

Terri scrunched behind the windshield to tie her blonde hair back with the red ribbon. She checked her look in the glass, making certain the ribbon was secure. She'd lost the ribbon during their tête-à-tête at the drive-in. Nick figured she'd just found it somewhere in the car. He eyed her as they approached the T.C. traffic light. Edging up on the passenger seat to lean forward, Terri scouted around in the black night. Straining to see, hands on her knees, Terri pressed her healthy front tandem up against the dashboard over the glove compartment. Dashboard lights reflecting off the glass revealed her deeply tanned chest. The girl showed well in a cute, scoop-necked, cotton, midriff top. Truly somethin' else.

"Say, you don't think those guys are laying for us up here, do you Nick?"

Terri voiced his silent fears but Nick said nothing. He didn't want to alarm her or Patti, the freckle-faced brunette, who sat between him and Terri on the vinyl, aqua cushion.

"You don't think they'd do that, d'ya Nick?" Patti's new, trendy, shag haircut compensated for her freckles, making her look older than her sixteen, nearly seventeen years. "I sure as hell hope not! Why would they? Wait for us, for what? Five hours in the middle of the flippin' night? What kind of creeps would do something like that?"

Like swivel-headed bookends, both he and Terri turned to look at Patti, as she if she had just fallen out of the sky.

"Oh bull slop," said Patti.

How could Patti forget how he'd made fools out of those boys earlier at Truley's?

"Those are bad boys Patti, muy malo."

Patti blanched at Terri. "Are they muy stupido, too?" Again, he and Terri turned to look at Patti without speaking.

"All right, all right, I get it. I get it. I'll shut up." And she did.

In silence, Nick pulled his sleek, '67 aquamarine Pontiac Bonneville convertible up to stop at the T.C. traffic light. Truley's Bar and Grill was right there, just where it had always been. Yep, right where they had left it about five hours ago on this late June night. Only then, the Buzzbee boys were oil-smearing and rolling in the gutter, beat all to hell. Now, the night was blacker and bleaker than before. The thunderstorm Nick had sensed coming their way approached in the form of dark clouds, finally sprinkling its first large, scattered, cold drops. He pressed the button to raise the convertible top. The girls turned and bent over the seatback to roll up the rear windows, as Nick locked down the ragtop.

He was admiring their swaying, classy chassis humped over the seatback when—

"My gosh Nick. Is that who I think it is over there?" Terri's head turned to him.

She slid back down into the shotgun seat. Her countenance paled beneath her summer tan as she faced forward. The girl's ample chest heaved with fright. Nick peered around and past her wind-tangled, dense, blonde locks towards Truley's. His heart thumped harder, as it had during his earlier confrontation with those goons here at the road house.

Terri had fingered them all right. It was them—the *Buzzbees*. *Damn it!*

The brothers were parked near the telephone pole that held the lone lamp over the vacant, dirt and gravel parking lot. Looked like Arlo behind the wheel with his brother Alvin, riding shotgun. Nick could hardly believe it. They were waiting in the empty lot just inside the range of the street lamp. The Buzzbee boys sat in a souped up, black and yellow, hot rod, pickup truck that sported a giant, black bumble bee on the yellow hood with smaller images of the insect on the doors. Looked like one of those funny cars dudes ran on weekends over at Quasco speedway. Raising his convertible top must have caught their eyes. Southern Maryland's bad boys recognized Nick and his 1967 Pontiac. The brothers flipped Nick off, raining profanities out their windows and gunned their engine.

Their jalopy jolted forward taking an angle across the empty, dirt and gravel lot to cut Nick off. Nick didn't wait for the light to change. The storm-wet, dark road lay empty and all but dead in the early morning pitch black, both ahead and behind. Nick turned left from the right lane. The Pontiac hurtled through the intersection across four lanes of highway down Old Veer. His Bonneville curved right, past the girl's worksite on his left—the health clinic—vacant and dead now at two a.m. The rain came faster.

