



evidence

a short story

BY WILLOWY WHISPER

Evidence

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EVIDENCE

"You can't keep neglecting her."

Derek slipped on his tennis shoes, ignoring her.

"It's not right, you know. You're such a jerk—"

"Oh, I'm the bad guy?" He stood to his full 6'2 height and glared down at his sister. "Why can't you take care of her? You're not an invalid."

"Because I have four children to support on my own! I can't *afford* to move her in!"

Derek breathed a laugh. "You know, it's not my fault you married a loser that you decided to dump four kids later. That was your bad call."

"This is not about *me*, Derek. She can't be alone anymore. It's not safe for her."

The vein in his neck bulged. He needed the gym. Bad.

"You're an unattached man with a good job and a comfortable home. There's no reason in the world why Mom can't stay with you."

"I don't have time to play nurse-maid, that's why." He hated her nagging voice. He thought about bringing up the possibility of sticking her in a nursing home, but he'd already argued that until his face was blue. He was in no mood to hear another half-hour lecture.

"We'll talk about this later. I'm leaving." He sidestepped her and made a bee line for the door, aware of the fact that she was following him.

"You can't keep putting this off, Derek. She's your responsibility, okay?"

He curled his fist over the doorknob, hesitating. For a moment, he just stood there, pushing away the thought that kept rising in his throat. He shouldn't say it, shouldn't think it . . .

"What is it?" His sister knew the look.

Derek swallowed and faced her. "What about Trent?"

Her faced drained pale, but she held his gaze. "No."

"Why not?"

"Don't drag him into this—"

"But why?" Derek balled his hands into fists. "He should *already* be in this, Jill. I'm serious."

She scowled, pushing past him, mumbling the words, "You're such a jerk, Derek. This isn't over," just before she slammed the door.

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It was the first good sight he'd seen this morning. He marched into the gym, letting his steps bounce a little, strutting his arms. Yeah, he looked good. He was the man. With his tall, pure muscle build, he was the handsomest bachelor in Amador County. And he knew it.

Yanking off his tank top, he went straight to the treadmill and started his work out. It was a lot of sweat and three water bottles later before he finally sat down to take a breather.

Corrie, his twenty-year-old friend of the gym, sat down next to him, her hair in its usual pony tail. She smiled, a little sweaty herself. "You haven't been around in a while."

"Busy." He tried to be as non-talkative as possible. He wasn't always convinced she was only interested in a friend—and right now, the last thing on his agenda was a girlfriend.

She nodded and twisted the cap off of her Gatorade. "You were going strong today."

He nodded. Grunted. Why did women bother him?

"Life rough?"

His eyes flew to hers, drinking in her expression. It was a full minute before he spoke, "Go jump in a lake, Corrie."

She laughed and gulped down some of the Gatorade. "Tender right there, aren't we now?"

She paused only for a dramatic effect.

It worked.

"And I'm guessing it's about your mom again, right?"

Derek ran his sweaty hands over his shorts. And exhaled. "What are you? A psychiatrist or something? Every time I talk to you, I feel like you're analyzing my life." He grunted again.

"How did you know?"

"Magic." Her teasing grin grew ever wide. "No, actually, just plain logic. I mean, what other kind of problems could you have? You have no wife, so it couldn't be marriage problems. And you got no kids, so it couldn't be discipline issues . . ."

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands to stop her. "Enough of that, Corrie." He stood to his feet, and even though it was against his better judgment to do so, he gave her his winner smile.

The reaction was immediate—her face glowed and her eyes got radiant, sweet, maybe even beautiful.

Derek strutted back to the weights, grinning still as they burned his muscles, knowing that Corrie was watching him.

He wasn't quite sure why he cared. Because honestly, the last thing he wanted was a girlfriend.

His life was stressful enough already.

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Jill jerked her second-to-oldest child to her feet. "Stand still, little Miss Prissy, before I tan your hide."

She stomped her foot, cheeks flaming. "I don't want my hair in barrettes! I hate them!"

"Don't say hate." Jill jerked the comb through her brown hair, and the child winced.

"You're hurting me, Mom!"

"Then hold still." Some days she wanted to scream. Other days, she wanted to kill. She snapped a barrette into her daughter's hair, thinking how likely it was that she would do both

before the day was over.

"Mom!" From somewhere in the house, she could the screech of her dramatic eleven year old. "Mom, come quick!"

"What is it?" she yelled back. How many times had she told them not to yell across the house? They never listen, and she was in no mood to press the point.

"It's an emergency! Come here!"

"I'm busy!" she screamed back, snapping in another barrette. "You're done, now go get in the car."

