No Safe City

A Seven Lampstands Thriller

by Caden Noir

Free Sample Chapters

Chapters 1 - 3

Chapter 1: The Empty Sky

The first brick struck the ambulance while Lexy was still watching Jerusalem on her phone.

It punched through the blue light above the windshield and burst across the hood in pieces. Sami caught her by the back of the jacket and dragged her into his chest as a second chunk of the building hit the pavement where she had been standing. She felt his heart through two layers of cloth, hammering. Then South Avenue rose under their feet and dropped them again.

Across the street a city bus lurched sideways into a row of parked cars. Sunlight flashed along its windows. Toward Park Central Square people poured out of the shops, some still holding their phones up like the sky owed them an explanation. Glass fell somewhere overhead, a light, almost delicate sound beneath the grinding of the earth, and Sami shoved her around the front of the ambulance as a whole section of brick cornice tore loose and came down.

She went down hard on one knee. The ambulance rocked against her shoulder. Dust swallowed the bus, the parked cars, the coffee shop where she and Ben had eaten breakfast on Saturday. Six weeks in Springfield and she had finally found a counter where the woman remembered her order. That was what her mind caught on while the street tried to throw her off it. A man was shouting the same name over and over. She tried to stand and found nothing steady to stand on.

Sami held her until it eased. Powdered stone had turned his dark curls gray and settled across the brown skin of his face. Blood ran from a cut beside his ear into the collar of the work shirt he had promised his mother he would throw away. His mouth was moving. She watched it until the words separated from the roar.

"Lexy. Your leg."

A tear in her trousers showed a scraped knee and one bright bead of blood. The joint bent when she asked it to. She nodded, mostly to herself, and fished for her phone.

Ben had been at the clinic when she left. He had kissed the top of her head over her coffee, and at five foot one she had resigned herself to looking up at her little brother, though she had never agreed to the kissing part. Twenty-one and all elbows, hair standing up in back no matter how often she flattened it. He had come from Chattanooga to help her move and stayed to help at the clinic. She had told him to stay put until her shift ended. He had made the face that meant he was twenty-one, not eleven.

She got the phone out and tried his number. It would not connect.

A child's hand appeared behind the cracked rear window of the bus. Fingers spread against the glass, vanished, struck it again.

"Bag," Lexy said. Sami was already moving.

The bus leaned against a white delivery van, its front buried under fallen brick and a slab of cornice. Through the ragged hole where the rear window had been, Lexy saw a girl in a yellow shirt trapped between two rows of seats, pulling at the sleeve of a woman sprawled across the aisle.

Lexy climbed onto the van's dented hood. Heat came up through her boots. Grit slid under her palms. Her braid had come loose; she pushed blond hair behind one ear with a shaking hand and left a smear of dirt across her freckles. Twenty-five years old, and until a few minutes ago she had still been quietly sure there had to be some other explanation for those two men.

She had watched it happen on the live feed Ben sent her. Two bodies rising while the crowd fell back. The last thing on her screen had been the empty sky above Jerusalem, and somebody off camera sobbing like he could not stop.

"Can you hear me?" she called into the bus.

The girl turned. A silver star clip hung sideways in her black bangs. Her face was streaked with tears and dust, one cheek marked by the clean outline of the hand she had pressed against it.

"She won't get up. I keep telling her, but she won't get up."

Sami climbed up beside her with the medical bag. He said the girl's name, and she looked up so fast Lexy understood she knew him.

"Noor. It's Sami, from the clinic. Remember me?"

"Her mother's Hanan," he told Lexy. "They live by my mom."

His voice had gone gentle in a way Lexy had never heard from him. In six weeks she had learned everything he complained about: her directions, the coffee, the way Ben borrowed tools and returned them missing pieces. She had not known Sami could make his voice sound like nothing dreadful was going to happen next.

Noor loosened her grip on her mother's sleeve.

Lexy went through the broken window with Sami holding her jacket. Her RN badge caught on the frame and she tucked it flat without thinking. The bus smelled of hot upholstery and diesel. A shopping bag had split under a seat. Tomatoes rolled against her boot as she crouched by Hanan, and the small ordinariness of them hurt worse than the blood on the woman's forehead.

Hanan's eyes opened when Lexy touched her shoulder. The same straight black brows as her daughter, drawn together now. She tried to rise, cried out, reached for Noor. Lexy covered her hand with her own.

"She's right here. We're getting you both out."

Sami leaned through the window where Hanan could see him. She knew his face. Her fingers closed around Lexy's hard enough to hurt.

Hanan's ankle was caught under a folded seat frame. Lexy could see daylight beneath the metal, but when she tried to shift it the whole row ground against the crushed front of the bus. Somewhere past the windshield, masonry scraped on masonry.

