her husband's jaw, down the neck, then beneath the collar of his shirt. "I've laid out your pyjamas."

"Well," John drawled, returning her caresses as he gathered both wife and baby into his arms, "I'll get into them only if you promise to help me get out of them soon."

"John!" Rachel giggled. Rebecca squirmed between them, lifted an arm and snagged her father's hair again. "I think she's hungry!" Rachel laughed. "Would you go downstairs and heat up her bottle for me, please?"

"Sure," he winked. "Don't go away. I'll be right back to try on these PJs."

Downstairs, Book stood staring dreamily at the milk-filled bottle surrounded by bubbled and steam in the pot of boiling water atop the gas stove. He wasn't really thinking, happy to just let his mind drift, enjoying the feeling of complete contentment at the promise of the night and the life ahead of him. Never had life looked so good. Somewhere nearby he heard a dog bark, then became fully aware of sounds again: wind rushing through the harsh, dry leaves still clinging to the trees that cloaked the house, rain beginning to fall in thick, icy splats against the window panes, distant thunder, and ... something else. Something that didn't fit the pattern. Absently, he tried to identify that sound as he reached out to take the pot from the stove and turn off the gas.

That small, nagging sound suddenly erupted into an ear-splitting crash, and John Book's mood of dreamy contentment was utterly shattered.

The sound had been the outer door lock being picked. Now the inner one splintered as a heavy boot slammed into it, sending it crashing back against the wall. Darkness, cold and wet, surged into the cosy kitchen and swirled about Book. Startled, he dropped the pot of boiling water. He jumped hurriedly back to avoid being scalded, watching and cursing as the baby's bottle spilled onto the floor. He looked sharply back to the door, aware that he was under attack, already backing away toward the kitchen bench on top of which lay a long, wicked carving knife.

"Go ahead. Pick it up," the intruder snarled from the doorway. He lifted his pistol a little, taking better aim. "I'll enjoy taking your fingers off with a bullet!"

Defeated, Book raised his empty hands over his head, hot anger burning away that first moment's shock as he heard his attacker's laugh of pleasure.

"Wise move, farm boy!" the man taunted as he stepped into the kitchen. Two more men followed him, all carrying guns, their eyes wary as they looked about the room. One, a tall, bald-headed black man dressed in lined shirt, vest and jeans, put down his rifle to close the door.

"Geez, Boss," he complained, "did ya have to wreck the door! It's freezing out there!"

The 'Boss' flicked his companion a contemptuous glance. "So? We'll be leavin' soon! You and Stubs go check upstairs. There are lights on up there."

"No," Book said quickly, instinctively moving to block the passageway. "No need for that. I can give you whatever you want. There's only my wife and baby up there. Leave them out of this."

Boss's death-cold eyes snapped back to his prisoner. "I'll make the decisions, farm-boy!" He nodded to his henchmen. "Go get the woman."

"Wait!" Book pleaded. "You'll frighten her. I'll call her down." Not waiting for permission, he turned and moved toward the foot of the stairs. "Rachel!" he yelled. "Rachel! Come down here, please! Leave Reb ..." His call was cut short as a rifle barrel jabbed hard into his back, almost causing him to fall as he overbalanced against the bottom step.

"Shut up!" Boss growled. "I make the moves here! You got that!"

Book snarled, his eyes dark with rage as he held his captor's gaze. Surprise and fresh appraisal crossed the intruder's face as he realised that he had underestimated his prey. Most people would be white and shaking with fear. This man was anything but, his expression hard and cold, full of intelligence and courage, eager for the chance to turn defence to attack. "Who are you?" Boss asked suspiciously.

"The name's Book," John said levelly. "If my wife and baby are harmed in any way, it's the name you'll take to your grave."

Astounded, Boss blinked, then nodded sharp appreciation of his foe. "My, my, what a hero!" he sneered. "We'll see how long that lasts!"

"John?" Rachel called, coming to the head of the stairs. "What is taking ...?" Her eyes rounded with horror as she saw the three intruders, all with guns, all looking up at her.

"Easy, Rachel," Book called soothingly. "It'll be all right." He looked back at Boss, desperate to distract his attention. Stubs, a pot-bellied, stubble-jawed slob, was eyeing Rachel's figure, gleaming hunger flaring in his tiny eyes. "What do you want with us?" Book asked.

"I want your pretty wife down here now!" Boss shouted. "Stubs!"

Happy to obey, Stubs hurried up the stairs, his flabby belly flopping over his low-hung jeans. He grabbed at Rachel's elbow and began pulling her down the stairs. "Keep your hands off her!" Book warned. He climbed the first step, intending to go to Rachel, but the rifle fell hard against his kidneys, knocking him to his knees, jarring the artificial one badly.

"You're a very slow learner, Mister Book!" Boss hissed. "We're going to have to give you some extra lessons!"

Rachel, sobbing soundlessly with terror, reached Book's side. He stood stiffly and drew her into the protective circle of his arms. "Shh," he soothed. He was outraged afresh as he felt her uncontrollable trembling. He knew the images from the past that would be filling her mind. "We'll be all right. We'll give them what they want and they'll leave." He looked up at Boss. "Right?"

"Right," Boss agreed with a cold smile. "A point for you, Mister Book. Maybe you'll make it to the top of the class in one piece yet!" He waved his pistol, indicating that his prisoners should move ahead of him back into the kitchen. "There's no need for anyone to get hurt. We have

some questions. Give us the right answers and there'll be no problems. Tige," he said to the black man. "Check the other rooms."

"No!" Rachel pleaded, turning about, pulling free of her husband's arms.

Book held her back. "Our baby daughter's the only one up there. If you so much as touch a hair on h...!!" Book was unable to complete the sentence as Boss slammed the gun into his solar plexus. Gasping uselessly for air, Book doubled up.