Her four year old son came running into the room, crying. "Mommy, Janell pinched me! Look! Look, Mommy!"

"Janell!"

The six year old child answered by bouncing into the room. She looked innocent. Jill grunted. *Innocent, my foot.*

"Don't pinch your brother, now all of you, go get in the car—"

"Mom!" Again, the scream across the house.

Jill told herself not to blow. She was a mom. She had to be responsible. She had to be patient . . .

But she wasn't doing a very good job, and she had a thousand things that needed done, and a mom that was losing her brain to dementia. Plus a jerk for a brother.

Jill sucked in a deep breath. "Kids, get in the car! *Now!*"

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Eye of the Tiger blared from his phone, and Derek snatched it up, sliding his finger across the screen. "Derek Bentley."

"Hey, this is Jill."

He sighed. "Can't you leave me alone for two hours?"

"No, listen to me."

Was that tears in her voice? He sat down in the floor, leaning against the gym mirrors. "Go on."

He heard noises in the background. Probably her kids. Brats, more like it.

"Uh . . . I don't exactly know how to say this. I don't know what happened. I brought the kids with me. I was going to pick up Mom and move her into my house . . ." Her words trailed off, and it sounded like . . . a sob?

Derek's heart sped up a little. "Jill?"

Nothing.

"Jill, what's wrong?"

Finally, her shaky voice was back on the phone, whispering the words, "Derek, Mom was dead!" Hysteria penetrated through the phone. "The kids marched in before I knew what was happening. They started screaming. There was so much blood . . ."

Blood?

He drew in a ragged breath, jumping to his feet. "Listen, Jill, it's okay. I'm on my way, alright?"

"Okay." Another sob. "But hurry."

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By the time Derek pulled his black sports car onto the concrete driveway, there were police cars and TSPN news men swarming the place.

Jill was surrounded by officers, but Derek pushed through them. "Talk to me, sis."

She cut off a police man and grabbed her brother's arm. "Excuse us." Jill stared at him. Wide-eyed. "Derek, the kids . . ."

He put his hands on her shoulders, feeling her tremble. "Where was she?"

"She was on the couch. Just lying there." Jill choked back a sob. "The kids were hysterical. I called their dad to come pick them up."

"You said there was blood."

"All over her." Jill winced as she spoke the words. "All over her chest . . ."

What? Pain sizzled through him—shock that was deafening. He tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Jill, what are you saying? What do you mean, about her chest?"

"She was shot!" Jill careened, but Derek pulled her against him. He held her close. Held her tight. Held her like the strong brother he wanted to be . . .

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Derek had to look. He couldn't just shy away from the whole thing, like a little child too afraid to see a little blood. With Jill asleep in his car, sedated, he found an officer and made his request.

"Are you sure you want inside?" the man said, opening the front screen door.

His jaw popped, but he nodded. How many times had he run through that door, all the while ignoring her request not to slam it behind him?

He stepped inside. The room smelled like her. *She's dead?* It didn't really seem possible. He half expected her to come walking through the door, wearing one of those denim jumpers, smiling behind a pair of thick, wire-rimmed glasses.

But she didn't. The officer led him through the house. He stopped in the threshold of the living room. And sucked in a breath. Maybe he wasn't prepared for this. Maybe he wasn't strong enough for it.

His stomach churned as his eyes went over the scene, circled off with yellow crime tape. She was lying on the couch, dead, with men hovering behind the tape and snapping evidence pictures with their high-tech cameras.

It made him sick. *Don't look at her chest. Avoid it.* But his eyes didn't listen, and they roamed right to where the bullet entered her body. Deep red blood splattered the front of her dress and the worn-out couch.

Her hand was dangling over the edge. Pale. Wrinkly. Who would shoot his mom? She'd never done anything to anyone, never been anything but good . . .

"Who did this?" Derek grovelled out the words.

The officer did a half-shrug. "We're collecting evidence, sir."

His temper boiled over his countenance, replacing the nauseousness into rage. He kept his eyes fixed on her face. "I want to know. Now."

"Besides your mother's, we found an extra pair of fingerprints all around the house. Does anyone else live here?"

"No one."

"Anyone been here, lately?"

"No."

The officer did another shrug. "We're checking on the DNA right now. We also found some blond hair follicles around the couch, and the same hair in a spare bed upstairs."

Derek's eyes flew to his. "Then someone was staying here?"

"Looks that way."

It didn't make sense. He'd called her just . . . two days ago? She hadn't said anything then. *But then again, her mind wasn't all that clear.* He remembered her soft voice, pleading with him to take her home. He'd insisted over and over that she *was* home, but she would have none of it.