"Sami. I need you in here."

He lowered himself through the opening. There was barely room for both of them; she had to press her shoulder to his chest while he bent over the seat. Above them Noor kept asking if her mother was going to die, and every time Hanan reached for her without finding the words.

A tremor ran through the floor. Sami went still, eyes on the front.

Through the dusty windshield the fallen slab shifted. A long crack climbed the brickwork above it, splitting the stone sill of an upstairs window. A curtain stirred in the room inside. The wall beneath it had lost its corner.

"We need to move," Sami said.

"I know."

"Lexy. Look at me."

She did. His dark eyes held hers, frightened and intent, and that frightened her worse than the falling brick. In their first week together an urgent call had broken up a routine run, children in the wreck, and Sami had hummed while they worked. She had mistaken it for carelessness until she heard his mother singing the same hymn over the clinic dishes.

He turned back to the seat. "When I lift, bring her toward you."

Lexy got behind Hanan and talked her through it while Sami braced. Noor knelt by her mother's head, holding her hand with the fierce concentration of somebody finally given a job she could do.

The frame rose a little. Sami's breath caught. Lexy pulled Hanan toward her until the foot came free. He let the seat fall with a crash that made Noor scream, and before it stopped shuddering they were moving Hanan toward the rear window.

Outside, two men had come up by the van. One wore a security uniform, the sleeve torn from shoulder to elbow. He reached through the opening for Hanan while the other steadied her legs. Noor would not let go of her mother's hand until Sami promised he would bring her out next, straight to her mom. He climbed out after Hanan and braced on the hood; Lexy lifted Noor through the window into his arms.

Her phone began to ring.

She nearly dropped it getting it out. Ben's name filled the cracked screen, and for one wild instant relief made her foolish. She answered like he had only been late coming home.

"Ben, where are you?"

"Lex?" His voice broke under a burst of noise. "I'm all right. I was at the south collection point. They said the clinic wasn't safe."

Sami was leaning through the window, arm outstretched. She looked up at him.

"What collection point? Are you hurt?"

"Listen to me. They had Jerusalem on the TV in the waiting room. After the men went up, people started praying. The soldiers put them on a different bus."

A heavy thump sounded overhead. Dust sifted from the bus ceiling onto the phone.

"Are you on that bus?" she asked.

"There was an old man. He couldn't get up the steps. I was only helping him."

Sami said her name, sharp now. She wedged the phone between ear and shoulder and caught his hand.

Ben was talking faster. "The doors are locked. Lex, they won't let me off."

The bus pitched forward. Sami seized her wrist with both hands and pulled; her jacket caught on something as her feet left the floor. She heard herself telling Ben to stay on the line while the cloth tore across her back.

She landed against Sami on the van hood. He shoved her down the far side and they hit the road together as the upper wall came through the bus roof. The sound struck her in the chest. For seconds there was only dust and darkness and Sami's arm across the back of her neck.

When she could breathe, she dragged the phone out from under her.

The call had ended. Across the street Noor clung to her mother, alive and weeping. Lexy held the phone to her mouth and called her brother's name anyway.

The security officer who had helped them stood beside the ambulance. He had picked up a radio, but he was not looking at the collapsed building. His eyes were on Lexy.

"Stanford," he said into it. "She's here."

Chapter 2: South Collection

Lexy got to her feet before she understood she had decided to run.

The officer lowered his radio. He was closer than she had thought, a rangy man with cropped sandy hair and a pale strip of skin showing where his torn sleeve had protected his arm from the dust. The same hand that had reached into the bus for Hanan now rested against the radio on his belt.

"Where is my brother?" she asked.

His eyes moved to the phone in her hand.

"Benjamin Stanford?"

"You know where he is."

"Transport put out a request for his family. Your name was on it." He pointed at the embroidered strip above her jacket pocket. "That's how I knew."

She looked down at her own name. A thread had come loose from the M. She wanted to pull it until the whole thing unraveled.

Sami had risen beside her, slower, one hand pressed to his ribs. He glanced from the officer to the road behind him. Only then did Lexy think to look for a way past the man.

"What kind of request?" Sami asked.

"Family contact. South Collection can tell her."

"Then tell them to bring him here."

The officer's radio crackled. Down South Avenue a horn had started sounding in long, desperate bursts. The dust was thinning enough to show a woman walking through it with an empty leash, calling for something Lexy could not see.

"I have people under buildings," he said. "I can't bring anybody anywhere."

"They locked him in a bus."

For the first time he looked uncertain. Then Noor called Sami's name, and all three of them turned.