The Buzzbees followed, firing across the two north-bound lanes into the grassy median strip. Their jalopy fishtailed through the median, giving Nick a moment to put some distance between them. Good, he needed a break. Despite his Pontiac's three hundred and thirty-three horses, the Buzzbee's souped up, drag racin' hot rod would eat him up out on the highway. Nick knew Old Veer Avenue as one of those winding, country, up and down affairs, with high-pitched banks on its curves and not much in the way of shoulders. It was a dual yellow-lined, roller coaster deal where you always seemed to get stuck behind a farmer on a tractor, unable to pass. And then, when you get to that one straightaway with spaced lines, oncoming traffic held you in your lane.

Nick led the Buzzbees north over the dippy-curvy, roller coaster road. Checking for their lights in the rear view mirror, he could tell their reactions were slow, clumsy. They swerved all over the road behind him. The boys must have been drinking—or doping—another break for him and the girls. If those creeps weren't careful, they'd kill themselves. And wouldn't that be sweet? He only hoped they wouldn't kill him and the girls in the process. With his ragtop hugging the black-wet, asphalt ribbon, Nick curved sharply to his left. Behind him, the Buzzbees slid off the road. Turning on his windshield wipers, Nick slowed to take the first right angle in a long, square-shaped, U-bracket, double turn. A mile and a half of straightaway sandwiched between the pair of dead man curves. The double, sharp right-turn angles were notorious for producing fatal accidents.

The Buzzbee's foul-up at the right angle of the first turn caused Nick to lose sight of them for a minute. Spotting an up-hill, tree-lined rural drive, Nick screeched to his right to turn up a dirt, farm lane. He flipped off his lights, hoping the Buzzbees would fly by,

as the Spanish cavalry had when they had chased Zorro through the forest. That ruse had worked great for Tyrone Power up on the big screen. Nick hoped it did as much for him.

With the car lights off, Nick inched his Pontiac further up the hill toward a two-story, white frame farmhouse. Within ear-shot of the house, Nick cut his engine. He told the girls they could stay with him or trek up to the farmhouse for help. Both girls wanted to stick with him. Pale and frightened, their suddenly child-like faces warmed his heart. Just kids really, like him. But their shapely teen bodies were those of full-grown women. There was nothing child-like about their figures. They were a pair to draw to for sure.

Behind them, they watched the Buzzbees careen around the right angle turn below. The hot-rod sped through the storm onto the straightaway. Shifting into high gear, the jalopy fish-tailed up the base of the U-bracket in search of the Pontiac. Nick watched until the Buzzbees turned right again at the far right angle turn, disappearing behind some trees bordering the road. He followed their headlights racing between gaps in the foliage.

“Thank God for big favors,” said Patti. “Come on Baby, let’s blow this place.”

Nick followed her advice. He backed the big sedan down the dirt drive to trace backwards his path over Old Veer. As he drove, he prayed silently, askin’ for help, for wisdom, for a way of escape. He knew those boys wouldn’t let their earlier altercation at the road house slide. If they didn’t catch him tonight, they’d come for him sooner or later.

The girls seemed to pray also. With heads bowed, their lips moved without sound. Terri crossed herself repeatedly over her solid chest. But this was no time to zone out on her luscious frame. Nick had to get his mind right if they were to get home unscathed.

He passed around the first leg of the long U-bracket turn back toward Truley’s.

“Turn the lights on, Baby. Floor it and get the heck out of Dodge.”

But, ignoring Patti, Nick stopped. He didn’t know why. He thought he’d heard, felt, something. Coming down hard, the rain drummed the convertible rag top of the car.

– *TURN AROUND, WAIT* –

“What? Who said that?” Nick looked around. The girls stared at him, waiting.

“One of you say something?” Both of them shook their heads “no.”

Against his reason, Nick began to turn the car around.

Patti asked what he was doing. She said they could escape if he kept on. Instead, he made a three-point turn in the narrow road. Then, after pausing for a minute, he inched the Pontiac slowly forward. He couldn’t explain why he did it. Something inside his heart encouraged him. He *felt* it. Felt those three silent words. Where were those creeps anyway? The driving rain pelted the ragtop, hood and windshields, sounding like an endless-ammo, machine gun bursting over their heads and on the hood before them.