The officer's voice interrupted his thoughts, "Also, we found a necklace in the victim's hand."

"Where is it?"

"Bagged for evidence."

"What's it look like?" Derek breathed, only he knew, even as the officer spoke the words . . .

"Gold chain with a little football in the middle."

The room started spinning and Derek groped for all the strength within him. *Trent.* His eyes readjusted on the grisly image of his mother's body. *Trent's necklace.*

Jill wiped her chin with the back of her hand, gasping, hunkered over. She'd awakened only a few moments ago, and although it was dark, there were many people still at her mother's house.

She puked again. She wasn't sure why the nauseousness hit now, but she knew Derek was going to kill her. He was a perfectionist when it came to his sports car.

As if on cue, the door opened.

Derek looked at the passenger's floor but said nothing. He was pale.

Jill swallowed, anchoring back her hair. "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah." A pause. His look was compassionate. "I'll take you home."

"But my car—"

"I don't want you driving when you're like this. Just sit tight." He shut the door and was in the driver's seat before she had a chance to reason out a good argument. Oh well. She was too drained to argue any ways.

They sat in silence as the car took them soothingly down the road. Boy, it rode easy. Nothing like her 2004 mini van with Littlest Mermaid stickers on all the windows. She felt sick again. Her kids would probably have serious issues now. Maybe they all would . . .

She glanced over at her brother.

He looked calm. Serious. Sad. But calm. Did anything ever shake him?

He let out a long breath and glanced at her. "Do you feel okay?"

Jill bit the edge of her lip. "I've got a headache." *And I don't really know what's happening.*

He hit the brakes at a red light. "There should be an aspirin in the glove compartment."

She ignored him. Like she really had the time (or energy) to baby her headache. "Derek, what's going on?"

The light flashed green, and he petaled the gas gently. He answered her with another question, "Did you know someone was staying with Mom?"

"What?"

"Yeah, at least a night. Maybe two." Derek hesitated. His voice was kind of low when he answered, "It was Trent."

Jill couldn't process it. She couldn't believe it, couldn't understand it, couldn't cope with it . . .

She crammed her eyes shut. *No.*

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With all that was happening, the gym should have been the last thing on his mind. But he couldn't help it. It was his haven.

Corrie met him as soon as he walked into the building. "Derek, I'm so sorry."

He was tired of hearing the condolences. They did nothing for his pain.

"Did you just leave the funeral?"

Mind your own business. He bit back his thoughts and answered softly, "Yeah."

Corrie placed her hand on his arm, her touch very gentle. "It's all over the news. The whole thing is so . . . awful!" Her eyes rounded in the sweetest compassion, even as her voice dropped an octave, "And the suspect . . . your own brother . . ."

"Trent isn't my brother."

"He's not?"

"Step-brother."

"Oh." She stayed silent for only a second until she couldn't stand it any more. "Is he your mom's child?"

"From her first marriage." Derek held the door for her as they entered the weight room. He waited until they were inside before he spoke again, "Trent's father died, and when Mom remarried, he sort of decided he hated everyone." Derek pulled off his shirt. "When me and Jill came along, it got worse."

Derek slipped under a barbell and lifted. His muscles screamed—but he loved it.

Corrie only watched, still listening with that I'm-dying-to-know-everything-about-you look on her face.

He grunted. "When Trent was eighteen, he left home and hasn't come back since. He calls

Mom for Christmas, but that's about all."

"That's so sad." Her brows pushed together. "The news reported said Trent hadn't been located yet. Haven't they questioned you of his whereabouts?"

"I wouldn't know."

She sighed, taking a step backwards, a grin dismissing the melancholy. "I'd better get to my workout and leave you be." The grin grew. "Them biceps looking good, Muscle Man."

He breathed a laugh, relaxing for the first time in days. "Yeah, sure, Miss Flirt."

She merely bounced her pony-tail and walked away.

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Jill sat in the car, window down, and watched her four kids hug their dad goodbye. She bristled. *Jerk*. He hadn't taken advance of his visitation rights in months, and sometimes she wondered if he even cared about their kids.

She sighed. At least he'd agreed to take them during the . . . crisis.

Now, looking disheveled and sleep-deprived, her children ambled to the car and got in the backseat. For once, they were quiet. For once, she wished they weren't.

Oh, great. Why was he walking over here? She didn't feel like talking to him—especially about reuniting their romance and gaining a shoulder to lean on. She could do without either.

"Hey, Jill. Sorry about your mom." He was a little skinnier than the last time she'd seen him, and his hair had grown out.

