

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

Description: On a cold, gloomy November day, the lives of Ricki Warbeck and Jessie Sanders are turned upside down when Ricki and the class of second graders she's teaching at the Joshua Bradley Elementary School are taken hostage by the depressed, armed Dale Henriksen. Jessie, an expert SWAT sniper, is deployed to the situation and watches everything unfold through the scope of her Remington rifle...

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06:00 AM

The alarm clock had barely finished beeping before Jessie Sanders moved aside the thick winter quilt and swung her long, shapely legs over the side of the bed.

Sitting on the edge of the double bed, she yawned widely and pulled her oversized sleeping T-shirt down before scratching her stomach, the undersides of her breasts, her neck and finally her short, pitch black hair. With a pair of eyes that had only just reached a state where they could see anything through the darkness, she peeked at the alarm clock which read one minute past six AM on November nineteenth.

Behind her, her long-time partner Ricki Warbeck - better known as her permanent housemate for those less than supportive in the rural Mid-West community they lived in - stirred and rolled over onto her back from her right side.

"Ugh... six already?" the honey-blonde croaked.

"Yep."

"Ugh. Come back to bed, you're stealing all the heat..."

"Can't, hon."

When Ricki let out an insistent, childish whimper and reached up under her partner's T-shirt to caress the smooth skin she found there, Jessie caved like she always did when Ricki wanted something. Climbing back into the bed, she quickly pulled the quilt over them and went to work on waking Ricki up in the best possible way.

Twenty minutes later, both women got out of bed with rosy cheeks and shining eyes. They quickly donned identical, white terrycloth bathrobes over their sleeping clothes and began their usual, well-drilled morning routines while sending each other plenty of little winks, smiles and kisses.

Jessie was soon in the shower, leaving Ricki to feed the Mochamaster, put three buns in the toaster oven and find the jam, the cereal and the milk.

"Oh... ew!" Ricki said, assaulted by a horrid whiff the split second she opened the refrigerator that was decorated with colorful magnets from landmarks around the United States. She sniffed the only jug of milk they had and ended up pouring the entire content into the kitchen sink. "Ew... not something I needed at six thirty in the morning," she mumbled, watching in horror as chunks and clumps of bad milk tumbled down the drain.

Once the jug was empty, she washed her fingers under the faucet and let the hot water run for nearly a minute to wash it all out.

It didn't even take forty seconds of that minute before Jessie leaned out of the bathroom door wearing nothing but a headful of shampoo suds. "Hon? What's up with the hot water?"

"The milk was bad, Jessie. I had to get rid of it... and clean the sink."

"The milk... shit!" Jessie said and slapped her forehead, sending suds floating down all over the hallway.

"Weren't you-"

"I know... I'm sorry. I forgot. I'm really sorry."

Ricki shrugged and began to set the breakfast table. "It's okay... only now we don't have any milk for your cereal."

"Hmmm... not much fun in Cap'n Crunch without milk..."

"No. You can have some of my coffee if you want," Ricki said with a smile as she put two plates down on the table.

"Oh, hell no!" Jessie said and quickly went back into the bathroom.

Ricki chuckled out loud as she put a butter knife next to her plate. "A grown woman not drinking coffee... I mean... that's just unnatural!" she said, shaking her head with the broadest smile imaginable gracing her features.

A short fifteen minutes later, Jessie leaned back on her kitchen chair, opened the second section of the Daily Herald and took a look at the day's cultural headlines. From time to time, she reached behind the paper to grab one of her toasted buns that she had covered in some of Ricki's home-made strawberry jam. "Oh, listen to this, hon..." she said between chews, "Carmichael's Bookstore wants to get rid of some of their older stock, so starting next Saturday, there's gonna

be a week-long book sale down at the Mission. One of those Dutch auctions where the price goes down the longer you wait... you know?"

Ricki briefly looked away from her own section - the political pages - and sent her partner a smile. "Really? We went last year, remember? It was kinda fun."

"Yep. Though we weren't too lucky with the books we bought," Jessie said, lowering the newspaper to look at the green-eyed, dimple-cheeked and just plain gorgeous thirty-one year old woman sitting opposite her.

"No, but that's the nature of the Dutch auction. You'll never know what's left. Anyway, I'll mark it on my calendar. Hey, here's something for you," Ricki said and folded her newspaper so she had the article right in front of her. "The Preston city council has agreed to raise the budget for the city police department."

"Mmmm? Maybe those poor suckers will actually get winter uniforms this year. First snow can't be too far off," Jessie said and turned the page to get to her favorite part, the comics.

"Well, they can't all have as cool uniforms as you SWAT-people... and, dare I say it..." Ricki said and shot her tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed partner a lusty gaze, "... they don't have anyone able to fill them out quite the way you do."

Jessie lowered the newspaper again and grinned broadly. "Why thank you, dear," she said and reached over to give Ricki's free hand a squeeze. "And you're the cutest elementary school teacher in the continental United States of America."

"Oh... not Hawaii?"

"Hmmm... I dunno... those Hawaiian girls look mighty fine, hon."

Ricki leaned across the table and hooded her eyes. "Would it help if I wore a hula skirt and a couple of coconut shells?"

Several beats went by where Jessie was imagining her partner in just such an outfit, hula-dancing around the house and into the bedroom. "Mmmm. Can't beat that. You're on."

Chuckling out loud, Ricki leaned back in her chair, took her mug of coffee and continued to read the political pages.

After breakfast, Jessie did the dishes while Ricki showered, whistling loudly as she swung the tea towel with aplomb. Even though she had the longest distance to her work, nearly thirty miles, she wasn't in a hurry because one of the regular state troopers she was sharing a cruiser with when she wasn't in active duty would be swinging by at a quarter past seven.

A few minutes later, Ricki came out of the shower and went into the bedroom where she began to dress for work. She donned sensible underwear, a warm pantyhose, a pale gray blouse and finally a dark gray skirt with a matching jacket. Flipping her honey-blond hair out of her collar, she went over to a small dresser drawer and took a gold necklace with a crucifix.

Her hair kept getting in the way, and she almost let rip an uncharacteristic curse before Jessie heard her partner's growls and came to her rescue.

"Wait a minute, I'll hold your hair," Jessie said and did just that. "You need a haircut, hon."

"I know," Ricki said and closed the gold necklace in front of her throat before sliding it around so it was on properly.

While Ricki's neck was deliciously exposed, Jessie leaned down and gave it a sweet little kiss. "I love you, Ricki Warbeck."

"I love you, too, Jessie Sanders," Ricki said and turned around to give her partner a proper goodbye kiss.

Jessie used the opportunity to nibble at Ricki's succulent lips and earned herself a throaty chuckle in the process. "Mmmm," Jessie said between nibbles. "Your Camry is fully gassed and ready to go. I did remember to do that yesterday."

"Good. I better hurry up... Principal Hobbs will have my hide if I'm late again," Ricki said and reached for her hairbrush.

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08:32 AM

The thirty-six year old Dale Henriksen was anything but pleased with the incessant ringing of the doorbell. By the fourth ring, he wanted to shout at the door but turned too quickly and fell off the living room couch where he had ended up the night before when he hadn't been able to find his way through the narrow hallway to his bedroom in his old, slightly dilapidated one-story bungalow.

Cursing and swearing, he swept the empty beer cans away from the floor and staggered to his feet. It took him a while to get to the door, but when he was finally there, he flung it open with such force that several more empty beer cans rolled across the carpet. "What the fuck 'you want? It's the middle of the fuckin' night!" he growled at the mailman outside, shielding his eyes against the harsh November sun.

"I have a registered letter for a Mr. Dale Henriksen. Are you Mr. Henriksen, Sir?" the mailman said, holding an official-looking letter. When he caught a whiff of the cigarette smoke, sweat and stale beer that emanated from the bungalow, he scrunched up his face and took a half-step back.

"Depends... is it a subpoena?" Dale said and stuffed his creased shirt into his faded blue jeans.

"I wouldn't know, Sir, I'm just a mail-"

"Yeah right," Dale said and snatched the letter from the mailman's hand. "I'll bet you people read every single fuckin' letter and do something to 'em so we can't see that you've... fuck, it's from my ex-wife's lawyers..."

"Sir, unless you're Mr. Dale Henriksen, I need the letter back at once," the mailman said and reached for the envelope, but Dale kept it out of his grasp.

"Yeah, I'm Dale Henriksen. You need my signature or something?"

The mailman sighed and reached for a hand-held device that was connected to his belt with a sturdy metal wire. "Yes, Sir. Please sign here," he said and handed Dale an electronic pen.

After hastily scribbling his name on the touchpad in a completely illegible hand, Dale slammed the door shut in the mailman's face and went inside. Putting the thick letter down on the coffee table, he sat down on the stained couch he had slept on and rested his throbbing head in his hands.

The serenity only lasted for half a minute. With trembling hands, he reached for the large envelope and tore it open.

"Mr. Henriksen," he mumbled through his beer- and bourbon-induced hangover. "We hereby regretfully inform you that due to your drunken and aggressive behavior towards Miss Mary Loughton and several other members of the teaching staff at the Joshua Bradley Elementary School on the Eighth of this month when you... blah, blah, blah, blah... lost the right of visitation-"

Reaching a certain point in the official document, Dale stopped mumbling and stared wide-eyed at the simple, black letters that seemed to mock him like so many other things had done throughout his life.

The letter slipped from Dale's fingers and ended up resting against the envelope on the coffee table. With a sigh, he leaned back on the couch, looking like he was about to pass out.

'Dale? Who was that?' a female voice said from the bedroom down the hall.

Sighing again, Dale rose from the couch, grabbed the letter and stuffed it down his rear pocket. "Nobody!" he said loudly, running his hands through his greasy hair.

'Gotta be somebody?'

"No! Go back to sleep, Darlene. It was nothing. I just gotta... gotta..." Dale said, standing in the middle of his living room feeling so deflated that he didn't know what to do with himself.

'What's wrong, Dale?'

Spinning around, Dale clenched his fists and bared his teeth in feral sneer. "I told you it was nothing, for fuck's sake! Go back to sleep!"

'That wasn't nice, baby!'

Dale sighed and buried his face in his hands. "Shut up, Darlene... just shut up," he said quietly. "I gotta think. Gotta think..."

"Dale?" Darlene McAvoy said standing in the doorway to the bedroom. When she didn't get an answer, the bleached blonde forty-two year old waitress swept the hot pink nightgown tightly around her body and padded up the hall on bare feet, hopping from clean spot to clean spot to avoid the worst of the beer stains from the festivities they'd held the night before. "Dale? You can tell me what it is. I've heard everything. Dale?"

In the meantime, Dale had gone back to the couch but was too antsy to sit down. He turned to look at the woman he had been living with for the past few months and suddenly realized she didn't look so hot in the harsh daylight and without the influence of watered-down beer and cheap whiskey. Darlene was working as one of the waitresses at Sergeant Casey's Bar & Grill, and she had been the only woman who had bothered to give him the time of day after his defeat in the divorce court.

"You wanna come to bed and have some fun?" Darlene said and quickly flashed open her nightgown to reveal that she was only wearing a pair of hipster panties underneath.

The sight stirred something in Dale's mind, but it wasn't lust for the waitress. Instead, he remembered the first few years with his now ex-wife, the mother of his son he was no longer allowed to see. How they had found and bought the house he was still living in, even when she had been seven months pregnant; how great they had started and how bad they had become. At the end, they couldn't even make a grocery list without shouting at each other.

They had been divorced for eight months, but on occasion, he could still smell her perfume lingering in the house, despite his best efforts to smother it with cigarette smoke, bourbon and stale beer. He had loved her, but it hadn't been enough for her; after five years, she had given up on him ever changing his ways and had moved back to her parents - and she had taken their son with her.

The pieces of the puzzle fell into place in Dale's mind, and he rose slowly from the couch and went over to Darlene who was observing him with a confused look on her plain face. "You've been good to me, Darlene," he said and caressed her cheek with surprising tenderness.

"Thanks, but..."

"I gotta go and do something today, babe."

"Yeah?" Darlene said, scratching her hair in confusion. When Dale didn't answer but simply turned and headed for the bedroom, she shrugged and followed him, thinking that he wanted to have sex.

When she reached the bedroom door, she furrowed her brow at the sight of Dale getting down on his knees and reaching in under their double bed.

He eventually found an indescribably dusty rectangular wooden box that he put on top of the duvet that Darlene had casually pushed aside. Once that was done, he went over to their closet and grabbed a pale blue gym bag that he emptied out on the bedroom floor before throwing it on the bed next to the wooden box.

"Dale, what are you doing? What's in that box? I've never seen that before...?" Darlene said, closing her nightgown.

Dale briefly turned towards her and held her confused look, but eventually grunted and went back to the box. "It's nothing for you to worry about, babe. It's just something I gotta do."

After opening the lid, he pulled out a double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun, a box of shells and a Colt M1911, prompting Darlene to gasp loudly.

"Dale Henriksen! What the hell is that?! Whatcha gonna do with those?!"

"They've taken away my son, Darlene. My Jeremy. They won't let me see him," Dale said while cracking open the shotgun and loading two shells into the empty barrels.

"But...!"

"So now I'm-"

"If you're gonna blow your fuckin' head off, I don't want nothing to do with it!" Darlene howled and ran over to the bed to grab Dale's shoulders.

Dale chuckled darkly and slammed the shotgun shut. "I'm not gonna kill myself. You don't have to worry 'bout a thing, babe. I'm not gonna hurt anyone. I'm gonna go shoot a few rounds down at the range. I just need some target practice."

"The fuck you do! You gonna go straight up to your ex and blow her away, aintcha?" Darlene howled, clutching her bleached-blonde head.

The fact that her nightgown fluttered open mattered less to her than the immediate threat, but when the chill ran across her bare stomach, she moved her arms back down and closed the gown.

Dale looked at Darlene's gently sagging breasts, at her pudgy, pasty white skin and at the two clumsy tattoos of animals she had on her stomach between her pierced navel and the top edge of her hipsters, and realized that although he had never really loved her, she had been a good

woman and bedmate. He knew that if he carried out the vague plan he had in his mind, he would probably never see her again - still, his mind was made up.

"Sorry, babe... I gotta go," Dale said and climbed to his feet. "And no, I'm not gonna kill Brandi. All I want is Jeremy back. But that's for later... for now, I'm gonna go to the range and shoot a few rounds. Okay?"

"Well... okay."

"Okay," Dale said and shoved the shotgun, the pistol and the box of shells into the pale blue gym bag. He furrowed his brow when he realized the barrel of the shotgun was too long for the bag, and decided to do something about it a little later.

"But you're gonna be home for dinner, right?" Darlene said and stood up on tiptoes to give Dale a little kiss on the lips.

Once they separated, Dale caressed Darlene's cheek again. "I'll try. Hey, you better put on some clothes, babe. You never know who'll show up. I mean, some well-hung plumber or somebody could swing by and see you... and don't forget, you're all mine," he said and pretended to bite her neck.

Darlene snickered and quickly flashed her nearly nude body while cocking her hips left and right. "Oh, I know. I don't let nobody touch me but you, baby."

