

# What Was Lost

by Cameron Pollock



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## Chapter 1 Insomnia

Milton wished he could sleep, but he couldn't. It was annoying. He didn't used to be this way. He readjusted his pillow and turned on his opposite side for, how many times had it been? He didn't even know anymore. He reached over to check the time on his phone. 2:45 AM.

"Quit fooling yourself," he thought. "This isn't going to work."

He fumbled for the lamp on his bed stand, and rotated the knob. With a click light filled the room.

Swinging his feet off the bed, he sat up, wearily glancing about at the walls. Why had he painted his room dark blue? Oh yes, it's because it was his favorite color. Not just dark blue, *royal* blue. Half-amused, half-embarrassed, he smiled to himself. He used to be so obsessed with royal blue, though he couldn't tell remember why. He just liked it. So when mom mentioned the possibility of repainting the pasty white walls, Milton had jumped at the opportunity.

A border of paper about a foot high stretched around the top of every wall in his room, totally encircling him, except for at the door, closet, and window. He had picked out the border himself while making the renovations to his room. It included every extreme sport imaginable, from sky diving to ski

jumping to trick biking. It wasn't that Milton had ever done any of these things. But he had thought they were cool, and that was good enough for him.

He smiled to himself again. "What a little kid. That was so childish." But his room had a familiar feel to him, and, though he wouldn't dare admit it to his friends, he still liked it. He stood up from bed and shuffled downstairs to grab a bite to eat. If he couldn't go to sleep, he might as well enjoy it. He knew there were a few brownies still left over; he just needed a tall glass of milk to go with it. But he never got the brownies. Or the milk.

It was a full moon that night, and the stairwell had a rather sizeable window at a landing halfway down that allowed in the light. Through the window Milton could see a wide expanse of desert prairie. It was a rare slice of untouched Colorado landscape in the midst of Denver suburbs. Though his house was in a subdivision, his was the last in a long row on their street. Beyond their house the subdivision stopped, and a large open space stretched away for almost a mile until it sloped down to a large city park. But Milton didn't think much about that now. It was a sight he had seen a thousand times, and it was much more attractive in the daylight. As it was now, the moon cast an eerie glow over the whole scene.

He rounded the landing and continued down to the bottom of the stairs, but as he walked down the hallway towards the kitchen, he happened to walk too

close to the computer stand and accidentally bumped the mouse. The screen turned on, its bright glow casting strange shadows down the hall. Annoyed, he reached for the mouse. He peered up at the screen to put the computer back to sleep. For some reason his mom had left a local news website up. “Probably checking the weather—again,” he thought to himself.

But just before he closed out the window, he glanced at the headline. And his jaw dropped.

## Chapter 2 Vanished

The headline read, "Semi-Truck Vanishes on I-25." Milton knew I-25; his dad drove over that highway every day to get to work. His family took it all the time while going to church, but usually they drove south. It was a large, multi-lane highway, a main artery that lead to heart of downtown Denver.

Apparently this incident happened just north on I-25, only about 15 minutes away. He clicked on the video to see the report.

A well-groomed, 30-something man held up his microphone. He was standing on what appeared to be the shoulder of the highway, with several emergency vehicles flashing their lights behind him.

"Good morning, I'm Warren Kramer with 9 News," he began. "It was at this spot at approximately 2 AM that the unthinkable happened. An Amazon semi-truck, fully loaded, was heading south on I-25, when it apparently vanished into thin air. Amazon company records indicate that the driver, 47-year old Marcus Sanchez, was driving a typical company route when the incident occurred." The camera panned to the left as the reporter took a few steps over and focused on a lady standing by herself. She seemed cold, scared, and bewildered. "We have eyewitnesses from the scene," the reporter continued, "who are still stunned from this shocking occurrence."

"Ma'am," he said, turning to the lady, "can you tell us what you saw?"

“Well, I’m not exactly sure how it all happened. All I know is I was driving down the highway, and I saw headlights approaching me.”

“When you say you ‘saw headlights approaching you’ do you mean they were on the opposite side of the highway?” the reporter questioned.

“No,” She continued, “that’s why I was so startled—the headlights were on my side of the highway, coming towards me. I slammed on the brakes in panic, and the headlights in front of me went down behind that little dip in the road.”

“And then what happened?” Kramer prodded.

“They never came over the hill. They just—vanished.”

“And you never saw the lights again?” Kramer asked.

“Never, it was the strangest thing. It was like the truck was driving at me, went down the hill, then disappeared. I would think I’m going crazy, but all these other people saw the same thing as well. A couple of people rear-ended each other, but thankfully the highway wasn’t very busy this late at night. I don’t think anyone was seriously injured.”

As the eyewitness spoke, the camera panned out to reveal a long line of cars beginning to back up on the highway.

The reporter wrapped up, “Thank for taking the time to speak with us.” He turned as the camera focused on him, “As you all can see, everyone is a bit bewildered and baffled here. I’ve spoken with several eyewitnesses who have

stayed to talk to police, and the stories are all remarkably consistent. Like we were just told, authorities say only a few individuals were taken to the hospital with minor injuries...”

The reporter’s words faded into the distance as Milton tried to wrap his mind around what he had just heard. A whole semi-truck, vanished? There was no way this kind of thing was possible. Sure, he had heard of airplanes disappearing and all those myths about the Bermuda Triangle, but this was 15 minutes from his house on a highway he traveled almost every single day.

Forgetting the brownies and the milk, he headed back upstairs to his room. What could this mean? It was so bizarre, he couldn’t wait to tell his mom and dad before they saw it on the news. By morning, everyone would be talking about it. Semi-trucks don’t just disappear every day.

At the same time, it was also unsettling. Why did it happen? And if it happened just 15 minutes away on I-25, where else could it happen? He started to wish he had slept through the night and heard the news in the morning. Uneasily, he slipped into bed and tried to get comfortable under the covers. Then he turned out the light. There he lay, wide awake, until sunlight started peeking around the edges of his dark blue window curtains.

### Chapter 3 Milton Meets a Stranger

It was Saturday morning. Milton heard footsteps in the hallway and turned to look at his alarm clock. He had fallen asleep just as the sun was coming up, and it was now almost 10 AM. He groggily swung his feet over the side of the bed, his tussle of brown hair looking rather ridiculous. Milton was not particularly tall, not particularly short. He wasn't particularly good looking or particularly ugly. He was pretty ordinary, except for his distinctive nose. The Cherokee in his family line had blessed his dad's side of the family with a distinctive hawk-shaped nose. He had an athletic build and usually a voracious appetite. He suddenly remembered what he saw last night, poked his head out his door, and said, "Hey, mom!"

Mrs. Maxwell had already shuffled halfway down the stairs and was rounding the landing. She wore her typical Saturday morning attire—a puffy pink housecoat and slippers. The care and concern of several decades of mothering lined her face (Milton was the youngest of six, and the only child still at home). But her mind was still as sharp as ever. She seemed to work on less sleep than the Energizer bunny. Without skipping a beat, she peered up at her son and said, "Are you feeling well, Milton? You look tired."

"I couldn't sleep last night and saw something crazy on the news. You've got to see this," he said as he bounded down the stairs past her to the computer.

“Ok, ok,” she said, waving him off with one hand as she walked past him into the kitchen. “Let me just get some hot water ready for my tea.”

Milton pulled up the news again on the computer. By this time every major news channel was reporting the incident—CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and the rest.

He fidgeted impatiently as his mom filled a pot with water and placed it on the stove. Finally she came over and sat down in front of the screen. Milton watched in silence as she started scrolling through the images and reports.

“Missing semi on I-25.” she muttered to herself. By this time the original news report Milton had seen the night before was buried in a sea of other media outlets trying to get their take. His mom browsed the pages in silence for a few minutes. Then, out of habit, she opened her Facebook account.

“What are you doing?” Milton asked.

“I have more important things to do than to worry about a missing truck,” she replied.

“Like scan Facebook?” Milton asked.

“At least I sleep well at night,” his mom shot back.

“You slept well when I didn’t get home until 11:30 the other night?” said Milton, smirking.

Without taking her eyes off the screen, she continued, “Why don’t you go play soccer at the park this morning? It might help you feel better.”

Years of experience had taught her to send boys outside if they seemed too stir crazy, and Milton was more than happy to oblige. He glanced at her well-worn Bible open on the table as he gulped down a bowl of cereal. Various verses were underlined, and his mom’s familiar handwriting marked many edges and corners of the pages.

He put his bowl and spoon down by the sink and filled a water bottle. In a minute he had tied his cleats, grabbed his soccer ball, and headed out down to the field.

The neighborhood had an opening down the street between two houses with a pathway that led down to the city park. Local residents frequently walked the trail; though it was surrounded by city suburbs, it’s high point on the hillside offered a stunning view of snow-capped Rocky Mountains to the west. The morning air was crisp, cool, and dry, and the early sunlight caused the mountains to radiate with brilliant golden hues. Milton had often walked this path. At the bottom of the hill an oval-shaped sidewalk encircled a large, grassy space where the city would host special events like festivals and youth sports tournaments.

After his brothers grew up and left home, Milton discovered other kids would play pick up soccer at the park most Saturdays during the warmer months.

Sure enough, as he came to the top of the hill looking down on the park, he could see them playing. Among them was the figure of Hudson, his best friend, running down the field. Hudson had an athletic build and a tussle of curly, red hair on his head, complete with freckles on his cheeks. He loved to get a good laugh at the expense of other people, and even from far away Milton could hear his jesting voice on the soccer field. Milton took a deep breath of the cool morning air and started on a jog down the hillside.

About two hours later Milton and Hudson were sitting down in the grass, taking long sips from their water bottles. Milton was glad he had come down today. Maybe he hadn't slept so well because he needed some exercise. But that would be admitting mom was right, so he pushed that thought out of his mind.

Hudson gathered up his things and headed toward the parking lot overlooking the park. As Hudson walked away, Milton also happened to notice a young boy walking away from them up the steep hillside, a good hundred yards away. Milton had never seen him at the park before. Almost without warning the boy stumbled, caught himself, and kept going. Milton wouldn't

have cared much, except he noticed a small piece of paper fall from the boy's pocket. The stranger hadn't seen it.

Milton stood up and started to wave, yelling, "Hey man! I think you dropped something!"

The boy hesitated and slightly turned his head, as if he had heard Milton but wasn't interested in talking. Milton started jogging towards the boy to retrieve the paper. The movement caught the boy's attention and he swung around so, for just a second, Milton caught a full view of his face. He was a Hispanic boy, probably about five years younger than Milton. His brown hair was tangled, his forehead sweaty. He looked scared. In a split second the boy was off in the opposite direction in a dead sprint.

Milton yelled again, "Hey buddy! I'm not trying to hurt you!" his voice trailed off as a gust of wind picked up the paper and carried it away. "I just want to help you," he finished, half-heartedly.

The boy had reached the parking lot by now. Seemingly out of nowhere a brown Ford LTD with dark tinted windows had pulled up. Without taking another look, the boy hopped in the passenger side of the car, slammed the door shut, and the car sped out of the parking lot.

Frustrated, Milton watched the car drive away, then turned around to get his stuff before heading home.

Hudson had noticed the commotion and came jogging up. “That went well,” said Hudson.

“Yeah, I know,” replied Milton. “Just trying to help.”

As they turned, Hudson noticed the paper had not flown away, but had got caught in the branches a newly planted tree at the top of the hill. “Ha!” he laughed, “What are the odds?”

Milton’s curiosity got the best of him. He knew he would always wonder what was on that paper if he didn’t go look now. Slowly, with stiff legs, he sighed and trudged up the hill. Hudson joined.