Calm and reserved, Terri asked, “What are you doing Nicholas?”

“I dunno, Terr. Gotta hunch, answer to prayer mebbe. I dunno. Just *feels* like the right thing ta do. If you know any good prayers, now’s a good time to say ‘em.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” she replied. He grinned at Terri.

“Oh, just being your lovely, gorgeous self, I guess.” As he smiled, she relaxed, as if he’d lifted a great weight from her shoulders. Sitting between them, Patti whined.

“What’s all this slop?” Right next to him, Patti’s heavy, direct glare unnerved him.

“Look Patti, why don’t you jump in the back Sweetie, and put a belt on?”

Terri fastened her safety belt about her slim waist. Nick cinched his a little tighter.

“Like hell I will. Let Terri jump in back like she did before.”

“Look Baby, ain’t no time ta argue. Got no center belt up here. There’s one in back.”

“So, Terri can sit in back.”

“She’s already buckled in, see? It’s nasty now. Could get rough, Baby. I can jes’ feel it. Go ahead now and be a good girl. *Please?*”

Patti grumbled under her breath, but she scrambled over the seatback. Via the rear view mirror, Nick watched her buckle up in the middle seat behind him.

The rain was pelting the car very hard now. It was one of those summer thunderstorms so prevalent in Southern Maryland after a long hot, humid day. Though he noticed, there hadn’t been much lightning or thunder in this one so far, just driving rain. He stopped to turn his windshield wipers on full. Patti leaned forward.

“What the hell ya still doin’ with the lights off, *Nicholas?* I can’t see a *damn thing.*”

“*Relax* Patti. Just be cool and relax. Nick knows what he’s doing, don’t you Nicky?” Terri motioned Patti back.

“That’s right, Terr. I can see in the dark but they can’t.” And besides, he hadn’t sensed any heartfelt urges to turn the lights back on, only – *TURN AROUND, WAIT.*

“*Nobody* can see in the dark.”

That Patti could be a real pain, but Terri was cool. She was really okay.

“Well, I can,” said Nick. “Now just be cool Baby and we’ll get through this all right.”

“I don’t believe you can see in the dark. Never heard of such a thing, have you Terri?”

“Saw some old war movie on TV once with Gary. Had some Indian marine scout in the Pacific, could see in the dark. Believe it was Clint Walker—what a great-looking guy. Thought it was just Hollywood stuff. You know? Made for a good story.”

“Never heard of *anybody* who could see in the dark. That’s for damn sure. And you *Nicky Sh’boom* are no exception.” Nick checked her displeasure in the rear view mirror.

“Well Patti, now you do.” She leaned forward to yell in his right ear: “Prove it.”

“Well, ever seen anybody with two-tone peepers like mine?”

“No. So what?” Nick turned to Terri. “You, Terr?” Terri shook her head no.

“There ya go.” He winked at Patti via the rear view mirror.

He thought talkin’ was good for them, occupied their minds ‘til the Buzzbee boys realized their mistake and headed back their way.

“Just because you’ve got the weirdest eyes we’ve ever seen Nicky, don’t mean you can see twenty/twenty at night.” He rolled his eyes and made a face in the mirror at Patti.

“Never said I see *twenty/twenty*. All’s I’m sayin’ is, I see better’n most people at night. That’s all.”

“Well, let’s just hope you do,” said Terri, who winked to show she was with him.

But it was true. He could always see well in the dark, not twenty/twenty o’ course, but a lot better’n anyone else he knew. Always could. Piece o’ cake.

“I don’t believe it. You wear *glasses* in class half the time for cripesake.”

“Them’s my readin’ glasses Patti. Oh ye of little faith. Use ‘em to take tests.”

Terri nodded. “Yes Patti, with faith as big as a mustard seed, you’ll move mountains.”

“All I care about *movin’*, is this car—turnin’ it around and *movin’* on home.”