Hanan lay on a folded coat near the ambulance, beyond the reach of the damaged facade. The other man who had helped them knelt beside her with both hands pressed to the coat beneath her head, as if it might slip away. Noor was trying to put her mother's shoe back on.

Lexy crossed to them.

"Leave that for me, sweetheart." She eased the shoe from Noor's hands. "You did a good job staying with her."

"She wants to go home."

"I know."

Hanan's eyes found Lexy's face. Her breathing had settled, but she flinched when Lexy touched her wrist. Blood from the cut on her forehead had dried through one eyebrow. Lexy checked her slowly, one thing at a time. Becca had drilled that into her: finish one observation before fear hurried her into the next. Inside her own head, Ben kept saying the doors were locked.

Sami brought the cot from the ambulance. He had found their bag where it fell beside the van and was checking it with quick, irritated movements. A packet of gauze had split. He threw it aside.

"Truck?" Lexy asked.

"Starts. Tires look good. One light assembly's gone, hood's dented. I'm checking underneath."

"And you?"

"Offended."

"Sami."

He stopped long enough to meet her eyes. "My side hurts. I can breathe. You can be unpleasant about it when we're out of the street."

The officer bent to pick up Hanan's coat. DANE was stitched above his pocket. Beneath it sat the gray patch of Regional Relief Security, a patch Lexy had been seeing more often than any local badge.

"South Collection has a medical tent," he said. "The hospitals are diverting. I just heard it."

Sami was under the front of the ambulance with a small flashlight between his teeth. Lexy could see one of his boots moving against the road.

"Then that's where we go," she said.

She could get Hanan to a receiving nurse. She could find the man who had put Ben on that bus. For a few precious seconds the two things she needed lay in the same direction.

Dane helped them move Hanan to the cot. When Noor tried to climb on beside her, he crouched and offered the girl her mother's shoe. She looked at his uniform, then at Sami.

"You can carry it," Sami told her. "Your mom will need it."

Noor took the shoe by its heel.

Lexy secured Hanan in the ambulance, checked Noor for injuries, and settled her in the child restraint where her mother could see her. Sami slid into the driver's seat after one last look beneath the engine. Dane stood at the open rear door while Lexy gave dispatch their location and patient report. Her first call brought only static. On the second, a tired voice acknowledged the unit number and told her to stay off the main approaches to the square.

"I'll tell South you're coming," Dane said.

"Tell them to keep my brother there."

He held her gaze a moment longer than she liked.

"I'll pass it on."

He shut the door carefully, with both hands.

It took them nearly half an hour to travel what should have been minutes. Sami doubled back twice. At one intersection he sat with his hands loose on the wheel while a family pushed a dead car across their path, a little boy leaning against the trunk beside his father. The ambulance's remaining emergency lights washed over their faces. Nobody moved faster because of them.

Lexy could see Sami through the opening to the cab. He had tried his mother's number three times before she asked.

"Anything?"

He shook his head.

"Text her."

"Did."

"Was she home this morning?"

"She was taking food to my aunt. Said she was leaving after breakfast." He looked back. "They argued about whether it was enough food. For two people. Two refrigerators would not have been enough food."

Hanan made a small sound from the cot. Lexy leaned toward her, but the woman was smiling painfully.

"Miriam made the bread yesterday," she said. "She brought us some."

Sami turned back to the windshield. His shoulders moved as he drew a careful breath.

"Then she probably started another batch."

"She told Noor the first one was practice."

"She's been practicing that bread for forty years."

Noor held her mother's shoe against her chest and watched the back of his head. Lexy saw him touch the phone lying beside the gearshift, turning it so he could see the screen.

She wanted to promise him his mother was all right. She had been making promises for twenty minutes, and she was starting to understand how much of her work depended on believing them.

Instead she put her hand against the partition, close enough for him to see, and left it there until they moved again.

The radio caught fragments of calls from outside the city. A dispatcher asked for any unit that could reach a collapsed roof in Republic. Another voice cut across hers with a report from farther west. Then somebody with a news broadcast playing behind him held a microphone open long enough for Lexy to hear earthquake damage in Memphis, and another city she missed, and the same stunned words repeated by a different voice.

It wasn't only Springfield.

She looked at the frozen frame on her phone, the pale Jerusalem sky Ben had sent her. Three and a half days of bodies on a screen, of people laughing while Ben stood silent in front of the television. She had asked him to turn it off the night before. She had wanted one evening when they could eat without looking at dead men.

Now she would have given anything to sit beside him in that room and listen to every word he wanted to say.

At a break in the traffic she sent a message.

I heard you. I'm coming. Tell me what you can see.

It waited beneath the photograph she used for his contact: Ben squinting into the sun, one corner of his mouth crooked in a grin, his gray-green eyes so much like hers that strangers always guessed. No delivered mark appeared.