The paper had landed at just the right angle on the tree and nestled itself among some leaves. Another gust of wind surely would have blown it away. It crinkled like it had once been wet as Milton reached up and pulled it out. With some more crinkling he unfolded it. It was a full size 8 ½ by 11 sheet of paper, and on it was printed a receipt from a construction company—Taylor Sons & Co. Commercial Construction.

“That’s odd,” Milton said, “Why would a kid have a receipt for a construction company? He can’t be more than eleven years old.”

They scanned the page for any other helpful info, then flipped it over to take a look at the back.

“Now this is interesting,” said Hudson.

The back of the receipt was covered with seemingly random notes— contact information, mysterious abbreviations, and lots of numbers. But Hudson’s eyes had fallen to the upper right-hand corner of the paper. He read the words aloud, “Amazon, PDL – 663.”

## Chapter 4 Horse Hooves, Not Zebras

Back in his room, with trembling fingers, Milton spread out the paper on his bed. Taking his phone out of his pocket, he prepared to take a picture of the back and front, then text the pictures to Hudson.

Before he had the chance, his phone lit up with a text message. It was Hannah.

“Impeccable timing,” thought Milton. But he couldn’t ignore her, not now.

Milton and Hannah had grown up together at church. She had often accused him of “scribble-scrabbling” when he strayed outside the lines while coloring in kindergarten. He made up for it in elementary school by relentlessly teasing her every chance he had. But the last few years Hannah had started acting, well, weird. He wasn’t really sure why, but he suspected his teasing antics had something to do with it. She had stopped hanging around him as much; he, not knowing what to do, had obliged. But she still would talk to him every once in a while. This text, though, was unusual. She hadn’t texted him in months. The mysterious paper would have to wait.

As he picked up his phone to read the text, his bedroom door suddenly popped open. His mom stuck her head in. “Milton, honey?” she said.

“Whaaaaat?” Milton said in frustration as he swung his eyes up to meet hers.

She hesitated, then, with a twinkle in her eye, said, “Oh nothing, just wanted to remind you, ‘Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he—”

Milton interrupted, ”—he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.’ Yes. Thank you.” He looked at his mom, her eyes still fixed on him with seriousness.

“Milton,” she said, “What’s wrong?”

“Well, currently I have a text message I need to deal with.” He replied.

“And who exactly, might I ask, is sending this text message that you need to ‘deal with’?” She replied, emphasizing his last two words.

Milton knew he was better off just talking through it with his mom. She had always been willing to listen and give advice, usually with a Bible verse thrown in somewhere.

“It’s Hannah. She’s been acting weird for months now, she hardly talks to me anymore. Suddenly I get this random text from her. Of course, I was up all night, and I’m not exactly in the mood to try to work through things with her right now.”

With an invitation to talk, Mrs. Maxwell opened the door and stepped just inside his room. “Why did she text you?” she asked.

“I dunno,” said Milton, picking up his phone. “She said, ‘Hey Milton, r u busy?’”

Mrs. Maxwell paused, then started to speak, then paused again.

“What is it?” said Milton.

“Well, I have no doubt Hannah texted you because she really wanted to talk. Maybe just try to be a friend and listen. I remember one time, before I had you, the instructor from our birthing class gave your father and I some good advice.”

“Seriously, mom? Birthing class?” Milton said.

“Yes, I know, more weirdness, but don’t get distracted from the point. I still remember it like it was yesterday.” Mrs. Maxwell’s eyes glazed over as if she were recalling a fond memory, “The birthing instructor said, ‘Remember, class, if your baby is crying, and you can’t figure out why, think horse hooves, not zebras.’” Mrs. Maxwell looked at Milton and smiled.

“Horse hooves?” Milton replied skeptically.

“Yes!” said Mrs. Maxwell “Horse hooves. The instructor was referring to those old Westerns when people would put their ears to the ground to listen for a herd of buffalo or riders on horses. They were listening for horse hooves, not zebras. Yet we do the opposite; we look at a crying baby and think the solution must be something strange or exotic like a zebra. Well I’m here to tell

you what you needed was usually a diaper change or a feeding or a good nap. Horse hooves! And you haven't changed much. Could probably use a nap now. But after lunch. Which, by the way, is why I actually came here in the first place. Lunch is ready." She smiled at him again.

Milton, speechless, stared back at her. He really didn't understand women, and he really needed a nap. But she was right, food would be good too.

Mrs. Maxwell patted him on the back, then said, "I'd just try to listen to Hannah and try not to read into things too much. She probably needs, more than anything, a listening ear. Like it says in James, "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

There it was. Milton knew the verse was coming.

"Tell you what," his mom continued, "I'll take your sandwich and chips up here to your room and you can text Hannah. Then try to get a nap.

"Thanks mom, I really do appreciate it."

"Let me know how it goes," She said as she left the room.

Milton looked down at his phone on the bed. Why was it so hard to type a simple response? He didn't want to mess up. He picked it up and typed out, "Yeah, I can talk. What's up?"

## Chapter 5 More than Just a Haircut

Hannah Meadows glanced over at her phone her bookshelf. Still no reply from Milton. She went back to her closet to think about what she needed for the new school year. She had pretty much already decided what she wanted to get when her mom took her shopping, but at least it was something to take her mind off Milton. Milton, Milton, Milton. She had no idea how he would respond to her, but she simply couldn't wait any longer. Did he not notice how things had changed? She had put up with his nonsense through all of junior high, waiting for him to grow up, but finally she just got tired of trying. The straw that broke the camel's back was the day she got her hair cut. She was pleased with how it turned out, and when she came to youth group some of the girls had mentioned how cute she looked. Then Milton opened his fat mouth.

She remembered hearing his voice suddenly from behind her, "Hey Hannah, bad hair day?" he teased.

Hannah whirled around, her eyes locked on him in rage, as she said condescendingly, "No Milton, it's called a haircut."

Milton gave his obnoxious smirk, "Oh, oops. My bad."

He and a couple other guys walked past her, snickering. Hannah stood alone; a single tear trickled down her cheek.

A buzz from her phone jolted Hannah out of her sad daydream. She walked over to her phone. It was a text from Milton,

“Yeah, I can talk. What’s up?”

She picked her phone up and typed out. “How r u doing?”

“Im OK. Been kind of a crazy weekend. How bout u?” He replied.

“Here it goes,” Hannah thought to herself. She bit her lip as she typed, “Well, honestly, not very well. I don’t know if u noticed, but I haven’t texted much recently.”

Milton paused, then texted back, “Yeah, I noticed.”

At least he wasn’t totally ignorant. She went on, “I don’t really know how to say this, but you remember when I got my hair cut?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I felt like that day you weren’t very nice to me. It hurt my feelings.”

There was a long pause.

You mean my ‘bad hair day’ comment?”

Hannah’s heart began beating faster, she felt a lot less sure of herself than when she started. “It’s not that it was a big deal... I mean, I just don’t like being teased...like that,” she replied.

Longer pause.

“It’s just it’s been happening a lot more...” Hannah added.

Another long pause. This was agonizing and awkward. Maybe she shouldn't have even bothered. How could she expect Milton to "get" something he should have noticed a long time ago, but didn't? It wasn't her fault, and she couldn't make him change.

Her phone suddenly buzzed—Milton was calling her.

She wasn't ready for that. But what else was there to do? She was the one who had said she wanted to talk. She answered the phone.

"Hey Milton," she said.

"Hey Hannah," answered Milton.

There was an awkward silence; Milton cleared his throat, then began, "I just wanted to say to you I am so sorry. I didn't realize how much that hurt you. I guess I was just trying to have some fun. But I shouldn't do it at your expense."

"It's OK Milton," Hannah said. "And yes, I do forgive you. It seems kind of silly now, but at the time it was really hurtful."

"No, it's not silly," Milton said, "It was important to you. I'm your friend, so it should be important to me, too."

Hannah smiled, "Does this mean I can make fun of your next haircut?"

"Uh, well my current haircut is pretty dorky. You could probably start there." Milton joked.

Outside Milton's door his mom was putting down his lunch plate on the floor. She heard Milton laugh from inside his room. She smiled to herself and went down the stairs. Mr. Maxwell was enjoying his own sandwich at the dinner table. He looked up at Mrs. Maxwell as she settled into her chair and took a sip of tea.

"Where's Milton?" He asked.

"On his phone upstairs." Mrs. Maxwell replied. Then added, "with Hannah."

"Oh?" Mr. Maxwell raised an eyebrow.

"It's not like that, Steve," said Mrs. Maxwell, giving him a reproachful push on the arm. "Hannah and Milton are restoring their friendship. And I'm thankful."

"Well, then, that is good news." He replied. "And I'm thankful, too. Let's just hope it stays there," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Meanwhile, Hannah and Milton were wrapping up.

"Oops, it looks like I need to go. My mom is taking me shopping this afternoon." said Hannah.

"Ok, have a good time." Milton said.

"I will," said Hannah, "Oh, and Milton?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for calling me."

“Sure!”

“K, bye.”

“Bye.”

A few minutes later Mrs. Maxwell came up the stairs. The plate was gone from the hallway. She didn't hear Milton anymore, so she pushed the door open a crack to peek in. There he lay on his bed, sound asleep, with an empty plate on his nightstand.

## Chapter 6 Forget It

The next day was Sunday, and Milton woke up late. He could hear his parents bustling about downstairs, getting ready to go to church. Groggily, he rolled out of bed, grabbed the mysterious paper, and hurried to get dressed.

He walked into Sunday school that morning with Hudson and saw Hannah across the room. She glanced over to see who was coming in and waved. He waved back. It was good to at least be on waving terms again. He took his seat with the other guys. Milton was so tired he had a hard time concentrating that morning, but for the lesson the youth pastor had them turn to Psalm 78.

“This is a long Psalm, 72 verses total,” his pastor began. “It’s really a piece of wisdom literature, kind of like a proverb, that God intends for us to take to heart so we can become wise. Wisdom is taking knowledge and skillfully applying it to life. For instance, think about that truck that disappeared this week on I-25. Wasn’t that close to your house, Milton?”

Up to this point Milton had been dozing off, but suddenly he sat bolt upright. He knew his youth pastor had asked him on purpose to wake him up, and it worked.

“Uh, yeah,” he replied. Now he was wide awake.

“It’s a pretty crazy story,” his pastor continued, “the facts from eyewitnesses alone will not solve this mystery. Investigators need wisdom to

figure out, based on the facts, what happened and who is to blame. The same is true for us. We need wisdom to figure out, based on the facts, what is the best way to live our Christian life. So the Psalm writer talks about the history of Israel, and how the people in that nation could have applied wisdom in their own lives but failed. What did they do wrong? Well the Israelites were supposed to teach their children God's law, as verse 5 tells us, and verse 6 tells us why,

‘that the next generation might know them,  
the children yet unborn,  
and arise and tell them to their children,  
so that they should set their hope in God  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep his commandments;’

And here in these first few verses we see the problem. The Israelites were to tell the truth to their children, the next generation, so they would ‘not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.’ The whole Psalm is riddled with this problem of forgetting. Look at verse 11, “They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them.” Then again in verse 42, “They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe.’ Over and over again Israel tested God. He disciplines them as a loving father, so that

they would remember what he has told them. But they kept forgetting the truth...”

Milton’s mind wandered as the pastor continued. The initial shock of being called out in class had worn off, and he was still zoned. He started thinking about that paper with the mysterious information. Perhaps, like his youth pastor had just said, investigators needed more facts to help them figure out the mystery. Perhaps his paper held the answers. Who should he talk to?

Then his mind lit up with an idea—what was the name of that reporter he saw on the computer that night? He put his hand in his pocket and felt the paper crinkle. It was still there. He had some research to do when he got home.