Nick quit listening to them. The rain had wet the road just enough to refresh old oil and fluid spills, but not enough to wash them off. The road was lifeless but treacherous, dangerously slick. He was waiting for further commands from his heart. The Pontiac was barely moving, inching along on a road void of life, enveloped in a wet pool of inky black. Absent the dashboard lights now, the black enveloped them inside, too. He could hear the girls breathing deeply, anxious but trying to stay cool. Terri was panting. Her heavy bust heaved with each breath. Nothing but that thin cotton top hid her bona fides. She’d lost the upper half of a two-piece swimsuit she’d worn under her cute midriff top back at the drive-in when things got heated, when Patti had left them for the rest room and concession stand. He wondered where the bra piece was now. After going missing in action during the heat of combat, so to speak. Even in the dark, Terri stood right out there. Both of ‘em heaved in synch with anticipation, leaving little to his imagination, much less his short-term memory. He swore he saw a pair of firm, pink tips pokin’ through that thin, white cotton top. *Ah, sweet seventeen*. Yeah. He saw good in the dark.

The girls prayed “The Lord’s Prayer.” Nick got his mind right enough to join them in a low whisper. They started up with “Holy Mary, Mother of ...” He didn’t know that one.

Nick edged his big ‘67 Pontiac Bonneville closer to the first right angle of the U-bracket. Needing some fresh air, he rolled down his window halfway then cracked the vent window half open. Cold, refreshing pellets splattered against his left cheek and shoulder. All was quiet now, except for the pounding rain, the purr of his big engine and the girls’ heavy-breathing. Tension was high. Off to his left, he heard a funny, low-pitched, buzzing sound, a kind of a hum that sounded like high-voltage electricity. Turning back over his left shoulder, Nick spotted an oversized, electric transformer, supported and housed by a scaffold of double wooden telephone poles with heavy cable wires running into it from all directions. Kind of a loud hum for electricity he thought. He turned on the dash lights. Terri was crossed herself. Her lovely lips moved in silence.

A line of shade trees bordered the right side of the road. Nick licked his lips. He was cool and calm. Just as he had been earlier at Truley's when he'd stuck it to those two turkeys. Seemed like a lifetime ago, instead of just a few hours. — *GO SLOW*.

Again, a silent but felt command from inside. Nick crept forward, peaking the speedometer at ten miles an hour. He turned right into the straightaway. A pair of headlights loomed between the trees, past the far bend in the U a couple miles away. He could see a vehicle racing beneath a rare streetlamp behind some sparsely planted, roadside, cedar trees. Couldn't make out a bumble bee on the door. Might be them, but he wasn't sure. Looked like some kind of a small truck mebbe.

Rolling distant headlights passed behind the trees the other side of the far bracket turn. The vehicle made the sharp left turn into the straightaway at the base of the bracket, fishtailing as it headed towards him. It had a tough time holding the road, turning ninety degrees left onto the straightaway. Yeah. Looked more like some kind of a small truck than a car. Jes' might be them. — *STAY SLOW* — The approaching vehicle was moving much faster than his Pontiac. Heading right for him now like a Wild West showdown. Had to be them. Surmounting the storm, Nick heard the deep but distant distinctive rumble of an on-rushing, four-barrel carb with dual exhaust. That menacing sound confirmed his suspicions. Had to be the Buzzbees souped up motor. Their hi-beams stared him in the face. Behind him, Patti cracked. She yelled to him to turn tail and run but he couldn't—too late now. Terri's wide eyes, pale face and heaving bust told him what they all knew. It was the Buzzbees, all right. And it was too late to turn back.

Them boys must have spotted the Pontiac even though his lights were off. Even if they hadn't, there was no time for Nick to make a three-point turn now. And he had just passed the farm lane he had ducked up earlier. He didn't know why he was driving so slow, when he wanted to go faster and challenge 'em—chicken 'em right off the road. But he drove as instructed, compelled by the mysterious, heartfelt, inner Voice to proceed cautiously. Even so, his speedometer crept up to twenty then twenty-five. The Buzzbees sped down the straightaway, running more than twice as fast as Nick. They had to be doing sixty. Nick thought he saw the bee on the hood, but how could he, with their hi-beams damn near blinding him? Must be his imagination.

