

“What do you mean? Pig in the hallway during class change?”

“Roy Simmons, last year. Suspended three days.”

“Glue Mrs. Fitzroy’s chair to her desk?”

“Jimmy and Jacky Barker. Two years ago.”

“Hack the billboard outside the gym?”

J.C. Faced Rodney. “Now there’s a deal. You know how to do that?”

“No. Somebody does. Some kind of funky light show. Included a cartoon dog. No idea who did it.”

“Janey Carter says it’s haunted.”

“She what?”

“Haunted. Saw it from her bedroom window. The sign flashing on and off all hours.”

“Livin’ across from the gym has given her special powers.”

“Whatever. Okay. Gotta go.” He got out, closed the door, gave Rodney the finger.

Rodney lowered the passenger window partway, returned the gesture. “Okay, let’s think about it. See ya tomorrow.”

J.C. stood on the kitchen porch and watched Rodney’s pickup stir the fine dust on the road down the hill. Scotty was sitting at the kitchen table. He motioned J.C. to sit. “You want decaf?”

“Nah. Don’t wanna get up in the middle of the night to pee.” He pushed the napkin holder with his finger.

Scotty leaned over and lowered his voice. “Your breath smells like you’ve got a lot to pee about. What’s the deal? You’re gonna get in a shit pot of trouble drinking underage. You know that, right?” He rubbed his eyes and looked down at the table.

Silence fell between them, punctuated by Scotty tapping on his coffee cup. He drew a deep breath. “What’d you guys do?”

“Round and round.” J.C. circled his finger in the air. “Drove up and down, round and round. Drank beer. What else?”

Scotty closed his eyes and shook his head. “Beer? Where did you get beer?”

Hatch. He bought it for us.”

Scotty shook his head. “Yup. Should ‘a known.” He leaned back, ran his fingers across his bald scalp. “Damnit. Hatch, the pain-in-the-ass. Won’t miss havin’ to deal with him at all. That’ll be somebody else’s problem.” One last swig of coffee. “Do me a favor, do all of us a favor. Will you please stay away from him?”

“But, he’s . . .”

“Family. I know. We don’t have any choice in that. But please keep your distance. He’s nothing but trouble. Doesn’t mean to be--but is. Keep him at arm’s length ‘til we leave here. Okay?”

J.C. nodded.

“Let’s change the subject,” Scotty said. “How’d Rodney take the news?”

“He said he’d miss playing basketball with me. I feel the same.”

“If you were a senior, it’d be different. Sorry ‘bout that.”

“Yeah, I told him. I asked him to keep it quiet.”

“Won’t be a very big surprise, to anybody ‘round here, I bet,” Scotty said. “Dan Baker was asking him why I wasn’t buying new tires for the tractor the other day. It was kinda hard to not open up to him. But he’s Pop’s buddy. It won’t come from me. Mom and I agreed to hold off ‘til right after Thanksgiving so she doesn’t get a bunch of shit from the school about breaking her contract.”

J.C. scratched the back of his neck and yawned. “That gonna be a big deal?”

“Hope not. She’s tried to ease into it. She told me today Mariel Espinoza had a lot of questions about wait till after Thanksgiving to schedule next semester’s team teaching. Lot of questions. Mariel’s not a talker. She’ll keep the secret, but that’s two with strong suspicions. All we need is one more, and the cat’ll be out of the bag.”

“I think we can trust Rod. He’s my best friend. Felt like I had to tell him.”

“No, that’s all right. We agreed he should know. Your sister wants to tell one of her friends, but I said no. I promised her she could say something when you guys go back to school after Thanksgiving.”

“Two weeks is a long time to keep a secret.”

Scotty got up, pushed the chair back to the table. “Yeah. I know. Well, I’m turnin’ in. See you in the mornin’.”

J.C. got up, pushed his chair in. “Yeah, Dad, in the mornin’.” He turned the light off over the sink and followed the blue glow of the night light to his bedroom. He was about to pull the curtains on his window. He leaned toward the glass until the vapor from his breath appeared.

He scanned the horizon, looking for the familiar lights of nearby farms, trying to imagine what the people asleep under those lights were dreaming about. He looked back toward town and one blinking red light caught his eye.

He stared for a moment, he looked away then back. He got out of his clothes and said, “That’s it,” as he pulled the covers up. “Yeah, that’s it.”

###

The next afternoon, J.C. got on his four-wheeler after helping Rodney unload. They rode past idle combines and trucks, down a gradual slope and out on the rolling prairie north of the McTague houses and barns. After an hour of jackrabbit-chasing and gully-jumping, they stopped on top of a slight rise and took out the sandwiches J.C.’s mom had made.

They sat on the ground in the shadows of their rides, eating tuna sandwiches, drinking Cokes, eating chips.

J.C. patted the dried grass beside him. “Granddad says this is an Indian burial ground.”

Rodney wiped his mouth. “How’s he know that?”

“My great grandfather told him.”

Rodney nodded. “And who . . .”

“Never mind,” J.C. said. “Got no reason to doubt it. When we first moved back here, my Sis and I used to piddle around out here, lookin’ for arrowheads. Found one or two. Little pieces of pottery, too. I dunno, maybe Indians were around here. Guess I’ll never know.”