Back at home that afternoon, after lunch, Milton hopped on the computer to dig up the old video. He remembered it was a local news station, but that video clip was old. He hoped he could find it. After about 20 minutes of clicking through endless videos, he suddenly recognized the scene. Same man, same well-groomed look, same dark highway. Bingo! He hit play.

“Good morning, I’m Warren Kramer with 9 News—” Milton hit pause. Warren Kramer with 9 News. He googled the name and station and found a page with a link that said, “Someone specific: If you’d like to connect directly with an individual member of our team, you can find them all here.” There he

was, Warren Kramer, cell phone and all. Milton dialed the number as he walked upstairs to his room.

It rang twice, three times, then four. Milton was getting ready to leave a voicemail when, to his surprise, an energetic voice answered, “Warren Kramer, 9 News.”

“Oh, hey! Uh, well, hi!” Milton stumbled over his words. He hadn’t actually thought about what he was going to say next. “My name’s Milton.”

“Hey Milton, what can I do for you?” Warren responded.

“Well I had seen your report on the missing truck online, I just happened to be up late that night, and I thought it was fascinating.” Milton said.

“Yes, it’s a pretty incredible story. I’m glad you are following along. It seems to have made quite a stir. Not every day someone loses a semi-truck,” Kramer replied.

“Well that’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about,” said Milton, collecting his thoughts. “I think I may have stumbled on some information that could help police figure things out.”

“What kind of information are you referring to?” Kramer replied.

“Well I happened to run into a random kid at a park. I don’t live that far from where the truck disappeared. Anyway, this kid dropped a piece of paper.

I tried to return it to him, but he ran away. It had ‘Amazon, PDL – 663’ written on the back of it.”

“Did it have anything else written on it?” Kramer asked. He seemed interested.

“Uh, well, I’m having a hard time understanding what it says. A lot of it seems like random letters and numbers. But the note is written on the back of a receipt for a construction company, Taylor Sons & Co. Commercial Construction. Oh, and here’s an address for a furniture store.”

Kramer coughed, “Ah, well, seems random. Listen, kid, that’s interesting and all, but I wouldn’t read too much into it. A lot of kids write things down for who knows what reason—you know, imagination, role play, pretending to solve mysteries. We deal with that kind of stuff all the time as reporters. I’m glad you found it, Mr., uh, what did you say your name was again?”

“Milton, Milton Maxwell,” Milton replied. He could feel his face turning red.

“Mr. Maxwell, yeah. Well hey, Milton, I appreciate the lead, but I’m going to have to pass on it this time. Nothing against you, but I’d just forget about it until we have something more substantial to go off of. Police department doesn’t like us wasting their time. Be sure to keep in touch, though, and let me know if you find any good leads. I’d be happy to help.” Kramer ended his last sentence in a tone of voice that told Milton the conversation was over.

“Ok, thanks for your time,” Milton said miserably.

“Sure thing. Have a good one, kid.” Kramer hung up.

Now Milton felt embarrassed and stupid. Here he had called a news reporter to give him information, only to feel like an idiot. Milton stared hard at the paper, crumpled it up, and threw it in his trash can.

## Chapter 7 Wasted

Hannah got home from church on Sunday afternoon feeling refreshed. School was starting up the next day, but she felt prepared. She was looking forward to her new teachers, her new locker, and getting back into the routine of seeing her friends every day. Of course, Milton would only be there at the end of the day. He was home schooled. If she saw him, she only saw him when he came for soccer practice.

Sure enough, the next day after school Hannah happened to see him walking from his car to the practice field.

“Hey Milton,” she called and waved.

He saw her, smiled and waved back. “Good to see you. How’s my hair look?”

“Har har,” Hannah replied. “Are you feeling better? You seemed tired yesterday.”

Milton turned red. Hannah was putting it mildly. Milton had fallen fast asleep during Sunday school, then Hudson had tied his shoelaces together. At the end of class, Milton jerked awake. Hoping no one had noticed, he got up to leave and tripped because of the tied laces. Then he fell into the refreshments table and scattered the leftover donuts across the floor. He still had a mark on his cheek.

“Yes, I’m feeling much better, thank you.” Milton said, trying to keep a straight face. He thought Hannah looked slightly amused, but he couldn’t tell.

“I had a... crazy weekend.”

“Crazy weekend?” Hannah inquired curiously.

“Yeah. I, uh, well, yeah, let’s just say it was crazy.” Milton didn’t want to risk embarrassing himself again.

“OK, well you can keep your secrets,” Hannah said.

They were suddenly interrupted by a loud whistle in the direction of the soccer field. It was Hudson. He cupped his hands to his mouth and started chanting, “Milton and Hannah, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I—”

“Hey, lay off, would you?” Milton shouted. He turned back to Hannah, “I should probably go. But I’ll tell you later. It’s nothing special.”

“Ok, see ya,” said Hannah, who also seemed eager to leave.

Milton turned and walked towards a grinning Hudson.

That night, after he got home from soccer practice, Milton headed to his room to text Hannah. She, too, had seen the news reports about the missing semi. Intrigued by Milton’s discovery of the mysterious paper, and by his conversation with the news reporter, Hannah started texting more questions.

“What’s on the back of the receipt?” She asked.

“Something like Amazon, PDL... I can’t remember right now.”

“663?” Hannah texted back.

“Wow, yeah, how did you know?” Milton asked, amazed. His phone buzzed; Hannah was calling him.

“Milton,” she began in an excited voice, “That’s the license plate number of the semi-truck that disappeared. I saw it on the news this morning. The police were telling people to report any details they might know on the whereabouts of the truck.”

“Really? That’s weird,” Milton replied.

“Weird?” Hannah exclaimed, “It’s down-right crazy! You could have missing clues that help solve, like, a real mystery. This is so cool.”

“Well kind of,” said Milton, “I mean, the news reporter thought it was a waste of time. He said it was probably just some kid pretending.”

“Well I don’t like that reporter,” Hannah retorted. “What does he know, anyway? I mean, does it look like a little boy’s handwriting? And why would a kid bother to gather and write down all those details, anyway?”

“I didn’t realize you were into this kind of stuff,” Milton said, a bit surprised.

“Into it? I *love* mysteries. My parents gave me the collected stories of Sherlock Holmes for my birthday this year. Oh, this is going to be *amazing*. What else does the paper say?”

“Um, the note was written on the back of a receipt for some kind of construction company. I think it had an address for a furniture store, along with some other notes.” Milton replied.

“Those are real places Milton. This has to be more than a coincidence. Maybe God wants you to help solve this mystery!”

“Well, I would, only I can’t.” Milton replied nervously.

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked, “You have the clues, so all we need to do is figure them out.”

“Well, about that—”

“You lost the paper?” Hannah asked in an anxious voice.

“Well, I, uh, I threw it away,” Milton confessed.

“You threw it away?” Hannah cried out. “You threw it—Milton! Why would you do that?”

Milton feared yet another a sudden reversal of their relationship status was close at hand. He had to think fast.

“Well, what I meant to say is that I put it in the trash can in my room. Looks like it’s been emptied. Sooooo there’s still a chance it’s in our trash outside. I’ll go check, call you back in a minute.”

Without waiting for her to reply, he hung up the phone and hurried downstairs, out the front door, and opened a gate that led to the side of the

house. His parents kept their trash in a large, dark-green bin. Ignoring the putrid smell, Milton flung open the lid and started digging through the bags.

“Let’s see, that was just yesterday, so it should be here on top,” he thought to himself. But the first bag was just garbage from the kitchen—broken egg shells, banana peels, dirty napkins from meals and other garbage. This was not going well. Milton dug through the second bag—nothing. Then the third—nothing again. Nervously, he ripped open the fourth and final bag, the last one at the bottom. After several minutes of frantic searching, he still found nothing. He slumped over the edge of the bin, exhausted and defeated, with his head still inside. Hannah was going to kill him.

## Chapter 8 A Wild Goose Chase?

“Ahem,” came a voice from behind Milton. He jerked his head out of the bin and whirled around. There, standing at the gate, was his dad, holding a bag of trash in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Through the white trash bag Milton could just make out the shape and color of the Walmart bag he had seen in his trash when he threw away the mysterious paper just the day before.

Without a thought, Milton snatched the trash bag from his dad’s hand and said, “Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!”

As Milton greedily tore into the bag, Mr. Maxwell surveyed the scene curiously then replied, “Gladly. Feel free to take the trash out whenever you like, since you seem to like it so much. Just try to keep it in the bags next time.”

“Yeah, sure dad,” replied Milton absent-mindedly as he anxiously searched for the paper.

“Ah-HA, I found it.” Milton said, holding up his prized receipt, still crumpled up.

“And what, may I ask, is ‘it’?” Said his dad, taking a sip of coffee.

“Um, it’s just a piece of paper for something I was telling Hannah about,” Said Milton.

His dad raised his eyebrows, nodded slowly, and took a sip of coffee, “Oh yes, Hannah. That’s interesting.”

“Dad, it’s not like that,” Milton said defensively, “It’s not about Hannah. Can I go back upstairs now?”

“Sure,” said Mr. Maxwell, stepping back with a swooping gesture of his arm.

In a few minutes Hannah was scouring pictures of the mysterious note Milton had texted her. Milton continued to text her, but she was ignoring him for the moment. She had noticed a different clue that sounded familiar.

“Furniture Row Distribution Center, E. 19<sup>th</sup> Ave,” she read out loud, then furrowed her eyebrows. Pulling up Google maps, she searched the location. It was a short drive down Colfax, just 10 minutes from her house. It was on the outskirts of Aurora on the east side of Denver, a fairly secluded location. Then she noticed, just on the other side of the tollway E-470, something else.

“Amazon Den2,” she whispered to herself. “Of course, it’s an Amazon distribution center. And it’s right across the highway from the furniture distribution center.” All the clues seemed to be piling up, and it had to be more than coincidence. She looked at the clock—6:30 pm. Her parents had gone out on a date and wouldn’t be back for another hour and a half. She could take the other car, do some quick investigating, then get back before they got home.

She grabbed her phone and her keys, then headed for the door.

What Hannah hadn't considered was the fact that the sun was setting. The shadows lengthened on the desolate open spaces around her as she drove down Colfax towards the isolated industrial park. Ahead on her left she saw several lights, freshly illuminated, casting a glow on a long row of semi-trucks backed up to the building, ready to be loaded or unloaded. Her heart felt like it would jump out of her chest as she rounded the exit and pulled onto East 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The building loomed ahead, looking larger than ever. What was she even doing here? What if it was a wild goose chase? What if it wasn't? She didn't want to think of that.

Hannah pulled straight into the distribution center. She had noticed one section, away from the employee parking, that was sparsely populated with trailers. She drove down as far as she could, to a dead end, parked, and turned off the car. Night had completely fallen, but at least the parking lot was well lit. Then the light directly above her flickered and blew out with a pop, causing Hannah to jump in her seat. She took a deep breath, bowed her head onto the steering wheel, and said, quietly, "Dear God, I don't even know if I should be doing this, but please protect me. If it is just a foolish idea, help me to be wise." She was about to get out when the headlights of a truck glimmered on the far side of the building. It had just come in the same entrance she used. It turned

left, however, the opposite of her, and drove in the direction where most of the other trailers were docked.

Quickly but quietly, Hannah hopped out of her car and ran across the parking lot to the nearest loading dock. It was dark inside. She hoisted herself up into the entrance, slipped inside, and knelt down in the shadows, allowing her eyes to adjust to the dark. She started to make out long rows of pallets, stacked almost to the ceiling. Some seemed to be shapes of shrink-wrapped furniture, but she couldn't tell for certain. She noticed that the inside of the building was actually separated by tall, metal walls. While her area was dark and isolated, on the far end of the room she could see three or four doors with windows. Light was shining through them, and she could faintly hear what sounded like an occasional whirring of a forklift, the shouting of distant voices. She plucked up the courage to start walking, carefully, down the nearest aisle framed by pallets, towards the light. Maybe she could peek through a window and see what was going on inside.