"I'm kinda in a hurry. Was there something you needed to tell me?"

"Uh . . ." That lost look. "Yeah, I think Janell is running a fever."

"I'll take care of it."

He leaned down closer. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine."

"You don't look *fine*."

It was just like him to put a little insult into that. Jill nodded. "I've got to run, Kris. Thanks

for getting the kids.”

“No prob.” He backed away, waving at his children in the backseat.

With troubled eyes, with little hands, they waved back.

Jill could have sobbed. They would never be the same.

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It was seven o' clock before Derek felt relaxed enough to quit the gym. He pulled his shirt over his head, and the tight sport material clung to his sweaty back. His eyes sought out Corrie. He wasn't sure why.

From across the room, she met his gaze and smiled. She was just shoving her things in her duffel bag, heading home herself.

Derek swallowed. The funeral had been hard—too hard. Had his biggest problem a few days ago really been taking care of his precious mother? What kind of jerk was he? And now she was gone. Dead. He should have been a better son . . .

“Going home?” Corrie spoke loudly from part way across the gym.

He frowned. “Yeah.” It was hard, these last few nights, going back to an empty home. Dare he ask her over?

“Yeah, me, too,” she said, falling in step beside of him.

“Got plans?”

She looked up at him, giggling. “Yeah, big plans. Get a shower, fix some coffee, and watch old TV shows with my cat.”

Derek laughed, holding open the door. Fresh air blasted them and eased some of the tension in his chest. “Yeah . . . well, I have a coffee maker.”

They were at her car now, and she leaned back against it, smiling at him through the darkness. “Are you asking me over?”

“If your cat won't mind.”

She burst out laughing and he noticed how alive her eyes seemed, even in the darkness.

"I'll meet you there."

Derek backed away, nodding, still hearing the sound of her laugh long after they both drove away.

Don't want a girlfriend. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel. *But I'm too grieved to spend the evening alone.*

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McDonald's was unbearably quiet.

Jill put on an all too cheery smile. "Did you kids have fun with your dad?"

Haley, her eleven-year-old, nodded, and the others ate their burgers in silence.

"Mommy, I don't like the green stuff." Her son, protruding his lower lip, shoved the burger towards her. "Take it back, Mommy," he whined. "It's nasssttty."

"Just eat it." She scolded herself for talking too sharply, and immediately softened her voice. "I'll take them off for you."

"I want to see Grammy." He looked up at her, eyes widened in horror, his cheeks streaked with tears. "I want to see her better."

All four of her children waited, lowering their ketchup fingers, staring at her.

Jill sucked in a breath. She couldn't do it. *Why, Lord?* They were so young. Too young. Too young to have to walk in on something like that. *Why couldn't I have gone in first?*

Haley was crying.

Her son took in a shaky breath, and his whiny voice got more shrill, more demanding, "I want to see her better, Mommy! I want to—"

"She's dead, okay?" Haley jerked to her feet, a sob slipping from her throat. She dashed away in the direction of the ladies room.

Jill felt like joining her. *God, who would do this to my mom?* She closed her eyes, just for one second, just to block out the haunting faces of her tortured kids. *Does Trent hate us that*

much?

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"We have . . . let's see . . . superheros, exercise videos, and . . ." He pulled out a VHS from his sparse movie cabinet. "What's this? Oh, home video."

"Of you?" Corrie drew her knees up to her chest, looking hopeful.

Derek shoved it back into the cabinet. "Oh, no. Not that."

"What is it?"

Derek stood to his feet and helped her off the floor. "My graduation speech. It was a total flop. I stuttered through the whole thing. I told Mom not to tape me . . ." His words trailed off, even as a spasm of pain ripped through him. He swallowed, pushing it away. "Sorry I don't have much in the way of good entertainment. My movie collection—"

"Stinks," she supplied, but smiled as if it didn't matter. "It's okay. I'm not much for TV anyways—"

The lights went out. The room was dark. Silent.

Corrie's voice was a quiet whisper, "What happened?"

"I have no idea."

She stepped closer. Her face was just next to his, tilted upward, looking at him. She maintained the soft voice, as if the darkness had commanded them into silence, "Guess we couldn't have watched anything anyways, huh?"

"Yeah." But something wasn't right. If there would have been a storm, then maybe . . .

A screen door creaked, then the knob twisted.

Derek's heart jerked in his chest. "Corrie, in here." He grabbed her arm, jerking her into the computer room. He slammed the door. Leaned against it. And prayed.

"Derek, what's going on?"

"Quiet."

"Do you have a gun? In the house?"