Dale grinned but it faded fast as he donned a pair of boots, a lined denim jacket and his favorite baseball cap, a black one with a red Chevrolet bowtie on the front of the crown.

On his way through the living room, he briefly put down the gym bag and took a picture frame from a bookcase near the door. The picture showed himself and a young, fair-headed boy who were mugging for the camera at a fun fair. He put down the frame with reverence, picked up the weapons and left his home.

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08:58 AM

The door to the classroom had barely opened when Ricki was greeted by an enthusiastic cheer of "Good morning, Miss Warbeck!" from the twenty-two young children that made up her first class of the day.

"Good morning, everybody!" she said in a similarly cheery voice as she went up to the teacher's desk at the far end of the rectangular room carrying a leather briefcase under her arm.

Unlike most other elementary schools in the State, the Joshua Bradley Elementary School had decided that the inevitable chaos between classes would be far less if the smaller children stayed

in the same classroom for the entire day, thus making the teachers move from room to room instead of the children.

"It's chilly today, don't you think?" Ricki said as she pulled out her chair and put the briefcase on the desk.

"Yes, Miss Warbeck!" most of the children said, but one or two shook their heads.

Ricki smiled as she looked at the expectant faces of her class; the children were all of the age where they were eager to learn, typically six or seven. They were a homogenous and well-behaved group, save for one or two of the boys that she knew she needed to keep a stern eye on.

'Some things never change,' Ricki thought as she looked at the prim and proper dresses worn by the girls and the slightly more rural-tough denim-wear worn by the boys. Chuckling, she opened her briefcase and found the books she would need for the class.

At the back, a couple of the rebellious boys were already whispering amongst themselves, but Ricki settled that by tapping her knuckles on the corner of the desk.

Once they were in order, she turned around and checked if the blackboard had been wiped by the night cleaners. Satisfied that everything was ready for her class, she took a step back and folded her hands in front of her chest. "Children, it's nine o'clock and it's time to recite the Lord's Prayer."

The pupils quickly sat up straight, put their elbows on their school desks and folded their hands.

"Billy," Ricki said sternly when she noticed one of the boys slouching on his chair. The strict tone in her voice made the wayward child sit up and mirror his classmates.

"Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen." - While Ricki sermonized the prayer, she kept a close watch on the children to see if they were following her and was happy too see that all were.

"Right. Today, we'll start with the blue book. Please open it on page forty-four... that's chapter five," Ricki said and sat down on the chair behind the desk. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see her principal observing her and her class through the window in the door to the hallway.

'Nasty old ass,' she thought. *'Of course he's looking at my class... now that he can't bust me for being gay anymore, I'll bet he's just hoping I'm gonna screw up on something else. Well I won't give him that pleasure!'*

After offering the principal a smile that made him go away, Ricki cleared her throat and began to read from the textbook.

Twenty minutes later, Ricki rose from her chair, grabbed the trash can and went down to the rebellious Billy who had once again drawn her attention. "Your chewing gum, please, Billy," she said, holding out the bin.

The young boy blinked several times and quickly took out the chewing gum. His hands were shaking, causing him to drop the gum on the floor which in turn made him blush furiously. Shooting up from his school desk as fast as he could, he snatched the sticky gum and threw it into the bin. "I'm sorry, Miss Warbeck."

"Thank you, Billy. Jeremy," Ricki said, turning towards the boy sitting at the next desk without prior warning. "Don't make faces at Billy. Okay?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Warbeck," Jeremy Henriksen said and ducked his head.

"All right. Now, please look at the magnetboard," Ricki said and went over to a four by four foot magnetboard on the wall next to the door where she put down the trash can. Finding a bright red magnet shaped like a tractor wheel, she attached it to the top of a folded-up piece of paper and pulled a pin to release a wall sheet in the shape of a silhouette of a man where all internal organs were in plain sight.

Behind her, some of the girls gasped, making her chuckle inwardly. *'I can't blame them... I still get the creeps from that wall sheet...'* she thought, squinting at the near life-sized drawing.

"Who wants to show me where the lungs are?" she said, walking back up to the teacher's desk to get a pointer so the shortest of the children could reach the ghoulish drawing.

"Me!" a girl in a pink and white princess-like dress said, reaching for the sky even before Ricki had finished her sentence.

Moving down to the girl's desk, Ricki handed the pupil the pointer. "Very good, Sue. Please show the class where the lungs are."

The young girl got up and moved over to the drawing. With some effort - and her tongue stuck firmly in the corner of her mouth - she drew an outline of both lungs, remembering to make room for the heart.

"That's very good, Sue," Ricki said with a smile as she helped the girl back to her seat. "Now, who wants to show me where the colon is? ... Nobody? Billy?"

"I don't know where it is, Miss Warbeck," Billy said, blushing even harder when he realized he had made his reply rhyme.

"Well, in that case, you should pay close attention now. It's right he-"

Suddenly reaching for the sky, Jeremy shot up from his desk and waved his hand in the air.

"Miss Warbeck, I know where the colon is!"

"Come over and show your classmates, Jeremy," Ricki said, holding out the pointer.

Jeremy took it and made a long doodle from the body of the stomach and down towards the bottom of the drawing.

"Very good, Jeremy. That's it exactly," Ricki said and smiled at the young boy. Before she went on, she smirked at the fact that the man-shaped silhouette had no external genitals. *'Well, if he isn't allowed to have a penis in 2012, he never will... poor fella,'* she thought, almost breaking out into an embarrassed snicker.

Snapping out of her train of thought, she helped Jeremy back to his desk and put her hands on her hips. "Right. Can anyone tell me where the liver is?"

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09:17 AM

The traffic on the westbound freeway that Dale Henriksen used to get to the other side of Preston was light so he was able to make good time. As he was driving, he rolled the driver's side window of his twenty-year old Chevrolet truck down to half mast, hoping that the chilly November air would blow some of the hangover away.

He glanced to his right at the pale blue gym bag that was gently bobbing up and down on the passenger seat as the old shock absorbers were unable to combat the uneven surface of the freeway.

A hacksaw had taken care of the problem of the shotgun not fitting in the bag. It hadn't even bothered him to ruin the gun he had won in a raffle years earlier, because in the end, it didn't really matter what happened to it.

"But what the fuck am I actually gonna do?" he mumbled quietly to himself. "Should I drive to Brandi's house and make her and her new asshole boyfriend shit a couple of bricks... or... or... should I go to Jeremy's school and make the teacher bitch who reported me last week sorry for what she did to me...? Or... or should I take Jeremy and go somewhere just the two of us? Jesus, I don't know what to do."

Suddenly hearing the characteristic sound of the rumble strips under his wheels, he looked up and realized that while he had been zoning out, he had drifted out of the lane and onto the hard shoulder. Cursing, Dale corrected the steering and looked in the rear view mirror to see if anyone had noticed.

"Fuck..." he said under his breath when he realized that a vehicle appearing to be a highway patrol motorcycle was trailing him by a good two hundred yards or so.

Sitting up straight, he glanced at the bag and pushed back his baseball cap that suddenly seemed too tight around his head. He kept one eye on the rear view mirror and one on the road ahead, determined not to make the same mistake twice.

He only made it another five hundred yards before the inevitable siren sounded from the motorcycle behind him. Staring into the mirror, he knew that his legendary rotten luck wouldn't allow him to get away with the incident, and sure enough, the police officer soon came up to the Chevrolet's door and waved the hand.

Dale sighed deeply and drove onto the hard shoulder where he slowed down at once. Turning off the engine, he found his driver's license and the car registration and waited for the police officer to come up to the door.

The officer parked his motorcycle behind the Chevrolet and briefly paused to look at something at the rear of the truck on his way up to the front. "Hands where I can see 'em, Mister," the officer said, opening the small click-lock holding the service pistol in place.

"Yes, Sir," Dale said and put them on the top of the steering wheel.

"I'm Officer Reed. I stopped you because you veered out of the lane and because your rear license plate is so dirty it's illegible. I need your license and vehicle registration," the officer said, holding out his left gloved hand - his right never moved far from his weapon.

The deep furrows on his granite-like face under the helmet proved that Joe Reed was a stern, no-nonsense man. His mirror shades and his dark mustache made it difficult to tell how old he was, but the unflinching look on his face proved that he was a man of great experience.

Dale obliged to the request at once and gave the documents to Officer Reed who immediately went back to the motorcycle to radio in the details. While his license was being scrutinized, Dale glanced down at the gym bag, getting increasingly worried that the seemingly experienced officer would search the car.

Once Officer Reed came back to the truck, he handed the documents to Dale with a gruff "Mmmm. Step out of the truck, Sir."

Hearing that, Dale's heart began to hammer in his chest. He knew that he didn't have any outstanding notices, but he was worried the officer could smell alcohol on his breath even though he hadn't had a drop all morning. "Uh... yes, Sir," Dale said and opened the door.

"Come back here," the officer said and pointed at the rear of the truck.

Closing the door behind him with a trembling hand, Dale moved back along the Chevrolet, feeling like he was sloshing along in a deep bog. "Yes, Sir," he mumbled.

"Look at that," Officer Reed said and pointed under the tailgate. "Your tailpipe and your muffler are in bad shape. I guarantee you that you'll lose your entire exhaust within a week if you don't get 'em fixed."

"Yes, Sir," Dale said, looking at the exhaust that had been in the current state of disrepair for close to four months.

"I can't fine you for it since it's actually still there, but I will give you a stern warning. Get it fixed now. If I meet you again and you haven't fixed it, you will be given a citation. You understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And another thing... I can't allow you to drive on before you've cleaned your license plate," Officer Reed said, pointing at the horrendously filthy metal plate.

"Yes, Sir. I have... uh... I have some water on the bed, I think," Dale said and began to fiddle with the latches on the tailgate.

"Well, get to it."

"Yes, Sir," Dale said, thinking that Officer Reed had to be the meanest son of a bitch he had run into for years. He quickly climbed up onto the bed and found a rag and - by a stroke of good luck for a change - a half-full bottle of GlassFriend window cleaning fluid. Looking at the plastic bottle like it was the Ark of the Covenant, he jumped off the bed, closed the tailgate and applied a healthy dose of the blue liquid onto the square license plate.

After a determined bout of hard scrubbing - read one-sided wrestling match - to get the age-old dirt off the metal license plate, the traffic officer seemed satisfied with Dale's effort.

With a curt harrumph, he began to walk away, but suddenly stopped and turned towards Dale. "Have a nice day," Officer Reed said before climbing onto his motorcycle and driving off.

Dale kept standing behind the truck for a few seconds, biting down on his tongue and forcing his arms down his sides. Despite the fact that he was elated that the officer hadn't wanted to search the truck, he knew that if he didn't control himself, even for a second, he'd give the cop a one-fingered salute.

An eighteen-wheeler thundering past with its airhorns blaring snapped Dale out of his dark thoughts, and he threw the rag and the bottle of GlassFriend back onto the bed, rearranged his baseball cap and stepped into the cab of the Chevrolet.

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09:57 AM

"And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins," Ricki said, looking up at her class as she read from the Gospel of Saint Mark. She was proud, and not a little amazed, that the children had managed to stay awake through her recitation though she had resisted sprucing up the slightly dry material. They were a little antsy, but she knew it was because they had just come back from a break.

"And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey; And preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose," Ricki continued, reading aloud from the crisp, practically unused copy of the King James Bible she had been given when she had started working at the school.

Pausing to flip the page in the pristine Bible, Ricki remembered the principal asking her why she never took it to work. Her answer had been that she was worried the gold logo on the front would wear off in her briefcase - an answer that hadn't pleased the principal one bit.

Since then, she had used the new Bible in her classes but rarely at home where she had an old, leatherbound one she had inherited from her grandmother.

"I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost," Ricki continued. "And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan."

"Now," she said and put the opened Bible down on the desk. "Can anyone tell me what actually happens when one is baptized?"

At first the pupils fell silent and looked at each other, but it didn't take long for Jeremy to put up his hand.

Smiling, Ricki moved a bit to the side so she was able to get a better view of the young, fair-headed boy. "Yes, Jeremy?"

"You get water on your head... it'll wash away your sins and take you closer to God."

"That's very good, Jeremy," Ricki said and offered the boy a smile. "Yes, when we're baptized, the water represents..."

Ten minutes later, Ricki was in the middle of reading another passage from the Bible when the sun came out and sent strong, harsh rays into the classroom. It didn't take long for her pupils to grow unsettled, so she moved over to the windows to the schoolyard to close the external metal blinds.

As she glanced casually out onto the parking lot, she noticed a battered Chevrolet pickup truck parked at an odd angle. The truck had two wheels up into a flower bed, and the first thought through Ricki's mind was that the principal would give the driver an earful if he happened to see it.

The second thought that raced through her mind was a flashback to an incident from the previous week - a parent had behaved aggressively when he was at the school to drop off his son. The man had terrorized one of Ricki's female colleagues to the point where she hadn't been able to come to work since.

Though the sunlight was in her eyes, she was able to see the outline of a man sitting behind the wheel, apparently drinking something from a bottle. Momentarily losing the plot, her voice trailed off into nothing.

"Are you all right, Miss Warbeck? Do you need to lie down?" Sue said. The young girl in the pink and white dress rose from her desk and looked concerned, earning her a snort from the perpetually rebellious Billy.

"Oh, I..." Ricki said, turning back to her class with a befuddled look on her face. "No, no, I'm just fine... thank you for asking, Sue," she continued, shutting the external blinds by pressing a button on the wall next to the window.

As the metal blinds clicked shut, the truck and the driver were removed from her view and she let out a sigh of relief. "I just remembered I had to buy some milk on my way home from work, ha ha. That's all. Where was I? Oh, yes..."

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10:08 AM

Alone with his dark thoughts, Dale was practicing his thousand-mile stare, looking through the windshield at nothing at all. Now and then, he took a swig from a bottle of bourbon that he had found in the glove box. The cheap, noname-brand whisky that he had bought a case of from Darlene's boss tasted like liquid rat poison but it was all he had.

He glanced down at the pale blue gym bag and felt the bourbon burn in his gut. He knew it was time to make up his mind, but should he go ahead with his plans? Should he go inside, take Jeremy and go wherever the kid wanted to go so they could be together... or should he forget all about it and go home to Darlene? With her, he knew what he had. She'd cook for him, she'd welcome him into their bed, she'd sit with him and offer her support when he needed to talk to a friendly soul - because of who she was, she'd gladly do all the things that Brandi had only done reluctantly, if at all.

In his peripheral vision, he could see metal blinds slide shut over the windows to one of the classrooms, but didn't think much of it. Another swig of the bourbon settled a few more of his indecisive nerves, and he suddenly made up his mind. "I'm gonna go in there..." he mumbled,

looking at himself in the rear view mirror, "and... ask. Yes. I'm gonna go in there and ask Jeremy if he wants to go with Daddy. If he doesn't, I'll say goodbye and walk away. Yeah... that's what I'm gonna do. I'll take the hardware with me... just in case. Yeah..."

Taking a deep breath, Dale grabbed the gym bag, opened the driver's side door and stepped out onto the parking lot. He quickly glanced around, but the few people who were there didn't pay him any attention.