She had almost made it about halfway down the row when she heard the sound of keys in the door directly opposite of her; a shadow filled the window. Someone was coming! To her horror, she suddenly realized she had gone too far down the aisle to run back for cover. Looking around desperately, she noticed a gap in the pallets just a few yards ahead of her. She made a break for

it, but as she rounded the corner, she ran into a wall, or something like it, and fell to the floor. She could hear the door opening now, light streamed down the aisle just a few inches from her feet. Stunned, she tried her best to crawl up to the wall and hide behind the pallets. As she crawled forward, she groped for the wall, hoping not to repeat her first mistake. But she could not find the wall. She crawled farther in—still no wall. Relieved, but bewildered, Hannah carefully continued her slow, blinded crawl. Trembling, she kept one hand outstretched in front of her. Her lip was numb; she could feel blood trickling down her chin. Suddenly light flooded the room; she heard footsteps coming down the aisle she had just escaped. Dazed and squinting in the flood of light, Hannah looked back behind her to see where she was. To her great surprise, she had been crawling, not through a tunnel, but under the entire length of a semi-trailer. She looked up and, almost as if it were staring at her in large, bold letters, were the words “Amazon Prime,” with the unmistakable smiling swoop of its logo beneath. She reached up and touched the license plate, running her fingers over cold, raised characters. “PDL – 663,” it read. Her heart skipped a beat; she should have stayed at home.

## Chapter 9 Missing Puzzle Pieces

The next day, Milton quietly scarfed down his lunch at home. Hannah had seemed so excited about his mysterious note. He had basically scoured all of his household garbage to retrieve it for her, embarrassed himself in front of his dad (he would never hear the end of *that*), and Hannah didn't even take time to say, "thank you." She hadn't texted him or said anything since he sent her the pictures the night before. He tried to push it out of his mind.

He had also texted the pictures to Hudson, and Hudson had a few of his own ideas. He told Milton in a text that morning he was going to call the company that the receipt came from, Taylor Sons & Co. Commercial Construction, and try to figure out what the invoice was for. Milton and Hudson agreed to arrive early before soccer practice that afternoon to compare notes. They met in the parking lot.

"So what did you find out? Did they tell you anything?" Milton asked skeptically. He still felt a little stupid about investigating the mysterious note.

"Ah man, it was so easy," said Hudson in his carefree way. "I thought maybe I would have to pretend I was an actual customer, but the receptionist didn't seem to care. She looked up the invoice and said it was a rental for, get this, of all things commercial grade work lights."

"Work lights?" repeated Milton. "What do you mean?"

“You know, when you drive past a construction site at night, they have those big floodlights out so they can work when it’s dark,” Hudson explained. “They are insanely bright.”

“Oh yeah, OK. I guess that makes sense. Maybe that kid’s dad works for a construction company?” Milton guessed.

“Maybe,” said Hudson. Then he stepped closer to Milton, with a serious look in his eyes, and lowered his voice, “Except for the fact that the rental was scheduled for last week. Friday to Saturday. The same night the truck disappeared.”

Milton stared at Hudson in stunned disbelief. Hudson continued, “It was returned early Saturday morning by your reporter friend.”

“What? Warren Kramer?” Milton gasped.

“One and the same,” said Hudson. “The secretary knew who he was, of course, so she mentioned it without me asking. I wouldn’t have known otherwise, because Kramer didn’t pay for it.”

“Who paid for it?” asked Milton, still in disbelief.

“Some guy named Marcus Sanchez. I have no idea who that guy is, but the important thing is this Kramer connection. He clearly knows more than he’s letting on.” Hudson glanced around, then said, “So we’ve found some of the puzzle pieces. But I think we’re still missing a really important one.”

“What is it?”

“It’s Hannah. She didn’t come to school today.”

“Really?” said Milton, frowning. “That’s not good. The last time I heard from her was yesterday. I texted her the pictures of the note just before I texted you. She hasn’t texted me since.”

“And she hasn’t texted anyone else, either,” Hudson replied. “Some of the girls tried to get information out of the principle or the teachers, but they must have had a meeting this morning. None of them will talk. They just said Hannah had been ‘excused from class today.’”

Milton put his hands on his head and let out a low whistle. This was all his fault. He hoped Hannah was OK, but he had no way of knowing. The coach blew his whistle to start practice. The two friends glanced at each other with the same look of concern.

“Text me if you hear anything,” Milton said.

“K.”

## Chapter 10 The Prodigal Son

Milton barely slept that night. He had sent more texts and still hadn't heard back from Hannah. He would have called her parents, only he knew the school must have already talked with them if Hannah had been excused. As the sun began to peek through his dark blue window curtains, he replayed the events of the past week over in his mind. Exhausted, he sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed, glancing at his nightstand to see what time it was. 5:30 am. He pushed his alarm clock away in disgust, and it fell off his nightstand then rolled under his bed. This only served to frustrate Milton more. He knelt down to reach for his clock, but instead of the clock, he felt something familiar—it was his Bible. Pulling it out, he looked at his name on inside of the front cover. It had been a long time since he had actually bothered reading it. Now, on his knees, he read the note his parents had written to him on his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Dear Milton,

We hope you will always treasure this book. It has been a constant guide to us in difficult places, when we felt like we lost our way. We pray God will use it to light your path.

Love,

Mom & Dad

Milton mindlessly thumbed through the pages then let the book fall open in his hands. It was Psalm 78. His eyes drifted to verse 5, the same one his youth pastor had talked about on Sunday.

*He established a testimony in Jacob  
and appointed a law in Israel,  
which he commanded our fathers  
to teach to their children,  
that the next generation might know them,  
the children yet unborn,  
and arise and tell them to their children,  
so that they should set their hope in God  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep his commandments;  
and that they should not be like their fathers,  
a stubborn and rebellious generation,  
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,  
whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

Milton's heart was cut to the quick. He knew *he* was like that "stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God." Sure, a lot of people would call him a "good kid,"

but he knew how to get by. His Bible was under his bed, covered in dust, because he never read it. Maybe he didn't normally fall asleep during Sunday school, but he usually was more interested in getting a good laugh out of Hudson. He rarely prayed.

He felt his Bible and realized the pages were wet. It took him a moment to realize what was happening. He was crying. Still on his knees, with quiet tears and a clinched jaw, Milton sobbed softly. They were not tears of self-pity, but tears of brokenness.

Sniffing, Milton wiped his cheeks and began to pray, "Oh God, you know me. You know I don't love you like I ought to. You've done so much for me. I'm so sorry. I've messed up big this time."

He looked up at the ceiling, whispering fiercely, "And I feel so lost. I don't know what to do. Can you help me? Can you help Hannah? Help her to be OK. In Jesus name, amen."

He added the last sentence because that's the way he had always heard other people end their prayers before. But now, he really hoped Jesus was listening. He lay his open Bible on the bed and turned around to look out the window, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. Before he could answer, it swung open.

"Dad?" said Milton, surprised.

“Hey Milton, put on some old shoes and come downstairs with me; I need your help,” his dad said in a serious tone.

“Is everything OK?” asked Milton, hoping it didn’t involve Hannah.

“Well, that depends on what you mean by ‘OK.’ The sewer pipe backed up in the basement. Now come on.”

Milton was secretly relieved, but he could tell his dad was very concerned. He quickly changed into some work clothes, put on a pair of old shoes, and silently followed his dad down to the basement.

A pungent odor overpowered Milton as his dad opened the basement door.

“Ugh, disgusting!” Milton grunted, covering his nose with his shirt.

“Here, you’ll need this,” his dad replied, handing him a ventilated disposable mask. “Thank goodness I had some left over from my last woodworking project,” his dad said as he headed down the stairs, sliding his own mask over his face.

Milton could hear the carpet squish as they stepped off the last step into the basement—the entire floor was soaked.

“Is this all sewer water?” asked Milton, with eyes wide, his voice muffled by the mask.

Ignoring the question, his dad turned around and explained, “We could pay one of those emergency companies to come in here and clean everything up,

but they charge an arm and a leg. They know how to milk the insurance for all its worth. We can save some money by tearing up the carpet ourselves and pushing it out through the window well.” He pointed over to a large window, then continued, “And when the carpet is up, we’ll also need to bleach mop the cement, twice.”

“Well, at least we get the insurance money. Maybe we could put in a home theater or something cool,” said Milton.

Milton’s dad stared hard at him. Even with the mask on, Milton recognized a familiar look in his dad’s eyes, the one that told him now was a good time to be quiet.

His dad’s eyes softened a little; he sighed heavily and put his arm on Milton’s shoulder, then said, “Son, this isn’t a payday. This is a loss. Anytime something like this happens, it’s always a loss. We lose time fixing the problem. We have a \$1,000 deductible, so we lose that money. Insurance rates go up. And who knows where the problem is—most likely they’ll have to dig up the yard, and that sewer line is 12 feet underground. I always wondered if we should have gotten a house with a bathroom in the basement.”

Milton’s dad looked back at the carpet and stared at it, deep in thought. He continued, “It’s the same with anything in life, son. Once you lose something, it can be hard to get it back. And it always comes at a cost. Think about a story

you've known since you were a kid. Adam and Eve lost their relationship with God, and they were totally helpless in their sin. God promised to send a Savior, his only Son—but at the cost of his Son's life. And ever since then, God has been pursuing lost sheep that his Son died for. He's always standing at the door of his house, looking, ready to receive the prodigal son who has wandered away."

For a second, Milton thought he might have seen the glimmer of a tear in his dad's eye. "BUT, back to the problem at hand," his dad said after a long pause. "Let's get to work."

And it was grueling work. All the carpet had to come up, but since it was dripping wet, it weighed even heavier than normal. Milton's clothes smelled of foul sewage, his back was sore, and his sinuses burned. The sewer company arrived by lunch time and sent a snake-like camera down a pipe in their front yard. Tree roots had invaded their already disintegrated line. The repair would cost thousands of dollars, not to mention the cost to renovate the basement. Until they could fix the line, they had to be extremely careful to flush extra water and use toilet paper sparingly. The whole mess was downright disgusting.

Late that afternoon, after Milton had taken a shower and cleaned up, he returned to his room to see his Bible, still open to Psalm 78, laying on the bed.

Everything in him wanted to slam it shut and shove it back under his bed. What good had God done him? Hannah was still missing, and now the sewer line at his house had broken. It was like adding insult to injury. Was God playing with him? Was it some kind of cruel joke?

But then he remembered the look of compassion in his dad's eyes that morning in the basement, the words echoing in his mind, "And ever since then, God has been pursuing lost sheep that his Son died for. He's always standing at the door of his house, looking, ready to receive the prodigal son who has wandered away." Milton sighed and picked up his Bible to read verse 7 again.

*That they should set their hope in God  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep his commandments;*

Milton looked out the window and, for the first time in his life (besides meals), prayed for the second time in one day.

"God, I don't get this. I really don't get this. But I want to set my hope in you. I don't want to forget all the mighty works you've done, like sending Jesus to die for me on the cross. I *know* you have done great works. Can you please do your mighty works again? I have no other hope. Help me. In Jesus name, Amen."

The prodigal son was coming home.

## Chapter 11 In Deep

That evening Milton went to church with his parents. He still had not heard about Hannah, either from her, or Hudson, or anyone else. When he walked into the youth room, he saw Hudson and made a beeline towards him.

“Still no word, huh?” Milton asked, dejected.

Hudson shrugged a bit, then asked, “So what are you gonna do?”

“I guess I could call her parents,” Milton said slowly.

Hudson’s eyes lit up, “Call her dad? Don’t you think it’s a little too *early* for that?”