He bagged the leftovers, stood, brushed the seat of his pants. He put the bag in the plastic basket on the back of the four-wheeler.

Rodney stood. “Why you say that? You’ll end up with this place someday. It’ll get passed along.”

J.C. climbed back on. “Nope. Don’t think that’s gonna happen. Grandpa is gonna sell soon as he can. He’s really upset ‘bout us leaving. Granda too—her especially. She grew up on the ranch over there.” He pointed north. “Across the creek.” He watched Rodney climb on his machine. “We ready?”

Rodney started his engine, revved it, then dropped back to idle. “Where?”

J.C. started his engine. “Down to the creek, I guess. See if we can spot the pigs.”

Rodney nodded. “Shouldn’t be too tough. Lots of ‘em.”

J.C. was about to touch the gearshift with his toe. Instead, he cut the engine and pointed to the west.

Rodney killed his engine. “What?” He looked in the direction his friend was pointing.

“See the Jerrod water tower?”

“Yep. Looks like one of those monsters from War of the Worlds.”

“Know what I’m thinkin’?”

“What?”

“Guess.”

###

A week later, Rodney shook J.C. awake. “We gotta go. Almost sunrise.”

J.C. sat up from the couch and rubbed his eyes. “You told your mom we were goin’ rabbit hunting, right?”

“Yeah, that’s why you spent the night, remember?”

“Beer fog.”

“I hear you. Come on, we gotta go.” Rodney extended his hand to J.C. and pulled him up from the couch. “Get your shit together and meet me out in the pickup. You put the paint in the back?”

“Yeah, the rope and gloves.”

“Okay. Be right there. Gotta leave mom a note.”

Five minutes later, Rodney got in the driver’s seat and punched the dozing J.C. “Get them eyes open, son. We got important work ahead of us.” He drove out of the Prairie View Apartments lot and headed toward the water tower at Veteran’s Park. He pulled up behind a stand of willows at the base of one of the 150-foot legs and stopped.

He rolled both windows down and held up a finger.

“What are you doing?”

“Listening.”

“For what?”

“Nothing, I hope.” He got out, eased the door closed, put his finger to his lips signaling J.C. to get out his side.

They loaded two dozen cans of black spray paint J.C. had found under a workbench in the barn into a tool bag, and Rodney tied a length of cotton rope through the handles.

“We gonna haul that up with that rope?” J.C. hefted the bag. “Seems pretty heavy to me.” He put it at the bottom of the rusty steel ladder attached to the leg of the tower. It was supported by foot-long brackets every six feet.

“Don’t worry,” Rodney said. “I outweigh you twenty pounds—most of it muscle—so I’ll haul it up. Get on the ladder.”

J.C. hesitated as he was about to pull on the second glove. “Wait, what’s this?”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

J.C. pulled his hand out of the glove, his middle finger prominent.

“Funny,” Rodney said. “Up.”

J.C. went up ten rungs. “This is bullshit. You know that, right? Can barely see the top of the ladder. Is it supposed to rain?”

“Naw, don’t think so. Clouds will burn off.” Rodney looked over his shoulder. “Sun’s comin’ up. Don’t worry about this, ‘bro. It’s somethin’ we’ll remember when we’re grandpas.”

J.C. willed himself up, hand over hand on the foot-wide rungs. “Hope you’re right.” Twenty more rungs. “Why did I talk myself into this?”

Rodney had climbed within a rung of J.C.’s feet. “You chickenin’ out?”

J.C. had his cheek pushed to the rung. “Nope, just catchin’ my breath. Okay, here goes.”

Three-quarters up, the rungs were slippery. J.C.’s leather glove caused one of the cross pieces to rotate. “You watchin’ this?” he whispered to Rodney. “This one’s loose. We should ‘a brought heavier gloves.” Up another twenty feet, he could feel the warmth of the rising sun on the back of his canvas jacket.

“Okay, I’ll watch it,” Rodney said from ten feet below. “One other thing.”

“What?”

“Why are you whisperin’?”

“Yeah, good point.” J.C. took ten more rungs. “Almost there.” Two more. “Okay, I’m gonna push this trap door thing to one side.”

He put his head against the piece of plywood and pushed twice. When it came loose, it slid across the steel catwalk and flipped over the edge. “Heads up.”

“Oh shit,” Rodney said. “That almost hit me.” Two beats later, a muffled thud announced the impact somewhere on Rodney’s pickup. “I’m not gonna look. Go on, get through that damned hole.”

J.C. moved up two rungs, his upper chest in the opening. To the right, the remains of the trap door hinge—two triangular pieces of metal with wood screws protruding. To the left, the latch hasp loosely mounted in splintered planks. “Okay. Gimme a minute. I’m going to try to get on the catwalk.”

He took two more steps up, pushed to the left. As he was about to grab one of the uprights on the edge of the catwalk, he felt the second rung down give way. “Oh, shit! Hey, Rod?”

“What happened?”

“The rung I pushed up on—gone.”