With determined steps, he walked towards the main entrance of the Joshua Bradley Elementary School.

Once inside the lobby that was painted in two shades of gray, he was again struck by the cold, near-sterile environment of the hallways. Everything had been built in hard, unwavering right-angled walls, and even the pictures of religious icons and symbols that adorned the walls were black and white charcoal drawings instead of the colorful displays he remembered from his own time in school.

Dale knew that the incident the previous week had made him *persona non grata* at the school, so he hurried along the hallways to get to the classroom he thought Jeremy would be in before someone could stop him.

The first two classrooms he reached were empty, and Dale cursed violently on the inside, thinking that it was just another example of his rotten luck. Before he had time to peek through the last three portholes in the doors to the classrooms, a black janitor in his mid-thirties dressed in a blue coverall, sturdy boots and black gloves came around the corner carrying a large plastic bag with the contents of some of the school's many trash cans.

The two men briefly stared at each other, but the janitor broke the silence first. "Can I help you, Sir? You look lost...?" he said, putting down the plastic bag and removing his gloves.

"Uh... yeah," Dale said and pushed his baseball cap back from his forehead. "You could say that. I'm actually looking for my son's classroom. You wouldn't happen to know where Jeremy Henriksen would be at this time of the day, would ya?"

"Well, I-"

"Oh, he's in the second grade, by the way," Dale said with a grin he hoped was disarming enough to stop the janitor from suspecting anything.

"Well, some of the second graders are on a field excursion today..."

"Damn!" Dale growled, slamming his fist into his hip. He immediately furrowed his brow and looked down at the linoleum floor to calm his jittery nerves by focusing on the dull pattern.

The janitor noticed, but decided not to make a comment. "Well, in any case, he would be in one of the five classrooms here on the ground floor. The older classes are all upstairs. Have you checked them all?" the janitor said, put on his gloves and picked up the plastic bag, clearly eager to resume his work.

Dale caught the hint and pulled his baseball cap back down. "Five classrooms? Uh, not yet, no. Only the first two. I better give it another shot, huh? Hey, I don't want to steal all your time. Thanks for your help, buddy," he said, taking a very firm grip on the heavy gym bag and walking further down the sterile hallway.

"You're welcome, Sir," the janitor said, furrowing his brow as he tracked the denim-clad stranger until he turned down one of the connecting hallways.

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When Dale peeked through the porthole built into the fourth of the five doors, he caught a glimpse of a blonde, long-haired teacher in a dark gray skirt suit who was reading aloud from what looked like a Bible.

Looking to his left, he let his eyes glide down over the pupils in the class until he found who he was looking for.

Dale's heart began to beat wildly in his chest as he zeroed in on his son, and he took a deep breath to try to calm it down. Jeremy appeared to be mesmerized by the story, sitting with eyes as wide as saucers as he was listening to the teacher reading aloud.

With Dale's blood pressure climbing to dangerous levels, the lined denim jacket was suddenly far too warm for the conditions, but he didn't have time to take it off. Instead, he went for the door handle but suddenly remembered from his incident the previous week that the doors were locked during class.

10:13 AM

Ricki was really enjoying herself reading from the Gospel of Saint Mark. As she had predicted - much to Jessie's disbelief - the passages she had chosen had the pupils on the edge of their seats.

Just as she had flipped the page to continue with the story, she was interrupted by a knock on the door. Baring her teeth in an annoyed grimace, she looked up at the door, thinking that it was the principal again.

Her position in the classroom meant that she couldn't see the identity of the person knocking, so she went over to the door and released the safety lock, never missing a beat in the story she was reading aloud.

The next thing she knew was a man in a denim jacket shoving her out of the way - thus thumping the Bible out of her hands - and entering the classroom with a determined stride; pausing for a second, he went straight for the children.

Ricki yelled out loud at being shoved aside, but her protective instincts rose at once and she jumped forward to get the stranger away from her pupils. She grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back with a loud "Hey!" but the man carried on regardless.

She registered that one of the children shouted "Daddy!" but it drowned in the sea of wild, uninhibited chitter-chatter that suddenly spewed out of all the pupils.

"What the hell are you doing!?" Ricki said, determined not to let the man get too close to the children. Lunging forward, she grabbed hold of his right arm with both hands and pulled him backwards.

"Get the hell away from my kids!" Ricki shouted, but the man spun around, planted a flat hand on her chest and gave her a strong shove away from him.

The shove forced her backwards where she nearly tripped over one of the children who had jumped up from her desk, causing the child to cry out in pain. Now Ricki's inner lioness really came out to play, and she stormed back to the man, growling deep in her throat and intending to drag him out of there by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his pants.

"Stay down, you dumb broad!" Dale shouted when he noticed the teacher coming back at him, but it was obvious by the Amazonic look on her face that she wouldn't listen. Without thinking - and his mind had been dulled by the rat poison bourbon, anyway - Dale tore open the gym bag and reached into it.

The first gun he touched was the pistol. Drawing it quickly, he pressed the mat black barrel of the Colt M1911 hard into the teacher's stomach to stop her.

Then everything went quiet.

Looking down at the gun in a state of shock, Ricki felt the blood drain from her face and she could almost see her life flashing before her eyes. Until then, she had wanted to protect the children, but now she understood her own life was at risk if she didn't do as the man said. She looked back up at the gunman and conveyed with her wide, frightened, emerald green eyes that she wasn't a threat to him any longer.

Dale's jaw muscles worked overtime. He knew he had painted himself into a corner, but he didn't know how to get out of it. Around him, the teacher and the children stared at him in various stages of shock and disbelief, and he knew he had just thrown everything away.

The first child began to sob, then cry, then scream in a wild panic. Within seconds, all the children started to scream, and it didn't take long for mass hysteria to spread among the

frightened pupils. Some of them jumped up from their desks and raced to the walls, but some stayed behind and screamed their little heads off.

Dale's hangover returned with a vengeance at the deafening wall of sound and he wished he had brought the bottle of bourbon with him. He suddenly realized that he was still holding the gun to the quivering teacher's gut - with a growl, he withdrew the Colt but kept it trained on the woman. "Jeremy? Jeremy? Where the fuck are you, buddy? Come over to Daddy, we're leaving," he said, trying to glance around the classroom without exposing himself to a counterattack.

When Jeremy didn't come to him, Dale looked at the far wall of the classroom where several of the pupils had assembled. He quickly spotted his son clinging to one of his friends, crying and clearly frightened out of his wits.

Seeing his son scared of something he had done - scared of him! - short-circuited Dale's brain and he rammed the barrel of the Colt hard into Ricki's stomach.

Groaning out loud at the intense pain, Ricki's knees buckled and she nearly slipped to the floor but managed to hang onto a corner of one of the desks so she wouldn't fall down completely.

Out of sight of the main players, the black janitor who had spoken to Dale as he had arrived appeared in the door to the classroom. Gasping out loud at the sight of the stranger physically assaulting one of the teachers, the janitor spun around and stormed over to the offices to alert the senior staff and to call the police.

"Jeremy!" Dale barked, never taking his eyes off the injured teacher. "Jeremy, pack your things... we're leaving. We're going for a drive."

At the wall, Jeremy shook his head violently and tried to press himself against the boy he was standing next to. "No! Where's mommy?"

"Mommy couldn't make it, son."

"Daddy, why d'ya hurt Miss Warbeck?" Jeremy squeaked.

"'Cos she was in my way... c'mon, get your stuff together..." Dale said, but when he looked at the mess on the desks, he realized it would take too long. "Naw, scratch that. Take your jacket and let's go. Miss Warbeck here is coming with us to the parking lot," he continued, moving towards Ricki and grabbing the back of her suit jacket.

"No, Daddy! Please don't hurt her!" Jeremy shouted, quickly followed by similar cries by the other children.

Dale jerked Ricki to her feet and turned her around. "I won't, son. C'mon, time to go," he said and gave Ricki a push on her back with the gun.

Ricki could feel the hard barrel press into her back and had no choice but to comply. With a groan, she took a step forward and then another; her head was swimming from the shock and the thump in the gut, but she was able to move her feet without too much drama.

Jeremy ran forward, grabbed his jacket that had hung across the back of his chair and joined his father and his favorite teacher. When he tried to take his father's hand that held onto the pale blue gym bag, he was denied with a growl.

The trio slowly made their way through the classroom followed by twenty-one pairs of frightened eyes. Ricki tried to lock eyes with all the children to tell them that everything was going to be all right, but she knew that her pale face and her wide eyes were so far from the norm that it would negate her efforts to calm the children down.

"Get to the door... and the parking lot. Once Jeremy and me drive away, you're free. I don't wanna hurt ya, but if you struggle, I... I... I'll shoot," Dale growled into Ricki's ear.

Ricki nodded and turned towards the door.

Arriving at the same time at the other side of the door, the principal, the janitor and four of the senior teachers formed a line across the hallway that Dale and the others wouldn't be able to get through. "Halt!" the principal said, holding his right arm in the air like an umpire at a baseball game.

Dale stopped with a jerk and pulled Ricki to a halt as well. "Are you fuckin' nuts? Can't you see I got a gun?" he hissed, scrunching up his face at the sight of the six men blocking his way.

The principal stepped forward and spoke in the droning voice Ricki disliked intensely - though now she was quite glad to hear it. "Put down the gun. You won't be able to get away, Mister. We have already alerted the police." Once he had made his statement, the principal extended his arm and held out his hand like he expected Dale to simply hand over the gun.

Dale couldn't believe his ears - or eyes for that matter. The business suit-wearing principal, who was at least in his mid-sixties, looked like one of the self-righteous, holier-than-thou people that Dale hated with a passion; even worse than the phoney televangelists that filled the airwaves on daytime TV.

The man was slightly overweight and he had a weak chin and thinning hair, but the thing that convinced Dale the elderly man wasn't going to be friendly to him if he gave up the weapons was the smug, arrogant expression in his eyes.

"Tell you what, buster," Dale said as he slowly backed into the classroom. "Why don't-

"That's Principal Hobbs to you, Mister!" the principal said in a booming voice.

"Do I look like I give a fuck? Why don't you take your choirboys there and stick 'em up your ass! They've probably been there already!" Dale shouted and kicked the classroom door shut with his boot.

Once it was closed, he pushed Ricki over to the panel with the safety lock. "Lock it! Lock it now!" he shouted into Ricki's ear.

Confused, she tried to turn around to face her captor, but a powerful push in her back that forced her up against the wall convinced her not to question the command. As she fumbled with the lock, she looked at the frightened, disbelieving faces of the children who had very clearly thought their ordeal had been over.

'Please, God... protect the children...' she thought as she finally managed to activate the locking system that slid into place with a meaty Clunk.

"All right... all right... gotta think..." Dale said, taking a step back from Ricki. He pulled the gun back but kept it loosely trained on her in case she wanted to try anything. "Okay... teacher..."

"My name is Ricki!"

"Don't give a fuck. Go sit with the children. I gotta think this through!"

Clenching her fists, Ricki spun around and tried to stare a hole through the man holding her prisoner. "It's a bit too fuckin' late for that!" she barked with eyes that shot green hellfire.

Behind her, some of the pupils snickered through their tears over the shocking, blue language from their usually so straight-laced teacher.

"Shut up," Dale mumbled as he went up to the teacher's desk and put down the gym bag. Pulling out the chair, he sat down with a bump, removed his baseball cap and wiped his sweaty brow.

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10:32 AM

In the gym hall at the Third Precinct police station in downtown Tulane Falls, a strong chant of "Go! Go! Go! Go!" echoed through the room.

Twelve police officers - six from the city police and six from the SWAT team assigned to the precinct - were cheering on two officers who were engaged in a furious contest of strength on the smooth, polished floor.

The two officers were locked in near-mortal combat, competing to see who could do the most pushups wearing a fully loaded, fifty-pound plastic barrel from a water cooler strapped onto their back.

Dressed in a white undershirt and the black uniform pants of the Tulane Falls Special Weapons and Tactics unit, Jessie Sanders was several pushups behind her male opponent, however, she had saved her strength by moving up and down at a far slower rate than the other officer who was racing along like he needed to catch a bus. He was already beet root red in the face and looking quite haggard, but Jessie knew she'd be able to keep going at her steady pace for quite a while.

Unfortunately, after forty-four pushups for the man and thirty-nine for Jessie, the contest was interrupted by the Captain of the SWAT team who entered the gym hall and cleared his throat loudly.

"Sorry to break up the party," the fifty-year old Anthony Joseph 'A.J' Reynolds said, "but we've got a hot one. A hostage situation, class A."

"Do we have any details, Captain?" Jessie said as she leaned back on her thighs and unraveled the Nylon straps holding the barrel on her back. With a look of sublime annoyance in her husky blue eyes, she looked at her red-faced opponent who was being congratulated by his fellow city officers for beating the 'girl'.

"Only a few, Sanders. A man that we presume is a parent is apparently holding children hostage at an elementary school in Preston. All right, form up at the bus in five minutes," the Captain said and spun around on his heel.

The news that children were involved put a damper on the celebrations, but that was nothing compared to the chill that swept over Jessie's body. Creeping up her spine and into her heart, it made her feel like she was drowning in an icy lake, and suddenly, she started fumbling severely with the Nylon straps.

She noticed that she hadn't been breathing since the Captain had issued his orders, and she took in a very deep breath, disguising it with her hand so the other officers wouldn't see it as a sign of weakness. *'It doesn't have to be Ricki... or even Ricki's school... but... Jesus! And now I don't even have time to give her a call to check if she's all right...'*

Realizing that she needed to get a move on, she pushed away the water barrel and got up to go to the lockers. Once there, she put on her uniform jacket and opened her locker to take her helmet, her goggles, her gloves and her knee- and elbow padding.

A few minutes later, she bounded down the stairs of the police station to get to the motor pool with her Remington 700P sniper rifle hanging loose over her shoulder.

She was the last one into the bus and the pneumatic doors closed right behind her as she stepped up into it. Even before she had found a seat, the driver had started and was driving up the steep ramp and away from the parking garage.

"Glad you could make it, Sanders," Captain Reynolds said, shooting Jessie a sharp glare.

Mumbling an apology, Jessie sat down next to one of the men who had been cheering on her in the pushup-contest.

Two police motorcycles were riding escort, clearing the path through the inner-city streets to help the large, black bus get through the traffic on its long journey to Preston - a trip Jessie knew like the back of her hand.

The Captain was getting the latest intelligence update from his cell phone and Jessie wished that it would turn out to be a false alarm, or at least a big misunderstanding. This would be her seventh assignment as the unit sniper, but for the first time, she dreaded what she'd see through her scope. She tried to breathe evenly so she wouldn't stress out, but the intensity of the situation made it hard for her to relax.

"All right, listen up," Captain Reynolds said and rose from his seat. The bus jerked around so badly on the uneven surface of the well-used road out of the city that he needed to support himself by clinging onto the metal bars that ran at the top of the interior. "Here's what we know. At a quarter past ten, a man we've yet to identify forced his way into a classroom at the Joshua Bradley Elementary School. He..."

The first of Jessie's fears were confirmed and she felt her insides clench like she needed to throw up. Forcing her jaw shut, she wrapped her fingers around the Remington and gripped it hard.