"Not in here." His pulse was a wreck. *Phone, phone . . . where's my phone?* Wasn't in his pockets. Must still be by the front door . . .

"Corrie, do you have a phone?"

"Not with me."

Great . . .

Corrie's hand reached for his arm, squeezing, even as her whisper penetrated the room.

"Derek, they're in the house!"

Footsteps. Soft. Quiet. Padding his carpeted floor and coming closer . . .

Derek rolled back his computer chair. "Get under the desk. Hurry. Don't move. Don't talk."

She crawled in, but whispered back, even as he pushed in the chair, "What about you?"

Derek never answered her. He stood braced. Ready. *God, help.*

And the door eased open.

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The kids were in bed, and she only prayed that God would spare them of nightmares.

Jill fell into her recliner and turned the volume up on the TV. The California News Broadcast displayed grainy videos of her mom's crime-taped yard.

She felt sick all over again. Did they really have to tell the world? But murder was big. Everyone wanted to know the gory details . . .

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she slipped it out and read the number. *Kris?* She hit ignore. She didn't need him. Never had. Never would.

Least of all now.

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A flashlight glared in his eyes, blinding him. Then a voice broke the silence, mounting the tension, "Derek?"

He knew that voice. Derek tightened his fist. "Me, too, huh?" He was sweating, raging, but the man wouldn't answer, only stood there . . .

Derek sucked in a breath, rasping in a louder voice, "Are you going to shoot me in the heart too, Trent? Or shall I turn around? Maybe back shooting me would—"

"Derek, please." Was that desperation in his voice? Trent lowered the flashlight to his chest. "You've got to hear me out. I didn't shoot Mom. I wouldn't."

Then why are you here? Derek didn't answer. He narrowed his eyes, waiting.

"I called Mom a week ago." His voice was shaky, even the flashlight trembled. "I lost my job, got kicked out of my apartment. I asked to stay with her, and she said I could."

Derek glanced down to the chair. Corrie was silent.

"She sent me out for groceries." He laughed, nervously. "She laid down on the couch—said she kept having dizzy spells. I was only gone a couple hours, but when I got home, and she was like that . . ."

Derek took a step forward. "You were there before Jill?"

"I was scared. I grabbed my stuff and ran. Everyone knew how bad I got along with Mom. I was afraid they'd think I . . ." Trent's voice broke slightly. He was silent for a moment, as if composing himself, and when he spoke again, his voice was calmer, "I didn't know the kids would find her. I had no idea . . ."

"Why are you here?" Derek tried to calm the beat of his heart. "I can't help you."

"I don't know what to do! They're looking for me!" Trent grabbed the front of his shirt, dropping the flashlight. Darkness fell over them like a velvet drape.

"You shouldn't have run. You made yourself look guilty." Derek paused. "And how do I know you're not?"

Trent let go of his shirt. "I know we didn't get on well together . . . but I thought you'd at least believe I wouldn't shoot my own mom in the head." Trent retrieved his flashlight. He flashed it in his brother's face. "So you won't help me? You won't at least hide me?"

Derek didn't flinch. "No."

"I should have known I couldn't count on you." The words were whispered very painfully, very low, before Trent ran out the door.

Derek watched him go. *For all his faults, for all his hate, he's not a killer.* Derek felt a cold chill run all the way through him. *And that means someone else . . .*

The chair hit the back of his heels, then Corrie was on her feet. "Derek?" Her whisper was soft in the dark.

He inhaled. "Yes?"

"I think I'd better go home now."

Of course. She was probably scared nutty. Guilt tugged at him, deepening his frown. He shouldn't have used her like that, groping for company at the expense of her feelings, knowing he would never take this anywhere . . .

"Yeah, okay. I'll walk you out." They made their way through the dark house in silence and slipped on their shoes at the front door. It wasn't until they were outside, with the streetlights casting their yellow glow across the earth, that Derek spoke. "Listen, Corrie, I'm sorry that had to happen."

She had opened her car door, but now she shut it and turned around. Her smile was a bit timid, and he could tell she was a little shook up. Who wouldn't be.

"Are you okay?"

She laughed, softly, barely—a quick sound that died nearly as soon as it started. "Yeah, I'm fine. Freaked me out a little. I thought for a second he might . . ."

"Shoot me?" Derek moved his hands onto her shoulders. The tip of her hair swayed down and brushed his knuckles. For some reason, it made his heart do a flip-flop in his chest.

"Are you going to call the police?"

"I don't think Trent killed her."

"Then why wouldn't you help him?"

