

Caribbean Layoff

C. Michael Lance

Chapter 5

Rural Kansas – Near Kansas City

10:10 p.m. April 3

Steve flung the Taekwondo uniform into his gym bag. He couldn't catch a break. The bag hung limply from his hand as he shambled to the exit. His brow furrowed. It seemed like more shit kept getting shoveled onto the pile of his life.

As the door swung open, the frown relaxed. His mouth pulled into a smile. Bobby and his dad, Frank, were waiting in the parking lot for him. “Great match today,” Steve said. He raised a fist. “Sorry it went so late.”

“Thanks coach,” Bobby said.

Steve's fingers flared in a mock explosion when Bobby's fist touched his. The corners of Bobby's lips twitched upward and he ducked his head.

“Thanks, we stayed to watch yours,” Frank said. “Too bad. You were winning.”

Steve shrugged. “Master Lee told me the difference between a red and black belt is control. I have to learn.”

Frank draped an arm over his son's shoulders as they turned toward their car. “Remember, no punches in the nose.”

Steve waved goodbye before pitching his gym bag into the back seat of his Land Cruiser SUV. He jumped in, started it, and flicked on the seat heater. It may be spring, but it felt like winter.

Despite his earlier depression, Steve's chest swelled with a deep, satisfied breath. The kids he'd trained did well. Three of the four kids he brought tonight had won their age group. Bobby, the youngest at twelve, hadn't, but he showed marked improvement. If he kept improving he had a chance to medal next time.

Steve had done well and like Frank said, he might have won his own match if he hadn't been disqualified. He'd punched his opponent—a younger black belt, a level higher than his own red—in the nose.

He shook his head. Taking satisfaction in a loss—it summed up the way his life was going. He blew out a heavy breath.

Yes, the head was off limits in matches, but that guy unleashed a combination of punches and moves that left his nose hanging like a piñata. Steve instinctively whipped out a backhand, smashing his first two knuckles down into the bridge of the opponent's snout as he'd been trained to do. He wished he could take it back as soon as it made contact.

Well, it was a lesson for both. Steve would learn not to take every available opportunity. And the black belt would learn to keep a guard up—after his broken beak healed.

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Steve swung his SUV out of the parking lot and headed home. He pressed the icon on his cellular for home. It rang three times.

“Done with the games?” Jen answered.

“The kids did well. Me not so much.”

“Did you set up any interviews today?” She demanded. Jen blamed all their troubles on his inability to find work.

“I made about a dozen calls,” he said. “Tried for decision makers, but mostly got shuffled off to HR. Did catch one VP at lunch. He didn’t sound happy to hear from me.” He’d tried to explain that jobs for fifty-nine-year-old quality control engineers these days were as mythical as baby dragons. It was like talking to a wall.

“But you have time for martial arts,” she said frostily.

“You know Master Lee gives me free lessons and workouts if I teach these classes.” When Steve was going to drop out, Master Lee told him “You good teacher. Kids like you. Leave me time for better students. You teach—your lessons and workout free.”

“It’s not about the cost,” Jen said. “It’s the time wasted.”

“You said it would be hard for me to find a job looking like the Pillsbury Doughboy. That it made me look older,” Steve said in exasperation. Years ago he’d slipped easily into the sedentary suburban life style—his riding lawnmower had a beer cooler on the back. “I work out so I look fit and energetic—like you said I needed to be.” He’d dropped forty-five pounds in the last fourteen months by dieting, exercise, and taking up Taekwondo again. Now, Jen complained that he was wasting time better spent looking for work.

“I saw the letter from the bank. It warns of foreclosure,” She said, changing subjects. “What are we going to do about that?”

It looked as if a job didn’t magically appear they’d have to sell the house. At least they weren’t upside-down like so many others, but they wouldn’t make much if anything. He’d tried to convince himself that it was better than letting the bank foreclose. “Let’s talk about options tomorrow.” Steve said. “I’m bushed.”

“Alright,” she said and disconnected.

He hoped Jen would be asleep when he got home. Their marriage had gotten rocky since his layoff at the beginning of what the media now called the Great Recession. Maybe hit-the-rocks was too mild an expression. It was more like falling off that giant rock at Yosemite—El Capitan.

The only good thing about being laid off—he was now in the best physical shape in twenty years.

But he needed some way to vent his frustration—his opponent’s broken nose was the result. Damn.

Driving this desolate Kansas highway gave him too much time to dwell on his problems. Tonight, dark, dense clouds stole all celestial light. No cars were in front or behind and few passed on the other side of the wide, undulating median that divided the four lane roadway. He raced along the tunnel that his headlights carved through the darkness. Only the dashed lines whipping by on the road gave any sense of speed.

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“Holy crap!” His hands clamped the steering wheel. Headlights charged across the median from the other side of the highway, dipped down out of sight, and then shot into the air. They bounced, tipped at an angle, banged back to level, and headed right at him.

Chapter 6

Rural Kansas

April 3

Steve stomped on his brakes. The ABS system moaned as his three-ton SUV decelerated to halt on a bridge. Two east-bound lanes enclosed by guard rails left little room to maneuver. He shifted into reverse, preparing to take evasive maneuvers. But the oncoming headlights passed across the road at an angle. Barely missing the guardrail, it left the roadway on his right.

Jouncing high beams charged toward fractured bands of limestone climbing a rocky cliff. The light colored van swerved sharply to avoid a head-on collision with the stone wall. Metal squealed as its side scraped against rock. It rolled erratically down the long slope toward the creek—dropping out of sight.

He tracked its progress by jittering flashes of light on trees as it bounced down the incline.