South Collection filled the parking lot of a closed grocery store off Campbell, south of Grand. The old supermarket letters had come down months earlier, leaving cleaner rectangles on the brick. Regional Relief had hung its own sign across them. Lexy had brought patients here twice since the medical tent opened, Sami driving, Becca checking her handoffs after. Both times there had been coffee, people complaining about the coffee, and a volunteer who insisted on finding chairs for anybody older than he was.

Now vehicles crowded the entrances, and people on foot came through a separate lane of metal barriers. Beyond them, a row of portable toilets had tipped against a fence. Two men were trying to set them upright while a woman in a yellow volunteer vest argued for more room around the medical tent.

Sami followed her pointing hand into the receiving lane.

Becca Han came out to meet them. She was short and broad through the shoulders, a streak of silver near her temple, a pencil holding up black hair that never stayed up a whole shift. On Lexy's first morning Becca had introduced herself as her preceptor and confiscated the clipboard Lexy was holding like a shield. Now she stopped when she saw her.

"Tell me that's somebody else's blood."

"Most of it."

"I hate that answer."

Then she saw Hanan, and her face changed. She listened while Lexy gave the account of the entrapment, the head injury, the painful ankle, asking two questions and repeating the important details to the receiving team. A cot waited inside. Someone had found proper splinting supplies, and another nurse was clearing a place beside the treatment area for Noor.

"They stay together," Lexy said.

Becca looked at the girl's grip on the shoe. "Of course they do."

Lexy stayed until Hanan was settled and the nurse had taken over. When she straightened from the cot, her scraped knee had stiffened enough to make her catch the rail. She waited for it to loosen, then wrote down the approximate times from the bus and her observations along the way. Her hand began to tremble halfway through her own name.

Becca covered it with hers.

"Give it to me."

"I'm fine."

"You have never once said that when you were fine."

Lexy let her take the pen. Becca kept them there long enough to clean the cut beside Sami's ear and check them both. He answered her questions without complaint until she touched his side. Then he pulled away, trying to make a joke of it. Becca waited for him to finish and asked again where it hurt. He was breathing evenly, but she told him to stop and seek care if the pain or his breathing changed. Lexy listened as closely as he did.

Behind them, Sami had crouched beside Noor. She held out the shoe as if he were finally the person who could fix what was wrong. He set it under her mother's cot, where both of them could see it.

"I'll know where to look," he said.

Hanan caught his wrist before he stood.

"Your mother was wearing the blue sweater."

He looked at her.

"If you have to ask someone," she said.

His face changed in a way Lexy had no wish to watch. She looked down at the completed report instead.

When they had stepped beyond the row of cots, she asked Becca about Ben.

The nurse's hand went still on the curtain she was holding aside.

"He was here."

"I know. He called. What happened?"

"They cleared the clinic before seven. There'd been threats all night, after somebody broke the front window. You'd already gone on the scheduled run downtown."

Lexy remembered the glass beside the clinic door. Ben picking it out of the mat with a folded piece of cardboard, telling her not to worry. A bottle, somebody celebrating the deaths in Jerusalem, the same ugliness they had been living around for days. She had left him sweeping while she and Sami took a patient downtown. After the handoff they had parked on South Avenue, and she had opened the feed Ben sent.

"They brought everyone here?"

"Patients and volunteers. We had the waiting room inside until the shaking. Ben was helping."

"And the people who were praying?"

Becca let the curtain fall behind them.

Sami moved closer. Out in the lot, a forklift sounded its warning as the driver backed away from a stack of bottled water. The ordinary noise made it hard to hear what Becca said next.

"They separated them."

"Because they prayed."

"That's when it started. When the men stood up on the television. Everybody saw it. This old fellow beside Ben started crying, and someone said, 'Praise God.' The guards made them come outside."

"You let them?"

The words were out before Lexy could stop them.

Becca flinched. She did not look away.

"I was with a woman who'd stopped breathing. Your brother went to help a man up the bus steps. By the time I got outside, the guard wouldn't let me near the door."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I didn't mean that."

"You meant it for a second." Her voice stayed low. "You can be sorry later. Let's find him."

She took Lexy through a gap in the tent toward the row of departing vehicles. Sami followed. A guard at the pedestrian barrier glanced at their uniforms and went back to the line of people waiting to enter. Lexy felt the shame of what she had said settling beside the fear, leaving room for neither to move.

The buses stood along the far edge of the lot, engines running. Some had handwritten destination cards in their windshields. The nearest was filling slowly with people carrying

shopping bags and bedding. A volunteer counted them as they climbed aboard, giving each family a bottle of water.

Becca walked past it.

"The other one was there."