The truck closed in on the halfway point of the straightaway. Flashing its high beams twice then leaving them on, the truck surged right ahead toward Nick. The hot rod crossed the center stripes, heading straight for his Pontiac. Yeah. Them boys knew he was here. They wanted to run him right off the road. Sure they did. Placing his left hand on the light switch, Nick pulled out the knob, flipping on his lights. This was it.

Behind him, Patti screamed.

“No! Don't play chicken with 'em Nick. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna—”

Th-wack! Terri had reached back over the seat to backhand Patti's thigh hard, shutting her up, earning even more of his respect. In the rear view mirror, Patti sulked but shut-up. "Sorry Nick," said Terri.

Forget it. Their lives were hanging in the balance. Nick shook her off.

Pulling his shades off the sun visor while pushing the visor down, Nick jammed on his dark glasses, trying to shield his eyes from the blaring high beam lights ahead that were nearly blinding him. He stomped his left foot against the hi-beam switch on the floor board to block out their brites but it didn't help much. Terri shoved down her visor too, throwing up an arm to screen out the onrushing hi-beams. The Buzzbees came on faster.

"S OK. Ya did fine, Terr—Patti?" He checked Patti out via the rear view mirror. "We're gonna be fine, Baby. Trust me. I gotta hunch."

Glaring at him in the mirror, Patti whimpered but nodded. Terri turned back to console her, but Patti said nothing. Then Terri faced front. She cracked her windows as Nick had. Then, seizing the vent window bar with both hands, she squished her twin torpedoes together between her elbows. She half-turned her head to Nick, managing a hopeful simper. Staring dead ahead, Nick nodded as they both focused on the road before them.

Seconds seemed like minutes. Rain fell in gusty torrents now. Windshield wipers beat a fast but steady rhythm though they could not match Nick's wild heartbeat or fully clear his line of vision. He flipped on the air conditioner with the fan on high to knock down condensation forming inside the windshield. Sweaty hands, dry mouth. Could feel the tension—Mann, what a ride. Rain fell in sheets. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked close behind it. The Buzzbees. Yeah. Had to be them.

Instants seemed like hours. Nick couldn't wet his lips. No spit. Palms, sweaty. Except for the dashboard lights, the car was dark inside. Outside, the slick, wet road was black and foreboding. Nick strained to peer through the inky black and driving rain. Oncoming bright lights stared him down. Just hundreds of yards away, the Buzzbees sped up. *Assholes.* Still no spit. Nick could smell the rain over the scent of the girl's combating perfumes. No further than a football field now. Blinding white light from their high beams shone dead on for him, looming larger. *Please help me, Jesus.*

Nick pumped his hi-beams twice. Their headlights grew, consuming him, coming, coming—eighty yards. Fifty! Twenty—*LEFT.*

Nick swerved left obeying the inner voice. The Buzzbees did the same. Patti screamed. They missed each other. *Un-bee-lieve-able!* But how? Both cars skidded toward opposite sides of the slick road, tires shrieking, just clearing each other's right rear fenders.

Nick tried to straighten the Pontiac out as he applied the brakes ever so slightly. The car skidded hard to the left, across the road. Turning quickly into the direction of the skid, Nick glimpsed in his rear view mirror. Behind him, the hot rod jerked violently to its left also. The faster moving pickup truck shot across the road, catching the opposite, shallow,

gravel shoulder with its driver's side tires. Braking, Nick thought he had the convertible under control when the Pontiac suddenly shifted, sliding right. He let up on the brakes, steering into the skid. Fishtailing sharply left, the wild skid carried him further than he expected. He steered into a second, correcting turn, breaking hard when he felt the front tires catching the narrow gravel shoulder.