Derek paused, tugging her barely closer, lowering his head just slightly. "Because he's a loser." Her smell was distracting. He inhaled that strong, wild perfume, thinking how much it fitted her . . .

"Okay, whatever." Her voice was slightly clipped. "I've got to get home."

"To the cat." *Yeah, just pretend like nothing just happened. Make light of it.* He did the winner smile.

She didn't react. "Yeah," she finally said, opening her car door, stepping away from his hands. "To the cat."

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Jill wished she could stop thinking about it—stop seeing it—stop hearing her kid's shrieks of horror.

But she couldn't. The voices, the images, they followed her throughout the day. Like a permanent nightmare.

It was 2:30 by the time she got home. Being a Real Estate agent didn't exactly provide the "steady" income she needed. Things were slow right now. The last thing she'd sold was one acre of land (with a trailer that needed burned, but the buyer overlooked that) outside of Amador, and that was at least a month ago.

Jill grunted. Some days, she just felt like giving up.

The kids were at school, so the house was quiet. On her way to the kitchen, she kicked Barbie dolls and muddy shoes out of her pathway. Why were her kids such slob?

There was a knock on the door. *Odd.* No one ever came to visit.

Padding back through the house, this time in her bare feet, Jill opened the door. And froze.

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Derek was still at his office when *Eye of the Tiger* rang. He answered the call, "Derek Bentley speaking."

The voice was all professional. "Relation to Jill Bentley?"

"Yes, sir. Who is this?"

"This is the Elementary school." A brief pause. "Are you available to pick up your sister's kids? No one showed up at the bus stop, and we haven't been able to reach her on the phone."

"I'll be right over." Derek ended the call. A knot tightened in the pit of his stomach and made him sick.

Jill never forgot. Not when it came to her kids.

Something was bad wrong.

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All four kids piled into the backseat of his car. He put on his kid-friendly smile and said in a cheerful voice, "How was school, kiddos?"

They all mumbled fine.

Janell, leaning forward from the middle seat, asked quietly, "Where's Mom?"

A pause.

Derek swallowed, focusing his eyes on the road. "Probably home. She must have fallen asleep or something."

"Yeah right," Haley countered. "She's never like not showed up before."

The smaller kids listened, eyes unearthly round, but said nothing.

Derek cleared his throat. "How about some music?"

They didn't answer, so he turned the radio on anyways. The music eased a little of the tension, and the kids began to whisper to each other in the backseat.

It was nearly fifteen minutes later before they pulled into her driveway. There was a blue Chevy truck parked beside Jill's van. Derek put the car on park and turned the music down. "Alright, kiddos. I'm going to go in and check on your mom. Just sit tight, okay?"

"Why do we have to stay in here?" Haley had that attitude in her voice, but Derek ignored it.

"Just do like I say and don't get out of the car. Promise?"

Haley grumbled a consent, and the rest merely bobbed their heads up and down.

Derek went to the front door, his heart beat going a little too fast. He didn't like this. He recognized the Chevy, but he couldn't think who he'd seen driving it . . .

He opened the door and stepped inside. The house was a mess. As usual.

"Jill?" He shut the door behind him and walked through the living room. "Jill! Anybody home?"

Noises . . . upstairs.

He ran to the stair case and yelled up, "Jill! That you?" Why wouldn't she just answer him? He took the steps two at a time and tried to avoid stepping on toys in the hallway. The kid's doors were all open. Empty.

Jill's door was shut.

Derek put his hand on the doorknob and sucked in a breath. "Sis, I'm coming in."

No answer, so he twisted the knob, opened the door, stepped in.

From across the room, Jill met his gaze. Her eyes were wide, bruised . . .

Something hard crashed against his head, sending him to the ground. Pain exploded in his head, then he felt blood trickling down the side of his face . . .

"No, Kris, please." Through a blur, he saw Jill rush across the room.

Kris? For a second, it all went black. Then the world grew clearer, the pain grew stronger.

Jill's ex-husband . . . ?

He heard the door slam. "You should have stayed out of here."

Derek winced, pulling himself to his feet. He pressed his hand against his head, looking at his sister. "What's going on, sis? What's he doing here?"

Kris walked to Jill and slithered his arm around her waist. She stiffened but made no move to fight him. From the looks of her face, she'd already tried that.

Derek fought the dizziness crowding in around him and stepped forward. "Get your hands off of her."

"Yeah?" Kris grinned and put his cheek against hers. "What are you going to do about it?"

Derek balled his fist, stepped forward . . .

"No, Derek, stop!" Jill shrieked. She breathed out a sob, closing her eyes, "He has a gun."