"I told you to stop making threats!" Boss shouted. "Stubs! Get him to the kitchen and tie him up! Move it, Tige! I want those rooms checked out!" He grabbed Rachel away from where she was bent over her husband, and pushed her ahead of him into the brightly lit kitchen.

Immobilised by sheer terror, Rachel stood with her back to the refrigerator, her frantic gaze shifting from Stubs as he shoved Book onto a chair and tied his hands behind him, then to the stairs where the black man had disappeared toward her daughter.

"What do you want?" Book repeated calmly as he got his breath back.

Casually, Boss lowered himself to sit opposite Book on the far side of the polished wooden table. He lay the gun atop its gleaming surface, one hand resting upon it, the other reaching inside his pocket and taking out a pack of cigarettes. He took his time, lighting and puffing a breath of smoke before replying. "Pumpkins," he said precisely. "We want our pumpkins."

"What!?!!" Book gaped, his expression registering utter puzzlement.

"There's only the kid up there, Boss," Tige reported as he came back.

"Good," Boss nodded. He looked back to Book. "Where's your son, Tommy?"

"Tommy?" Book spluttered, momentarily off balance. "He's not my son. And he's not here."

Boss frowned and looked toward the black man. "What was the kid's last name?"

"Barnes," Tige answered. "But this is the right place. I've made exchanges with him here before."

"Look," Book explained. "The Barnes have gone away for a few days. We're watching the place for them."

"Huh!" Stubs snorted. "Not doing a very good job of it!" Giggling nervously, he moved closer to Rachel who instantly edged away from him, backing into a corner. "You're a real looker, lady!" he leered. "No need to be scared of me. I won't hurt you."

"Get away from her!" Book snarled. He made to stand, but Tige reached out and pushed him back into his seat.

"Stubs!" Boss snapped, and the fat man reluctantly moved back a pace. "So, you're not Barnes," he continued, speaking to Book. "Don't matter. We only want the pumpkins Tommy left for us."

"Real special pumpkins!" Tige gloated.

"Right," Boss agreed. "He hid something of value to us in them. He said they were all hollowed out, stacked and waiting for us behind the shed out there. Well, we looked. Real careful-like. There ain't even the smell of pumpkins out there!" He leaned menacingly across the table. "So now, Mister Book, you tell us where they are and we'll leave you and your family in peace."

Book seriously doubted that. He guessed they were drug-runners. Such men wouldn't leave witnesses and would have no qualms about cold-blooded murder. He flicked a look at Rachel, seeing the same conclusion in her frightened eyes. There was no way either of them would lead these killers to Samuel and the other children at the camp. Book looked back to his captor, shrugged and said, "Hey, we only just arrived here. How the hell would we know where the damned pumpkins are!?!"

Boss nodded one to Tige and the black man lashed out with a close-fisted jab to the side of Book's mouth. He almost fell from the chair, but straightened, glaring at his tormentor, blood spilling from his cut lips. Rachel made to go to him, and Stubs grabbed at her, drew her hard against himself, and began kissing her throat, one hand clutching at her breast, the other reaching low to pull up the hem of her skirt.

Book lurched to his feet and hurled himself toward the slob who was pawing his wife. Seeing him coming, eyes widened with alarm, Stubs released Rachel, his hands scrabbling back to the counter toward his gun, but too late. Book's head rammed him square in his gut, and he let out one agonised 'oof' and fell with comic slowness to his knees. Book didn't stop there. He straightened, and, back to the counter-top, leaned against it to kick the kneeling man in the groin. At the same time he closed his

bound hands about the carving knife. He took a step over the sprawled henchman, urging Rachel forward toward the door leading to the stairs, but that was all the victory allowed him. Tige sprang toward him, rifle raised, and, at a hopeless disadvantage with his hands tied behind him, Book turned to face the attack, shielding Rachel. Tige didn't shoot, there was no need. He swung the rifle barrel and connected a glancing blow to Book's forehead, the upraised sight tearing a line over the man's temple, across the eye and on to the cheekbone. Book gave a muffled grunt and collapsed limply to the wooden floor, blood already flowing from the gash.

Rachel screamed and moved down to him, but Tige pushed her away. Stubs re-entered the fray, mad and hurting. He got to his feet and began kicking into the fallen man, landing powerful blows to ribs, stomach and groin. Then, as Book groggily curled into a protective ball, Stubs began slamming his booted feet into the unprotected back, kidneys and thighs, surprised when a mis-aimed kick to the back of the knee was the only blow that produced a cry of agony. "Tender spot, huh!?" he sneered. "What a shame!?" He landed a second blow on the knee with the same result.

"Stop it!" Rachel screamed, breaking free of the black man's hold, fury and terror lending her strength. She ran forward and pushed Stubs backward. Off balance, he fell. He sat glaring murderously at her as she went to her knees beside her bloodied, semi-conscious husband.

"You filthy whore!" Stubs snarled. He spotted the carving knife where Book had dropped it. He reached for it and began getting up. "I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget!"

"That's enough!" Boss roared. "Put down the knife! Both of you, calm down!"

Tige moved forward and tugged the knife away from Stubs who backed off sullenly, still glaring his hatred at the couple crouched on the floor. Ignoring them, Rachel stood, took up a dish cloth, soaked it in the sink, then knelt again, holding it over the wound in Book's brow. She watched worriedly as he began to come round fully, moaning under his breath as he squinted and blinked up at her.

"You ... all ... right?" Book asked weakly. Unable to find her voice, Rachel nodded and managed a feeble smile.

"Get him up!" Boss ordered. Tige grabbed Book under the arms and dragged him to his feet. Book cried out as his weight came down on his bad leg. Those kicks hadn't helped his frozen, surgically wired knee. As he was slammed back onto the chair, fresh pain flared in his chest and

back. There were probably cracked ribs as well as bruises. 'You're doin' just great here, Book, m'boy!' he thought sarcastically. Blearily, he looked across the table to Boss.