"... is armed and is most likely dangerous. A janitor witnessed him assaulting a teacher. There are twenty-two young children in that classroom and our primary objective is to get those twenty-two children out of there alive. They're only second graders so they'll be shocked and stunned by the events. They'll be confused and unpredictable. We need to remember that."

The news that the perpetrator had attacked a teacher made Jessie's stomach churn ceaselessly, but she was able to regain some of her composure by remembering that Ricki had told her once over dinner that the school had a whole host of teachers. The discussion had stemmed from Ricki's nervousness over being outed and fired, but a Supreme Court decision had settled that. *'Man... that seems so long ago now,'* Jessie thought as she looked at the bleak, suburban scenery that flew past in a blur. *'God, please let Ricki be all right...'*

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11:04 AM

By the time the SWAT bus arrived at the elementary school, the parking lot in front of it resembled a trade fair for police and rescue vehicles. No less than a dozen police cruisers - four each from the city, county and state police - and a similar number of ambulances and paramedics had filed into the lot, blocking it completely and creating a headache-inducing din of noise and flashing lights.

In the middle of it all, the two motorcycles escorting the SWAT bus arrived with full lights and sirens, adding even more madness to the proceedings. The chaos only grew worse when the lead motorcyclist had to jerk out of the way of a paramedic unit who reversed out from a parking spot without looking. The motorcycle bumped hard over a curb and threw its rider who fell down into a bush - fortunately, his leathers and his helmet saved him from injury.

The driver of the SWAT bus had to stand on the brakes, causing everyone to jerk forward and let out several inventive curses. With the passage into the parking lot well and truly blocked, Captain Reynolds got out of his seat and pressed a button on the dashboard that activated the pneumatic doors.

"Assume your positions," he said, holding up his hands. "Even though we're going to step into a three-ring circus, I expect you to conduct yourselves in a manner fit for the uniform you're wearing."

The members of the Tulane Falls SWAT unit all grunted and nodded.

The Captain nodded back and pointed at Jessie. "Sanders, you're with me. We need to get you as close to the action as possible."

"Yes, Sir," Jessie said and shot up from her seat.

In two heartbeats, she was at the door and stepped out onto the parking lot. From dropping Ricki off at the school a hundred-and-one times, she had extensive knowledge of the perimeter and the layout of the buildings, a fact that she hoped would help her if it came down to a shooting match.

"Sanders, how about this location?" Captain Reynolds said, walking over to and pointing at a deep purple metallic Toyota Camry that was parked at a favorable angle to the classroom at the center of their attention.

Jessie almost forgot how to breathe when she realized that she'd be using Ricki's car as a firing base. "Okay," she croaked, hoping that the sniper rifle's tripod wouldn't scratch the paintwork - she knew how much Ricki loved that deep purple.

"All right. I'll get back to you. First of all, I need to speak with the officer in charge... I'm sure someone must be," the Captain said, rolling his eyes at the disorganized pandemonium.

Jessie took the Remington off her shoulder and extended the tripod legs. Trying to breathe deeply and evenly, she placed the powerful rifle on the roof of the Camry and began to calibrate the scope.

Looking around, she could see two rescue crews lead a group of children and a few teachers over to the line of ambulances - but no sign of Ricki anywhere.

She gulped nervously, trying not to think of the reasons why Ricki wasn't in the parking lot. *'Maybe she's been evacuated to the back of the building... maybe,'* she thought, but deep down inside, she knew that something bad was about to jump up and snap at her.

More sirens behind her made her turn her attention back on the road. Six black SUVs came racing toward the school with red and blue flashing lights stylishly integrated into the grilles and the windshields. "Oh great... the Feds are here to save the day," she mumbled under her breath as she resumed watching the classroom.

The six SUVs came to screeching halts on the road and turned into the already overcrowded parking lot. Once the vehicles had stopped, nearly twenty field agents in dark suits, dark sunglasses and perfectly styled hair jumped out and began to set up a command and communications base using modular units they took from the back of the SUVs.

With all that going on, the parking lot couldn't exactly be called peaceful, but the last doubts were erased by a news helicopter thundering across the site only fifty feet above the ground. Everyone in the parking lot ducked and hurled abuse at the pilot whose frantic climb to clear a row of tall pines lining the road seemed to suggest that he had been too eager to please the camera person who was hanging out of the helicopter's open door.

Jessie knew that mobile news teams couldn't be far behind a helicopter, and sure enough, it didn't take more than five minutes before a column of nearly-identical multi-colored vans all equipped with satellite dishes on the roofs entered the parking lot and stopped in all sorts of inane places.

"Oh, this is just getting better and better," she mumbled, concentrating on what she could see through the scope so she didn't have to look too much at the mess behind her, or at the car and the little trinkets Ricki loved to have in it.

One item in particular made Jessie gulp and taste the bile at the back of her throat: a cute little teddy bear wearing an outfit similar to Jessie's black uniform that had been sticky-taped onto the dashboard. When Jessie had bought it on a whim, Ricki had said that it would be her lucky charm. *'And now she's in there... and I'm here, pointing my Rem at her. Oh God, please let her be safe,'* she thought, momentarily closing her eyes.

Sighing deeply, she looked through the scope as she moved the Remington in a slow arch from right to left. Her firing base was directly opposite the only classroom where the external metal blinds were closed. A quick check through the scope confirmed that the other four classrooms on the ground level were empty.

To her right, she noticed her Captain walk over to talk to a tall man in a gun metal gray business suit. Jessie immediately recognized the man as the principal of the school, Elwin Hobbs. Just the look of the man's arrogant face gave Jessie the burps and she turned back to the scope at once.

When the conversation was over, the principal was led to a dark Lincoln sedan with tinted windows that soon left the parking lot, escorted by one of the two police motorcycles.

'Listen up, everybody,' the Captain's voice said in Jessie's electronic earpiece. The volume was a bit too low for all the racket around her, so she reached in under her collar and moved the slider further up. 'Status report. I've just spoken to the principal and he confirmed that the female hostage is one Ricki Warbeck, thirty-one years of age, Caucasian, blonde and wearing a gray skirt suit.'

Jessie sighed deeply, not surprised in the least that Ricki was the hostage. Her heart began to beat double-time but she was determined not to let the storm of emotions that screamed through her insides interfere with her work.

'All units, use extreme caution if you see her. Sanders, that goes double for you. I don't have to tell you the mess we'll get in if the hostage is harmed.'

Jessie grunted at the bizarre irony of the Captain's words. "Yes, Sir. Extreme caution," she said into the microphone on her collar. She couldn't recognize the voice as her own at all, a fact that was picked up by the Captain as well.

'Sanders, you may have a bad mic. Your voice sounds funny. All right, secondary units, once the...'

As Captain Reynolds continued issuing orders in the background, Jessie tried to make herself comfortable behind Ricki's car and forced her breathing into a calm, even rhythm.

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11:11 AM

The situation in the classroom was as chaotic as the one outside the closed metal blinds. Every single one of the children was crying inconsolably, and Ricki had spent the last hour running herself ragged trying to comfort them all, patting wet cheeks and wiping dripping noses.

Dale stood at the end of the classroom the furthest away from the crying children. Dizzy, hung over and white as a sheet, he was clutching his Colt almost like it was a pacifier. He had already barked at least five times that the children should shut up, but all he had got out of it were sharp glares from the blonde teacher.

He had no idea how to get out of the situation he had brought himself into, and for each passing moment, not to mention each police car arriving outside the windows, he knew that his chances of getting away got slimmer and slimmer.

Dozens of lights played across the wall opposite the blinds; bright white light mixing with the red and blue from the emergency vehicles. Interested by the white light, Dale crept over to the windows and tried to look through the metal blinds but found them too effective. "Hey! Teacher!" he said, waving the gun around.

"My name is Ricki!" Ricki growled, wiping Sue's running nose.

Dale grunted and turned back to the blinds. "Well, excuse the flying fuck outta me! Get over here and open the blinds. There's some funny lights in here and I wanna see where they come from."

Ricki sighed deeply and got up after mussing Sue's hair. On her way over to the panel that controlled the blinds, she kept an eye on the Colt that her captor was treating very carelessly. "Sir, we would all feel very much safer if you put your gun away. We can't leave, so-"

"No. Open the blinds. Now," Dale said, pointing the gun at the panel.

Ricki had a pretty good idea on what was waiting for them on the other side so she shied back from the windows as she pushed the button that operated the blinds.

Once the blinds had moved up to a ninety degree angle, Dale waved the gun in Ricki's face which made her jerk backwards to get away from the potentially deadly weapon.

"Get back to the kids! And hey... if I see you treat Jeremy badly to get back at me, I'm gonna make you regret it!" Dale said in a deep growl.

Ricki's lips and chin quivered though it wasn't tears that tried to come to the surface, it was anger. A vein started pulsing on the side of her neck, and suddenly, she couldn't hold it back any longer. "Treat him badly? Treat him badly?! What the fuck do you think I'm doing here? I love these kids like they were my own! I comfort them, I wipe their eyes and their snotty noses, I whisper soothing words to them to make this less of a fuckin' nightmare and what the fuck do you do? You fuckin' threaten them with that piece of shit gun right there! So don't you fuckin' tell me what to do!"

Spinning around on her heel, Ricki stomped back to the children who were all giving her wide-eyed stares over her uncharacteristic outburst.

Dale mumbled something that sounded like "bitch," before he turned his attention to the parking lot. He tried to count the number of uniformed officers but had to give up after reaching twenty-five.

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11:13 AM

"Captain, the blinds are opening," Jessie said as she looked through the scope. "... and... yes, I have visual contact with the aggressor."

Briefly looking away from the scope to get the big picture, she moved back to the ocular and studied the man holding Ricki prisoner.

'Excellent, Sanders. Stand by for now. Maybe he's trying to communicate with us.'

"Standing by. He's passive at the moment, Captain... he's just observing us. He's holding a firearm in his left hand."

'Copy. Listen up, everybody. The aggressor has been identified. He's one Dale Henriksen, thirty-six, lives in Brentford, a suburb of Preston. He has a few traffic violations and misdemeanors... nothing major. He was divorced in March and has lost the visitation rights to his son, Jeremy Henriksen, a pupil at the school. He was barred from accessing the school following an incident last week with a female teacher... uh... a different female teacher from the current hostage according to the info I got from the principal. He's obviously violated that as well.'

The captain's words made Jessie remember a conversation she'd had with Ricki the week before. She'd talked at length about the incident that had completely disrupted the day's events. *'Man... it's just so typical the son of a bitch couldn't let it go... but why did it have to be Ricki's class he went into?'*

Suddenly a female voice broke into the line, making Jessie pull back from the scope and look over her shoulder. At the FBI communications center, a compact blonde in a dark pantsuit walked back and forth wearing a headset while she gesticulated with her hands. Jessie chuckled darkly when she realized the agent reminded her of the actress Kristin Chenoweth.

'Captain Reynolds, all police and SWAT units,' the woman said in a surprisingly rich voice. *'This is Special Agent Melissa Conrad. I have been appointed chief negotiator for this tragic situation. If we keep calm and follow the guidelines, we will give the people who are being held captive by the aggressor a chance to get out alive.'*

"No shit, Sherlock," Jessie mumbled under her breath, remembering to block her mic.

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11:15 AM

Dale suddenly saw the light - literally - when he caught a glimpse of the news vans that were lined up at the back of the scene. "That's where the bright lights came from... hmmm... wait a minute," he said, looking around the classroom.

His eyes fell on a TV set on a portable table down the other end of the room. "Teacher- Ricki," Dale said, thinking that it couldn't hurt to act just a little friendly. "Does that TV work?"

"Yeah," Ricki said and got up from the table she had stomped over to.

"Hook it up. I wanna see what they're saying about me."

Ricki looked towards the heavens but didn't get a reply. After mussing Sue's hair again, she went over to the portable table and wheeled it through the classroom. Attaching the antenna jack to the digital set top box, she plugged the extension cord that held both units into the socket and turned on the TV and the digital receiver. "It's on. Which channel?"

"One of those stations that's out there," Dale said, pointing at the windows with the Colt.

Ricki sighed under her breath and picked up the remote for the digital receiver. She had to zap through four infomercials and two prayer sessions before she found someone that broadcast live from the parking lot; a FOX News affiliate. "There," she said and backed away from the TV.

Dale reluctantly tore his eyes away from the real deal to see everything on live TV. A pretty brunette in a blue parka was standing in front of the camera, holding a pen and a small notepad and relaying all sorts of details and trivia on the hostage situation and how it rated compared to earlier, bloodier events.

As a dramatic effect, the camera zoomed past the fast-talking woman and panned across the many vehicles parked haphazardly around the lot.

The images showed that something was going on next to Ricki's deep purple Camry, and the teacher quickly moved back to the TV to see better. When the chilling image of a SWAT sniper standing like a marble statue and aiming a rifle at the school came into view, Ricki's heart skipped several beats - there was something awfully familiar about the stance and the shape of the sniper.

She had always joked that she could pick Jessie out in a crowd of a thousand simply from the tall, long-limbed woman's body language, and right now, she was certain that she was looking at her partner.

A fleeting glimpse of the warm and spirited love-making they had enjoyed that same morning floated through Ricki's vision, but she pushed it into a little box inside her mind. *'I need to be strong... the children need me... if I lose control, I'll let them down... I gotta be strong,'* she thought and moved over to her pupils to comfort those who needed it.

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11:19 AM

Jessie inched the rifle to the right to try to get a better view of the person who had just left her field of vision. It didn't take long for her to realize that it had to have been Ricki.

The thought that something could happen to her love turned Jessie's guts into a hard knot but she tried to push it away for the time being. If she kept the aggressor in her sights, she'd be able to kill him in an instant if he tried anything.

Inching the rifle back to the left, she reacquired Dale who was still standing at the TV with his back to her.

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11:32 AM

The sound of many engines coming closer made Jessie pull back from the ocular and look over her shoulder. Up on the road, nearly a dozen trucks and four-wheel-drive SUVs came into sight and tried to get into the thoroughly blocked parking lot.

"What the hell is that all about...?" she mumbled, looking at the chaotic scenes that followed when the people in the vehicles all jumped out and hurried towards the police lines.

Then it struck her; they were the parents of the hostages who had been alerted by the newscasts that something was going on at the school.

"Shit... I'll bet it's breaking news on all the channels. Maybe we've even gone nationwide... great, that was all we needed," she said with a deep sigh.

Predictably, the press fell over the parents like bees on lemonade, and soon, the most photogenic of the nervous men and women were lined up in front of the cameras to tell their side of the story.

'Oh... oh, this is...' Special Agent Conrad said in a frazzled voice in Jessie's electronic earpiece. Looking behind her, Jessie could see that the FBI communications center had been overrun by parents and was now in the middle of a sea of humanity. *'This is... oh! Police chiefs, will you please get your officers to move people back? Thank you in advance! We have extremely expensive equipment here... this entire area needs to be off-limits to civilians.'*

Jessie had to chuckle out loud when her captain's response was a blunt: *'SWAT team, remain at your present positions. This isn't our problem.'*

After a while, the city, county and state troopers managed to get the parents and the news teams moved to a cordoned-off area reserved for them which reduced the racket substantially.