Kris nodded. "She's right, big brother. And I know how to use it, too."

Derek took another step forward.

"Or do you need an example of my handiwork?" Kris tightened his grip around his ex. "Just remember your mom. See how good my aim is?"

Derek stopped dead still, his blood running cold. "You?"

"Oh, yeah, me." Kris became serious. Angry. Maybe even insane, so wild was the look in his eye. "You think I was going to put up with that? Her dumping me like that?" He paused.

Trembled. Held Jill closer. "No woman tells me no."

"Why Mom?" Derek choked back the pain, the rage. "Why would you kill Mom? She was always good to you."

"Because Jill needed that . . . crisis in her life. She needed a reason to want me again. She needed my shoulder to lean on, only she still wouldn't come back to me."

Derek swallowed.

Jill shot him a terrified look.

"Let her go, Kris." Derek took another full step forward and his voice got lower, "Now."

"Jill changed her mind." Kris pulled her back and looked into her face. "Didn't you, babe? Tell him we're getting back together."

She hesitated . . .

Kris swung his fist, throwing her backwards. "*Didn't you?*" he screamed . . .

Derek ran forward, tackling Kris to the ground, throwing his fist.

Only he wasn't fast enough, because Kris pulled out the pistol, pulled the trigger . . .

Derek jerked, rasping, laying limp on the floor. *No. God, help me.* Blood. His shoulder. So much blood . . .

Kris jumped off him and ran for the door.

Derek closed his eyes. *Oh, God, no.*

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Haley pushed her little brother's feet off the seat. "Stop it, stupid. You're like taking up way too much room!"

Her little brother stuck his tongue at her. "You're not my mom!"

"I'm older!"

"You're ugly!" he retorted back.

Haley shoved his feet away, which he had stubbornly put back on the seat. "Just stay on your own side."

Janell let out a big sigh. "I'm bored. Why can't we just go inside?"

"I don't know." Haley took her angry gaze to the window. "It's stupid. Uncle Derek thinks we're babies . . ." Haley hesitated. Did a re-look. "Daddy?"

The man ran through the driveway, out of breath, and glanced at the car.

Haley waved. "Look guys! It's Dad!"

He paused, glancing at them, then he sprinted forward and got in the driver's seat.

"Daddy! What are you doing here?" The children badgered him with questions, hardly noticing the fact that the vehicle was moving.

Their father didn't answer them. The car moved faster. Too fast.

Haley leaned forward, swallowing. "Daddy, this is Uncle Derek's car. Where are we going?"

But he wouldn't answer them.

And the car moved faster.

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"Derek! Derek!" Her sobs peeled through his unconsciousness, then he felt her hands cupping his face.

For a second, nothing made sense. Then her hysteria jerked him back into reality. He pulled himself up, just slightly. "Jill . . . you . . . okay?"

She grabbed his shirt and made a fist around the fabric. "Derek . . . I thought you were dead . . . and he took your car . . ."

"Car?" His heart slammed in his chest. The kids. He'd ordered them to stay in the car . . .

Panic jerked through him, pulling him to his feet. He gasped, gripping his bleeding shoulder, stumbling for the door.

"Derek, wait! It's okay. Just stay here. I'll call the police—"

"The kids," he rasped. He whirled on her, anguish ripping through him. "Jill, I left the kids in the car."

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She floored the pedal. The van picked up speed, throwing dust in the air behind it. He was going to kill her kids. She knew it. He'd do anything he could to get even, anything he could to hurt her.

"Police are on their way, Jill. I told them which way he'll be headed, so they'll be waiting at the highway." Weakly, Derek tossed the phone to the seat. "Go faster," he said.

Jill gripped the steering wheel. Pressed her foot harder, but the van wouldn't go any faster. "It won't," she rasped, panic ringing in her voice. "He's going to kill my kids."

"No he won't." Derek leaned his head against the window, spearing the glass with blood. He looked half dead, Jill thought. Maybe he was. Maybe she was in line for five more funerals, all in one day . . .

A sob slipped from her throat, wracking through her body. Still no sign of the black sports car. They'd never catch up. That car was expensive, fast.

"Jill, I'm not doing good."

She glanced over at him. His eyes were closed, his breath labored. She clenched her jaw.

"Just relax. You'll be okay."

And her kids—they'd be okay, too. Surely their own dad wouldn't hurt them. Surely not.

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The car jerked off onto a side road and stopped along some thin woods. Everyone got quiet.

Haley unbuckled her seat belt. "Dad, what's going on? Where's Mom?"

He opened his car door. "Come on, guys. Out of the car."

"Why, Dad?" they whined.