An empty stretch of pavement lay beside a portable office, marked with a trail of cooling liquid and two flattened paper cups.

Lexy stopped so abruptly that Sami caught her elbow.

"When?" she asked.

Becca looked toward the office, then at a woman collecting abandoned bags from the pavement.

"The clinic transfer. How long ago?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe. Once they got the lane open."

"Which bus?"

"Twenty-seven."

The woman kept picking up bags. One split when she lifted it, spilling socks and a plastic bottle of shampoo. She crouched to gather them, murmuring an apology to whoever had left them behind.

Lexy went to the portable office.

A young man stood at its window with a radio cord caught under his collar. He was tall and narrow, his blue shirt pulling free of his waistband as he reached for something inside. Close-cut brown hair, a thin scar through one eyebrow, shoulders too clean for anyone who had been downtown. TRANSPORT was printed across his back. When he turned, she saw blood on the paper towel wrapped around his right hand.

"Bus twenty-seven," she said. "Where did it go?"

He looked at her torn jacket, then her face.

"Alexis Stanford?"

She reached for the edge of the window before she could stop herself.

"Everybody knows my name. Somebody tell me where my brother is."

The young man glanced at the guard by the barrier. Becca stood beside Lexy, her chin lifted. Sami had stayed half a step behind, leaving the man a clear view of his face.

"I'm Jonah Reed," the man said. "I asked them to find you."

"Then you can tell me where he went."

He lowered the paper towel from his hand. Blood had soaked through where his fingers gripped it.

"Yes," he said. "I'm the one who sent him."

Chapter 3: The Service Gate

Lexy heard the engines behind her, the forklift, a child arguing with his father about a bag he had left at home. The world kept doing things while she looked at Jonah Reed.

"Bring him back."

"I can't turn the bus around from here."

"You could send it."

"Lexy," Becca said.

"He just told me."

Jonah put his injured hand against his chest. He was young enough that she found herself looking for someone behind him, somebody older who had made the decision he was trying to explain. There was no one. A desk stood inside the portable office, its drawers hanging open from the shaking. Above it, a map of the region had slipped sideways on its pins.

"I had a crowd outside the clinic," he said. "I had patients who needed somewhere to go and drivers who were refusing that street. We brought them here before the broadcast changed. That part was mine."

"And after?"

He looked toward the buses.

"Security called it protective transport. There were people shouting at the ones who'd been praying. I had an order to separate them before somebody got hurt."

"So you locked them in."

"I allocated the bus."

Sami moved beside Lexy. His voice was quiet enough that Jonah had to lean toward him.

"The difference is bigger on your side of the door."

Jonah's mouth tightened. He looked as though he might argue. Then he reached through the window and picked up a clipboard.

"Your brother helped Martin Ellis aboard. Mr. Ellis walks with a frame. Benjamin wasn't on the original list. When the guard reported the extra passenger, I added him so he wouldn't arrive without a name."

"He's Ben."

"Ben." Jonah swallowed. "He asked for you. I sent the family-contact request through security because their radios were working."

That was how Dane had known. A line spoken somewhere across the city had reached Lexy's jacket while she was climbing out of a bus. She could follow each small step now. She hated that the steps could be so ordinary.

"Where?" she asked.

"West Receiving. The old distribution property outside the city, toward Republic. Off the main road."

"Does it have a hospital?"

"There's a medical unit."

"You have been there?"

He hesitated.

She took the clipboard from his good hand. He let her.

There were twenty-four names. Her brother's had been added at the bottom in blue ink, the loops too small, the letters drawn by somebody who did not know that Ben had spent most of school putting a little lightning bolt through the middle of his last name. Beside him was Martin Ellis, seventy-six. Beneath the list Jonah had signed his own name.

Lexy turned the page over. The back was blank.

"Where's the return trip?"

"Those are scheduled from Receiving."

Becca reached past her and pointed to a printed line near the top.

"What does this mean?"

Jonah looked where she was pointing.

RELEASE BY SECURITY AUTHORIZATION ONLY.

"It's on the protected transfers," he said.

"I discharge patients," Becca told him. "Who discharges these people?"

He took the page back, careful to keep his bloodied hand away from it, and studied the printed condition as if he had never been asked to explain it before.

"Let me make a call."

Becca's radio sounded from the pocket of her scrub top. A nurse was asking for her at the medical tent. She looked from Lexy to Sami.

"Stay together."

"We will," Sami said.

"That was mostly for her."

Lexy caught her arm before she went.

"Thank you. For Hanan. For telling me."

"Bring that boy back. He still owes me a door hinge."