Milton stared at Hudson, “I didn’t say ‘call her dad’ you moron, I said ‘call her parents.’ Besides, I don’t think its funny, not right now.”

The door behind them open and in walked Hannah.

Milton stared at Hannah in disbelief, “Hannah!” he exclaimed. “You’re here!”

Hannah looked at Milton, puzzled, “Yeeeeesssss, didn’t you kno—” her voice trailed off as she glanced over at a grinning Hudson.

“Hudson, you jerk!” she said, slugging him in the arm.

“OW!” Hudson said dramatically, rubbing his arm as if he were hurt.

“Wait a minute,” interjected Milton, “You knew she was back? And you didn’t tell me?”

“It was a small oversight,” said Hudson, shifting his eyes between Hannah and Hudson, “I thought about texting you this morning—OW! *Easy*, Hannah! Now that really hurt.”

Hannah interjected, “What he meant to say is I *told* him to text you first thing this morning when I got to school. Apparently, someone thought it would be funny to withhold the news.”

“No harm done, right?” Hudson replied, holding up his arms in defense. “I mean, I knew Hannah was OK. Milton, you were going to find out tonight anyway, so I thought I’d just—let him find out,” he finished with a dramatic sweep of his hands.

“Well it wasn’t funny,” said Hudson. “But I’m glad you’re OK Hannah. What happened to your lip? It looks—” Hannah’s eyes narrowed, “—it looks like I should just let you explain what happened,” Hudson finished slowly.

Hannah proceeded, in quite dramatic fashion, to tell Milton and Hudson about her harrowing trip to the warehouse. When she finally got to the point where she discovered the missing truck, Milton interjected, “Woah, woah, woah—wait a minute. You found *the* truck? It’s still around?”

“Well yeah, it’s not like aliens took it,” Hannah replied sarcastically. “But let me finish. After I read the letters on the license plate, I realized whoever it was who had come into the warehouse had simply turned on the lights. That’s why

it had suddenly gotten so bright. I could still hear the footsteps, and they had almost reached the gap in the pallets where I had dashed into just a moment earlier. Still on my hands and knees, I peered underneath the trailer and saw a pair of brown shoes stop just opposite of me. Whoever it was had on work jeans. I felt like even my breathing sounded loud. I slowly crawled back under the semi-trailer, hoping I could hide under it, always keeping an eye on the shoes.

“Suddenly I heard a man talking. He said, ‘Nobody seems to really care in my department. I think we’re fine.’ Then he paused, as if listening to someone else, and said, “Mmm hm, yep. Yeah, I hear you. I think it’s a legitimate concern. But panicking isn’t going to help anyone. Let’s ride the storm out.’ Then I realized this guy, whoever he was, was having a conversation on the phone with someone else about the missing truck. Then he said, ‘I mean, that’s what we wanted, didn’t we? Give it a few months or so, swap out the plates, then get your man Marcus to take care of the risky business.’ He paused, as if listening again, then said, ‘What do you mean he’s getting nervous?’” For a moment, I thought the guy who was talking might be heading back toward the door where he came from, but instead his shoes turned around the edge of the trailer and started coming down the side in my direction.”

Milton broke in, “What did you do?”

“I froze,” Hannah replied. “I wasn’t sure what do to next. I really wanted to hear what he was saying, so I thought maybe I could try to wait it out under the trailer. Whoever he was, he probably would walk around the trailer just to check things out and then leave. But as his shoes came closer, another thought crossed my mind. If I hurried, I could crawl past him under the trailer, back to the row between the pallets, sneak out of the building, then start my car and drive away quickly without being discovered.”

Hannah took a deep breath, then continued, “I definitely liked the idea of escaping the most, so I decided to make a break for it. He had walked almost halfway down the trailer by then. I tried to crawl as quietly as possible. It was terrible to have to crawl towards him, but if I wanted to get out right away, it was the only chance I had. Oh, I can’t tell you how scared I was when I passed him. I felt as if my senses were on high alert. I could see the diamond-shaped pattern on his brown shoelaces. I could smell a strange mix of body odor and cigarettes.” Hannah shivered, then continued, “With each step, I could hear a rock stuck on the bottom of his shoe scrape against the concrete floor. He continued toward the end of the trailer, and I kept crawling toward the exit.

“Then, when I only had a few yards to go when I heard him say, ‘Hey, hold up a second. There’s something on the floor back here behind the trailer.’ I

glanced back over my shoulder to see his shoes at the far end of the trailer, where I had just been only 30 seconds earlier.

'It looks like blood,' he said, then he stooped down to take a closer look. I scrambled as fast as I could out from under the trailer and ran out of the building. I don't think he saw me, at least no one followed my car out of the warehouse parking lot." Hudson stood in silent shock, absorbing the news.

Hannah continued, "After I got home, my busted lip was a dead giveaway. And by that point I realized the whole thing was a really bad idea, so I would have told my parents anyway. My dad was mad, *really* mad. So they took away my phone, and I haven't been able to text anyone. I can't drive anywhere, either. I feel really bad that I couldn't text you, Hudson, I really do," Hannah said apologetically as she finished her story.

"Well I'm glad you are all right," said Milton. "If all that happened on Monday night, where were you yesterday?"

Hannah glared at Hudson again, "You really didn't tell him anything, did you?"

"All right, all right already! It was a stupid joke, I get it," Hudson responded, looking flustered, "Can you just tell him?"

Hannah turned back to Milton, her lower lip quivering, "My dad took me to the police station yesterday, Milton. He told me I needed to file a report."

Milton's jaw dropped, "Seriously? The police? What did they say?"

"Not just the police—the chief of police. He said they needed all evidence. And witnesses." She said, exchanging nervous glances with Hudson.

"Me? They want to talk to me?" asked Milton, still in disbelief.

"All three of us, first thing tomorrow morning," Hannah replied, "and they want that note of yours."

## Chapter 12 Answered Prayer

Milton felt nervous to tell his parents, but he knew he had to. He had to be at the police station with Hannah and Hudson first thing in the morning. They lived a good distance from their church, so the 25 minute ride home that night provided plenty of time. He spilled out the whole story to them, sparing no details. His mom occasionally interrupted to clarify details that were unclear to her, or to speculate about the possible answers to clues he had discovered, but his dad said nothing. Milton, from the back seat, was not sure how to read his dad as he quietly drove home on the dark highway. Milton felt horrible for unloading this on his parents, especially after everything that happened with their sewer that day.

Just as they exited the highway, they could see signs that warned of a road closure further down the highway—authorities had temporarily shut down the highway to investigate. Traffic was bad, with red taillights glowing off and on through the night.

When they arrived home, Mr. Maxwell pulled the car into the driveway, turned off the engine, then sat quietly for a few moments. Milton's mom broke the silence, "Well, Steve, what are you thinking?"

Milton's dad sighed, drumming his hands on the steering wheel. "The first thing I can say is, nothing happens by accident." He turned as much as he

could to face Milton in the back seat, “And I really mean that, son. The sewer, this mystery, this, *Hannah* girl,” he said with a slightly exasperated sound in his voice—Milton could tell his dad was kind of joking.

His dad continued in a more serious tone, “I must say it certainly explains a lot of strange things that have been going on recently. There’s no doubt you are in deep waters, son. I mean, we’re talking about *the law* here. And you would be crazy to think your mother and I haven’t noticed. We have.”

Milton bit his tongue and waited for the lecture.

“But you also can’t help how things have fallen out, most of it, at least,” his dad said. “I’m not sure what I would have done if I were in your shoes. Goodness knows I’m *still* not exactly sure how you handle this kind of situation. But I can tell you this, I have a Father in heaven who does know. He allowed all this to happen, and I’m, I’m...” Mr. Maxell’s voice trailed off as he turned to look out the front windshield. Milton could see tears welling up in his mom’s eyes. Mr. Maxwell recovered and, looking over at his wife, said, “If this is what it takes for God to get your attention, son, I’m all for it.”

Milton’s parents smiled knowingly at each other and looked back at Milton. His mom, wiping a tear from her eye, said, “Milton, sweetie, we’ve been praying for you *a lot*.”

“Why don’t we pray right now?” asked Milton’s dad. “I think that’s the best thing we could do.”

“Sure, dad. That would be good,” Milton replied.

The Maxwell family bowed their heads in the car, still parked in their driveway, and Mr. Maxwell began to pray, “Dear Father in heaven, you knew all this would happen. Help us right now to have wisdom in how to deal with this note Milton found, the situation with Hannah, and the police report tomorrow. God, we just want to do what’s right, and we want justice to win out. This is so beyond any of us. But, God, you have brought us through deep waters before. You can do it again. Thank you for helping Milton to see his need for you. Use this situation in Hannah and Hudson’s lives, and in all our lives. We pray, thanking you for your Son Jesus. Amen.”

Mr. Maxwell raised his head from prayer, then said, “I’ll go with you to the police station tomorrow, son.”

“But dad, you already took off work today to fix the sewer line,” Milton replied, surprised.

“No, it’s OK. I already discussed it with Hannah’s dad tonight. We both want to be there,” Mr. Maxwell opened his door to get out.

“Thanks, dad.”

That night, as Milton got ready for bed, his mind drifted back to the Psalm he had read that morning. He pulled out his Bible and flipped to the right page; there it was.

*That they should set their hope in God  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep his commandments;*

To his amazement, Milton quickly realized he already had a work of God to remember. In all the excitement of the day he had failed to notice it until just now—God had delivered Hannah! God had answered his prayer. *And* God kept the news from him the entire day, even though Hudson should have texted him that morning. It *was* a rotten joke, but if Milton had heard from Hudson that morning, he would not have felt nearly as desperate.

“Oh God, your ways are good,” Milton muttered under his breath, looking up at the ceiling, “Nothing happens by accident.” He clicked off his lamp and fell into a deep sleep.

About the time Milton was drifting off, a man sat alone in a dark office, staring intently at his computer screen. He seemed to be searching for something, clicking methodically through video camera footage. Suddenly he stopped, enlarged a particular camera angle, and replayed the video. He smiled an evil smile and chuckled to himself, “Gotcha.”

Picking up his phone, he pushed a few buttons and waited for someone to answer. "Hey, man," he said, "I think I found our rat. This should be easy. Looks like some girl."

## Chapter 13 Blackmail

Milton and Mr. Maxwell had an early breakfast the next morning. They needed to be at the police station by 8 AM. They were soon on their way.

Milton's phone began to buzz. He pulled it out and frowned, "I don't recognize the number. It's a 303 area code."

"Better answer it," his dad replied as he drove. "If it's the police, we don't want to miss an important call."

Milton picked up, putting it on speakerphone so his dad could hear, "Hello, this is Milton."

"Hey kid," came a man's dark voice that sent shivers up Milton's spine. Milton's dad cocked his ear towards the phone, still keeping his eyes on the road.

Without waiting for Milton to reply, the voice continued, "Listen, we know what you're up to. We caught your sneaky little friend on camera."

Milton gasped, "You mean Hannah? How did you—" but he was interrupted by his dad, who was frantically waving at him with one hand, motioning him to be quiet.

"Ah, I see," the sinister voice chuckled, "You know what I'm talking about. Very nice. Well, between you, me, and the fencepost, I think it would be best if you kept your little secrets to yourself. We wouldn't want *Hannah* to get hurt."

Milton kept silent. He could see his dad flexing his jaw muscles.

The man continued, "Well seeing as you don't feel very talkative today, I'll have to let you go. Just remember, kid, I'm warning you *and* your little girlfriend. If you know what's good for you, you'll leave well enough alone." He hung up.

Milton and his dad sat in silence for a few seconds, then Milton said, "Dad, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to say anything stupid."

"Milton," his dad replied, "I'm not blaming you for anything. I think he was fishing for information. I don't think he was sure you knew Hannah."