“Yeah, passed me on the way down. Don’t worry. I’ll make it. I’m gonna get up to you and hand you the rope. Damned paint is gettin’ heavy.”

“Okay. Be careful.” J.C. laid on the three-foot-wide catwalk and caught his breath. He turned over, looked down at Rodney. He held up the rope, and J.C. strained to grab it and pull the bag onto the catwalk beside him. He wrapped it several times around one of the uprights, tied it off.



“You okay?”

“Yeah, sorta,” Rodney said. “These rungs . . .” He had wrapped his left arm around the ladder.

“What about ‘em?”

“Looks like they’re almost burnt through on the right side like somebody’s used a cuttin’ torch on them. Shit. No, wait. Crap. It’s where lightning hit. Okay, I’m gonna come on up, puttin’ my weight on the left. You ready?”

“Yeah.” J.C. moved back over the opening and freed his arms. Just as Rodney cleared the third rung down, it snapped, leaving him dangling in space, holding to the ladder frame on the left, swinging out, flailing with his right hand.

J.C. leaned into the opening to grab Rod’s right wrist. Rod’s hand locked on J.C.’s wrist. He began to pull up.

“Wait.” Rodney’s voice was an anguished whimper. “I’m afraid I’m gonna have to go back down.”

“Bull shit. Come on. Take the next step up.”

“I can’t, man, I feel like I’m gonna fall.”

## Chapter 2

“I damned near died.” Rodney was lying on the catwalk, staring up at the sky. “Thought you were gonna pull my arm out of the socket.”

J.C. sat up and put his back against the water tank. “No other way to do it. You’re so damned heavy and, you were flailing around.”

Rodney sat up and rubbed his shoulder. “Couldn’t help it. Anyway, thanks.”

They bumped fists.

“Time to get to work.” J.C. stood, picked up the bag of paint cans, untied the rope. “You okay? I’m gonna go ‘round the other side. See if there’s a good place to do this.”

“I’m all right. Sore.” Rodney sat up, leaned against the tank. “Don’t fall off, asshole.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout me,” J.C. said. Holding two cans, he started around the tank, moving along the safety line that ran between large eyebolts halfway up. He reappeared a few minutes later, as Rodney was trying to pull himself up to stand.

“Nothin’ ‘round there,” J.C. said. “The boards are rotted through. I didn’t even get halfway.” He leaned against the tank, shook his head, looked back in the direction he’d just come from.

“What?”

“Clouds. Big time clouds. Low on the horizon. Comin’ from the west.”

“Shit,” Rodney said. “We can’t get caught up here in a storm.” He took his cell phone out of his back pocket and rubbed the screen. “Damn. Big old storm. Look’s like it’s right over Abilene now. Movin’ fast.”

“Looked closer than that to me,” J.C. said. He reached for the phone. “Lemme see.”

Rodney lost control of the phone as he was handing it over. J.C. grabbed for it but missed. It fell, bounced off the catwalk, spun out into the air. They both leaned to the handrail and watched it tumble down. It sounded like it landed in Rodney’s pickup bed. He shook his head. “Well, ‘least all my junk’s in one place.”

“Well, this is a good a place as any,” J.C. said, looking toward the top of the tank. “There is a ladder just around there,” he pointed, “We could get up higher.”

“Fall farther,” Rodney said. “This is good.” He took a paint can from the bag, shook it, began spraying “R.”

J.C. moved about six feet away, stood on his tip-toes, painting “J” and was about to move to “C.” A faint vibration ran through the tower. “What the hell? Did you feel that?”

Rodney turned and looked to the horizon. “Wind. That front’s movin’ in. Wish I had my damned phone. Look it up on yours. What’s the radar show?”

“Hang on a minute.” J.C. emptied his second paint can on the “C,” put it in the bag, leaned back to admire his work. He patted his back pocket, then side pockets. “Damnit. I musta left that damned phone beside your couch. We’re officially out of touch, bro’.”

Rodney looked at him without smiling. “Not funny. How we gonna let anybody know if we get in trouble up here?”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it,” J.C. said. “Finish up. We need to get down.” A more intense vibration came, followed by popping noises.

Rodney glanced at J.C., who was leaning to the right, trying to look around the tower’s curve. “Don’t even want to know what that means.” Rodney picked up his third can, turned to the tank, glanced over his shoulder, looked toward the top, painted a large “D.” Holding the safety line, he stepped left, leaned against the tank, glanced at the letters. The vibration seemed to grow as the breeze freshened. “We better get our asses off this.” His voice was pitched higher.

J.C. nodded and worked his way back on the safety line, hand over hand. “Okay, we’ve got four cans left. I’m gonna tie the rope through the handles and put them right here.” He pointed to the opening in the deck. “You go down first, I’ll lower the bag, then you tie the rope off to your belt loop. Got it? We’re gonna be all right.”

Rodney sat on the edge of the opening, leaned to put his right foot onto the second rung. It snapped and whirled downward. He pulled back. “Now what? Three gone. I can’t reach the fourth one.” He leaned back against the tank and looked up. “We’re stuck.” There was a child-like quality to his voice.