The rear tires shrieked. The Pontiac slid sideways right, making that terrible, fatal, highway sound. Nick braked hard for fear of sliding over the road embankment down into the adjacent field. The car tipped, teetering for a second on its right tires. Patti screamed again. Nick leaned left against the door. His side of the Pontiac fell back to the ground, halting half across the gravel shoulder, back end perpendicular to the road with the back bumper, jutting out over the asphalt. The front end pointed downhill towards a planted field. Nick twisted quickly to his left to watch through his half-open window.

The Buzzbee's hot rod truck careened back across the road. Those boys either panicked or were too drunk or tired to react properly. Unable to stop, the truck steered sharply off the opposite, left shoulder then back to the right to regain the road. But the driver overcompensated. Trying to hug the asphalt, the hot rod turned sharply left again. Its ass-end slid right, across the road out of control into and through the right corner U-angle, far too fast to hold such a severe angle. Looked as if the driver had lost his nerve by braking too stiffly, too long. The hot rod's tires shrieked horribly. The truck slid up the sharp-banked asphalt right through the corner of the bracket. Too late, the truck turned in the direction of the long skid. The sound of loud-squealing tires gave Nick goose bumps.

The hot-rod truck vaulted up, out and over the steeply down-pitched bank of the curve, crashing sidelong into the double telephone poles holding the transformer he had heard humming minutes ago. Striking the poles nearly halfway up, the high velocity of the vaulting truck cracked the poles in two. They toppled like timber. The pickup's stinger end swayed to the right. The hot rod crashed to the ground on the driver's side at the base of the sloping embankment. The top half of the telephone poles, the scaffold and the huge, electrical transformer smashed down, squashing the passenger side of the truck. Starlight white electric sparks, from cable wires ripped asunder, showered into the wet, inky black over and around the crash site like so many holiday sparklers. Seemed to Nick as if the Fourth had come a few days early this year.

Within a matter of seconds, the electric sparks met what must have been gasoline fuel leaking from the hot rod. A fiery explosion erupted into a huge, black-yellow-orange and red mini mushroom cloud that vomited up into the black, stormy night. Stupefied and appalled, Nick removed his sunglasses to watch. The terrific explosion catapulted the truck's hood skyward, shooting it above and beyond the flames while shearing off the roof top. The roof landed and bounced, dancing end over end, away from them, across the field, as if it had a life of its own. The downed, wooden scaffold flamed yellow-white

atop the wreck. Streaks of fire shot high into the sky, licking at the inky, falling rain. The hood ricocheted off the embankment into the field the other side of the sawed-off poles.

Seconds later, a secondary explosion insured the demise of the notorious Buzzbee boys. The missing cab roof exposed their heads and torsos to the view of Nick and the girls. Still inside the cab, the Buzzbees' bodies blazed along with remnants of the jalopy. The boys were still—limp. Nick figured those boys were unconscious, if not dead. With the truck on its side now and the cab roof gone, Nick watched in shock as white-hot flames consumed their heads and torsos while the boys lay atop each other on their sides in the wreck. If they weren't dead a minute ago, they sure as hell were now.

"Could have been us," Nick mumbled under his breath. "Damn, it could have been us, if—" Terri squeezed the top of his shoulder from behind. Her hot breath panted against his neck. That inner Voice he had felt in his heart had saved their asses. If he had gone a little faster, as he'd wanted, the convertible might have flipped over down the slope. It damn near had anyway. If he had steered right as he'd wanted, they would have crashed head-on. He could have wound up like his Uncle Bill, pinned beneath the steering wheel and paralyzed for life, or worse—dead, like those boys fryin' in the flames.

In speechless terror, Nick and the girls watched this horrific, ghastly spectacle through the heavy downpour from the distant safety of the convertible. As flames engulfed the wreck, the Buzzbees fried. White electric sparks sputtered, sizzled and popped sporadically like effervescent sparklers. Live wires hopped off the ground, disconnected from the downed transformer, evidence the thing was down but not out. One sparking wire whipped out of control like an unmanned fire hose.