"Now!" His face had gotten red, his eyes intense.

The children obeyed, filing out of the vehicle, and looked at him with questioning eyes.

He pulled out a gun. And aimed.

Haley screamed.

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There were police cars behind her, but still no sight of his shiny black sports car. She was

crying so hard she could hardly see straight, hardly drive. But none of it mattered. Kris would do anything he could to hurt her. To get even. Anything.

"Sis, calm down." Derek's voice was soothing, deep.

She wiped snot away from her nose, whipping around the curve like a race car at the finish line. "Don't tell me what to do!" she bit back between sobs. "You . . . you shouldn't have left them alone!"

Derek didn't reply.

Angrily, she glanced over at him. He looked feverish and his face was white, death-like. The metallic-sweet scent of blood filled the vehicle. Jill hated it.

"Jill—the car!" he rasped, leaning up.

She slammed on the brakes, catching the glare of black from within the trees. She turned down the road, the police trailing after her.

"Hold on, sis. Let them go first."

"No, my babies—"

Derek grabbed the wheel, turning the van to the side.

The police, lights flashing, sirens screaming, raced ahead of her.

Derek reached for her arm, holding it with surprising strength. "Stay here. They know what they're doing."

"No." She choked out the word with another gut-wrenching sob. "They need me . . ."

But Derek would have none of it, and reluctantly she listened to him. So she sat there, stiff, breathless, staring out the smeared-up dashboard of her 2004 mini van.

The cars blocked her view. She saw police men getting out of their vehicles. She saw guns. *Oh, God, protect my babies.*

She heard a gunshot. Then another. Voices got louder. Sirens kept blaring . . .

And through the roar of the chaos, Jill heard the sound of her children crying. She wilted into another sob, opening the van door, running forward . . .

A police man stepped in her way. Holding her back. Keeping her from her kids when they needed her.

"My kids!" she rasped, hitting at him. "Let me go! I need my kids!"

"Ma'am . . . we need you to stay away from the body."

"Body?" she breathed.

"Your ex-husband fired at us—and we shot back. He's dead."

"My kids—"

"I'll bring them to you." Then he was gone. Behind the line of police cars. In the rush of men and guns.

Then the angel faces of her four children emerged from chaos. They were walking. Horror-stricken. Frightened. But walking and alive and coming towards her . . .

Jill opened her arms and her four children ran for her. She closed her eyes, breathing in the subtle smell of their hair, relishing in the feel of their soft skin against hers. "Oh, thank God you're safe! Thank God!" She clung to them, sobbing.

"Mommy, they shot him." Her little boy's voice was soft, quivering.

"And Daddy was going to kill us, but he took a long time," said another, a crack in her voice. "And I think he couldn't do it, but Mommy, we were so scared!"

"I know, I know." She held them tighter. "But it's all over now. My babies are okay."

They didn't answer her, but she didn't expect them to. She knew she was wrong. Her babies weren't okay. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not the next day.

Her babies would never be okay again.

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Derek walked into the gym, a little less self-esteemed. He didn't do the strut. Not this time. Too much had happened, and with his shoulder in this brace, he felt a little humbled. Maybe it was good for him.

Corrie rushed over, her eyes radiant under mascara-thickened lashes. She smiled. "You're looking more alive." She'd visited him at least four times while he was in the hospital, and had brought casseroles to Jill on several different occasions.

Derek nodded. "Yeah, I feel more alive."

"Glad to hear it."

"Glad to feel it."

She laughed and let her gaze skim over the gym. "So back to the old work out, aye?"

"Not hardly. I'm not really up to working out."

"What then? You just came to enjoy the environment?"

"No, actually, I came for you." His voice got soft, thick.

Her gaze flew to his, and the color of her cheeks grew deeper. "Really?" she asked, with a smile in her voice.

"My house?"

"Is it a date?"

He looked at her. No getting around it now. But for some reason, he didn't mind. "Yeah," he said, touching the side of her cheek. "It's a full-fledged date."

"Good." She beamed, triumphantly, and Derek had the weirdest feeling that he'd been hooked. "One more thing, though."

He grunted. "So this has strings attached?"

"No," she laughed. "This has advice attached."

"Alright, alright. What am I doing wrong?"

"I think Trent deserves your help, don't you? I mean, after all. Not only is he homeless, but he just lost his mom and had the whole world convinced he was a killer. Don't you think he needs someone to lean on?" How could he say no to eyes like that?

He nodded, leaned forward, and brushed his lips against her forehead for a quick second. "I'll find him after our date." He paused. And gave her the winner smile. "Think your cat will be lonely?"