###

Holden County Deputy Marvin Harter spotted Rodney's pickup parked at the base of the water tower. He pulled up behind it and saw the sharp dent at the rear of the cab. He got out of his cruiser and noticed the wooden hatch cover lying in splinters in the pickup's bed. Harter turned to the driver's side door and pulled the handle. Locked.

He walked back toward his cruiser, then stopped when the wreckage of a cellphone near the tailgate got his attention. He unclipped the radio from his left ephilet. "Holman S.O., Holden twenty-two."

"Go ahead, twenty-two," the day dispatcher said.

"Copy a plate."

"Go ahead."

Harter read the license plate, double-clicked the mic's send button to indicate he was waiting. He walked toward the tower.

He had placed his hand on the ladder, prompted against the tower leg, and looked up. "Holden twenty-two."

"Ten-four."

"The plate is registered to a Marvelle Dickerson. You want the address?"

"No, not necessary. Thanks. Show me ten-seven at Veteran's park."

Two clicks indicated the dispatcher understood. Harter moved the ladder side to side. No rust stains. The city maintenance man hadn't left it. Harter stepped back, looked toward the top of the ladder attached to the leg. He shook his head, walked back to his cruiser.

He scrolled down the contacts on his cell phone and punched one of the numbers. A sleepy woman's voice answered on the fourth ring.

"Velle? This is Marv."

“Hey, little brother, what’s up? Why you waking me? Just got home from work.”

“Is Rodney there?”

“What? Huh? No, he went rabbit huntin’ with the McTague boy. They left right at sunrise, I guess. Marv, what is it?”

###

Rodney and J.C. sat side by side, leaning against the tank. “This is the shifts,” Rodney said. “What are we gonna do?”

“No way people are gonna know we’re up here,” J.C. said. He leaned forward, looking east toward his farm. He grabbed the handrail and pulled up, looked left to right. Four cars were in the All Saints Episcopal parking lot. Someone was getting out of a pickup at the Zip In. He pulled the sleeve of his jacket up and checked his watch. Eight-thirty. “We’ve been up here an hour,” he said.

“Oh shit. Look.” He pointed straight down. “It’s a cop.”

Rodney stood and looked over the side. “It’s my Uncle Marv.” He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. “Marv. Hey Marv. Hey. Look up here. Marv.” He looked at J.C., “Can’t hear me.”

J.C. looked over the side, then at the bag at his feet. “Gimme that.”

Rodney unwound the rope from the upright and handed it to J.C. He zipped the bag closed, held it over the rail, side-stepped a few feet away from Rodney, and dropped the bag. They watched as it tumbled down, bounced off the tower leg, landed about ten feet behind Marv Harter.

First, he jumped back toward Rod's pickup, then walked toward the bag. He lifted it and looked up, saw the two faces peering off the side. He took his cap off and waved. They waved back.

"Holden S.O., Holden twenty-two. Switching to channel three."

"Ten-four."

Harter turned his mic over, selected the secure channel. "Holden?"

"Go ahead."

"Got two on the water tower."

"Did you say water tower?"

"Ten-four. Think I know their I.D.'s." Harter looked down at his protruding stomach.

"Gonna need some help out here. I can't get up there."

"Ten-four twenty-two. Guess I better call fire. Looks like Henry Shaffer is on call. Stand by."

Marv clicked the mic button twice, walked ten feet back from the tower. "Don't worry," he yelled. "Help's a'comin'." He waved left and right. High above, the two waved back. He took out his cellphone.

"Velle? Got some news."

"News? What are you talkin' about?"

"You outta be sittin' for this."

"Wait. What?"

"I think Rodney and the McTague boy are on the water tower." He looked up at the clouds moving in from the west, decided not to mention them. Her voice told him she was holding back tears.

“I’ll be right there, Marv.” There was the sound of car keys being picked up from the end table of her couch. “Hey,” She said. “Look’s like J.C.’s phone. Must have forgot it. I’m gonna call Rodney.”

Marv glanced at the pickup, then up to the tank. “Don’t bother. They’re, uh, too high up there to, uh, get a signal. Get here when you can. Don’t worry, we’re gonna get ’em down. I can see Rodney right now. Wavin’ at him. He’s okay.”

“Are they comin’ down, Marv?”

“We’re workin’ on it.”

“I’m comin’ Marv,” Marvelle said. His phone blinked off.

Marv looked up at the boys and held his arms up like he was calling a touchdown. He made a pushing motion, willing them to back away from the edge. Their faces disappeared.

He called the Sheriff’s office. “Hey, you need to call Scotty McTague and tell him his kid is up there with Rodney. Tell him we’ve got everything under control and not to worry.”

“Wouldn’t you worry?”

“Damn betcha. Don’t make it sound like an emergency, that’s all.”

“Gotcha.”

“Better call the sheriff.”

###

#####

“Looks like help’s here,” J.C. said, leaning out to look over the catwalk. “There’s the fire department, and the sheriff just drove up, and, oh shit! There’s dad’s pickup. I’m in a shit-pot of trouble.”



“Probably me too,” Rodney said as he looked over. “Yep, there’s mom. I’m gonna get my butt kicked over this.”