"Well yeah, until I opened my fat mouth and blew it," Milton replied dejectedly.

"Don't beat yourself up, son," his dad replied. "Nothing happens by accident. Besides, that guy had a target on Hannah's back already. He just wanted to verify the connection. Maybe the phone call will help us track these people down."

Milton looked out the passenger window at the shifting city landscape. He knew his dad was right, but he still felt terrible. Blackmailed by threatening Hannah? What kind of a person would do something like this? It blew his mind. He didn't have much time to think about it; they were pulling into the police station parking lot.

And what a sight it was. The entire lot teemed with people. Milton started counting trucks from all the major media outlets until he lost track. News reporters seemed to be buzzing around everywhere. The media didn't seem to pay much attention when Milton and his dad rolled into the parking lot. Near the entrance of the police station Milton could see a makeshift stage with a podium set up for press conferences.

"Crazy," muttered Steve Maxwell. "I thought they would've cleared out by now. Do you see that Kramer guy anywhere?"

Milton craned his neck to look over at the 9 News truck, "Nope, no sign of him. He could be anywhere in this crowd though."

Milton could see Hannah already getting out of her car with her dad. Hudson had arrived by himself and was joining them. Hudson's parents were divorced, and his mom had to work, so he came by himself.

Just before they got out of the car, Milton's dad prayed a brief prayer with him. They didn't discuss the threatening phone call any more—they both knew what they had to do.

## Chapter 14 Interrogation

Inside the police station a tall, broad-shouldered man greeted them in the lobby. His imposing presence immediately commanded respect. He looked them each squarely in the eye with a piercing gaze as he shook their hand. He was polite, but direct, and he never smiled.

“Mr. Maxwell, Mr. Meadows, thank you for coming. Hannah, we’ve met. And you two must be Milton and Hudson,” he said, looking them both up and down. “I’m Chief Reynolds. Come on back to my office, please.” As he turned to lead them down the hallway, Milton felt his hands starting to get cold and sweaty.

“Come on in and have a seat,” he motioned through his open door. He closed it behind them as they found their seats. He walked around behind a large wooden desk with a laptop and family photos, and took his seat on a rolling swivel chair. He folded his hands together on the desk, gestured up to a camera mounted on the ceiling in the corner of the room, then began,

“I want you to know, for legal purposes, this entire conversation is being recorded. Hannah, when we last spoke you relayed to me that you had entered the Furniture Row Distribution Center because you thought it might contain the missing Amazon truck, is that correct?”

“Yes sir,” Hannah replied.

The police chief continued, "If that were the case, like we discussed previously, then you are aware you could be prosecuted for trespassing."

"Yes sir."

"Well, it is my duty to inform you the situation may be a little more serious than that," the police chief said. "It is possible, considering the circumstances, that your trespassing actually constitutes a form of burglary. Depending on the extent of this burglary, it could be class 3 or 4 felony."

Mr. Meadows interjected, "But how could that be possible? She's already told you her intent. She wasn't there to steal anything. She was just trying to help."

Chief Reynolds looked at Mr. Meadows very calmly and replied, "That is why we have witnesses, Mr. Meadows." He turned his eyes on Milton and Hudson, "Gentlemen, do you understand the seriousness of the situation?"

Milton and Hudson nodded silently in unison.

"So tell me," he said, training his eyes on them and leaning forward on the desk, "did either of you accompany Hannah to the distribution center? Hudson, why don't you go first?"

Milton heard Hudson gulp beside him. "N-n-n-o, sir. I went home after soccer practice and did homework, then went to bed."

“Milton, how about you?” said the chief, shifting his penetrating eyes on Milton.

“No sir, I wasn’t with her either. I was at home that night. But I can guarantee you she wasn’t stealing anything.”

“How do you know that?” Chief Reynolds questioned.

“Because,” said Milton, fumbling in his pocket, “I sent her a picture of this paper I found. It has a lot of strange notes on it that seem to connected to the missing Amazon truck. That’s why she went to the Furniture Row Distribution Center. It’s listed on the paper,” He took the paper out and stretched forward to hand it to the police chief.

Chief Reynolds took the paper and studied it intensely. He set the paper on the desk, then looked up at Milton, “How am I to be certain you didn’t just make this note up as an alibi to save your friend? Hannah has clean record, that’s clear enough. But it’s a pretty phenomenal claim to make, discovering that missing truck right under our nose. My officers have been scouring this city. We have the FBI involved. Goodness knows I even had a friendly chat with the Vice President of the United States yesterday. I have a critical press conference scheduled in 30 minutes. If this is a wild goose chase, Milton, you will be wasting very precious and valuable resources. I don’t have time for that.”

Milton glanced at his dad. His dad nodded. Milton continued, "I understand the position this puts you in, Chief Reynolds. I don't take it lightly. But with all due respect, Hannah isn't the type of person to make stuff up like this. It would be totally out of character for her. But more than that, I want you to know I received a threatening phone call on the way here. I turned on my speakerphone; my dad can confirm the entire conversation. A man who didn't identify himself said he had caught Hannah on camera."

Hannah, who had been quiet up to this point, let out a quiet gasp and cupped a hand over her mouth.

"They threatened to harm her if I said anything, sir."

## Chapter 15 Breakthrough

Chief Reynolds shifted in his seat, eyes still fixed on Milton, “What else did he say? Did he say how he would harm Hannah?”

“Nothing else, sir. We think he was trying to fish me for information. I’m not even sure how he knew I was connected with Hannah until I said her name. Then my dad motioned me to keep quiet,” Milton said, glancing at his dad.

“It was not a particularly *friendly* phone call. I didn’t want him to say anything else that would put anyone in danger,” Mr. Maxwell explained.

“Do you have the phone number?” Chief Reynolds asked.

“Yes,” said Milton, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He found where the call was listed and handed the phone over.

Chief Reynolds looked at the phone, then typed on his laptop. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the soft drumming of the keys. Then he stood up and walked over to a window, looking out as he spoke, “I have no reason to believe you are being dishonest with me, Hannah. And I still have to deal with the fact that you trespassed. But if we seek a search warrant for that truck, I need more evidence, more eyewitness testimony, preferably from someone who was directly involved with the crime.”

Hudson spoke up, “If you want a place to start, sir, I’d recommend talking to the secretary at Taylor Sons & Co. Commercial Construction. That note Milton

found is actually a receipt for a construction company. Just turn it over on the other side, you'll see. I talked to her about the invoice, and she said that 9news reporter Warren Kramer brought back commercial grade construction lights that had been rented the night the truck disappeared."

"Oh yeah," Milton chimed in as Chief Reynolds flipped over the invoice, "And I actually got in touch with Kramer this past Sunday to tell him about the note."

"And what did Mr. Kramer have to say?" asked Chief Reynolds, as he looked over the invoice, typing quickly again on his laptop.

"Well that was the strange part," Milton said. "He pretty much told me to forget about the whole thing."

"Kramer made him feel like an idiot for bringing it up, actually," Hannah added defensively.

Chief Reynolds held up his hand, "Wait just a minute. There's too much information to process at once. Let's back up. Hudson, you said, according to the secretary at Taylor Sons & Co., Kramer *returned* the rental, did you not?"

Hudson nodded.

"Then who actually *ordered* the rental?" asked Chief Reynolds.

Hannah and Milton both looked at Hudson. He scrunched his face up in a funny way as he tried to recall the name.

“Wasn’t it Mark something?” Hannah said.

“No, no, it wasn’t that,” Milton replied. “That’s close, but not quite it. It was Mark, Mark—”

“Marcus!” exclaimed Hudson, his eyes lighting up. “Marcus Sanchez,” he finished, confidently.

Chief Reynolds looked at Hudson, “You are certain that was the name?”

“Yes sir,” Hudson said, nodding vigorously, “and I can prove it. The secretary said she had his name on file with the credit card.”

For the first time since they had met Chief Reynolds, he smiled. “You kids may be careless, but you certainly are helpful.”

“What, what did we do?” asked Hudson, baffled.

“You really don’t know who Marcus is?” Chief Reynolds asked in disbelief.

“Oh wow, I’m an idiot,” said Milton suddenly.

Chief Reynolds smiled again, this time at Milton. “Would you like to enlighten the class, Milton?”

“Yeah, I just remembered when I watched Kramer do his original report that night the truck disappeared,” said Milton as he looked at the police chief, “Marcus Sanchez is the name of the Amazon truck driver.”

“Bingo,” said Chief Reynolds, still smiling.

## Chapter 16 A Rat

Marcus Sanchez shifted uneasily in his seat. He was sitting in a sparsely furnished office, and across from him at a bare desk sat the man he had most regretted meeting in life, Nicholas Moore. Nicholas impatiently fidgeted with the only thing on his desk—a smoldering cigarette in an ash tray.

Moore was an assistant manager at the Furniture Row Distribution Center. He looked and smelled as if he had just rolled out of bed—several colorful tattoos covered his left arm.

Nicholas looked at the floor as he spoke to Marcus, “Thanks for coming in today. Not like you had any choice.”

Nicholas flicked the tip of the cigarette, still smoking, onto the floor, then leaned back in his chair, kicked his legs up on the table, and stared up at the ceiling. “I suspect you know why you are in here, Sanchez?”

Marcus said nothing.

“It’s because we had a deal,” Nicholas continued, still never looking at Marcus. “And the time to come through on that deal is now.”

Marcus began to speak in broken English, slowly, with a thick Spanish accent, “You told me we wouldn’t need to move the truck for another 3, 4 months.”

“Yeah well plans changed,” Nicholas sneered as he sucked his cigarette and released a puff of smoke. “We need to move the truck now.”

“I have a family to feed, Nicholas,” Marcus objected. “Cops are crawling all over Denver looking for that truck. If I take it out right now, I’m as good as dead.”

Nicholas crushed the butt of his cigarette into his ash tray, staring at the cigarette as he mashed it in, and said, “On the contrary, Sanchez, I think that completing this project in a timely manner will be of great benefit to your family. I’d suggest you take that little rat in your car and hit the road.”

“That little rat is my son!” Marcus shot back, turning red.

Nicholas slammed his fist on the hot ash tray, breaking it in pieces, and then screamed, “Oh shut up Sanchez!” He stood up and walked around the desk, leaning down to get in Marcus’s face, “Don’t think I’ve missed what’s been going on. We had a teenage girl sneaking around the warehouse on Monday. I found blood on the floor and then caught her on the cameras. You don’t think I know how she found us?”

Marcus looked down at the floor, partly out of shame and partly to escape the stench of Nicholas’s breath.

“Yeah, you know,” continued Nicholas, still standing over Marcus. “Your rat—yes, you heard me—R-A-T, RAT had to blow our cover. The boss gets a

phone call from an overly curious high school kid. He says he found a note with way too much information on it. You hear me? WAY. TOO. MUCH. INFORMATION.”

Nicholas spat on the ground at Marcus’s feet and strutted back to sit in his chair. He waved his arms dramatically, then said, “And here we are. I warned that Milton kid to keep his mouth shut, but right now we’re living on borrowed time—all because of you.”

Marcus glanced up at Nicholas with a look of desperation in his eyes.

“So,” Nicholas concluded, staring his crushed ash tray, “go start the truck, get your *rat*, then get that truck out of here. Now.” Nicholas, still staring at the ash tray, held out a set of keys toward Marcus and impatiently jingled them.

“I don’t have to deal with this,” Marcus mumbled. He stood up and turned to leave.

“I really was wishing I wouldn’t have to do this,” he heard Nicholas say behind him. Marcus stopped and turned to see Nicholas opening a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a small pistol, cocked it, and pointed it at Marcus.

“I’ll be escorting you to the truck,” he sneered.

Marcus stared at Nicholas. “What about my son?” he asked.