'Sanders, status report,' Captain Reynolds said over the radio, managing to break into the police chatter.

Jessie slowly swept the rifle past the front of the windows looking intently for any signs of hostility from Dale, but everything was quiet. She hadn't seen Ricki since she had stood in front of the TV, but she took that as a good sign. "Nothing to report, Captain. All is quiet. The aggressor moved away from the windows roughly five minutes ago and he hasn't reappeared."

'All right. Stay sharp.'

"Copy," Jessie said and briefly moved away from the ocular to get the big picture.

The news helicopter that had tried its worst to spook everybody in the parking lot when it arrived had been sitting idly in a barren field across the road ever since, but now the rotors began to turn, indicating that it was time for it to go to work.

It didn't take long for it to lift off and go straight up in the air. After doing a few figure-eights, it moved several hundred yards away only to come back low and slow. Hovering above the school at two hundred feet, it created such a downdraft - not to mention a deafening wall of noise - that the pine trees lining the parking lot swayed violently back and forth and threw needles, cones and even larger twigs across the entire perimeter.

Jessie just sighed and hunkered down behind the rifle, knowing from experience that such an unexpected occurrence could make the aggressor do unpredictable things, but the SWAT Captain blew his top and stomped over to the news teams.

'Get your Goddamned chopper outta there at once!' Jessie heard the Captain bark into the radio that he had apparently forgot to mute. *'Tell him to go higher or get the hell outta here! This is serious business, not the grand opening of some funky new amusement park!'*

Jessie couldn't hear the answer her Captain was given, but reckoned it must have been an affirmative one as the helicopter slowly climbed to a higher altitude, leaving a wind-swept parking lot behind.

A split second later, movement inside the classroom made her focus squarely on what she could see through the scope. As she had predicted, Dale Henriksen had moved over to the window and was looking out at the helicopter. Ricki wasn't with him, but two of the little boys were; pointing at the helicopter, they craned their necks to watch it go up.

For the first time, Jessie had a clear view of the aggressor and she used it to study him closely. He looked to be an ordinary Joe wearing a baseball cap and a denim jacket over some kind of shirt. He had an average face and mustache, and he was of an average build and age - and yet he was anything but average as he had taken an entire class of second grade children and their teacher hostage.

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11:40 AM

Stepping back from the window, Dale wanted to stick his fingers in his ears. The boys next to him - Jeremy and Billy - were squealing loudly at the sight of the helicopter, and the girls who were all sitting at the far wall were sobbing or crying.

All in all, it created a headache-inducing atmosphere that did nothing for his hangover.

Sighing, he went back to the TV and sat down with a bump on one of the desks that he had pulled over to have something to rest on.

Ricki was hugging the two girls who were crying the worst. Humming a little song to them, she gently moved left and right to give them a friendly shake to go with the hug.

The two girls eventually calmed down and went back to the far wall of the classroom where they met with their friends and spoke in hushed tones about what was happening.

Ricki wiped her weary eyes and stood upright. Her back was beginning to ache from all the bending down she had been doing, but her stomach had already protested for the better part of the last fifteen minutes - it was way past the time where they usually had lunch.

"Sir..." she said, moving a lock of hair away from her eyes and behind her ear. "Do you think it would be possible to call for some food? The children are getting hungry... and quite frankly, so am I."

"Dale."

"I'm sorry?" Ricki said and shifted her weight to the other foot.

"My name is Dale."

"Oh... all right. The food?"

Dale sighed and looked at the teacher. Her gray skirt suit had become creased and her face was pale, but she still had quite a bit of fire in her green eyes. "I don't have a way to contact them," he said in a downcast tone.

"Well... okay, but..." Ricki said, scrunching up her face. Looking at the parking lot to her left, she knew that through the scope on the rifle, Jessie would be able to see everything that took place in the classroom, or at least everything that happened by the windows. A small light bulb went off in her mind and she started moving over to the window to signal for a telephone.

Before she had made it all the way there, the TV station they had tuned into returned from a commercial break to show a parent standing next to the brunette reporter, clearly waiting to be interviewed.

The reporter received her cue and began to speak to the parent, a man in his early forties wearing a dark green bomber jacket and a yellow-and-black Caterpillar baseball cap. *'Mr. Anders, how do-'*

'Anderson.'

'Mr. Anderson, I beg your pardon. I know you must be terribly nervous, but please give us an insight into how you're holding up at this point. I believe you have a daughter in the class?'

'That's right,' the man said and looked straight at the camera. *'My little Sue is in there.'*

"Daddy!" Sue yelled and rushed away from the wall to get to the TV. Soon, her friends followed her and stood three-deep at the TV, all yapping over each other and pointing at the screen. It didn't take long for Sue to start sobbing and then crying, and her actions quickly inspired the rest of them into following suit.

"Oh no," Ricki groaned, rubbing her forehead and glancing wearily at her captor.

'Right now I'm putting my faith in the law enforcement we see here,' Sue's father continued, briefly turning away from the camera to make a sweeping gesture across the parking lot. 'But on a grander scale, I know our Good Lord will keep His hands around our children and protect them through his touch.'

'Thank you, Sir,' the reporter said and moved a few steps over to a weeping woman who was clutching a pair of knitted kids' gloves and a G.I. Joe action figure. 'Here's another parent... come over here, please, ma'am... here, please... and your name is?'

'Marcia Compton. I have a son in there, Billy. Honey, if you ever see or hear this, don't forget that Mommy loves you! Look at this, Sarge was hiding in our van, remember we couldn't find him? He had fallen down behind the back seat... and... and he's right here when you get out!'

Hearing what his mother said and seeing her holding one of his favorite toys proved too much for Billy, and he let go in an earsplitting, wailing howl.

Soon, all twenty-two children were crying their eyes out, wailing so loudly that even Ricki's ears were beginning to ache.

Dale was far beyond that. Already on his last nerve, he lost his temper and stomped over to the pale blue gym bag. Sticking the Colt into the waist of his jeans, he tore the bag open and took out the double-barreled shotgun and the box of shells.

Moving frantically, he cocked one of the barrels and held up the shotgun. "Shut up! All of you!" he barked, locking eyes with Ricki who at once understood the gravity of the situation.

"Children... shhh... shhh, please calm down... shhh," she said, mussing hair and stroking cheeks at random to get them to turn down the volume, but it was to no avail.

The wailing continued at such a horrendous level that Dale felt he had no choice. Turning away from the pupils, he aimed at the ceiling and squeezed the trigger.

The hard, flat and incredibly loud boom produced by the shotgun shocked everyone into complete silence. Plaster, dust and felt rained down from the ceiling where the shotgun blast had punched a fifteen-by-fifteen inch hole in the sound-dampening material.

"Shut up... just... shut up," Dale croaked, lowering the smoking shotgun.

Ricki looked at the children with frightened eyes, worried that they would break out into even louder crying, but they seemed to have been jolted into keeping quiet.

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11:51 AM

'Shots fired, shots fired!' Captain Reynolds hollered into Jessie's earpiece but she had already watched it unfold through the scope.

Inside the classroom, she could see Dale holding the sawed-off shotgun at a forty-five degree angle, pointing the barrels away from the children.

"Captain, this is Sanders. The shot was fired at the ceiling, repeat, the shot was fired at the ceiling," Jessie said in a rock-solid voice that didn't hint at the terrible storm of worry that raged inside her.

'Copy, Sanders. Stand by.'

"Standing by."

A few seconds passed with Jessie holding her breath and keeping Dale in the center of her crosshairs, but then he moved away from her line of sight. "Captain, the aggressor has moved away. I've lost visual contact."

'Copy, Sanders. Were you able to read his motivations?'

"Negative, Captain. All of a sudden, he came into sight with the shotgun and immediately fired at the ceiling. We really need to establish contact, Sir."

'I know. The FBI are working on it.'

When Jessie could see that the TV was still on, a plan was formed in her mind. She furrowed her brow and tried to strain her vision to see which station the TV was tuned to. After a short while, she thought she could see a brunette reporter on the screen.

Moving away from the ocular, Jessie looked over her shoulder and spotted the same brunette standing next to the FOX van. "Hmmm," she said thoughtfully. "Captain, it's Sanders. I have a suggestion."

'Go ahead.'

"There's a TV set on in the classroom tuned to FOX News. Perhaps Special Agent Conrad could use the news team to reach out to the aggressor...?"

'Good thinking, Sanders. Stand by.'

"Standing by."

A minute went by without any activity, but then Special Agent Conrad said '*Sanders?*' in Jessie's earpiece.

"It's Sanders. Go on."

'Thank you for the suggestion. I'm at the news team now... they're getting ready to go live. You're our eyes, please report back to me directly if you see anything occur inside the classroom.'

Jessie briefly looked away from the scope and sent the Special Agent a thumbs-up that was reciprocated from the agent's position at the news vans. "Will do, Agent Conrad," Jessie said before turning back to her rifle.

'Sanders,' the SWAT Captain said, *'I'm going to stay off the air during the interview. SWAT team, maintain radio silence until I lift it. Captain Reynolds out.'*

The FOX News team apparently wasn't ready yet so silence filled Jessie's earpiece. She still had the background noise to contend with - and the news helicopter was still hovering in the air above them - but for the first time since they had arrived an hour earlier, she could actually hear herself think.

Inevitably, her thoughts turned to Ricki and what she had to be going through. *'I'll bet she got mad at the man for shooting at the ceiling like that... she's my angel, but she's got the world's biggest temper if she feels she's being slighted... Oh, God, baby... please don't give him an opportunity to take it out on you...'*

Sighing, Jessie narrowed her eyes and studied what she could see of the classroom. The TV was still showing a commercial, but even as she was watching, the Breaking News jingles started playing and the station returned to their on-site reporter.

Jessie could see through the scope that the camera operator zoomed in on Agent Conrad who had assumed a suitably concerned expression.

11:57 AM

'Hello, Dale,' Jessie heard the Special Agent say, speaking in a somewhat cheery but fully controlled voice. *'My name is Melissa. I'm with the FBI and I'm here to help you. I think you'll agree that we need to have a talk about what's going on here.'*

That's why we'll get an Agent to put a two-way radio outside the door to the classroom in five minutes' time. We would like you to use it to talk to us about any needs or requests you may have. It's noon and I'm sure the children are hungry and thirsty.

First of all, though, we would like to have Miss Warbeck and the children come to the windows so we can see if any of them needs urgent medical attention. It's just a little thing that'll ease a few worries out here.

Hope to talk to you soon, Dale.'

While the FBI chief negotiator was speaking, Jessie studied the classroom. She could see the aggressor standing next to the TV so she reckoned he had heard the public message and was chewing on a response.

For the first thirty seconds, nothing happened. Jessie was about to tell the FBI negotiator that the plan had failed when Ricki started shepherding the children over to stand in front of the window. Most of them looked like they had been crying and they all looked frazzled and intimidated, but all in all, they appeared to be none the worse for wear.

Jessie knew her job was to focus on the children, but it tore at her to move the scope up so she could see how Ricki was doing. "Sanders to Agent Conrad. The children are being paraded now in groups of six."

'All right, Sanders. Please keep us up to date,' the Special Agent said in Jessie's earpiece.

"... Twelve... eighteen... twenty-two. They appear to be fine. They're crying, but nothing else. No injuries that I can see."

'Excellent. Thank you.'

Once her official duties were over, Jessie instantly raised the scope and found Ricki. It was easy to see that the honey-blonde was distraught, but she seemed to be doing well, all things considered. Before turning away from the window, Ricki flashed a brief, very tired smile that Jessie responded to in kind, even though she knew her love wouldn't be able to see it.

'Sanders, the Agent is leaving now with the two-way,' Conrad said.

"Copy that," Jessie said and peeked to her right where an agent was hurrying across the parking lot headed for the entrance to the school.

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11:57 AM - Two minutes earlier.

Dale raised his Chevrolet cap and wiped his sweaty brow with his sleeve. The commercials that ran on the TV were uninteresting to him and he found his thoughts wandering to how many years in prison he'd get for the stunt and for firing at the ceiling. *'Probably twenty to life... and if anything happens to the kids, I'll get the needle... or the chair, or whatever the hell they do here. Maybe a firing squad at dawn.'*

On the FOX affiliate, the Breaking News jingles started playing and the station returned to their on-site reporter. The camera wasted no time in zooming in on an official-looking, well-dressed woman in her early thirties.

'Hello, Dale,' the woman said in a somewhat cheery voice. At first, Dale felt a cold wave splash over him, but then he snapped out of it and accepted they knew everything about him. He briefly turned around and noticed that the chaos in the parking lot had grown a lot less since the last time he looked.

'My name is Melissa. I'm with the FBI and I'm here to help you. I think-'

"Crap... the Feds... I'm fucked no matter what I do from now on," Dale said and rubbed his face.

'-need to have a talk about what's going on here.'

'That's why we'll get a Special Agent to put a two-way radio outside the door to the classroom in five minutes' time. We would like you to use it to talk to us about any needs or requests you may have. It's noon and I'm sure the children are hungry and thirsty.'

Dale looked to his right at the children and Ricki who had asked for something to eat nearly twenty minutes earlier. He could use some himself; the whiskey he'd had on his way over to the school was wearing off, leaving a fair-sized hole in his gut.

'First of all, though, we would like to have Miss Warbeck and the children come to the windows so we can see if any of them needs urgent medical attention. It's just a little thing that'll ease a few worries out here. Hope to talk to you soon, Dale.'

The camera panned back to the FOX reporter who spoke a few sentences that Dale didn't hear. Taking a deep breath, he looked back at his hostages and weighed the pros and cons of getting some food and talking to the FBI.

In the end, the pros won out and he walked away from the TV. "Ricki... did you hear that? They want me to show 'em the kids."

Ricki looked at her captor with tired eyes. She was suffering from a headache that had started somewhere deep in her head but had spread to every single one of her brain cells. "Yeah, I

heard... all right. But when you get the two-way radio, you need to ask for something to eat and drink. We really need it," she said as she moved off the desk she had been sitting on.

"I promise," Dale said and stepped well back from the children.

At first, Ricki couldn't put two thoughts together, but she eventually decided on taking groups of six instead of everyone at once. "Come on, let's go to the windows. The nice people outside want to see us. Hey, it'll be like a little beauty pageant! I need six at a time... no, Billy, you'll go in the next group."

Once Ricki had shepherded the children to the windows in three groups of six and four at the end, she kept standing at the glass and looked out at the parking lot and the masses of uniformed men and women that were there.

She quickly found her deep purple Camry and looked at the sniper she knew was Jessie. Even though the face of the SWAT officer was mostly obscured by the black Kevlar helmet and the rifle, she felt she could see those baby blue eyes staring back at her.

A sudden realization there was a real risk they'd never see each other again hit Ricki squarely in the heart, but she refused to let it dominate her. Instead, she offered the sniper a brief, tired smile before turning away from the window.

12:01 PM

Scraping noises from the hallway made Dale jump up from the chair behind the teacher's desk and point the shotgun at the locked door. He stared at it breathlessly until he realized it had to have been the Agent with the two-way radio.