“You’ll have company.” J.C. zipped his jacket and turned this collar up. “You notice it’s getting’ colder? Glad we got these gloves. Hey, I’m gonna get up and walk around to look at the clouds.” He stood, leaned against the tower, and wrapped his hand around the safety line.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere but down from here,” Rodney said. He leaned back and gathered his knees up as J.C. disappeared around the curve of the tank. He pulled his cap down on his forehead and avoided looking down again.

“Well, can’t say that looks good,” J.C. said as he reappeared. Lots of clouds. They look heavy.”

“Boys, can you hear me?” It was Espinoza’s tinny voice from a bullhorn below. “Wave if you can hear.”

J.C. stepped up to the catwalk rail and waved over his head. “We can hear,” he yelled.

Espinoza looked at Henry Shafer, who was pulling his fire department turnout gear on. “You hear him?”

“I heard something. I guess he can hear.”

Espinoza shook his head, aimed the bullhorn up again. “Are both of you all right?” He felt a tug at his sleeve.

“Can you see Rodney? Please tell me he’s all right.” Marvelle Dickerson asked.

“I’m sure,” Freddy said. “Hey,” he shouted into the microphone end of the bullhorn, “let me see both of you.”

Two heads appeared over the catwalk.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Marvelle said, “how can we get them down?”

“Freddy patted her hand, gently pushing it away. “It’s gonna be all right.” He glanced at Marv Harter, who took his sister’s shoulder.

“Why don’t you get in the car with Ella over there?” He pointed to Ella Parker a fellow nurse, who was parking beside the fire department truck.

As she got in, Scotty, his wife and daughter drove up. They got out of the pickup and he shook hands with Harter.

“They okay, Marv?” He looked up toward the top of the tower.

“Yeah. They’re gonna get kinda chilly up there before we can get to them.”

“I can imagine,” Scotty said. He toward his pickup.”

“What are you doing, Scott,” Jenny asked. She put her arm around Emilie, who was beginning to shiver in the dropping temperature.

“Binoculars,” Scotty said over his shoulder. He sighted toward the top of the tower. “Here, take a look.” He handed the binoculars to Jenny.

She looked for a moment. “There he is,” she said, waving. J.C. was looking over the rail, waving back. She turned to Scotty. “We’ve gotta help them.” She wiped a tear from her eye and hugged Emilie closer.

He took the binoculars from her. “Don’t worry. We’ll get ‘em down.”

###

J.C. leaned back against the tank. “You ain’t the only one in trouble. Guess misery loves company.”

Rodney nodded and looked up at the darkening sky. “Please don’t rain.”

###

Mariel Espinoza got out of her car and walked over to Jenny and Emilie. “Hey, why don’t you guys get in the car with me? They’ll let us know what’s going on. Better than standing out here in the cold.”

“Okay,” Jenny said, glancing up at the tower. She and Emilie followed Mariel to her car. “I’m worried about J.C.—about both of them—in this cold. J.C.’s asthma . . .”

“Jenny, don’t . . .”

She closed her door and turned to Mariel. “Thanks for being here, Mariel. You don’t have to keep reassuring us.” Her hand shook as she took a tissue from her purse. “I’m worried, that’s all. Look at the clouds.” She leaned forward and looked up through the windshield, then down at the group of men standing at the base of the water tower.

Scotty raised his binoculars. “Hey, that’s gonna be a problem. Here, take a look at the rungs in the ladder just below the catwalk.” He handed the binoculars to Freddy and glanced at Jenny, sitting in Mariel’s car. She raised her eyebrows and held her hands outward, palms up. Scotty signaled *wait* with one finger. He glanced at the sky, becoming crowded with dark fluffy clouds moving from the west.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Freddy said. He turned to Henry Shafer. “You got another turnout set? All I really want is the bibs. How much half-inch line you got?”

“Don’t know, I’ll check.”

“Hard hats?” Freddy asked. Shafer and went to the fire truck, came back with the bib overall, a canvas vest and six hardhats strapped together “Looks like I’ve got about two hundred feet of nylon line. It’s rated eight hundred pounds.”

As he pulled the bibs on, Freddy turned to Scotty. “Here’s what I’m thinking. “We’ve got to get to those kids in the next hour, no more.” He held his hand flat, palm up. “See? It’s

starting to mist. We've got to get to them before it opens up. Can you get your wife and daughter and meet me at Ella's car?"

###

J.C. looked down at the crowd. There were a dozen cars with people standing outside, pointing up. He saw his father gesture to the pickup, his mother and sister get out and follow to Ella Parker's suburban. He turned to Rodney. "Looks like they're huddling up." He drew a deep breath and coughed.

Rodney continued to stare upward, wiping the thickening mist from his eyes. "No rain, please."

###

"Hey J.C, Rodney," Freddy said into the bullhorn. "You okay?"

First J.C., then Rodney's face appeared at the catwalk. J.C. waved, Rodney stared.

"We're on our way. Don't move, don't stand up from now on. Understand?"

Both waved and disappeared.