"That was foolish," Boss said mildly. "I told you, all we want is those pumpkins and we'll go."

"Why is it I find that hard to believe?" Book taunted.

Boss ignored the question. "Where are those pumpkins?" he repeated, his tone full of dangerous-sounding patience.

"I told you ..." Book began, then drew a sharp, terrified breath as Tige produced a flick knife, grabbed at Rachel and held the blade to her throat.

Boss smiled like a cat toying with its victim. "You might like to reconsider your answer, Mr Book," he advised. "Think very carefully. Don't lie to me again. You know where they are. They were here this morning. We know that. Tommy assured us they'd be here tonight. Whatever happened to them this afternoon, you must know about it. Tell me."

Book's eyes hadn't moved from that gleaming blade pressed into the flesh of Rachel's throat. "You're right," he said very quietly. "I do know where they are." His eyes moved steadily back to hold his captor's gaze, flat, cold and hard with icy anger as he added, "But you'll never find out while your goon has his hands on my wife!"

"Tige," Boss said calmly, his eyes still locked with Book's. "Let her go." The black man obeyed, and Rachel ran, sobbing, to her husband's side.

"You can't tell them!" she began. "Samuel will ..."

Book cut her off, not wanting her to give away more. "My step-son, Samuel, helped us move the pumpkins this afternoon. We wanted to get them under shelter before the storm hit.'

"Where's your step-son now?" Boss said suspiciously.

"Gone with the Barnes for the weekend. Come on." Book continued, struggling to get to his feet. "I'll take you to your damned pumpkins then you can get the hell away from my family!"

"My, my! You are in a hurry all of a sudden!" Boss sneered. "We already searched inside the shed. They're not there."

"Right," Book lied smoothly. "We took them down to the boat-house, over the hill, by the river."

Boss's eyes narrowed. "Why would you do that?"

"We were planning to bring the kids here for a picnic on Halloween." Book shrugged. "They were going to carve Jack O Lanterns. Come on. I'll have to show you where it is. There's no light out there and it's a rough track through the woods. Do you have flashlights?" He took a step forward, then winced, cold-sweat pouring from him as sickening pain set fire to his knee.

"Something wrong, Mister Book?" All of Boss's instincts were sending out alarms. There was much more to this man than met the eye.

"Football knee," Book lied again. "The idiot over there didn't help it any."

Stubs took insult and moved forward, but Boss waved him off. "Very well," he concluded. "Take us to this boat-house. But I warn you, Book, you had best deliver what I want. I'm leaving Tige here with your wife. She'll be unharmed if we come back with my cocaine."

"Drugs, huh?" Book sneered. "I thought so. How did Tommy get involved with you people?"

Boss smiled. "Money, Mister Book. Kids never have enough of it. He would have done very well for us if not for that storm. Now - get moving, and remember, your wife's safety depends on your co-operation."

Lashed by stinging, icy rain upon open, bleeding gashes; slipping several times on the muddied hillside, Book was far from comfortable. His hands remained tied tightly behind his back, he leg was killing him, and he had no protection from the freezing night, dressed only in thin shirt and jeans. Still, he barely noticed, his senses keeping track only of the beam of the flashlight he followed. The track was more a stream, flooded with storm-water, gushing about his ankles. Sodden, black branches reached out to snag clothing or slap at exposed flesh. It was a miserable night, but Book was more or less oblivious to it, concentrating only on his frantic plans to protect his family. Of course there'd be no pumpkins in the boat-house, but there should be a rifle. It probably wouldn't be

loaded, but his captors weren't to know that. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was all he had. Meantime at least he had two of the bastards, and especially Stubs, out of the house and away from Rachel and Rebecca. If he could take care of these two, then get the jump on Tige ...

"How much further?" Stubs complained. "Christ, it's freezing out here!"

"Down the other side," Book shouted, not slowing his limping stride. As they reached the crest, a bright rolling sheet of lightning highlighted the swollen river below, and they could see the dark blot of the boat-house against it.

"So far, so good, Mister Book," Boss said. "Keep it up."

Book scowled and plodded onward, finding the footing even more difficult going downhill. Eventually, out of breath, frozen and sore, he limped up onto the boat-house porch. "Locked!" he shouted, indicating the door.

Boss nodded to Stubs who stepped up and kicked it in. The door opened onto pitch blackness. "Where's the light?" Boss asked.

"No power," Book lied, moving after Stubs to come inside. His time was up. It was now or never. "There should be a lantern over here," he continued, moving toward where he knew the rifle would be hanging on the wall above the workbench.

"Freeze," Boss ordered suddenly. "I don't trust you, Book. I don't trust you at all. Stubs, find that lantern!" As the fat man moved to obey, Boss aimed his flashlight into the interior. "I don't see any pumpkins, Mister Book."

"They're at the back, against the wall, behind the boats. Come on, I'll show you." No chance to get to the gun directly, Book thought, praying that Boss's curiosity would get the better of him. Sure enough, the drug-runner came up close behind him, dogging his footsteps. Book knew the boat-house well. There were three canoes strapped in racks by a spring-loaded barrier. Just as Boss stepped in front of them, Book set it off. The canoes came tumbling down, knocking Boss from his feet. Book turned, searching desperately in the dark for the gun. He couldn't see it and knew Boss would reclaim it before he got any closer. He dodged further into the shielding darkness intended to circle round, get to the rifle. "Watch out!" Boss called. "He got away from me. He's somewhere in the back! Come and help me find him!"