She was already moving when Lexy remembered Ben on a chair at the clinic, a screwdriver between his teeth, insisting the hinge was fine and the whole door had been installed wrong. She had laughed at him. Less than a week ago that crooked door had seemed worth arguing about. She could still see him on the chair, a loose screw tucked behind his ear.

Jonah went into the office. Through the open window Lexy heard him give the bus number, wait, then give her brother's name. He listened long enough that she could hear his breathing between the bursts of radio traffic.

"He's not a patient," he said at last. "He's a volunteer. His sister is here. She can collect him."

A reply came too softly for Lexy to make out.

"I'm asking who can authorize it."

He turned away from the window. She could still see how tightly he held the radio.

Sami had taken out his phone. There was still no answer from his mother. He typed something with both thumbs, erased it, and began again.

"What are you saying?" Lexy asked.

"That I'm all right."

She touched the torn place in his shirt.

"More or less," he added.

"Tell her you're with me."

"Then she'll worry."

Lexy looked up at him. The corner of his mouth moved, and she was so grateful for it that her throat hurt.

"She likes me."

"She thinks you need feeding. You mistake that for a character judgment."

He showed her the message before he sent it. With Lexy. We're both up. Please tell me where you are.

For once she had nothing to correct.

A white van pulled into the space beyond the office. It was the kind they used for mobile vaccination visits, the old lettering covered by a sheet of gray vinyl. The man who stepped out wore the same security patch as Dane. He was stocky, with a square face and silver showing above his ears. His boots were clean, but a square of gauze was taped against his neck, and he winced

when he turned his head.

Jonah came back to the window.

"This is Supervisor Holt," he said. "He handles the receiving authorizations."

Holt checked Lexy's identification, then Sami's, holding hers a moment longer than his, reading the name off it before he handed it back. His attention settled on the fresh dressing beside Sami's ear.

"You both need to be seen."

"We need my brother," Lexy said.

"Your brother is accounted for. That's a better position than a lot of families are in."

She heard the rebuke under the reasonable voice. She had heard it in hospital corridors during clinicals, when a family wanted someone to stop walking and give them an answer.

"Then let me speak to him."

"Personal phones are being collected at reception. It prevents rumors moving ahead of the medical information."

"He's not there yet," Jonah said. "The vehicle's still on its route."

Holt glanced at him.

"The same rule applies on arrival."

"I can drive out," Lexy said. "You can radio ahead."

"We have a family assistance team. They can take your information and verify the relationship." He indicated the white van. "It's running to the north office. There's room."

"My brother went west."

"The team is north."

Behind Holt, the nearest bus had finished loading. The volunteer who had been handing out water walked its length and tapped the bodywork twice for the driver. Lexy watched the door fold shut. Through the window a woman was counting children by touching the tops of their heads.

"How long?" she asked.

"I can't promise a time today."

"Tomorrow?"

"Miss Stanford."

"You said he was accounted for. You're standing in front of the man who sent him. I'm here. What else do you need to know?"

Holt looked at Jonah. The younger man held the clipboard against his side.

"These transfers require a review," Holt said.

"For what?"

"Public safety."

"He helped a man climb some steps."

"That will be considered."

She had been waiting for him to say somebody had made a mistake. She had left a space in every question for that answer, an easy way for him to give Ben back without losing anything himself. Now she understood he did not need the space.

"I'm not going north," she said.

Holt's eyes moved to the ambulance parked beside the medical tent.

"Is that your unit?"

"It belongs to the clinic."

"All registered relief vehicles are being reassigned here. Check in with the transport desk before you leave."

"We just checked in."

"For deployment."

He took the clipboard from Jonah, glanced at the page, and carried it to the van. Lexy watched her brother's name disappear through the open window.

She wanted to go after it. Sami's hand rested against the back of her elbow, steady but not restraining her. She could feel him waiting for her to decide what sort of trouble she meant to get them into.

Holt spoke into the radio in the van. Then he drove toward the row of barriers, where the passengers for the north office were gathering.

Jonah stood without moving until the van had turned away.

"They told me the families would be allowed to collect them."

Lexy looked at him.

"You heard him."

"I did."

"Now tell me how to get to West Receiving."

He went inside. A chair scraped across the floor. When he returned, he carried a road sheet printed before the earthquake, the receiving properties marked around the city. He laid it on the window ledge and circled one with the pencil clipped to his shirt.

"Don't trust the travel time on this. Nobody knows which approaches are open. This is the vehicle entrance. The road turns off before you reach the property."

"And the people?" Sami asked. "Where do they take the people once they're inside?"

Jonah shook his head.

"Then what are we driving into?"

"I don't know."

It was the first answer he had given that Lexy believed without effort.

He folded the sheet and handed it to her. Beneath the bloodied paper towel, a cut crossed the heel of his palm. She had been looking at it for minutes without seeing it as anything but a part of him she disliked.