Freddy turned to Harter and Scotty. "Okay. Henry and I are going up, me first. I'm taking the vest and the end of the climbing rope. When I get to where the rungs are broken out, I'm gonna have to work my way up the ladder rail until I can get close to the top. I'm gonna take some slack in the rope and throw it up for one of the boys to catch."

Shafer nodded agreement.

"This will be the tricky part—one of the tricky parts—they'll have to pull the line through one of the eyebolts on the safety line and then drop it to the ground," Freddy said.

He was interrupted by the sound of sniffing from Jenny McTague who had walked up behind him. She handed an inhaler to Freddy. “When J.C.’s excited, his asthma flares up. Give him this, please.” She walked back toward the pickup.

“I know what you’re gonna say, Scotty, and I’d be thinking the same if my kid was up there, but we can’t risk it. Too many people on that ladder will make it even more dangerous. I need you and Marv down here with the line tied off to that brace so you can control descent. Okay?” He looked from Scotty to Marv and back. Both nodded.

“We’ve got enough of these hardhats for me and Henry, the boys and you and Marv,” he said as he unclipped the yellow helmets from each other and handed them over. “I don’t want to risk anybody getting hurt my stuff that might fall off that tower. So, if someone—including wives and mothers—approaches the tower any closer than those pickups”—he pointed at the line of vehicles sitting fifty feet away—then you need to make sure they move back and stay back.” He looked up, rubbed a raindrop off his face and put his helmet on.

He walked ten feet away as he was looking up. He gestured for Harter to join him. He turned his back to the tower and lowered his voice. “You have your earphone with you?”

Harter nodded as he clipped his helmet’s chin strap.

“Use it. I want you listening, not talking. I’m only going to talk back and forth to Henry, understand? Don’t answer anything I say to you.’

Harter nodded again.

“I don’t want anyone—anyone—here on the ground hearing what’s going on, trying to get involved. Yes?”

Another nod from Harter.

“Okay, go back over there and stand by with the line. I’m gonna run it through this ring and tie it off and leave enough for one of them to grab when I get up there. Whatever you do, keep your hands on the line. When you hear me say ‘take,’ pull it tight but don’t lift until you feel it go loose. That way you’ll know I’m moving up. If I say ‘loose’—well, you got the idea.” He patted Marv on the shoulder. “I’m depending on you.” Harter smiled and nodded.

Freddy passed the line through a ring sewn to the front of the bibs and coiled a ten-foot length behind one of the bib straps. He clipped the vest with a carabiner through a cloth loop at his waist. As he stepped onto the leg’s ladder, raindrops were making small tic, tic, tic sounds as they landed on the bill of his hard hat..

He and Henry worked their way up the ladder, pausing every few steps to make sure the line wasn’t snagging. Freddy paused where Rod had displaced the first rungs, stretched, pushed as hard as he could, managed to get on the rung two feet up after telling Marv to “take.”

Another ten feet and he was stopped where three rungs had been broken out, leaving a six-foot gap. J.C. McTague’s face appeared in the trap door opening. “Hey. We’re glad you guys are here. Gettin’ real cold up here.”

“J.C., is Rodney okay?”

“Yeah, he’s pretty cold. When can we get down?”

“Almost there. I’m gonna get up there soon as I can. Gimme a few minutes.” He looked down and touched his mic. “Marv, we’re almost there. Take.” Marv shook his head. “You all right, Henry?”

Henry signaled okay with his thumb and forefinger. He was squinting as intermittent drops began hitting his face.

“Don’t drop that line, Henry.” Freddy wrapped his arms through the ladder frame, rubbed his gloves together and began to inch up the side of the ladder avoiding the pointed fragment of a missing rung. He could hear Henry below him, moving the carabiner on the line from the top of his bibs from one ladder rung to the next.

J.C.’s face appeared in the opening. “Hey sheriff, I think you need to take Rod first. He’s shiverin’ real bad.”

“That’s fine,” Freddy shouted. He made one more effort, slipped downward six inches, was within arm’s length as the line went taut again. “Loose, Marv.” He pulled the end of the line from inside his bibs and gathered the loose coil around his hand.

“Okay, J.C., I’m gonna toss this end of the rope up to you. Put it through that eyebolt. Okay?” J.C. nodded. “Get on your stomach and stretch your arm as far as you can.”

After three attempts, J.C. caught the line, wrapped it through the eyebolt and lowered the end back to Freddy. Freddy said “pull” into his microphone and waited to be lifted toward the opening so he could pull himself through.

Freddy said “clear” into the mic as he stood, unclipped the vest and handled each boy a yellow helmet.

Rod had his back to the tower pushing himself hard. Without moving his head, he muttered “I’ve got to get down. I’m wet. My mom is down there. I’ve got to get down.” He looked at toward the sky, at Freddy, to J.C. the horizon, back to Freddy. “Please.”

Freddy told Rod to stand and hold the safety line while he put the vest on him. “Okay, Rod, you’re gonna need to scoot over here next to me.” He took the shaking boy’s arm and moved him close. He checked the Velcro straps across his chest.

He looked at J.C. “Hang onto that line.” J.C. nodded.

Freddy unclipped the rope from the snap link at his chest and ran it through the steel handhold on the back of the vest.