“Open the door, Sanchez, and go to the truck,” Nicholas repeated, waving his gun.

Marcus had no choice but to obey Nicholas. He opened the office door. There in the hallway he saw a brown haired, wide-eyed eleven year old boy, bound and gagged, with a masked man holding him from behind. The boy was Marcus's son.

"Go to the truck, Sanchez, or else," Nicholas repeated.

## Chapter 17 Balloon Boy

“But why would Marcus Sanchez be involved?” Milton asked.

“Who knows?” replied Chief Reynolds. “Motive can be a difficult thing to pin down. But this whole situation reminds me of a big hoax that happened over ten years ago up in Fort Collins.”

“You mean the balloon boy?” Mr. Meadows queried.

“Exactly,” replied Chief Reynolds.

Mr. Maxwell nodded knowingly while Milton and his friends looked at each other in confusion.

“If you don’t mind me asking, sir,” Hannah piped up, “Who’s the ‘balloon boy’?”

The men looked at each other and chuckled, “Well, I guess you probably wouldn’t remember it very well,” Chief Reynolds replied. “But we do.”

“It was all over the news, just like the missing truck,” Mr. Maxwell added.

“So what happened?” Hannah asked.

“Well I wish my friend Jim could tell you,” started Chief Reynolds, “He was the Larimer County Sheriff at the time. Back in 2009 a storm-chasing man with three sons was working on his helium balloon at home. It kind of looked like a flying saucer. It “unexpectedly” untethered, with his 6-year old son inside, and launched into the air. The dad called the news, then the authorities, and it

became a huge media uproar. A news helicopter caught up with the balloon, following it through three counties in Colorado. Millions of people were watching as ‘balloon boy’ hurdled through the sky at hundreds of miles per hour.”

“Then what happened?” said Hudson, drawn into the story.

Chief Reynolds smiled. He could tell all three of the teens had never heard this story before. “When the flying saucer finally landed, and first responders tore open the balloon, the boy wasn’t there. Truth be told, he never got into the balloon in the first place.”

“What? Why?” said Hudson.

“Because the parents wanted to get on a reality TV show,” Chief Reynolds said, with a look of contempt. “They had been on reality TV before, and they were looking for attention. In the end, their six-year old son accidentally gave the truth away during a CNN interview.”

“So you’re saying the truck went missing so Amazon could get attention?”

Hannah guessed.

“I’m not making any accusations, none whatsoever,” the police chief clarified.

“And please don’t leave here with that impression. I’m just saying that it’s *highly possible* someone did this to get attention. The question would then be, who? And why?”

“Did you say the balloon boy’s dad called the news *first*?” Milton interjected.

“Yes,” replied Chief Reynolds, “That’s one of the facts that seemed suspicious.”

“Hm,” said Milton.

“If you have something that would help, Milton, now would be a good time to share it,” the police chief prodded.

“Well, I just keep going back to that video I saw of Warren Kramer that night I couldn’t sleep. He was the first reporter on the scene,” Milton said.

“That’s correct,” replied Chief Reynolds, “Go on.”

Milton continued, “When did the truck supposedly disappear? Wasn’t it like 2 AM?”

“Actually the first phone call we have on record occurred at 2:27 pm,” Chief Reynold’s corrected.

“But that’s just it,” Milton said, getting excited. “Kramer *said* it happened around 2 AM on the report. I know he did, you can watch the footage. Then he magically shows up on the scene, in the middle of the night, and is the first to report at 3 AM? That’s impossible! I mean, how long did it take him to get there?”

“He may have been there before my officers arrived,” admitted the police chief. “They arrived 15 minutes after the first call, at 2:42 pm. At first we just thought the caller was drunk. Then we started getting more phone calls.”

Everyone in the room sat silent for a moment as the truth started to sink in. They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Chief Reynolds barked. Another officer swiftly opened the door.

“This had better be important, Deputy Chief,” Chief Reynolds said sternly.

“Yes sir,” the Deputy Chief replied. “It’s the warehouse, sir. An officer just reported highly suspicious activity.”

“You were watching the warehouse?” Milton asked in surprise.

“We don’t have time to talk about it—everyone step out please,” Chief Reynolds commanded.

## Chapter 18 The Smell of Blood

Milton, Mr. Maxwell, Hudson, Hannah, and Mr. Meadows stood in a circle in the hallway outside the police chief's office, speculating about what could possibly be going on at the distribution center. They didn't talk long, for Chief Reynolds soon came marching out of the office with his Deputy Lieutenant close behind.

Chief Reynolds turned to Milton's dad, "If it's OK with you, Steve, I'd like to take Milton and Hudson with me. We need to head over to the distribution center immediately. I need help identifying a suspect."

"That will be fine," Milton's dad quickly replied.

Milton and Hudson barely had time to think, and before they knew it, they were following at the heels of Chief Reynolds, struggling to keep pace with his long strides. The police chief managed to look calm as he led them around a few corners and down a different hallway than they had entered the building. He relayed instructions to his lieutenant as he went.

Just before they reached a door, Chief Reynolds stopped and turned to look at the boys. He seemed neither panicked nor casual. He spoke calmly, but in a serious tone, "We are going out the back way. Hopefully we can get out before any of the media spot us. If they do, they won't be able to keep up for long. For your safety, I want you gentlemen to do exactly as I say. Is that clear?"

Milton and Hudson both nodded seriously.

“Good,” said Chief Reynolds, placing his hand on the door handle. “Let’s go.”

The trio stepped outside into the crisp morning air, and Milton could see rows of various police vehicles, all emblazoned with the same city logo. Chief Reynold’s strode past several vehicles till he reached a brand new, unmarked black Chevrolet Tahoe. It had completely black tinted windows. Milton and Hudson looked at each other and raised their eyebrows.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like you gentlemen to ride in the back,” Chief Reynolds directed.

“No problem,” said Hudson with a grin.

The two boys slipped in the row behind the driver’s seat as Chief Reynolds started the undercover SUV. The back parking lot of the police station wrapped around the building and connected with the front parking lot. The boys held their breath as the police chief rounded the curve. They soon saw the sea of media trucks and reporters slowly milling around, waiting for something to happen. At first, it seemed like their sneaky escape might work. But all at once the chief and the boys saw people starting to point, cameras turning, and reporters scrambling to get in position.

“Hang on,” said the police chief. Then he gunned the engine. He had an advantage over the reporters; the back parking lot connected to the main

parking lot right next to the exit. The media had all gathered on the opposite side of the parking lot, close to the stage where Chief Reynolds gave his updates. In a split second he sped through the exit unhindered.

Chief Reynolds drove a few blocks before merging onto the highway. He casually flipped on his lights and sirens, then spoke a few words into his radio. He seemed completely in his element as they sped toward the distribution center on the interstate.

“I think we lost them,” he finally said, glancing in his review mirror. “We only have a short time, so let me brief you gentlemen on why I brought you. You didn’t realize it at the time, but much of the information you gave me corroborates our current investigation. When that truck disappeared, Marcus Sanchez vanished with it. We need to talk to him, but up until now we have not been able to locate him.”

“Did he show up at the distribution center?” Milton asked.

“Yes, about 10 minutes ago” replied Chief Reynolds.

“But we’ve never met Marcus,” interjected Hudson. “And everyone knows who Warren Kramer is.”

“You are correct, Hudson,” Chief Reynolds replied. “I don’t need help identifying those two men. However, Marcus brought someone with him who could help us piece some of the details together.”

“Who?” asked Hudson and Milton in unison.

“Marcus’s son, Eliacim,” Chief Reynolds revealed. “The description our officer just reported matches the description of that boy you two met at the park by your house, Milton, the boy with the mysterious note. I knew about Eliacim before I even met Hannah, which is why I believed her story all along.”

Milton and Hudson looked at each other and raised their eyebrows, again. Their conversation was interrupted, however, by a crackle on the radio, “This is Adam 12, we have a code 8 at Furniture Row. Immediate backup requested.”

Chief Reynolds quickly gripped his radio and replied, “10-4, Adam 12. This is Smith 5. What’s the cause?”

“Masked 320,” came the reply.

“10-4,” Chief Reynolds said. Then he finally said something into his radio both Milton and Hudson could understand, “Dispatcher, this is Smith 5, authorize S.W.A.T. to Furniture Row. I repeat, S.W.A.T. to Furniture Row.”

Hudson and Milton could feel the SUV pick up speed as they raced down the highway. Without taking his eyes off the road, Chief Reynolds interpreted, “Eliacim was taken hostage by a masked suspect.”

They had no time to think, for they could already see warehouses rising up in the distance. “Almost there,” Chief Reynolds muttered. Just as he was

speaking, a deafening roar engulfed them, and a helicopter flew overhead them toward the warehouses.

“A news chopper,” commented Chief Reynolds, still as even keeled as ever.

“How did they find us?” Milton wondered aloud.

“They’re just like sharks, Milton,” replied Chief Reynolds. “They can smell blood from miles away.”

## Chapter 19 Breaking News

Mrs. Maxwell tried hard to keep her emotions in check. She had prayed, read her Bible, and even tried passing the time with Sudoku puzzles. She knew God had his own test in store for her as she waited to hear back from Steve and Milton. They had left for the police station at 7:30 AM. It was almost 10 AM, and she felt certain she would have heard from them by now.

The home phone rang, and she felt a rush of relief when she heard Steve's voice, "Hey honey, its me. Everyone is OK."

"It's so good to hear from you," she replied. "When are you coming home?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Steve said hesitantly. "You see, the police chief asked for Milton and Hudson to accompany him to help identify a suspect. Like I said, they are both OK. They're safe with him. But you should probably turn on the TV."

"Turn on the TV? Why?" Mrs. Maxwell asked with knitted eyebrows.

"Just turn it on to channel 9," Steve persisted. "We're all here watching it in the police station."

Mrs. Maxwell scrambled to find the remote and turned on the TV to channel 9. Blazoned across the top of the screen she read the words "Breaking News," and she could see an aerial shot of a black undercover police SUV barreling down the highway with lights flashing.

“Now don’t panic, honey,” Steve Maxwell continued cautiously. “But Milton and Hudson are in that black SUV with Chief Reynolds.”

“My baby?” whispered Mrs. Maxwell as she sat on the couch to catch her breath.

They listened, still on the phone together, to the voice of a female 9 News anchor as she tried to explain what was happening on the screen. “Media first sighted Police Chief Reynolds leaving police department offices at approximately 9 AM. As you can see, our news helicopter caught up with him heading south on E-470. We believe Chief Reynolds may be driving to an unknown location connected to the mysterious disappearance of the Amazon truck. And as I speak it looks like he is exiting the highway at the intersection of I-70 and E-470.”

The camera panned up from its aerial view of the black SUV to reveal several warehouses. One warehouse, however, stood out from the rest. Black vehicles seemed to be swarming towards it like an army of ants.

The 9 News anchor continued, “We’ve pinpointed the location to the Furniture Row Distribution Center on East 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Aurora. It looks like several emergency vehicles are arriving on site as we speak.”

Mrs. Maxwell placed one hand over her mouth and muttered into the phone, still clasped to her ear, “Dear Lord, protect our son.”

“Just a minute,” continued the reporter excitedly, “an Amazon semi-truck appears to be attempting to exit the warehouse parking lot!”

Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell, Mr. Meadows and Hannah all watched in horror as a heroic patrol car swerved in to block the only remaining exit from the warehouse parking lot. A semi-truck was barreling towards the patrol car and seemed to be picking up speed rather than slowing down.

“The semi-truck looks as if it might ram right into the patrol car,” the news anchor continued in disbelief.