Stubs obeyed, thus aiding Book's plan. Silently, he made his way back to the front wall, desperate to reach the rifle, but first needing something with which to cut through his ropes. He knew there was a sharp, upturned edge on the vice by the work bench. He had cut his hand on it once. He found it and began sawing away, but in his haste he knocked some tools to the floor. "Shit!" he cursed, knowing he had given away his location. He had to leave his cutting edge, moving as fast as he dared. Not everything had been left where he remembered it from weeks ago. He didn't know what it was that tripped him, but he went down heavily, the jolt of pain in leg and ribs stunning him. He scrambled up again, backing towards the wall, wondering how he could reach or use the rifle with his hands tied.

All his plans suddenly crumbled as the flashlight beam found him, flicking immediately to his face, blinding him. He tried to hide from it, but it tracked him, and Boss called, "Don't move again, or I'll put a hole right between your eyes."

Damning his luck, Book obeyed. As Boss moved forward, the beam of light moved with him, losing its target. Stubs added to the distraction by calling, "there ain't no pumpkins in here, Boss! This bag of shit lied to us! Look, up there, on the wall! That's what he was after!!" Stubs aimed his flashlight at the rifle and Boss instinctively followed suite.

Book knew he was as good as dead now they had been robbed of their prize. He had to make a break for it, double back to the house. He dove headlong for the door, rolled across the porch, off its edge, and lurched to his feet; but slipped and fell again in the mud. It was hard going, getting back to his feet with one stiff leg and his hands tied; and it cost him his lead. Stubs and Boss came charging out of the boat-shed, their torch beams taking only moments to track him down. He had gone only a few yards, running at a stumbling pace toward the shelter of the gully on the left of the shed. Gunfire suddenly competed with the storm noise, and Book saw the bullets spray mud and wood chips as they impacted about him. He had almost made it to cover when one of those bullets found its mark. It caught him a shocking blow to the top of his left shoulder, sending him plunging head first over the edge of the gully onto the rocks and logs ten feet below. He came to a jarring halt as his head struck one of those boulders. A sudden, deeper darkness and a hollow silence swallowed him up.

* * *

"There he is!" Stubs shouted a few minutes later. "I told ya I got him!" He stared down at the still figure, sprawled over the rocks below.

Boss was not impressed. "And who's going to tell us where our cocaine is now?!" he snapped. "Climb down there and see if he's still alive."

"Me?" Stubs protested, looking fearfully down into the dark, boulder-strewn, flooded gully. "It looks like its flooded down there, Boss. The woman can tell us where they stashed the stuff." He fell silent, feeling the anger in the other man's presence. He'd be safer in the gully. "I'm goin'! I'm goin'!" he surrendered.

Slipping, sliding and collecting bruises, mud, and cuts; Stubs made his way to Book's side. He had been following the beam of light directed from above by Boss; now he reached for his own flashlight to better examine the wounded man. "Oh shit!" he muttered as he saw the thick, dark stain. Blood was soaking heavily through the thin material of the shirt, spreading rapidly as it mixed with the rainwater. "I think he's dead!"

"Make sure!" Boss called.

Stubs bent closer. "He ain't movin', Boss!" he shouted back. "He's bleedin' like a stuck pig and I don't think he's breathin'!" He slid his hand inside the shirt and pressed it, against the ribs. "Hey, I think I can feel his heart beatin'!" He paused, uncertain as he lost the pulse. "Maybe."

"Throw some water over him," Boss advised.

Stubs gaped. "Jesus!" he swore. "It's comin' down in bucket loads and he wants me to throw some water over him!" Sure, Boss!" he called sarcastically. "Whatever you say!" He needed only to bend down to reach the torrent rushing past the unconscious man's head. The creek level was rising rapidly. He cupped the icy water and splashed it onto Book's face. "Oh Christ!" he cursed, only now seeing the blood seeping from a new wound behind Book's ear. He dumped more icy water over him, but Book didn't bat an eyelid. "This is crazy!" Stubs complained. He stood and shouted back up the bank. "He's cracked his skull open on the rocks! If he ain't dead, he's dyin'! We sure as hell ain't gonna get anythin' more outa him!"

"Damnit!" Boss cursed. "All right. Get back up here. We'll try the woman."

"Sounds good to me," Stubs chuckled. "I could use some warming up!"

* * *

The past hour had been the longest of Rachel's life. Rebecca had begun to cry shortly after John and the others had left. Tige had allowed her to go upstairs, bring the baby down to the kitchen and feed her. That action, and the need to protect her daughter, had been all that had kept her from coming apart under the unceasing weight of terror. All that had kept her from picturing what may have happened to her husband when his captors had discovered they had been cheated of their precious drugs. Rachel's hand shook as she held the now almost empty bottle to Rebecca's lips. Her daughter was asleep, no longer needed feeding, but Rachel didn't notice. All her attention was focused on the sounds of the night beyond the door, her eyes fixed upon it. Still she jumped, waking Rebecca and dropping the bottle as that door finally opened. Drenched and muddied, Boss and Stubs entered. Rachel stood, craning to see beyond them, desperate to find John's face, fearful that he should be last. Her heart seemed to come to a stop with the sound as the door slammed shut again. He had not returned to her.

"Where's our coke?" Tige asked.

"Not there," Boss answered angrily. "He lied."

"Where is the shitter then!?" Tige growled. "I'll beat the truth out of him!"

All the strength drained from Rachel so that she collapsed back onto the seat. Stubs moved over to her, smiling evilly at her, revelling in the despairing shock he saw in her eyes. "Your darlin' ain't never comin' back." He said gloatingly, answering Tige as well. "He tried to make a break for it, and I fill him full of holes. See? I've got his blood all over me."

"No!" Rachel whispered, shock making her dizzy. "No. John, please God, no!" Unconsciously, she had tightened her grip on the baby. Rebecca began to cry. Rachel remained staring at the door, disbelieving that she would never see her husband again.

"Now sweetheart," Stubs leered. "You and I are gonna have some fun! And your old man won't be doin' no more heroic rescues!"

Rachel blinked, her gaze settling with sickened horror at the blood splattered on the man's coatsleeves.