He tapped Rod's helmet, causing him to turn and look at Freddy wide-eyed. "Now it's real important to do exactly as I tell you. Are you listening?"

Rod nodded, his lower jaw quivering. He wiped the rainwater rivulet off his face. "Okay. Listening."

"Rod, two guys are on the other end of this rope down there. When we signal, they'll take up the slack and lower you down the tower to where Henry Shaffer is waiting. Go ahead and sit on the edge of the hole." Freddy moved the other side of the opening, still holding the rope tied to Rod's vest.

Rod complied, still looking up squinting. "It's gonna rain. I'm cold."

Freddy gave him a gentle tug. "We're gonna get you down. Now, look down there. See Henry?"

Henry, looking up at Rod, waved and smiled. Rod nodded, then looked out toward the horizon. "I'm gonna fall."

"Not when me and Henry are here; you're not." He spoke into the radio. "Marv, take." The bright blue line snapped taut. "Good. Hold it there."

"Now, Rod, I want you to scoot through the opening, then turn around, face the ladder. Don't worry. It'll feel like you're just hangin' there, but the guys on the ground won't start lowering you until I say so. So, here we go."

Rodney moved his hands from the sides of the hole and leaned forward, letting out a little yelp. "I'm not gonna fall, am I?"



“No. Guide yourself you go. Don’t stop yourself. Let Henry and the guys down there do the work.” Freddy spoke into the mic. “Okay, loose.”

Rod looked up as reached for the sides of the ladder. “Rod, we’re going to lower you all the way to the ground. Henry is down there to back you up, so listen to him.. Don’t look down, just face the ladder. Here you go.” He clicked his mic twice. Henry nodded, and Rod began to inch downward.

Without taking his eyes off Rod, Freddy asked J.C., “How’s it goin’? You okay?”

“Yeah.” It was nothing more than a loud whisper.

Freddy turned to look. J.C. was breathing in gulps, clutching his chest, his lips had a blue tinge. Freddy remembered the inhaler in his bib pocket.

“Shit, J.C.,” he said, standing and moving toward the boy. “I forgot this.” He took his glove off, fished in his pocket. “Here.” J.C. reached for the inhaler, tipped it with his finger. It spiraled up, pinged the handrail, and disappeared. J.C.’s eyes went wide.

“All right,” Freddy said. “You need to –” The two-way on his shoulder strap squawked. He held up a finger to J.C., then looked over the side.

A squawk from Henry’s radio. “I got him. Hey! You hear me?” He was one rung down from Rod if he missed his footing. Five minutes later, Henry looked up and spoke into his microphone.

“We’re down. I’m putting the vest on the line. It’ll be on the way up in a few.”

###

Marvelle got out of Ella’s Suburban as Rod stepped from the tower to the ladder propped against the leg. She ran to Rod, wrapping her arms around him. “Oh, thank the Lord, you’re down. Are you all right?” Ella, Jenny, Emilie were standing nearby.

“Rod, how’s J.C.? Did he get the inhaler? Is he coming down?” Jenny looked upward, shielding her eyes from the increasing raindrops.

Rod looked up. “I think he’s okay. I don’t know.” He looked at his mother. “I’m real cold.”

Jenny and Emilie went to Scotty as Marvelle led Rod to her car. Jenny touched him on the arm.

He glanced at her, then up. “Jenny, they dropped the inhaler. I think there’s one in the glove compartment. Can you go look?”

Jenny looked up, hugging Emilie. “No, it’s not there. I took it out last week. It was cracked.”

###

Freddy looked back to J.C., who was lying on his side, eyes closed, breathing shallow gulps of air. “Marv? Call the EMT’s.”

One click

“Hurry with the vest. He’s having breathing problems.”

Another click.

It seemed like an hour passed. Rainwater was flowing down the line as Freddy pulled the vest up through the catwalk opening.

He moved carefully to J.C., who was shaking violently, taking in gulps of air. “Okay, pal, let’s get this on you.” It took a minute to adjust the Velcro straps to fit J.C.’s smaller frame.

Freddy moved him to sit in the hatch. He talked him through the same steps he’d gone over with Rod.

Freddy keyed his mic. “Marv? Henry?” The two looked up. “Ready. Slowly.” The line went taut. “Okay, J.C., here you go.”

His lips were noticeably bluer. Freddy eased him over the hole and turned him to face the empty part of the ladder missing rungs. “Let your hands slide down the outside of the ladder, J.C. you’re gonna be just fine. Freddy looked down, watching as J.C. reached Henry, who gave a thumbs-up. “Marv, you guys, get him down as quick as you can. Find something to wrap him up in. Get that line back up here now.”

###

J.C. managed to hang onto the ladder until he was about twenty feet above the ground. The glaze of sleet on one of the ladder rungs made him slip off and twirl sideways, a sharp piece of metal protruding from the tower leg sliced into his arm.

The impact tore his jacket and put a deep cut in his bare arm. As he was lowered the last few feet, the blood was flowing down his arm and splattering the ladder Scotty was holding against the tower leg.

He grabbed J.C. around his waist and lowered him to the ground. He covered the wound with one hand and motioned to Jenny.