"But how can I get to it...?" he mumbled. "If I open the door to take it, they'll either grab me or storm the classroom... and if I send the teacher, they'll grab her and take her away to safety... and the kids can't open the Goddamned door! Fuck!"

Growling, he moved past the TV that was in the middle of a commercial break and grabbed Ricki's shoulder. "Ricki, open the door and get the radio. If there's an Agent out there, tell him I have the gun pointed at the children so they better not try anything stupid!"

Ricki was shocked at Dale's threat and the aggression in his voice. Her chin began to quiver at the thought of something happening to the children and she quickly got up and hurried to the door.

Even though her fingers were trembling quite badly, she managed to disengage the safety lock that slid back with a loud *Clunk!*

After opening the door very slowly so she wouldn't accidentally spook anyone into firing at her, she stuck her head out into the hallway and quickly spotted a high-tech two-way radio lying on the floor all by itself.

The oppressive silence in the otherwise so active hallway was a stark reminder that it wasn't an ordinary day at the Joshua Bradley Elementary School.

Opening the door a bit more, she inched out into the hallway to take the electronic device. To her left, an FBI Agent suddenly emerged from the shadows, pointing a black pistol at her which caused her to gasp loudly. "Pl- please don't do anything! He's got the- he's threatening to hurt the children if- if you..."

Bending down, Ricki scooped up the radio and clutched it to her bosom. "I- I'm Ricki Warbeck," she croaked almost as an afterthought. "I'm fine but the children are scared. Please don't try anything."

The Agent nodded and stepped back into the shadows. "This is Agent Barazzi," he said into a microphone on his collar. "I've spoken to Miss Warbeck. She's pale but all right. The communications unit has been delivered."

Shivering, Ricki walked backwards into the classroom, closed the door and re-engaged the safety lock. Once the lock was in place, she leaned against the door and rested her forehead on the cool surface. *'That took ten years out of my life... God, I hope I won't have to do that too often...'*

"Did you get it?" Dale said harshly, backing away from the children.

"I got it," Ricki said and went over to the desk to put down the two-way radio. Wiping her sweaty palms on her creased jacket, she walked back to the children and sat down on one of the desks.

Dale went the other way and sat down at the desk. He stared at the high-tech radio for nearly a minute before picking it up to figure out which of the many buttons he should try first.

"Miss Warbeck," Sue said and pressed herself against Ricki's leg. "You look like you need a hug." The small girl promptly put out her arms, wrapped them around Ricki's body and gave her a heartfelt squeeze.

The simple gesture made tears well up in Ricki's eyes and her throat contracted to the point where she could hardly breathe at all. Reciprocating the hug, she ran her hands up and down Sue's small back. "Oh... thank you, Sue," Ricki said, struggling to hold back a sob. "Thank you so much..."

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12:06 PM

'Hello?' Jessie heard Dale say in her earpiece. She briefly wondered how he could speak to her until Special Agent Conrad's voice was heard on the same frequency.

'Hello, Dale. My name is Melissa. I'm the one who spoke to you on TV. I have you patched through to all of us so you don't have to repeat anything you want to say.'

Jessie looked back over her shoulder and saw the chief negotiator standing at the communications unit with a small electronic device in her hand. Sighing, she turned back to the scope.

'Oh... okay.'

'Is there anything you need?'

'Well... yes. We need something to eat... and to drink. I guess the kids are kinda, uh... hungry.'

'Do you want anything in particular, Dale?'

'Now, just something from the teachers' cafeteria. Sandwiches? Maybe some sandwiches or something? And a couple of sodas, I guess.'

'Sandwiches and soda for twenty-four. That'll take us a few minutes, Dale.'

'All right.'

A strange silence filled the airwaves after Dale had spoken as both parties seemed to be waiting for the other to make the next move. More alert than ever, Jessie let the scope sweep over the windows and she could clearly see Dale sitting at the teacher's desk with the two-way radio in his hand.

He seemed to be talking to someone else, and that could only be Ricki.

Jessie let her index finger glide down to the trigger. It would be so easy for her to end the siege right there, but due to their strict moral code that had been introduced after a high-profile incident where a sniper had taken the law into his own hands, she wasn't allowed to kill an aggressor before she had a clear and direct order to do so.

A crackling sound over the radio marked Dale's return, a fact that Jessie could confirm by looking through her scope.

'Hey, d'ya think you could make some of the sodas diet Cokes or something?'

'Of course, Dale. We'll give you a mix of diet and regular sodas,' Special Agent Conrad said in a cheery voice.

'Listen...' Dale continued after clearing his throat, *'before we... bef- before we talk too much, I just wanna say that I'm not one of those mental cases who wants twenty million dollars in U.S. bearer bonds and a chopper to Atlantic City or wherever... that's not my game here. You have to understand that. I ain't got no crazy demands or anything like that.'*

'But you do have some demands?'

The conversation was once again interrupted by a stony silence, but unlike the first time, Jessie could hear faint activity going on in the background - an adult female voice singing a song which was replied to by several children.

When Jessie realized she could hear Ricki singing Old MacDonald with the children - presumably to keep them occupied - she bared her teeth in a terrified grimace. Her heart started hammering in her chest, and for the first time in her career, she had to move her eye away from the ocular so it wouldn't mist up from the tears that appeared out of nowhere and began to trickle down her cheeks.

She felt her body blow hot and cold and her insides clench several times, but she knew she had to stay sharp and focus on the job at hand. Quickly raising the rifle, she peeked left and right to see if anyone - worst of all, her Captain - had seen her uncharacteristic lapse, but no one had time to look at her.

'No, but... I did come here for a reason,' Dale finally said.

'Which was?'

'To see my son. My Jeremy. My ex-wife's lawyers have taken him from me. I got a letter this morning explaining that. I just... I just wanted to see him, and...'

'There are many fathers out here right now who would love to see their sons or daughters, Dale.'

'I know. I...'

'It would help your case if you would let some of the children go now.'

'I... uh... I gotta think about that. I'll be back.'

'All right, Dale,' the chief negotiator said. A few seconds later, the line went back to normal and the regular police chatter was reinstated.

Wiping her eyes, Jessie sighed deeply and pressed her transmit button. "Chief Reynolds, this is Sanders. What are my orders, Sir?"

'Your orders are clear, Sanders. Do not fire until the aggressor becomes a threat. Until then, you are to remain passive but keep him in your sights. You understand?' Captain Reynolds said from somewhere behind her.

"Loud and clear, Sir," Jessie said, looking through the scope.

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12:11 PM

Dale turned off the two-way radio and put it on the desk. Sighing, he rubbed his weary face and looked at his hostages. "The food should be on its way... but you never know with these people. They may just be blowin' hot air in my ear."

Ricki looked back at her captor, shooting him a defiant glare that slowly turned to one of sympathy. "I'm sorry about your son. Jeremy is a good kid," she said, turning around to observe the boy in question who was busy making a drawing with his friend Billy.

"Yeah," Dale said and stretched his back. "But his mother is a world class bitch. How that woman could change so much from when we got married... I'll never know. I mean, it didn't come overnight, she just... sorta changed," he continued with a shrug.

"Mmmm."

"And then we got divorced." Getting up, Dale put the shotgun into the pale blue gym bag but kept the Colt in the waist of his pants. With the two-way radio, there was no need to have the TV running, so he went over to it to turn it off.

Just as his finger hovered above the on-off button, the station returned with their familiar Breaking News jingles. The brunette reporter in the parka coat quickly relayed the latest updates and threw back to the studio where the anchor welcomed a guest, an author who went on to talk about the mental strain of being a hostage. During this piece, they showed several poor, unflattering photos of Ricki overlapped by data on her career so far where her last name was consistently spelled Warbuck, not Warbeck.

Not wanting to hear it, Dale zapped through the other channels to see if anything could hold his interest, but nothing could - in the end, he turned off the TV and the set top box.

Ricki sighed and moved off the desk she had been sitting on. At the thought of what she was about to do, her heart began to race in her chest and she felt her hands grow cold. "Dale, you've had a chance to spend some time with Jeremy... how about letting us go now...?"

"Letting you go..." Dale echoed despondently and looked towards the heavens.

"The woman at the other end of the line said it would help your case," Ricki said in a trembling voice, feeling so nervous that she needed to clench her jaw while she spoke.

Even though her first instinct was to prod her captor a bit more, she could see that he was already thinking very hard, so she kept quiet.

Without a word, Dale spun around on his heel and walked back to the teacher's desk. He picked up the two-way radio, turned it on and pressed the little button for the mic. "Hey... are you listening out there?"

'We're here, Dale. What's up?'

"Would it really help my case if I let s- some of them go now?"

'Yes, it would.'

"All right," Dale said and wiped his sweaty brow with his sleeve. "All right... th- the kids can leave. But not all of them. I'm keeping my boy, Jeremy."

'That's a good decision, Dale.'

Ricki clutched her cold hands to her bosom. She stared at her captor with wide eyes and a heart that was beating so fast she could almost taste blood at the back of her mouth.

Dale locked onto Ricki's emerald green orbs and sent her a tired and almost apologetic look. "And I'm keeping the teacher. I- I need her for something. And I know Jeremy likes her very much..."

The intense shock of disappointment that raced through Ricki's system was so strong that the edges of her vision began to blacken. Letting out a cross between a sob and a grunt, she took a staggering step backwards and grabbed onto a corner of one of the desk to stay erect.

'I see. Are you sure about that, Dale?'

"Y- yes."

'In that case, we'll send three Special Agents and an EMS team to the hallway where-'

"No! Just one Agent! Just- You! I want you there!" Dale barked, looking out onto the parking lot. "I know you fr- from TV... I don't know any of the others!"

'I understand. Tell you what, when we get there, we'll give you the food and the sodas. Okay? We all think better on a full stomach, don't we?'

"Okay... okay," Dale said and terminated the connection. Sighing deeply, he looked at Ricki who was white as a sheet. When he couldn't hold her frightened stare, he looked away.

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12:18 PM

'Dale?' the chief negotiator said from the other side of the locked door. *'We're out here and we got the food and the sodas. Are you ready?'*

Dale grunted and moved away from the desk. "Ready?" he echoed, looking at Ricki and the children who had lined up in rows of two in the middle of the classroom. The children were holding hands and they were pale and visibly frightened, but they had stopped crying.

"We're ready, Dale," Ricki said, leaning in towards Sue who was the first in line to muss her fair hair.

"Now, children, please listen to me," she continued with a tremble in her voice that she tried to conceal to the best of her abilities so her pupils wouldn't get spooked all over again. "Remember what I told you... walk to the door, don't run. Hold each other's hands until you're out in the parking lot. Outside the door, you'll meet a nice lady who'll greet you and take you to your parents. Okay? Do you all have your jackets and your mittens? It's cold outside."

When everyone nodded, Ricki tried to smile but it never made it beyond a faint, quivering crease of her lips. "Do you have any questions? ...yes, Billy?"

"What about Jeremy?" the young boy said, looking at his friend who was standing alone at the back of the line.

"Jeremy is going to stay with his Dad for now, Billy, but he'll join you later." - *I hope,* Ricki thought, gulping nervously at the thought that Dale still needed her for something.

"Oh... okay. Bye, Jeremy," the perpetually rebellious Billy said and quickly ran to the back of the line to slap his friend a high-five.

"Bye, Billy," Jeremy said with a concerned expression on his young face.

Ricki had a hard time dealing with the storm of emotions that raged inside her, but she knew she needed to keep quiet or else she'd lose control completely. Trying to smile at the children, she moved up to the door and began to punch in the combination that would release the safety lock.

With the lock disengaged, she opened the door ajar and peeked outside. The blonde woman in the black suit was the only person near the door, but Ricki could sense - rather than see - activity further up the hallway.

"Hi, I'm Melissa, the chief negotiator for the FBI," the blonde said. "You must be Ricki. Are the children ready?"

Ricki still hadn't found her voice so she had to give the affirmation with a nod.

"Good," Melissa continued, holding up a heavy-looking plastic bag that Ricki hadn't noticed before. "Here's the food... sandwiches and sodas. I guess you won't need as many now, but..."

"It's okay. I'll take them," Ricki croaked and reached out for the bag. As she touched it, Melissa leaned in towards her.

"How are you holding up, Ricki?" the negotiator whispered for Ricki's ears only.

"By the good grace of our Lord," Ricki croaked and grabbed the bag. Behind her, Sue and the girl she was standing next to peeked out of the door, trying to see who was talking. "I gotta get back to my children," Ricki continued and went back inside.

After putting the plastic bag on the nearest table, Ricki knelt on the floor and took Sue's hand. "Sue, I'm putting you in charge. Remember what I said, walk-"

"Walk, don't run... I remember, Miss Warbeck. Is- is Daddy outside?"

"I'm sure he is, and I'm even more sure that he's looking forward to you meeting him there. Off you go. Don't forget to hold hands," Ricki said and staggered to her feet.

Sue smiled at her teacher and led her classmates out of the classroom and into the hallway; all holding hands and walking in a strict two-by-two formation like they had been told.

As the last of the twenty-one children left the classroom, Ricki stood in the doorway and made eye contact with Special Agent Conrad who was keeping a record of everyone who left.

The two women looked at each other for a few seconds before Melissa mouthed 'thank you' and moved swiftly down the hallway to keep up with the children.

Sighing, Ricki closed the door and re-engaged the safety lock.

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12:22 AM

Outside the Joshua Bradley Elementary School, the entire world seemed to be holding its breath. Every time there was movement at the entrance to the school, everyone in the parking lot stared at it, hoping it would be good news.

Jessie had been following the extraction through her scope so she knew it had been a success, but she didn't want to break the self-imposed radio silence, especially not as she was the only one who wasn't about to meet a loved one.

For each passing moment, the tension grew stronger until it was so thick it could be cut with a knife. Suddenly, the radio crackled to life: *'This is Agent Conrad. I have twenty-one children in my custody. We'll be exiting the main entrance in a few seconds. Stand by.'*

A collective sigh of relief spread among the law enforcement and the EMS personnel, but the press and the parents were still kept in the dark.

With everyone watching intently, the glass doors in the main entrance were opened and the children came out onto the parking lot, holding hands and walking in pairs - almost immediately, an unbridled, emotional roar rose from the assembled parents as it dawned on them their children were safe.

Hearing their parents, the children broke formation and began to cry as an entire army of adults and EMS personnel raced towards them.

Soon, that part of the parking lot was transformed into a beehive of activity with EMS crews, FBI agents, police officers, parents and children all in one, big huddle. One after the other, the children were led to a staging area under a large American Red Cross awning where they were examined carefully by nurses and doctors before they were released to further evaluations and debriefings by expert crisis counselors.

Only then were they allowed to meet their parents who all wrapped their arms around their children and offered them crushing, sobbing hugs.

Jessie sighed from the bottom of her soul and looked back to the classroom where she could see the aggressor pacing back and forth near the teacher's desk. He appeared to be talking to someone, but this time, Jessie couldn't make out if he was simply talking to himself or to Ricki.