At the last second, however, the semi-truck veered sharply to one side. Its long trailer skidded in a wide turn, leaving a black trail of tire marks and a cloud of smoke that could be seen even from the helicopter above. The trailer teetered on one edge, threatening to smash the patrol car, then tipped back upright, landing heavily on all its wheels. S.W.A.T. team agents poured out of black vehicles that had already arrived, their guns trained on the semi-truck.

“This is unbelievable, simply unbelievable,” continued the news anchor. “We just witnessed a near collision between what appears to be the missing Amazon semi-truck and a patrol car. You can clearly see the logo on the, on the—” but the news anchor had nothing else to say, for the video feed from the helicopter went dead at that exact moment. Bewildered, the news anchor

struggled to regain her composure as she awkwardly shuffled her notes, glancing desperately around the studio for direction.

“What is happening to my son?!” Mrs. Maxwell cried at the TV set.

“We apologize, but for some reason we seem to be experiencing technical difficulties,” the news anchor said stiffly, tapping her papers on her desk. “We will continue to keep you updated on this breaking news as the events unfold.”

## Chapter 20 Unmasked

What had happened was this: Milton and Hudson rounded the corner with Chief Reynolds in the undercover SUV and saw the Amazon truck, horn blasting, hurtling towards the patrol car.

“Get out of there!” Chief Reynolds growled under his breath at his officer in the patrol car. But there was no time to react, and there was nothing anyone could do. The police chief watched helplessly as the semi-truck swerved, teetered, than fell to a stop just a few feet from the patrol car. “Stay in here,” Chief Reynolds ordered Milton and Hudson as he put the SUV in park and got out. The teenage boys watched as he pulled his gun and joined the S.W.A.T team now surrounding the truck. Even from inside the SUV they could hear S.W.A.T. team members barking orders for the truck driver to step out.

In a few seconds the driver’s side door on the semi-truck opened, and Marcus Sanchez stepped out with hands raised.

“Where’s Chief Reynolds going?” Hudson asked.

Milton followed the direction of Hudson’s gaze and saw Chief Reynolds running at a full sprint to the far side of the building with a handful of officers behind him. Milton suddenly realized the 9 News helicopter that passed them overhead earlier had landed on the far side of the warehouse.

“He’s running towards the helicopter,” said Milton, pointing.

About that time the boys saw two officers split off to the right and try a door at the side of the warehouse. Finding it unlocked they went in. Chief Reynolds, flanked by a few other officers, continued running without breaking stride.

“Do you think they are looking for someone else?” Milton wondered.

Inside the warehouse two officers wrestled Nicholas Moore to the ground. “You’ve got the wrong guy!” He yelled, “He’s heading out the back.”

“Smith 5 this is Charlie 1,” radioed an officer as he struggled to hold Nicholas down. His partner snapped the handcuffs on Nicholas’s wrists, and Nicholas gave up fighting. “We’ve apprehended a suspect; a second suspect is in route to you.”

“10-4,” replied Chief Reynolds, who had just rounded the far side of the warehouse. He held up a hand, signaling his two accompanying officers to stop, then quickly knelt down behind a dumpster. His officers followed his lead.

A half second later a door slowly opened, and a masked man wearing black gloves and holding a small pistol peered out. After quickly scanning the area, he stepped out, taking off his mask. It was Warren Kramer. He emptied the clip from his gun, then tossed the mask, clip and gun into the dumpster.

Thinking the coast was clear, he began to run towards the news helicopter idling just a couple hundred yards away.

“Freeze! This is the police!” Chief Reynolds yelled over the whir of the helicopter blades, stepping out from behind the dumpster with his gun drawn. Kramer straightened up, slowly raised his hands, and turned around with a smile.

“Ah hello, Chief Reynolds,” he said in an oily voice. “Is something wrong?”

“Put your hands on the ground, Kramer,” barked Chief Reynolds. “You’re under arrest.”

Kramer looked shocked and said, “Me? I’m a reporter! I was just fleeing to safety. ”

“Put your hands on the ground, now!” Chief Reynolds barked, this time more fiercely. In a matter of seconds, Kramer was in custody.

Milton and Hudson waited anxiously in the undercover SUV. They had not seen Chief Reynolds since he disappeared around the corner of the warehouse. In a few minutes Chief Reynolds returned victoriously with Kramer in hand. After the police chief had placed Kramer a patrol car, Chief Reynolds came back to the SUV.

“You can step out now, boys. It’s safe. I need your help,” he said.

Milton and Hudson clambered out and followed Chief Reynolds. He led them around the semi-truck. There, standing before them, was the same frightened boy Milton had seen last weekend at the park. The police had untied the gag in his mouth and the ropes on his hands.

“We found poor boy tied up inside the warehouse. Apparently Kramer had an accomplice who was helping him,” remarked the police chief as he nodded in the direction of another patrol vehicle. Police officers were preparing to put Nicholas Moore in the back. “Do you recognize this boy?” Chief Reynolds asked Milton and Hudson, gesturing towards Eliacim.

“Yes,” Milton replied without hesitation. “Oh, and look Hudson, there’s the car we saw him ride off in parked over there.”

But Hudson wasn’t looking at the car. He was still staring at Nicholas Moore, whose back was to them.

“Hudson?” Milton asked, trying to get his attention.

Hudson ignored Milton, took a few steps toward the patrol car, then called out, “Dad?”

Nicholas Moore stopped and looked back while officers urged him to get into the patrol car.

Nicholas turned pale as if he had seen a ghost. “Hudson!” he exclaimed.

“Dad?” Hudson repeated in a hurt voice. “So this is why I couldn’t visit for the last 6 months? This was your ‘new job’ that was going to change everything?”

“Hudson, listen to me, it’s not what it looks like son,” Nicholas called out desperately as the police pushed him into the patrol car. “You gotta believe me, I wouldn’t ever hurt anyone!” He cried as they shut the door.

Hudson stood motionless, staring blankly at the patrol car as it drove away. Several officers close by who had paused to watch the scene slowly began resuming their work.

Milton didn’t know what to say. He finally managed to fumble out, “Hudson, I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks,” Hudson said hoarsely, then walked away.

“He just needs some time and space, Milton,” said Chief Reynolds, putting a hand on Milton’s shoulder. “Boys need good fathers,” he continued, gazing at Hudson with a hint of sorrow in his eyes. “And it’s hard when they don’t. Very hard.”

## Chapter 21 Bittersweet Answers

The media soon descended on the Furniture Row Distribution Center like a pack of wolves. Chief Reynolds remained at the scene of the crime, but quickly sent Milton and Hudson back to the police station in a separate patrol car. Grey clouds gathered overhead, and it began to rain. A sullen Hudson stared out the window. They rode silently the whole way back.

Milton quietly prayed for Hudson, at a loss for even the words to pray. It was difficult to see Hudson not being his joking, chipper self. The whole situation felt so strange. Sure, they caught the bad guys. But Milton never expected one of the bad guys to be Hudson's dad. It was difficult pill to swallow.

Back at the police station Milton rejoined his dad and said goodbye to Hudson. Hannah and Mr. Meadows had already left for home once they found out the good news. The media had all left, leaving the parking lot bare. Nothing remained aside from a few empty water bottles and bits of trash soaking up the rain.

Once in the car, Hudson shared the details with his dad. "I dunno dad, I just wasn't sure what to say to Hudson," Milton confessed. "Should I have said something more?"

“No, I think Chief Reynolds gave you wise advice,” Mr. Maxwell reassured Milton. “Hudson has suffered from a lot of uncertainty and broken promises in his life. The best thing you can do for him is be a faithful friend. You don’t need to have all the answers. You just need to be there for him.”

Milton nodded in agreement with his dad’s words. He made up his mind then and there to stick with Hudson no matter what. Milton glanced up at the clouds just in time to see a golden beam of sunshine break through. It shone even brighter against the backdrop of black and grey. He remembered the verse again,

*That they should set their hope in God  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep his commandments;*

Hope flooded Milton’s soul.

Mrs. Maxwell soon welcomed her two men home with a huge hug. It took several minutes before she let go of Milton.

“I see where I rank in this family now,” jested Mr. Maxwell.

“You weren’t flying down the highway at a hundred miles per hour,” Mrs. Maxwell chided.

“Oh is that what it takes? Good to know,” Mr. Maxwell replied with a twinkle in his eye.

The TV was still on when they walked into the living room together. Chief Reynolds was just stepping to microphone to give a press conference. As cameras flashed, he cleared his throat, adjusted the microphone up, then began, “According our investigations, 9 News reporter Warren Kramer bribed two individuals, Nicholas Moore and Amazon truck driver Marcus Sanchez, pulling off what some are calling the ‘Semi Ghost Hoax.’

“Kramer and his crew rendezvoused in the shadows of an overpass on I-25 at approximately 2 AM early last Saturday morning. Kramer and Moore waited for a significant break in traffic then shone commercial grade construction lights into oncoming traffic, giving the illusion of semi-truck lights approaching head on. Their plan proved more successful than even they had imagined, and Moore stole away from the scene with the construction lights while Kramer assumed his role as a reporter.

“During this time, Sanchez drove the stolen Amazon truck on isolated backroads, eventually hiding it in a rarely used section of the Furniture Row Distribution Warehouse on East 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Aurora. Following a tip from local teenagers, law enforcement determined the location of the missing truck and stormed the facility late this morning, freeing a hostage and apprehending all three suspects.

“Kramer has since confessed to us today he was dissatisfied with his position and pay and had been conducting interviews with several major media outlets. He fabricated the hoax to attract attention to his reporting skills. I’ll now take questions.”

“Well, well, well, Milty, it looks like you’re a hometown hero,” said Mrs. Maxwell, beaming.

Milton blushed, “Mom, please. Just don’t call me ‘Milty’ on national television.”

They all laughed.

## Chapter 22 A Different Kind of Apology

Back at church and school, Milton, Hudson, and Hannah suddenly became local superstars. Word spread quickly, and it wasn't long before media outlets big and small came calling for interviews. It was a crazy time.

Ashamed of his father and not wanting to face all of the difficult, awkward questions, Hudson kept to himself and declined to take any interviews. He found Milton to be a reliable and trustworthy friend, one of his few sources of consolation amid the disappointment and hurt.

Hudson's absence meant Milton and Hannah took most of the interviews together. One night, after yet another interview with a local channel, they stood outside the news station waiting for Hannah's mom to pick her up. Warm summer nights had begun to give way to cool autumn evenings. There was a slight breeze, and Milton noticed Hannah seemed cold, so he lent her his jacket.

"It's still so hard to believe this is real," said Hannah, wrapping his jacket closer and looking up at the stars.

"Yeah, no kidding," Milton replied. "And to think a few months ago you hated my guts. I mean, I deserved it," he said with a laugh.

"You know," Hannah confessed, "I never really said sorry when I ignored your texts and got myself into trouble by driving to the warehouse."

“I wasn’t offended,” Milton said, shrugging his shoulders. “I was more concerned that you were OK.”

“All the same, it wasn’t right of me,” said Hannah. She paused, then added in a softer voice, “And thank you for speaking up for me when Nicholas threatened you. I thought it was a very brave thing to do.”

Milton’s heart fluttered. He had given a lot of big interviews in the past few weeks, but none of them made him feel quite how he felt at that moment.

Just then, Hannah’s mom pulled into the parking lot. “Oh, there’s my mom,” said Hannah in sing-songy voice. She glanced over at Milton with an admiring look he had never seen before and said, “See you tomorrow after practice?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah, definitely,” Milton managed to get out. Then he said the only thing he could think of to say, “Have a nice day.”

Hannah cocked her head slightly to one side with an amused smile and said, “You too,” then got in her mom’s car. She was still wearing his jacket.

She waved at Milton as the car pulled away, and Milton waved back. He turned to walk to his car. Looking up at the stars, he shook his head and said to himself, “Have a nice day? Milton, you are a moron.”

The End