She took a clean dressing from the pocket of her jacket and put it on the ledge.

"Have Becca look at that."

His fingers closed over the dressing.

"The office window," he said. "When it started shaking."

"Have her look at it."

He picked up the dressing. She was already turning away when he said her name.

"If they ask you who gave you that, it has a transport-office number on the bottom. They'll know."

"Then why give it to me?"

He looked toward the space where bus twenty-seven had stood.

"Because I know which way he went."

She folded the sheet inside her jacket. It lay against her chest beneath the torn embroidered name.

At the ambulance, Sami opened the rear doors and checked that they had their bag and the supplies left after Hanan's transfer. Becca had exchanged the cot linen and set a sealed bottle of water on the bench. On it she had written DRINK THIS, BOTH OF YOU in lettering large enough to read from the cab.

Lexy held the bottle while Sami took several long swallows. Then he held it for her. They drank without speaking, standing in the narrow shade of the open doors.

"You need to find your mom," she said.

"I do."

"I haven't forgotten."

"I know."

"You don't have to say that."

He took the bottle back and screwed on the cap.

"Tell me where the paper says we're going."

She showed him. He studied the road names with one hand braced on the door.

"My aunt's north of here," he said. "If Mom got that far, she's with somebody. If she didn't, I need to know where she stopped."

"We can go there first."

The offer frightened Lexy as soon as she made it. Ben was moving farther away while she stood drinking water. Every part of her wanted Sami to refuse.

He looked at her long enough for her to understand that he knew.

"We're closer to this turn," he said, touching the sheet. "We find out what we're dealing with. Then we get word north. We don't spend the whole day telling each other that somebody else can wait."

"All right."

"I mean it, Lexy."

She nodded. She had been asking him to help her since the moment he dragged her out of the bus. This was the first time she had heard the terms.

They climbed into the cab. Sami set the medical bag behind their seats, then paused with his hand on the key.

His lips moved. Lexy caught only his mother's name and a quiet please. He did not close his eyes or ask her to join him. When he started the engine, the sound seemed louder than it should.

The lane to the main exit had stopped moving. A line of relief vehicles stood nose to tail, drivers outside, while a guard checked their numbers against a board. Across the lot, the service gate was still admitting supply trucks. Sami turned toward it.

They had almost reached the gate when Dane stepped out from beside a delivery truck.

Sami braked. Lexy's seat belt tightened across her sore shoulder.

Dane came to the driver's window. The torn sleeve was gone now; he had cut it off cleanly above the elbow. Dust still lay in the creases beside his eyes.

"Where are you headed?"

"To collect a member of our crew," Lexy said.

"Did Transport release the unit?"

"We handed over our patient. We're leaving."

He looked at her, and she saw recognition without surprise.

"You spoke to Holt."

"Yes."

"Then you need to go through the deployment lane."

Behind them, a truck driver sounded his horn. Dane raised a hand without looking back.

"Put it in park, Sami."

Lexy turned toward him. "We aren't your prisoners."

"I didn't say you were."

"Then move."

His jaw tightened. He stood there with his hand on the window frame, visibly searching for a way to make her listen.

"I helped you get those people out."

"You did. You helped save that little girl's mother." Lexy leaned toward the open window. "I'm asking you to help me now."

"This isn't the same thing."

"It is to me."

The delivery truck at the gate began to move. Its driver pulled forward slowly, following a worker's signals through the gap in the fence. Dane stepped aside to let its mirror pass behind him. For two seconds the lane ahead of them was clear.

Sami did not move.

He was waiting for her again, and this time Lexy understood what the choice would cost him. Their clinic passes had kept them working when other people lost access to fuel and medicine. The ambulance's number was painted on three sides. There would be nothing anonymous about leaving.

"We're going," she said.

Dane reached for the door handle.

Sami took his foot off the brake. The ambulance rolled forward, slowly enough for Dane to step back, and Lexy heard him strike the side of it with the flat of his hand.

"Stop the vehicle."

The guard beyond the gate turned. Dane lifted his radio. Lexy looked straight at him through the mirror as Sami steered around the supply truck's tail.

Nobody fired. Nobody needed to. Dane gave the unit number over the radio, each digit distinct, while the gate receded behind them.

Sami drove two blocks before he spoke.

"Seat belt stays on. Phone stays in your hand. If I tell you we have to turn around, you believe me."

"I believe you."

"Even when Ben's the other way."

She looked down at the road sheet. Her brother had become a circle on somebody else's map, and she could already feel how easily she would make everything outside it disappear.

"Even then," she said.