'All units, this is the Preston chief of police,' a new male voice said in Jessie's earpiece. 'Those of the former hostages who need medical attention will be taken to Preston Methodist Hospital. I'm assigning four cruisers to that job, oh-two, oh-three, oh-six and oh-nine. Two and Three will go ahead and clear the way, Six and Nine will follow the ambulances at close range. The hospital has been alerted. We will use the Major Incidents Accessway at the rear of the hospital building. Two and Three, start now.'

The command had barely been spoken before the two cruisers from the city police started and drove away from the parking lot. Once they were on the road, they stopped to wait for the EMS units.

The parents and the children who needed medical attention beyond what the doctors or crisis counselors could provide at the site were quickly ushered into some of the waiting ambulances - almost at once, the doors were closed and the large vans started backing out of the slots they had been waiting in.

With flashing lights but no sirens, five ambulances and two paramedic units drove up to the road and were soon on their way towards the hospital escorted by the cruisers from the city police.

The activity had sent the media into a predictable frenzy, and Jessie could see over her shoulder that the entire line of reporters were busy recording videobites or reporting the latest development live to their hubs.

'All units, this is the Preston chief again. Those of the former hostages who do not require medical attention will be driven by their parents to the Mission where they will undergo more extensive psych evaluations and debriefings. Units oh-one, oh-four, oh-five and oh-seven, you'll escort them. Get to it. Chief of police out.'

Jessie sighed and concentrated on looking through the scope. She was hit by an irrational urge to key the radio and tell everybody to calm the hell down because not all were out yet, but she knew it wouldn't do her any good.

To take her mind off the danger that Ricki still faced from the aggressor, Jessie flexed the fingers on her right hand to be sure they'd function if the time came where she'd have to shoot into the classroom. Her arms and legs were aching after standing in the same position for so long, and she began to bob up and down on the balls of her booted feet to get the circulation going.

The helicopter that had caused the emergency units so much grief during the day by blowing a fierce, ice-cold gale across the parking lot finally took off and followed the road towards Preston, no doubt to get to the hospital ahead of the column of ambulances and paramedics that had left earlier.

All around Jessie, the children who didn't need medical attention left with their parents in all kinds of trucks and SUVs to go to the debriefing in the town's Mission, prompting Jessie to think about the times she and Ricki had gone to concerts or exhibitions there.

'Why... why hasn't that son of a bitch let Ricki go? What could he possibly want with her?! If he touches her, I swear to God I'm gonna go in there and rip his fuckin' head off!' she thought, working herself into such a agitated state that she had to close her eyes momentarily to get over the dark thoughts that had descended upon her.

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12:31 PM

"Oh no!" Jeremy exclaimed when he had finally unwrapped the cellophane that had been around the sandwich he had taken from the plastic bag.

"What's wrong, son?" Dale said, taking a long swig from a Coca-Cola.

Jeremy shook his head and pushed away the sandwich that ended up at his father's side of the teacher's desk where they were eating. "It got cheese on it. I don't like cheese. And the others are cucumber and I hate cucumber!"

Dale grunted and took a look at Jeremy's sandwich before he reached into the bag and took another one. "Hey, this is ham and cheese. You like ham, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Tell you what we're gonna do... we're gonna make two out of one. Like this," Dale said and unwrapped the cellophane. He quickly took the top bun off the sandwich and put the two slices of ham on the cellophane - then he took Jeremy's discarded sandwich and did the same with the slices of cheese.

Smiling broadly at his son, Dale meticulously transferred the slices of ham to Jeremy's sandwich and the slices of cheese to his own. "And there we got it... cheese for me, ham for you," he said and handed Jeremy the ham sandwich.

The boy's face lit up in a hero-worshipping smile as she dug into the sandwich. "Ffankff, Dad!" he said as he chewed on the first nourishment he'd had since breakfast many hours earlier.

Ricki watched the scene unfold from the table she'd sat down on when her legs had finally given out. At any other time in her life, she would have thought the food-swapping would have been a cute display of love, but now she couldn't look past the fact that the tender, caring Dad who had just helped his kid to a sandwich was holding her against her will, and at gunpoint.

She tried to pick up the cucumber sandwich she'd been given, but even though her gut was screaming for food, she couldn't eat. Instead, she found her can of diet Coke and took several long swigs.

12:36 PM

"Dale," Ricki said around a sigh. "What was it you wanted me to do? You said you needed me for something, but you never said what it was."

Her captor wiped his mouth on a napkin and leaned back in the chair he had taken. "Well," he said after such a long pause that Ricki had begun to feel he was ignoring her. "I was thinking... that maybe you could help me talk to my ex-wife."

"Your ex-wife?" Ricki echoed, frowning her brow.

"Yeah... maybe you can, I don't know... work out what she says, 'cos most often, I don't have a clue. I mean, you're a woman, and so is she. You know... you share common values."

'I wouldn't bet on it, buddy,' Ricki thought, but wisely kept it to herself. "I'll help you if you promise to end this thing afterwards. Sooner or later, the people outside will lose patience... and I'll bet you know how that will end, right?"

Dale narrowed his eyes and studied the teacher who was sitting on one of the desks. "They wouldn't dare... not with you and Jeremy in here."

Ricki sighed and rubbed her weary face. A few tears escaped her eyes and ran down her cheeks; she wiped them away with her fingers. "I wouldn't be too sure, Dale," she said in a voice thick with emotion.

"Shit... that wasn't my intention!" Dale said and pushed the chair back so it knocked against the wall behind him. "Fuck!"

Ducking his head, Jeremy eyed the two warring adults wearily. He remembered all too well what would happen when his Daddy started to argue with a woman: he'd get sent off to his bedroom to clear the stage for the adults to go at it for real. Sooner or later, his Mom or Darlene would come into the bedroom with a snack or to tuck him in - and she would always be crying.

Dale closed his eyes and looked towards the heavens. Suddenly feeling sick to his stomach, he threw the Chevrolet baseball cap onto the teacher's desk and rubbed his face repeatedly. "Fuck..." he said again a little while later.

"Promise that you'll end this once we've spoken to your ex!" Ricki said, clenching her fists.

"I..." Dale said, pausing to find the words. "I promise to end this once she's been here... talking to me in person. I want her to see that Jeremy and me are great together!"

"But that could t- take..." Ricki said in a voice that trailed off to nothing. The implications of Dale's words hit her squarely in the gut - she'd most likely have to spend several more hours in the confining classroom.

Unable to look at the man who held her captive, she buried her face in her hands and let out a trembling sob.

At the desk, Jeremy mirrored his favorite teacher's gesture. Once again, an argument between his Dad and a woman he cared for had ended badly, but this time, he was going to do something about it. Getting up, he ran across the classroom, wrapped his arms around Ricki's hips and pulled himself into a hug.

Dale stared at the tender scene with his mouth gaping wide open. "Jeremy..." he croaked, stopping when he realized that his son had made a choice and that it had gone against him. "All-right," he continued in a croaky voice. "I won't ask my ex-wife to come here... but I still need you to talk to her. I need to let her know about Jeremy and me... then I'll end this," he said, picking up the two-way radio.

Ricki looked at her captor and sent him a very tired look of gratitude. Musing Jeremy's hair, she crouched down so she was at eye-level with the boy and gently kissed his forehead, a gesture that made him shy back and go "Ew!"

"Just give me a signal and I'll help you," Ricki said after getting back up.

"Thank you... while I get in touch with the Feds, would you mind keeping Jeremy busy...? Maybe you could make him another ham sandwich...?"

Ricki was too tired to do anything but smile, but she took Jeremy by the hand and led him down to the desk the furthest away from the teacher's desk before getting the plastic bag with the food and the sodas.

"Hello? Are you still out there?" Dale said into the two-way radio. At first, he didn't get a reply, but just as he was about to try again, the radio crackled to life.

'We're here, Dale,' the chief negotiator said in her trademark cheery voice. *'Do you have a question?'*

"No, but I have a request. I want to you, uh, find my ex-wife. I need to speak with her about... about something."

'I'm sure we can do that, Dale.'

"Good. Uh... do I need to get a new phone or something? Will this radio work?"

'We'll find a way to make it work. Don't worry about that.'

"Uh... okay. When I've spoken to her, I've..." Dale put down the two-way radio and sighed deeply. He knew that if things went wrong, he wouldn't live to see another sunset.

'Dale?'

"I'm here... I've promised the female teacher to end this thing after I've spoken to my ex... and I intend to keep that promise. So... uh... do whatever you have to do. I'll be waiting."

'Okay, Dale. That's very good news. We'll find her for you, don't worry. Talk to you soon.'

With a grunt, Dale put down the two-way radio on the desk and buried his face in his hands. "Oh fuck... that's gonna be one hell of a conversation," he said through his fingers.

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12:48 PM

"Sanders, we need to talk," Captain Reynolds said in a grave voice even while he was still on his way to Jessie's position.

"Sir?"

"While the FBI are looking for the aggressor's ex-wife, we need to create contingency plans in case he's only feeding us bull."

"Yes, Sir," Jessie said and took a look through the scope - everything was still quiet inside the classroom.

Captain Reynolds studied the front of the school in general and the metal blinds covering the windows in particular. "You've been here a while... do you think your aim is sharp enough to pop a smoke bomb or a tear gas canister through the blinds?"

"Hmmm," Jessie said and tried to work out the angle she'd need to hit the window pane. "In all honesty, Sir, I don't know. My best assessment is that there's a fifty-fifty percent risk it would ricochet off the blinds instead. But even if I could hit between the blinds, I'm almost sure we would need to soften the glass first."

The captain turned towards Jessie with a confused look on his face. "Why's that?"

"I happen to know that it's a double-glazed window. I live here, remember? I've been at the school countless times."

"Sanders," the captain said in a dangerous tone. "Do you mean to tell me you know someone who's working at the school?"

Jessie sighed. After a short while, she nodded.

"Jesus! If I had known, I would never have okayed you for this job! Oh... oh, hell no... it's not the last remaining hostage, is it? Whatsername... Warbeck?"

Jessie just stared dead ahead. Even though she didn't speak, her silence and the dark look on her face spoke volumes.

Captain Reynolds opened his mouth once, then twice, but not a sound came out. Instead of trying to speak, he rubbed his face repeatedly, groaning through his fingers. "Sanders, for Christ's sake... you're relieved of your duties. At once! Go over to the EMS people and get some coffee... that's an order!" he said when he finally found his voice.

Jessie sighed even deeper and lowered the rifle onto the roof of Ricki's deep purple Camry. "Yes, Sir," she said in a downcast tone and shuffled away.

The SWAT captain followed her with his eyes - when he wasn't looking toward the heavens - until she was at the American Red Cross awning. Shaking his head angrily, he cleared his throat and keyed his mic. "Burke, come to my position at the purple Camry at once. You're the new point man."

After she'd been issued with a huge mug of steaming warm tea - she hated coffee with a passion - Jessie shuffled back along the parking lot, intent on sitting in the bus for the rest of the hellish afternoon.

Everything inside her had fallen into a huge, black, bottomless pit of disappointment and despair. She hadn't wanted to blurt out her relationship with Ricki like that, but since she had important operational information regarding a potential target, she thought that the Captain needed to know. "...But I should have kept my big yap shut," she mumbled under her breath.

When she reached the bus, she put one foot up on the lower rung of the steps but stopped when she heard the FBI chief negotiator's characteristic voice nearby. Suddenly interested, Jessie stepped down from the bus and shuffled towards the voice.

The FBI communications center was a bustling anthill of activity with half a dozen agents tapping away on keyboards and reading off monitors that displayed data streams so advanced Jessie didn't even bother to give them a second look.

"Hi," Special Agent Conrad said when she noticed they'd gained an unexpected spectator.

"Hi," Jessie said with a tired smile. Up close, she could see that the Agent didn't look like Kristin Chenoweth at all, apart from the compact body type. The woman's perfectly styled, white-blonde hair acted as a strong contrast to her tanned skin and her pair of deep blue eyes that were well-set in an angular face. In short, she looked like the experienced, thirty-something FBI negotiator she actually was.

"Anyway," Jessie continued, "I heard your voice and I just wanted to congratulate you on getting those kids out of there. That was something else, let me tell you. You definitely earned my respect there."

The praise made Agent Conrad cock her head and flash Jessie a charming smile. "Thank you, Officer Sanders," she said, moving a stray lock of white-blond hair behind her ear. For the briefest of moments, the Agent's eyes went on the scenic tour of Jessie's long, graceful body before they returned to her face.

The tour had only lasted for a heartbeat or two, but Jessie definitely noticed it. "My name's Jessie," she said with a tired grin.

Putting out her hand, Melissa waited for Jessie to do the same and then shook it. "Hi, Jessie... I'm Melissa, but I think you must have heard that already."

"I suppose," Jessie said and took a swig of her warm tea. "I feel I've been here so long I can't even remember which day it is..."

"I know exactly what you mean."

Disconnecting the microphone on her collar, Jessie leaned in towards Melissa. "When you saw the adult female hostage, how did she look?" she said in a hushed tone.

Melissa glanced around at the activity and pointed at a quiet corner of the parking lot. Jessie nodded and followed her there.

Once they had better privacy, Melissa put her hands on her hips and shot Jessie a concerned look. "Well, I only saw her for a few seconds, but based on my five years of experience on the negotiating team, I'd say she was on the edge of a breakdown. That was then... she may already have had it."

"Shit," Jessie said and crushed the empty Styrofoam mug in her strong hands.

"You know her," Melissa said, not as a question but as a statement of fact.

Jessie sighed and looked at the negotiator with a dead-tired sheen to her blue eyes. "I know her. In fact... we..."

"Live together."

For the first few seconds, Jessie just stared at Melissa Conrad, but after the brief delay, she nodded solemnly. "Yeah. We're married in all but name."

"Jesus," Melissa said and did the same the captain had done when he had been told - she rubbed her face. "Why did they let you take the point?"

"'Cos I didn't tell them," Jessie said with a tired sigh. "Look, you're not from around here... you're from California or somewhere out West, right?"

"Long Beach, yeah. I was transferred to the branch in Tulane Falls earlier this year."

"Melissa, you have to remember that this isn't Long Beach or L.A. or anywhere else progressive... this is... this is..." Jessie said, but the words failed her. Ultimately, she just made a sweeping gesture across the parking lot.

Scrunching up her face, Melissa shook her head slowly and put a comforting hand on Jessie's elbow. "I think I understand. She's not out."

"No, and that's how it's going to stay... you hear me? Right now, she's doing what she's always wanted to do, teaching little kids. She got a job here because of her skills and her beliefs. She has a crucifix on a necklace that she puts on every morning that means the world to her... she really does believe in God and all those things, but out here, who she is and what she believes in don't and will never mix. If she's outed, she can't stay here... and that'll tear her apart. Aw, fuck!" Jessie said, slamming her fist into her open palm when she realized she had delivered a heated tirade to someone who probably hadn't wanted to hear it.

Melissa quickly put out her arms and pulled Jessie into a hug. "I can see that you love her a helluva lot," she said for Jessie's ears only.

"I do... I really do," Jessie said once they separated, feeling tears sting the back of her eyes for the umpteenth time that day.

"How are you holding up? It must be awful for you..."