* * *

Nightmarish visions grabbed at the silken threads of John Book's consciousness, so that they snapped one after the other, continually dropping him back into a pit of nothingness. A pit from which he knew he needed urgently to escape. The nightmares all promised horrible fates for Rachel and his daughter if he did not fight his way free. But even the stronger threads of awareness gave way under the crushing weight of agony that awaited him beyond the brim of the pit. Still he struggled, remaining unmoving and unaware for only brief minutes, before terror brought him to near-wakefulness yet again. Snow began to fall softly, mixing with the red fluid flowing from his shoulder, the white trying to hide it as if to provide him with a blanket.

Nothing would have been easier for Book than to lie there and die, to give in to the drowsiness caused by shock, blood loss, and severe cold. Rachel needed him. His daughter needed him, and so he tried one more time. A new nightmare brought him fully awake, and he discovered this one was real. He was drowning. Icy water flowed in a series of splashing tides, surging over the boulder beside his head, coming down forcefully upon his face. He swallowed water whenever he tried to draw breath, coughing and choking, terror giving him some strength. He managed to roll over and use numbed hands to push himself clear of the water. Fire burned in his wounded shoulder, and he almost welcomed the warmth. Never had he known such intense, bone-gnawing cold. He shivered and shook, shaking like an aspen leaf in a storm, pain flaring in new places at the movement. Darkness and snow closed about him, and he felt dizzy, disoriented, and sick. The night was pitch black, but he doubted his eyes would be of much use even should there be light. His head pounded and throbbed mercilessly, bringing nausea to wash over him in waves, weakening him still further.

Somehow, he struggled to his feet, the thought of what Rachel might now be suffering giving him the will to keep moving. He stumbled and fell many times, but never stayed down long. He followed the creek bed, away from the roaring of its junction with the swollen river, heading upstream. There, he knew, lay a bridge where the road came up from the village and circled around to join with another that led to the house. It was a quicker, easier route than that he'd taken over the hill. He hadn't wanted his captors to know that, had succeeded there at least. How long had he been unconscious? Had there been enough time for his enemies to return to the house? What was happening to Rachel?

Desperately, he blocked out the strength-sapping negative thoughts, needing all his energy, all his will just to put one foot before the other. He found the bridge, clawed his way backwards up the embankment, staggered out onto the road, and collapsed.

How long he lay there, he had no way of knowing, but bright, searing light awoke him. Groggily, he struggled to sit up and hands reached to help him. "Easy! Easy!" a voice urged. "Don't try to move! God Almighty! You're covered in blood! And your hands are tied! What the hell happened to you?! Geez, man, I almost ran over you! C'mon, I'll get you into my car. We gotta get you to a hospital!"

"No!" Book protested, wincing as he shook his head. "H...have to get back to Rachel."

"Who?" his rescuer enquired. "Is there someone else out here?"

"No. Back at the house," Book mumbled. "My w-wife."

"Okay. Look, let's get you outa the rain first, then you can tell me. Good god, you're like a block of ice!" Strong arms encircled Book's waist, heaving him to his feet and almost carrying him to the car. "Watch your head," the driver instructed, lowering him carefully into the passenger's seat. "Looks like you already split it open!"

Stunning, blessed warmth enveloped Book, bringing shock to the surface, and he began retching, leaning from the car to throw up. When the spasms were finished, the same helping hands draped a blanket over his shoulders and eased him back against the seat, then closed the door. Gratefully, he leaned his aching head against the head rest, and closed his eyes, the bright light adding to the pain there. The driver climbed in beside him, and he felt a tugging behind his back, then his arms came free as the man untied him. "Th-thanks," Book said weakly. "Who are you?"

"Terry. Terry Walters. Travelling salesman." There was a chuckle as the man addressed, "Very lost travelling salesman! I don't suppose you can tell me how to get you to a hospital?"

"No hospital," Book repeated. "Rachel. My wife. They have my wife and baby."

"The people who did this to you?" Walters asked.

"Yeah." Book replied, desperately fighting to hang on to consciousness as he began to drift. "Have you got any alcohol?"

"Well - yeah, but I don't think you should."

"I need it now!" Book demanded. "I'm gonna pass out without something to keep me going! I've got to get back to my wife!"

"Okay. Sure." Walters fumbled in the glove compartment and came up with a bottle of Johnny Walker. "Here you are."

Book felt pressure as the bottle was pressed against his hands, but he couldn't grasp it. He had practically no sensation from the elbows down, badly affected by exposure.. "Damn!" he cursed.

"Here. Let me," Walters offered. He uncapped the bottle and lifted it to Book's lips, only now really noticing the gashes, bruising and swelling on the man's face. "Christ! They really worked you over, didn't they!" The liquor stung the cut lips and Walters pulled it away as Book choked and spluttered. He waited a moment, then fed him more.

Book felt a wonderful blaze burning its way to his stomach, then spreading out, bringing renewed strength and feeling to his limbs. It also made him more aware of the beating he had taken. God, he hurt all over! He couldn't decide whether shoulder, knee or head was torturing him the most. Despite his will, he moaned. Walters put the bottle away, took out some aspirin and fed them to him. "Man, you are in bad shape," the salesman exclaimed. "You're bleeding all over my car! They shot you?"

"Yeah," Book said, his voice hoarse with pain.

"Damn, you could be dying, y'know! Are you sure you don't want ...?"

Book turned burning, desperate eyes upon his rescuer, his vision clear enough now for him to see a young face, all frightened, wide eyes and cold-ruddy cheeks under a wind-tousled mop of sandy-brown hair. "Jesus Christ!" he cursed. "They're probably raping my wife right now, and you want me to go to a hospital!"

"Sorry," Walters said softly. He reached back into the glove compartment. "In that case, maybe this'll help you more than the whiskey." He produced a .38 revolver and lay it on Book's lap.