The radio asked their unit to acknowledge. Sami kept his eyes on the road. A second voice repeated the number and directed all relief checkpoints to hold the vehicle for return to South Collection.

The dispatcher tried the ambulance's number twice more and got nothing back but static. The quake had dropped the towers in a band past the river; nobody was reaching anybody who had driven into it. They would hold the checkpoints and wait.

At the next large intersection, traffic had been reduced to a single lane. A utility pole leaned across the westbound approach, its wires hanging low over a crushed pickup. Relief workers had drawn traffic away with cones. Two security officers were passing vehicles through the remaining gap one at a time.

Lexy saw the nearer officer touch his radio. Then he looked up the line of vehicles directly at them.

"They have us," she said.

Sami had already stopped short of the queue. He checked his mirror, looking for room behind them, but a flatbed truck was coming up fast. Its driver braked when he saw the ambulance's reverse lights. The officer at the intersection began walking toward them.

"Can you back up?" Lexy called through her window.

The truck driver spread both hands above the wheel. A line of cars had formed behind him. Sami put the ambulance back into drive, and Lexy heard him draw a sharp breath as he looked over his shoulder. His ribs were hurting more than he had admitted.

To their right was the broad entrance to a small strip of shops. People were standing out in the parking lot, well clear of the building. At the far end, a second driveway opened onto the side street.

"There," Lexy said.

"I see it."

The officer called for them to stay where they were. Sami turned into the lot at walking speed. A man carrying a little girl stepped back, startled, and Lexy leaned out far enough for him to hear her.

"We're going through. Keep her with you."

The man lifted the girl higher and drew two other children toward him. Sami waited until they were clear. The officer had reached the entrance now. He slapped the side of the ambulance, close enough that Lexy jumped, and shouted for Sami to shut off the engine.

Ahead of them, a woman was pushing a shopping cart into the far driveway. She stopped in the middle when she saw the ambulance coming. The cart was full of loose groceries and a single green houseplant, its pot wrapped in a bath towel.

Lexy opened her door before Sami had quite stopped.

"Stay in," he said.

"She can't hear you."

She climbed down and nearly fell when her knee took her weight. The officer was coming along the driver's side, trying the handle as he went. Lexy caught the front of the cart and helped the woman draw it back onto the pavement beside the shops.

"Hold here," she said. "Just a second."

The woman clutched the houseplant against her chest. Lexy could smell wet soil from the broken pot. It was such a small, particular thing to carry away from a ruined morning that for an instant she wanted to stop and ask the woman's name.

Then Sami called hers.

She ran the few steps back to the cab, using the doorframe to haul herself in. Pain flashed up her knee. She caught the belt and pulled it across herself while Sami moved toward the exit. The officer stopped clear of the rear wheel and spoke rapidly into his radio. By the time they reached the side street, the route west was behind them.

"That's north," Lexy said.

"West is closed."

"The next street could take us back."

"It could put us in the same line."

She looked in the mirror. The officer had come out of the parking lot and was pointing toward them. A security vehicle was trying to turn through the queue at the intersection, its lights flashing against the flatbed. Sami took the next corner and put the shops between them.

Lexy held the road sheet against her knees. He had told her he might have to turn away from Ben. She had agreed when it was only something that might happen.

Now she watched the next street go by without telling him to take it.

They made two more turns before Sami eased his grip on the wheel. There were no flashing lights in the mirror. The radio kept asking other units for their position.

Lexy set the folded sheet between them where they could both see it. Her phone still showed the message to Ben waiting to send.

Beyond the windshield, Springfield opened into a stretch of low houses and big trees. A woman was carrying cushions onto a lawn. Two teenagers had set up chairs beside an elderly man who kept trying to stand, and one of them knelt to put his shoes on him. Lexy recognized the house with the red porch swing. She and Ben had passed it while she was learning the way home from the clinic, hungry and late, with music playing and him stealing fries from the bag between them.

She could not tell from the houses which ones still had everybody who belonged inside.

Sami slowed for a fallen branch. When he turned the wheel, he winced and brought his elbow close to his side.

"At the first safe place, I'm looking at your ribs," she said.

"I was promised unpleasantness. I wondered when it would arrive."

She reached across and touched the uninjured side of his face, lightly, below the dust. He glanced at her, then back at the road.

"Thank you," she said.

He covered her hand for a moment before letting her take it back.

Her phone vibrated. Both of them looked.

The message to Ben had finally gone through.

Lexy watched the small word beneath it until her eyes blurred. Delivered. It did not mean he had read it. It did not mean he was safe. Somewhere ahead of them, though, something she had sent had reached him.

She wiped her face with her sleeve and opened a new message to Miriam Nassar.

I'm with Sami. We're looking for Ben. We're coming for you too.

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