Lights winked out with an abrupt crunch.

Steve drove across the bridge and parked along the right shoulder. A semi-truck whooshed by in the fast lane. It was the first vehicle he'd seen on this side of the divided highway since leaving the tournament.

He jumped out and waved his arms at dwindling tail lights. The truck kept going.

Steve shut off his headlights and flicked on the flashers. Didn't need two accidents in the dark tonight.

After hustling around the SUV to the guardrail, he looked toward the wreck. It was a pale form in the darkness of the trees lining the creek.

On the other side of the rail, between the highway and rocky cliff, the ground descended toward the creek. A narrow concrete drainage ramp followed the incline down.

He needed to call for help. Report the accident first. Then check on the passengers. He retrieved his phone from the console and punched in 911. Silence. He tried again. Still nothing. He squinted at the screen. Shit! No bars.

Steve ran along the road and rechecked twice more—the signal still flat lined. Drive to somewhere with reception?

No. Check on the passengers. He had Red Cross certification. He could administer first aid or CPR. Maybe someone stopping would go for help.

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Steve grabbed the first aid kit from the emergency bag he kept in the back of the SUV “in case.” He yanked on his leather gloves. There might be jagged metal or broken glass.

Carrying the first aid kit and his flashlight, he strode to the guardrail. He swung his legs over and jogged down the grade toward the creek. Branches of lightning danced across the clouds. “One, two, three... ten, eleven....” His instinctive count matched the slap of his right foot on the concrete drainage ramp... “fifteen....” *BOOM!* The lightning was three miles away. Close.

Steve ran up behind the van and swung wide to see what he had to work with.

Steps he taught in Red Cross first aid classes for the Boy Scouts raced through his mind—look around, make sure the area is safe. Rescuers often rushed in, turning themselves into victims. Sniffing the air, he detected the sweetish smell of antifreeze, but no gasoline.

Two thick trees growing from the creek were all that kept it from falling in. He heard the roar of rushing water. It must be raining upstream.

The ground upon which the vehicle rested descended precipitously. And then it fell away. The undercarriage just behind the front wheels rested on the edge of what he estimated to be a twelve-foot drop. Front wheels dangled in space.

Lodged against the trees that had smashed it’s front end, the van appeared secure. Steve tried to open the back doors. Locked. He shined the flashlight through darkened rear windows. He saw a jumbled cargo of boxes—no passengers.

The loading door on the right side was also locked. The impact had buckled the front passenger door. It didn't look like it would open without the Jaws of Life.

He circled to the driver's side. Although the ground was steeper, there was less damage in front. That door might open.

Steve glanced up at the bridge. Red flickers from his emergency flashers reflected off the bridge rail. Any traffic sounds would be inaudible over the rumbling water. The bridge was at least thirty feet straight up. No one could see the van down here unless they leaned over the rail.

Maybe someone would stop for the blinking lights. If they did, would they think to look down here? *Please, someone stop and look.*

He eased beside the van, down the steepening grade toward the driver's door. Steve kept a hand on the vehicle's rain gutter for security in case he slipped.

Leaning forward, still gripping the gutter with fingertips, he grabbed the door handle. The handle moved but the door didn't open. Stuck.

His flashlight played over the driver. A man was out of the seat—stomach draped over the top of the steering wheel. No seat belt. Deflated airbags sagged below him. His head and neck stuck through the top half of the broken windshield.

Steve used the flashlight to trace from where the man's thigh lodged against the bottom of the steering wheel down to his foot pressed against the front of the seat bottom. It wasn't a straight line and the angle was in the wrong direction. Some part of that limb must be broken. The way it was wedged perhaps was all that had kept him from flying through the window to the creek below.

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Steve stretched his left leg until his toes rested on the edge of the bumper. Re-gripping the rain gutter with both hands he took a deep breath and lunged with his right leg, positioning those toes on the bumper, too.

The left shoe started to slip, but he shifted weight and planted his foot against the sycamore tree holding up the van. The sole slid on the smooth pale bark and then caught on a knot on the trunk. He held a death grip on the rain gutter with his fingertips. This was crazy.

Breaths coming in short gasps, Steve glanced down toward the thundering water. If he fell, they might find his body ten miles away—or not at all.

He inhaled deeply. Thank god the tree was sturdy—an eighteen-inch diameter colossus growing from the bank. It arched over the cascade below.

Two feet away, the driver's head protruded through the shattered windshield. Steve flicked the flashlight back on.

Fractured, laminated glass bulged outward where the man's shoulders had slammed into it. His head and neck sagged crookedly out of the hole they had ripped through the windshield. Steve grimaced. Necks shouldn't bend like that.

He dragged off a glove and pressed fingers against the carotid artery on the neck just below the jaw. No pulse. Was it his imagination or was the dark olive skin already starting to cool?

The rearview mirror dangled—touching the driver's shoulder where it pressed against the torn opening. Steve reached his fingers into the hole. His glove scraped glass edges. With a tug, he pulled the broken mirror loose.

No fog formed when he held it under the driver's nose. Steve's mind flashed to deaths he'd encountered up close and personal in Vietnam. “May God receive your soul,” he whispered.

He dropped the mirror and watched it bounce off the rocks. Water swept it away.

Steve shined his flashlight beam at the churning water. All this for a dead man. He started to ease his way back to firm footing. Then he stopped.

Could there be a passenger? Shining his light around the right side of the cab, he noted that a box had broken open and spilled its contents between the seats. He must be a craftsman. It looked like a scattering of tiles or small bricks. Steve held the light still and squinted. His heart surged. “Holy shit,” he gasped. The flashlight revealed packets of money scattered all over the floor.