Tears of gratitude and relief filled Book's eyes. Before he got the chance to respond to this godsend. Walters had turned off the interior light, started the engine, and asked, "Which way?"

"Turn her round. Head back up the hill."

"Right," Walters nodded. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Book. John Book. You'll never know how glad I am to meet you, Terry."

"No thanks necessary. Let's just get the bastards!"

"I like the way you operate," Book complimented, feeling himself fading again. "Take the next turn to the left. Have you ever been in a gunfight before?"

"No, but I'll do my best," Walters said calmly.

"I'm a police officer," Book explained. "I've been trained for these things. I don't want you hurt. I can handle this."

"Bullshit!" Walters exclaimed. "I'll give you even money you can't even stand up for more than five minutes! I'm coming with you, and that's final. I can take care of myself. Is this it?"

"Yeah. Look, Terry, thanks, but ..."

"How close do you want me to go?" Walters asked, ignoring him. "If they hear a car we could be in trouble, but then I don't think you can make it far on foot."

Book smiled grimly, glad of the help. "I'll make it. Let me out just before you get to the drive."

"Are you sure? What are you going to do?"

"Divide and conquer," Book answered. He tried to pick up the gun but his hands were still too numb. "Damn!" he muttered, then tucked them under his armpits to warm them. "It's only fifty yards to the house from there. Give me a minute, then you go up to the door."

"What!?"

"You wanna help, you do as I say, otherwise forget it."

"Okay. Sure. But what's your plan?"

* * *

Inside the house, Boss and the others were having no luck getting any information from Rachel. "I think she's in shock or somethin'," Tige muttered. He looked down at the woman who sat staring blankly into space. Her baby daughter gurgled and smiled, waving a tiny fist, reaching out for

Tige's shiny belt buckle. "You shouldn't have told her you killed her old man, Stub."

"So, what are we gonna do now!?" Stubs sneered. "Give her some hot tea? Hold her hand? Are you goin' soft in your old age or what?! I'll get her tongue movin' again." He grabbed at Rachel's hair and yanked her head back. She screamed and reached up to free herself, her eyes focusing in pure terror upon her tormentor. "Now, darlin'," Stubs taunted, "You wanna talk, or will we just go up to the bedroom!?" He pulled hard on her hair again. Rachel cried out and struggled against the hold. Rebecca began to cry.

"Take the kid outa here," Boss told Stubs.

"No! No!!" Rachel screamed, clutching at her baby as Tige reached for her.

"He ain't gonna hurt her," Tige said, giving a threatening look to his partner. "He'll just put her in her crib." He tried to free the baby from the woman's arms, but she hung on tighter. Stubs reached round, grabbed her wrists, and jerked her arms hard behind her.

"No, please! No!" Rachel begged, tears of pain and horror streaming down her face as she watched the black man give her baby to Stubs, who left the room with her.

"Shut her up!" Boss ordered urgently. "There's a car coming into the drive! Damn!" All three watched as the headlights shone through the window, growing rapidly brighter, until finally the car came to a halt a little way up the drive, behind the other two parked vehicles. They heard a car-door slam, and footsteps tramping through fallen leaves as someone came toward the porch. Tige had clamped his hand over Rachel's mouth, and was holding her other arm tightly, preventing any movement. Boss picked up his gun, crossed to them, and instructed, "I'll take her into the parlour." He glared down at his prisoner. "One sound out of your and I'll snap your brat's neck! You understand me!?" White with fear, Rachel nodded. Boss grabbed her elbow and dragged her up. "Tige," he ordered. "Whoever that is, tell him we don't want any, and get rid of him quick!"

Tige nodded, his eyes upon the door as he listened to the footsteps cross the porch. He checked that his handgun was properly concealed beneath his shirt.

The rapping at the door grew louder and more insistent. "I'm comin'! I'm comin'! Keep yer pants on!" Tige called, anger taking the edge off his fear as he opened the door. A young rain-soaked man in a trench coat stood squinting at him as the brighter light reached his eyes. "Yeah?" Tige asked, relieved that he wasn't facing a sheriff or the like.

"Umm," Walters began nervously. He had heard screams as he let Book out at the head of the drive, and he wondered if the man had the self-control to keep to the original plan. "I was wondering if you could help me."

"Whaddya want!?" Tige scowled.

"Just some directions back to town. I'm lost."

Tige relaxed. "Oh. Head back up the hill, take the first junction, then a left, a right, and you'll be back on the highway. Follow the signs from there."

"Thanks. Ahh," Walters added apologetically, "I'm on empty. Can you give me some gas?"

"Christ!" Tige cursed. He looked back nervously as he heard a sound from the parlour. He ran his hand over his bald head, then looked angrily back to the young man on the porch. "This ain't no gas station!!"

"I know." Walters said with a weak smile. "But I don't think I'd make it further than the hill without some. Maybe, umm, maybe I could siphon some from your tank?"

"What!?" Tige yelled. Upstairs the baby cried more loudly than ever. Tige would like to go check on the kid. He didn't trust Stubs. "Okay! Okay!" he surrendered.

"Thanks. I really appreciate it." As Tige didn't move, Walters added, "Ahh, could you come out and unlock it for me, please?"

"Shit!" Tige scowled. He patted his trouser pockets, felt the keys there, and stepped out onto the porch, closing the door behind him. "It's damned cold out here, y'know!?" he complained, following the man up the tree-lined drive, into deeper darkness.

"Sorry to have to bother you," Walters replied. "This won't take long."

"Yeah! Yeah!" Tige snapped. He crossed behind his van, out of sight of the house, pulled the keys from his pocket, and bent down to open the fuel tank lock. And that was the last he knew for some time. Something slammed into the back of his head with enough force to crush his skull. He was unconscious before he hit the muddy drive.