Through his open window, Nick could hear the staccato buzzing of the felled, grotesque electric monster, gasping, fighting for life. Sitting motionless, mouths agape, he witnessed a premature but unprecedented Fourth of July fireworks display, not to mention a gruesome, fiery, twin electrocution-execution. It was a sight Nick wished he never saw. The three of them sat in stunned awe and horror, but also in thankful reverence for being spared. Lightning flashed long, revealing the gruesome sight, as if it were broad daylight. Loud thunder followed.

"Did you see that?" Terri and Nick turned back to stare at Patti drying her tears, adding, "Yeah, guess you did."

Like Nick, Terri had removed her shades. Breathing heavily, she leaned in close to him to whisper. "Do you think they can survive, Nick?"

Her full, deep cleavage heaved above the drooping, scooped hem of her top revealing most all she had to offer. The voluptuous sight failed to excite him as it had earlier.

Behind him Patti replied, "You gotta be kiddin' Terri. Are you muy stupido, too? Can't you see their heads fryin'? Most gruesome thing I ever saw."

"How can you say that Patti!"

“Very easily, cuz I see ‘em fryin’ right there in front of me with my own two eyes. You want me to say it again so you can read my lips? Those were two bad boys—*muy malo*. You said so yourself, Terri. They deserved it.”

Terri whispered, more to herself than Nick or Patti. “Never said they *deserved it*. We *all deserve* to die. We’re all sinners. But *nobody* deserves to die *like that*—nobody.”

She raised her tone. “That could have been us down there. If Nick had sped up or turned the other way, it could have been us, just like Nicky said. There’s another transformer like that up there.” Terri pointed to her right up toward the left side of the road near the far right angle of the square-U bracket by the lone street lamp. Terri turned back to face them— “Only not as big as that monster.” She shuddered.

Funny thought Nick, the Pontiac didn’t get so much as a scratch.

Terri nodded toward the wreck. “Thank the Lord that that’s not us.”

“Amen to that sweet prayer,” said Nick. Patti concurred.

“You girls all right?” They nodded they were.

“Yes. Thanks for asking Nicky.” Terri patted his shoulder, offering a thin smile.

“*Yes. Thanks for asking, Nicky.*”

Patti mimicked Terri, in a spoiled kid’s, high-pitched sing-song. Then, in her deeper, normal voice: “Sounds like you two are scum-suckin’ in love all of a sudden. What happened when I went to the restroom anyway?” Nick and Terri ignored her.

“Well, what happened?”

It came to Nick again, as he recalled those simple, silent but direct, internal commands.

TURN AROUND, WAIT – GO SLOW – LEFT

He had felt those silent commands inside his heart and obeyed. His obedience had saved them. But he kept this to himself. They watched the pickup burn for a couple minutes. Lightning flashed for an instant like daylight, revealing the gruesome scene. Thunder pealed again close by. The girls confessed the sight of the crash was making them ill. Terri thought she saw lights twinkling through the trees up on the hill above and behind them. Flashlights, *mebbe*. Probably from the farmhouse up there, the one with the dirt lane Nick had entered earlier. But the house itself was dark.

Nick heard faint voices floating above the storm down the hill through the rainy dark.

“Let’s beat it Nicky.” Patti leaned forward, peering over the seatback to make her point.

Terri faced straight ahead. Nick looked into the profile of her stunned, blank stare.

“Come on Nicky! Scram!” Patti poked the back of his shoulder. “Let’s get the hell out o’ here—*fast!* We can’t do nothin’ for them boys now.” Patti was sure right about that.

“Cept call the morgue *mebbe*,” he said. “Shoot!” Terri looked down at her lap.

Nick took the wheel and shifted into Reverse. He backed up, turning the wheel to the left, steering the Pontiac back onto the road. After stopping to shift gears, he lowered his

~ Bzzzz—SWAT! ~

window letting the rain splash him. He headed for home through the driving storm, hoping the rain would wash away his sin.

Bzzzz—SWAT!

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“Bzzzz—SWAT!” is excerpted from Chapter 1 of the Novel *Even Better*. For those interested in reading the rest of the story, click on the Even Better link in the Novels section of the website.