Scotty wrapped the line around cleat at the base of the tire and helped J.C. stand. Jenny gasped, touched the bloody smear on J.C.’s shirt, turned, and yelled for Ella Parker.

She looked around and saw Emilie standing with the nurse. “We’re going to the hospital. You come with your daddy, okay?”

“But mom. It’ll be all right. Come with your dad.”

The EMT’s managed to squeeze in either side of J.C. and move him into the ambulance, Jenny on their heels. Ella Parker climbed in the ambulance first and extended a hand to Jenny.

“Mom,” J.C. rasped over the siren, “it’s okay. It’s really okay,” he said as he struggled to take in a breath. “My arm hurts, though.”

Ella pulled a large piece of cotton off a roll in the cabinet above J.C.’s head. She put it on the cut and wrapped it with an Ace Bandage, and put an oxygen mask on him, ran the straps around the back of his head. “We’ll fix him up soon as we get there,” Ella said as he concentrated on the blood pressure gauge on J.C.’s arm.

Jenny braced against the side of the ambulance as it took a sharp turn. “Ella?”

Ella nodded and smiled. It was gonna be okay.

Jenny glanced out the back window. Scotty and Ellie were following close behind.

###

Freddy’s voice was breaking up on the radio. “You guys get me down. Now.” He barely heard two clicks on his mic as the line went taut, and he began to move down. A loud “whang” echoed through the tank. Freddy almost lost his balance as a gust broke around the tower, causing it to vibrate.

His gloved hand slipped off the rungs several times as he reached for the ladder and twisted on the line as he was lowered. Ten minutes later, he was on the ground, leaning against the tower, Mariel at his side as the downpour started.

###

Jenny sat up and shook the sleep away.

“Mom?”

She took J.C.’s hand and squeezed.

“Careful. That hurts,” he said, rubbing the large bandage that covered his upper arm.

“Should hurt, you little stinker.” She smiled, brushed his curly hair back, and kissed his forehead. “How you feeling?”

“Okay. At least I can breathe.” He tried to push up on one elbow, winced, laid back. “How bad is it? I can kinda remember somebody sticking a needle in my arm.”

“You’ve got a pretty good gash,” Jenny said. She held her thumb and forefinger far apart. “About like this.”

“Rod?”

“He’s okay. Went home with his mom.”

“He was afraid he was gonna get an ass-kickin’ from her.”

Jenny walked toward the door. “Wouldn’t blame her. You’re kind of in hot water, yourself.” She grabbed the door handle, smiled, and shook her head. “I’m going to find your father.”

Three minutes later, Scotty walked in, stood at the foot of the hospital bed. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re suffering from a case of the dumbass.” He touched J.C.’s ankle and moved to the head of the bed. “How you feelin’?”

“I’m okay. Arm’s sore. When can I go home? I’m ready.”

“Tomorrow. Doc Chin wants to keep you overnight to make sure you didn’t pick up tetanus in that cut. We’ll have you out of here first thing in the morning.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“Talked to the sheriff. He’s not gonna charge you or Rod with anything. He figures you learned your lesson.”

“That’s for sure.” J.C. winched and rubbed his arm.

“You need to make sure you thank him, Henry Shafer, Deputy Harter and the EMT’s. They really went out of their way to get you two idiots down.” Scotty stepped to the half-open door, looked up and down the hall. He walked back to the bed, pulled three photos out of the inside pocket of your jacket.

“I’d forgotten all about these. Your grandma told me to show you when she heard about your little adventure. You know she was real worried about you.”

J.C. looked down. “I know. Sorry.”

“You need to tell her that.” He leaned close and handed J.C. the first photo. “Look at that guy. Any idea who that is?”

J.C. held the photo close to his face, moved it in and out. “I dunno. Who?”

“Jeep Weldon.”

“Who? Weldon? You mean like Charlie Weldon?”

“His dad.”

“Damn, looks just like him. When was this taken? Where was he? Looks like—wait a minute.” He held the photo close again then looked at Scotty. “Is he on the water tower?”

“Yep.” He glanced toward the door again and gave J.C. the second photo. “Recognize him?”

J.C. looked at the picture, at Scotty, back at the photo, at Scotty again. “Uh, wait—you? Is it you?”

“Afraid so.” He looked toward the door again. “Your mom doesn’t know about these. She’s still kinda pissed. I’d be careful about showing them to her. She’s probably forgot all about them.”

“Wait,” J.C. said, “who took the pictures?”

“Mom had given me a Brownie camera I carried around. I enjoyed taking pictures. It kind of made sense to, uh . . .”

“ . . . take it on the tower, with—what’s his name?”

“Jeep. He and I were best buds around here. Went everywhere together. Got in the same trouble, dated the same girls.”

“Took pictures of each other on the water tower?”

“Right again.” He handed J.C. the third photo. “What’s that?”

“The tower. Kinda looking up.”

“Right. See the black paint?”

“Yeah.” J.C. moved the picture close.

“What’s it say?”

“It says ‘S M.’ It says I was a dumbass. And I think it says you need to stick to hunting jackrabbits.”