Walters stared at the crumpled figure, then looked up to John Book, who it seemed, had used almost all his reserves of strength to deliver the blow with the .38 butt. He leaned heavily against the van, shivering and wincing, panting with exertion. He squatted down and hung his head, trying to overcome the dizziness.

"Uh, you okay?" Walters asked lamely. This was turning into one hell of a night.

"Just dizzy." Book peered up at his new found ally. "You did good, Terry. Thanks. One down, two to go. If they've hurt Rachel, I swear I'll ..." He didn't finish the thought but pushed himself to his unsteady feet, instead. "I heard her screaming."

Walter's looked away from Book's desperate eyes, back to the unconscious man. "You want me to tie him up?"

"No. He won't be coming round for a long time. Take his gun. Stay out here and watch the house. If any other man comes out, shoot him." Walters gaped. "It's us or them. Remember that. I'm going in through the basement."

"But there's two of them!" Walters protested.

"I know," John said simply, then he turned and disappeared into the dark, the .38 held ready before him.

* * *

"Please, let me go to my baby!" Rachel begged again as she heard Rebecca's cries.

"Shut up!" Boss ordered. "Christ, what's Tige doing out there!?" He crossed to the window and peered out, but could see nothing in the rain-lashed night. "Shit!"

Unguarded, Rachel began edging toward the stairs, desperate to get to Rebecca. Boss turned about, spotted her, and dragged her back. "Bitch!" he snarled. "I told you to stay put!" He slapped Rachel hard across the

mouth, knocking her to the floor. She began sobbing, holding her hand to her bleeding lips. "Stop your snivelling, or I'll give you another one!" Boss warned. Rachel quietened, and in the sudden stillness, Boss heard the creaking of floorboards in the kitchen. "Is that you, Tige?" he called. There was no answer. Bright light shone through the half-open door. The wind howled mournfully overhead. Boss was suddenly afraid. "Tige?" he repeated. "Answer me for Chrissake!" Still nothing. He stepped cautiously to the door, gun arm outstretched. He caught a movement as something fell toward him from behind the door, but wasn't fast enough to completely avoid the blow. A piece of firewood cracked down hard against his wrist, snapping the bones, and causing him to drop his pistol. He cried out, grabbing at his arm, watching as his attacker came out of his hiding place to pick up the fallen weapon, though he already carried a gun in his left hand. Boss caught sight of a blood-soaked back, then the man straightened up, and those dark eyes bore down upon his once more. Boss took an involuntary step backward, sure he was seeing a Halloween apparition. "You're dead!" he whispered fearfully.

"No," Book answered softly, aiming the gun at the man's head. "You are!"

Boss backed away further, stepping back through the doorway. "No! Please, don't kill me!" he begged.

"Don't move!" Book ordered, coming closer, standing in the doorway himself now. "Maybe I'll let you live, if you call your partner down here - now! Tell him to leave the baby!"

Totally shocked, Boss simply stared at this blood-caked, white-faced Nemesis. The fingers tightened on the trigger and the hammer cocked. Boss found his voice. "Get down here, Stubs!" he called. "Leave the kid!"

"Okay, Boss!" came the reply.

"Into the pantry," Book instructed. "Move it! So help me, I'd love to blow your head off!" Nervously, Boss began edging past Book into the kitchen. He had only taken one step toward the pantry door when Book hit him from behind, and he fell unconscious. Book went to the stairwell, crouching down in a blind spot.

In the parlour, Rachel had decided to try again to reach her daughter. As she made for the stairs, she heard voices in the kitchen, turned and saw Boss backing away, seemingly terrified of something he had found there, pleading for his life. Rachel's heart leapt to her throat as she imagined she heard Book's voice, but then Boss called to Stubs, and afraid

she backed up, then resolute, returned to the hallway, determined to sneak past Stubs after he had entered the kitchen. As she did so, she saw a figure crouching down behind the stairs.

Just as Stubs came hurrying down the stairs, Rachel appeared, stumbling blindly towards Book's hiding place. "John?" she whispered tearfully, believing that she too had seen a ghost.

Stubs stopped at the foot of the stairs and stared at her. "What did you say?" he asked. Rachel seemed not to have heard him. She continued moving woodenly toward the stairwell corner. Puzzled, Stubs made to follow her.

Book cursed silently as Rachel entered his line of fire. "Stubs!" Book called, standing up and stepping to one side to take a clear shot.

The fat man's jaw dropped, and he gaped open-mouthed at the nightmarish vision before him. John Book looked like a corpse freshly dug from the grave. Stubs made a grab for his gun. Fire flared forth from the ghostly figure, and something slammed with agonising force into Stubs' gut. He dropped his gun, clutching at the pain, staring in horror at the blood pouring between his fingers, splattering onto the floor. Shocked, he looked back up at the ghost who had shot him. His eyes glazed over, and that expression of disbelieving horror remained engraved on his face as death claimed him.

Rachel jumped at the sound of the shot. She turned about, her eyes following the movement as the heavy man crumpled limply to the floor. "Rachel!" a voice whispered behind her. She swung about, and saw John Book standing looking at her, tears filling his eyes, and a faint smile playing about his lips. Shirt and trousers were torn, sodden with rainwater and smeared with blood everywhere. His flesh was deathly white, contrasted by blotches of blue from both cold and bruising. Scarlet streaks trickled down from wet, plastered hair-line to jaw.

"John!" Rachel sobbed. "Oh John!" She made to run to him, but her knees buckled as shock hit home. He moved forward and caught her awkwardly with his good arm, but he was too weak to take her weight. They both went to their knees, desperate hands reaching to draw the other closer. "I ... I thought you were dead!" Rachel sobbed.

"Did they hurt you?" John asked, touching gentle fingers to her torn lips.

She shook her head, blinking away her tears, trying to smile for him. They could both hear Rebecca's cries, the sound assuring them at least

that she was alive and unhurt. "They shot you!" Rachel said brokenly. "You're bleeding! They ... they told me, you were dead!"

"Oh Rachel, honey," Book soothed. He kissed her, then drew her close, hugging her hard, imagining the terror and grief she had endured. "I'm here. I'll never leave you."

"John!?" a voice called from the porch. "What's happening in there? John, are you all right?"

Dizzily, Book tried to push himself up. Rachel immediately took his arm about her shoulders. "It's over, Terry!" he called. "You can come in now!"

* * *

Walters called the police and the paramedics as soon as he walked in. He tied Boss, then helped Rachel escort a groggy John Book to the upstairs bedroom. Book and his wife immediately took their baby daughter into a combined embrace, checking her for injury, and relieved to find none. Book swayed on his feet as the effects of wounds and exposure finally took their toll. Walters feared the mixture of hypothermia, concussion and blood loss. "You better get into bed," he advised, "before you fall down - or freeze to death."

"I'm okay," Book mumbled, but was too far gone to exhaustion to protest further. He was pushed onto the bed, striped and wrapped in woollen blankets. "Leave me alone!" Book muttered as Walters continued to fuss over him. "Not you, Rachel," he amended as she came to him, having finished settling Rebecca to sleep in her crib. Both his nurses ignored him, Walters turning him carefully to one side so Rachel could press a clean towel to the bleeding shoulder wound. The bullet had gone straight through the muscle above the collar bone. Walters and Rachel were greatly relieved when they heard the sound of sirens approaching the house. "Aww, no," Book mumbled, thinking of all the questions he faced. "Don't let them up here! I just want to sleep."

Rachel eased a warm, wet wash-cloth over her husband's gashed brow and cheek. He flinched and made to pull away, and she held him steady. "You need a doctor, John," she said softly. Walters left to greet the police and give them an initial explanation of the sequence of events.

"Don't need a doctor," Book mumbled. "Did fine without one before!" He smiled woozily up at her as she continued to wash dirt from his many abrasions. "Just needed you. Still do."

She bent to kiss him. "Then maybe I should have Stoltzfus make you some of your favourite tea!" He groaned and she giggled, but the sound turned to sudden sobs, and hot tears filled her eyes. "Oh, John! I was so scared!"

"Hey! It's okay! It's okay!" he soothed, wincing as he struggled to prop himself higher to draw her close into his embrace. "It's over. We're safe now. Shh." Crying, Rachel huddled against him, feeling comforted by his presence and the soft stroking of his hands at her hair.

Then the room was suddenly full of people as Walters returned with two police officers, a doctor, and a paramedic team. Embarrassment overcame some of Rachel's shock, and she sat up on the edge of the bed, one hand still clinging to her husband's, the other wiping away her tears. One of the paramedics moved to examine her cut face, and the doctor tended to Book. The sheriff began asking a never-ending series of questions, until finally annoyed, and concerned for his patient's well-being, the doctor ordered them away, telling them the less urgent information would have to wait; their witness was near complete collapse. Rid of that distraction, the doctor produced pain-killing injections, and sterilised instruments, and commenced stitching and bandaging shoulder and cheek.

Book tried to focus upon Rachel as she too was tended, but he was having trouble keeping his eyes open, feeling wonderfully comfortable as the pain eased and the blankets began to warm him. Then he heard the doctor telling the paramedics that they could move him now, and the uniformed men produced a stretcher. "Oh no!" Book declared. "I'm not leaving this bed! Thanks for everything, but please just go away and let me sleep, okay?"

"Deep sleep is precisely what I'm afraid of, Mister Book," the doctor warned. "You have a concussion at the very least, possibly a fractured skull. You should go to the hospital for precautionary x-rays. I'd like to see pictures of your ribs and knee as well."

"Fine! I will!" Book said. "Tomorrow!"

"Very well," the doctor sighed, "But I won't be held responsible for the consequences. Someone should wake you frequently."

"I will do that," Rachel responded.

"All right, we'll leave you then." The doctor agreed. He hunted in his medical kit and produced some pills. "Give him two of these if he has more pain. And two of these every four hours to prevent infection."

Finally, Book and Rachel were alone again as their attendants filed from the room. "Come here," John said. "Come to bed."

"I'm supposed to sit with you and make sure you're all right," Rachel refused.

"After what you've been through!" Book argued. "No way! Get into bed and set the alarm, then you can wake me."

"I don't know ..."

"Please," John pleaded, giving her the little-boy-lost look he knew she could never refuse. "I need you to keep me warm. C'mon. Have pity."

Rachel gave in to a slow smile, nodded, changed into her nightgown and climbed in beside him. She set the alarm, then snuggled up against him carefully, placing one arm across his waist, and her head on his undamaged shoulder. They lay in each other's embrace for some time, speaking soft words of reassurance and love. "Poor Andy and Jen," Book said over a weary yawn.

"Yes," Rachel agreed. "It will be hard for them to hear of Tommy's involvement with such violent men."

"I hope the police get to those pumpkins tonight," Book commented.

"They will. I am glad Samuel was not here," Rachel responded, and Book made a sound of agreement. They lay listening to the rain and wind, enjoying the feeling of warmth and shelter. Rachel looked up as her husband yawned again. "You should be asleep. Is the pain bad?"

"No. That shot they gave me must have been powerful stuff. Rachel," he added, feeling himself beginning to drift. "I'm so sorry all this had to happen. I ... always ... seem to ..."

"Shh," she interrupted. "I will not listen to apologies for the life you have given Rebecca, Samuel and I! We love you very much, John." She made to stroke his face, but pulled her hand back as she met with bandages. "You are one big bruise!" she sighed.

"It's not my fault," Book mumbled.

"I know." Rachel smiled and kissed his shoulder, finding that he had finally surrendered to sleep. "Sleep well, John," she whispered. "I thank God. He has brought you back to us."

END

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