Jessie took a step back and rubbed her weary eyes just to be sure that others wouldn't get the impression that she was losing it. "You know... it's the worst day of my life, quite frankly."

Behind them, one of the Special Agents arrived at the secluded corner of the parking lot and held up his hands almost like he was embarrassed to interrupt the quiet moment. "Ma'am, we have the ex-wife on the line. We're ready to patch her through."

"Excellent, Mr. Barazzi! Uh... Jessie, come on over, I'll give you a headset," Melissa said and pulled the sniper over to the communications center.

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12:58 PM

'Dale, are you there?' Melissa's voice said through the two-way radio.

Jumping up from where he had been playing with Jeremy, Dale hurried back to the desk and sat down on the chair with a bump. "I'm here. Did you find her?"

'We found her. We'll patch her through now.'

"Okay..."

A few seconds went by with nothing but crackle and static, but then the hiss on the line changed tone, indicating that a new person had joined the connection. 'Dale?' a female voice said at the other end of the line.

Leaning back in the seat, Dale sighed deeply and keyed the mic. "Yeah, Brandi, it's me."

'Will you tell me one thing? Just what the hell do you think you're doing? Taking hostages! Kids! And Jeremy too, for fuck's sake!'

Rubbing his brow, Dale leaned forward and put his elbow on the desk. He briefly keyed the two-way radio to let his ex-wife know that she wouldn't be speaking to him directly, but the sound of her angry, bitter voice made him shake his head in disgust. Frustrated, he let go of the button.

When the frequency became clear, Brandi took control of it and didn't seem to want to relinquish her right to speak. *'Okay, you listen to me, you stupid idiot!'* she said in such a condescending tone that even Ricki cringed. *'I've been watching it on TV all day at work and I've been saying to myself, when the hell did Dale get a crack habit 'cos that's the only thing that can explain what you've done!'*

I couldn't believe my Goddamn eyes that you would do such an idiotic thing! Is it because of the letter? Jesus fuckin' Christ, it's because of the letter, isn't it? You got that letter today and went postal because of it. Well, you know what, I should have sent you that letter months ago! And just so you know, you'd still be able to see Jeremy if you hadn't shown up drunk off your ass last week and harassed that teacher... you know that, right?

No wait, let me guess... it was because you lost your job again, right? You always drink hard when you lose your job. How many times has it happened now, Dale? Five, ten, fifteen times? You know why you keep losing your jobs, right? You keep losing your jobs because you're an aggressive smartass who's always shooting his mouth off at his boss, at his co-workers, at everybody... but if they even look at you funny, you punch their fuckin' lights out!

"That's not true, Brandi... that happened once... once!" Dale said out loud, slamming his fist down onto the desk. When his ex-wife continued to tell him off on the two-way radio, he let out an angry grunt and shot up from the chair.

All through the one-sided conversation, Ricki had been studying Dale intently while she was playing a memory game with Jeremy. She could see that Dale's eyes had gained a dark, fatalistic look that hadn't been there before - a look that said that it didn't matter what he did or didn't do because he was headed down a one-way street.

"Dale," Ricki said and got up from the desk she had been sitting at, "let me speak to her. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Be my guest... I can't speak to that bitch... I just can't!"

Sighing, Ricki went up to the desk and took the radio. "Hello?" she said, remembering to key the mic.

'Who is this?' Brandi said, cut off in the middle of an impressive series of curses. *'Dale, who am I talking to? Is this another of your conquests...? I know it can't be that skank from the bar.'*

When Ricki keyed the mic to correct Brandi, Dale leaned down and roared "Darlene ain't a skank, she's a great woman... unlike you, you fuckin' bitch!" over Ricki's shoulder, nearly frightening her to death.

'She's a bleached blonde skank! I know 'cos I saw her interviewed on TV not half an hour ago. Right after that, the Feds hauled her skanky ass in for questioning. Oh, didn't they tell you that? Looks like she'll spend the night in the slammer with the other street trash, Dale. Wow, she really looked like someone you can be proud of!'

Ricki rubbed her face, wondering what on earth the two people had seen in each other when they got married. She keyed the mic, but like Dale earlier, she didn't know what to say to the irate, foul-mouthed woman so she let it go.

'Dale?' Brandi said on the radio.

Turning around on the chair, she locked eyes with Dale and sent him an apologetic shrug.

'Dale? You're not drunk again, are you?'

"Yeah... I know," Dale said somberly as a reply to Ricki's shrug. "Don't feel bad about it, Ricki. She's a psycho. I don't know what the hell I was trying to accomplish."

Reaching down, he took the two-way radio and shut it off.

When Ricki saw the last of the LEDs fade out, she got an eerie, unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't a psychologist, but she could tell that Dale's entire demeanor had changed, and changed for the worse.

"Listen, ah..." Dale said, turning away from the teacher's desk. At that exact moment, the sun came out from behind the thick cloud cover it had been hiding behind for most of the day to send strong, harsh rays into the classroom. The light blinded Dale and he pulled down his baseball cap to shield his eyes.

At first, he just stared at the sunlight like he had never seen it before. Then he turned to Ricki and said: "Hey... how do you close the blinds?"

"You just press the button, Dale... right there... you're standing next to it," Ricki said, pointing at the panel on the wall next to the nearest window.

"Why don't you do it...? I got a headache from talking to that bitch," Dale said and began to move down to Jeremy.

Puzzled, Ricki scrunched up her face but chose to remain silent. The tension in the classroom suddenly grew to unbearable levels and she could feel that something was brewing just under the surface. Getting up, she went over to the panel on slightly wobbly legs and pressed the 'Close' button.

As she watched the external metal blinds slide shut, the thought struck her that by turning off the two-way radio and closing the blinds, they were now completely cut off from the police and the SWAT units outside - thus forcing them into a making a move.

._*_*_*._

1:07 PM

Outside, Jessie couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the blinds closing. She stopped breathing and just stared at the horrible sight. "Oh... God... no," she croaked, feeling her throat contract and her heart beat double-time in her chest.

Groaning in frustration, Melissa took off her headset and threw it onto the small desk that formed part of the communications center. "Brandi, that crazy bitch... everything was going so well and then she had to provoke him. Man! He was going to let them go!"

"I've been in this situation before..." Jessie said to no one in particular in a strangely flat voice. "Last year... in an office building downtown... it means the aggressor's ready for the endgame."

"I know," Melissa said darkly.

"Last year, the man killed his hostage and blew his own brains out..."

'All SWAT officers, this is Captain Reynolds,' Jessie heard her captain say in her earpiece. *'The situation has changed to an active hostage rescue, repeat an active hostage rescue. Form the team at the main entrance... Sanders, I need your local knowledge. Get your ass down here on the double!'*

"Gotta go," Jessie said and took off in a sprint without bothering to look at Melissa.

The agent nodded and ran her hands through her perfectly styled hair in frustration over the unexpected collapse of their meticulously staged plan.

"Sanders... here," Captain Reynolds said and threw Jessie an MP5 submachinegun even before she had come to a halt.

Jessie quickly checked the weapon and held it ready. She looked like she could throw up at any minute and the other SWAT officers gave her a very wide berth.

'Captain Reynolds, this is Special Agent Conrad,' Melissa said over the radio. 'I've tried to get in touch with the aggressor or the female hostage, but there is no response. I don't know if it means the radio has been turned off, or... something else.'

"Thanks for trying, Agent Conrad. We haven't heard gunfire so we hope for the best. We'll take it from here. Reynolds out," Captain Reynolds said and worked the action on his own MP5.

"Sanders, are you up for it? Once we're in there, there's no room for hesitation or weakness, you know that."

"I know. I'm up for it," Jessie said in a cold, detached voice.

"Good. Form up. Let's be quick and efficient... we've got a few people to save," the Captain said and opened the double glass doors to the hallway.

1:11 PM

The strike team ran down the hallway with their weapons raised, ready to take out anyone who posed a threat to them. The empty corridors echoed with the footsteps of the military-style boots they wore, and the many black and white pictures of religious icons and symbols wobbled back and forth as the wind caught the edges of the frames.

"They're in the final classroom, around the corner," Jessie said over her shoulder.

"Good. Watch for tripwires and other booby-traps," Captain Reynolds said, bringing up the rear.

"Copy," Jessie said and raised a clenched fist in the air when she arrived at the corner. As one, the unit stopped and awaited her command. Wasting no time, she quickly peeked around the corner and found the hallway to be free of foreign objects that could have been set up as traps.

"All clear," she said and signaled that the unit should move on.

**_*_

1:09 PM - Two minutes earlier.

"Hey, buddy," Dale said as he crouched down next to Jeremy and pulled him into a little hug.

"Hey, Daddy."

"Listen, I'm sorry you had to hear the things said by your Mom. I don't think she was well. You know how she can be sometimes."

" 's okay. She never talks like that when I'm there..."

"Mmmm. Which one of the desks is yours?"

"That one," Jeremy said and pointed at one a couple of desks away from the one they were sitting at.

"Mmmm. Are those your things?"

"Yep."

"Mmmm."

Ricki could sense that something was very wrong, so she walked around the desk to pick up the Bible she had left there when the horrible mess had started several hours earlier. Leafing through it absentmindedly, she eyed the pale blue gym bag that was still on the table as well.

Dale mussed his son's hair and went over to the row of coat hooks between the locked door and the magnetboard where the gruesome drawing of the incomplete man was still hanging. Sighing, he took the only jacket left, fluffed it and turned back to Jeremy. "Son... I promised that you and Ricki could go once I'd spoken to your Mom."

"Yippie!" Jeremy said and hopped over to his own desk to collect all his things and throw them into his school bag.

"Dale..." Ricki said in a trembling voice. Clutching her Bible, she began to walk closer to her captor, never taking her eyes off the hilt of the Colt that was still sticking out of the waist of his pants. "You actually said you would end it once you had spoken to your ex-wife..."

"Oh, I remember. And I will. Anyway, you're free to go... hell, you're the only one of us who can work the safety lock," Dale said with a tired chuckle.

"Dale, don't... whatever you're thinking of doing... don't do it. Please," Ricki said quietly so Jeremy wouldn't pick up her agitation.

"Why would you care what I do?" Dale said and wiped his sweaty forehead.

"Because a life is too precious to throw away for nothing."

Ricki's heartfelt plea didn't work as she had expected. Dale simply rolled his eyes and looked at the ceiling of the classroom, chuckling from somewhere deep in his throat. "Aw, yeah... Jesus saves... don't give me that crap! I'm fucked no matter what I do."

"I'm ready, Daddy!" Jeremy said, closing the strap-lock on his bag.

"That's great, son... here's your jacket," Dale said and helped Jeremy get his arms down the sleeves. "Now, listen to me... come over here, sit on my lap. This is important," he continued and sat down on a corner of one of the desks.

"Okay," Jeremy said and jumped up on his father's lap.

"Jeremy..." - looking up, Dale caught a glimpse of Ricki's face that was whiter than ever. Sighing, he reached up and mussed his son's hair again. "Jeremy, when you get back to your Mom, I want you to forget all about what happened here today. I want you to have a happy childhood... I want you to grow up to be an honest man with a good job, a good wife, a happy family... and stay off the booze. I hope that one day you'll understand... that... that it couldn't end differently. Okay?"

"But, Daddy, aren't you coming with us...?" Jeremy said, staring at his father with eyes as wide as saucers.

"Not right now. There's something I gotta do first," Dale said and leaned in to kiss Jeremy's forehead.

Jeremy's eyes welled up and he grabbed onto Dale's denim jacket for support. "But, Daddy... I don't understand..."

Ricki swallowed several times to get the bitter taste to go away. She didn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out what Dale was going to do the minute he had sent her and Jeremy outside. Aware of the weight - physically as well as metaphorically - of the book she held in her hands, she felt she needed to give it one last try. "Dale, please reconsider. This isn't the way. Not for Jeremy... not for yourself. You'll do time, yes, but nobody has been hurt... that'll help you. You released the children the first time they asked you to, that'll help you... You-"

"No, Ricki. I-"

"Dale, will you pray with me? Jeremy, you too," Ricki said, feeling her heart hammering so hard in her chest that she almost had black spots in her vision. She held the pristine copy of the King James Bible to her heart, reeling at the cruel irony that the book that had been used against her so often - and that she had hardly used herself - could possibly be the tool that would save someone else's life.

"Pray?" Dale said with a tired chuckle. "I'm not the praying kind, Ricki." Leaning down, he kissed Jeremy's forehead again and began to lift him down to the floor.

"I'll make it a short one. The Lord's Prayer!"

"Ricki-"

"Please!"

Dale looked up and saw the fierce determination in Ricki's eyes. Once again, he couldn't hold her emerald green stare and had to look away. Sighing, he nodded and got up from the desk he had been sitting on.

Ricki closed her eyes and felt responsibility weigh down on her narrow shoulders with tremendous force. "I do have one condition," she said in a trembling voice.

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1:13 PM

"Stand by," Captain Reynolds said, holding up his hand. "On three! One... two... three!"

The two SWAT officers at the front of the unit swung the heavy doorbuster at the lock on the door to the classroom. The ordinary lock was shattered upon impact but, unfortunately, the secondary safety mechanism was too good and the door withstood the beating.

"Fuck! Go again! Again!" the Captain roared, waving his arms to show the men holding the heavy tool that they should give it another whack.

The second attempt was delivered with even more power and they finally managed to rip the safety lock off the doorjamb. Moving as one, the SWAT unit filed into the near-empty classroom with their MP5s raised.

"Firearms secured!" one of the officers roared from the desk where both Dale's Colt and his shotgun had been placed next to the pale blue gym bag. The shotgun had been cracked open and the unused shell had been removed.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" a female voice shouted from somewhere out of sight. Jessie stormed into the room and looked around in a state of shock, not understanding at all why the aggressor hadn't tried to fight back - then she spotted three people standing at the far end of the classroom; one of them was holding a Bible. A second look confirmed that it was Ricki, white as a sheet but unharmed.

When Jessie realized that the woman she loved more than anything in the world was safe, she had to clamp her jaw shut and bare her teeth in an instinctive grimace to hold back the unbridled screams of joy that threatened to burst out of her.

"Aggressor secured!" another of the officers roared, running down to Dale and aiming the MP5 at him.

Shoving her submachinegun onto her back so it wouldn't frighten the child, Jessie rushed forward and crouched down to give the crying Jeremy a quick check before getting back up and taking Ricki's hands in her own. "Hostages secured!" she shouted, once again thinking that it didn't sound like her regular voice at all.

For the two women, the rest of the world disappeared - it simply faded away into nothing. All that existed for Jessie and Ricki were the eyes of their partner and the pure, endless love that exuded from them.

Distraught blue met dead-tired green, silently conveying such a strong message of love that Ricki felt completely safe for the first time since her day had been shattered by the intruder.

The wave of emotions flowing over her proved too much for Ricki and she broke down with a wailing sob, throwing herself forward into Jessie's strong arms where she began to cry in earnest.

Jessie fought hard to hold back her own tears, but feeling her lover's body racked by sobs in her arms overcame even her strength and she had to cry along with Ricki, muzzling the honey-blond hair with her mouth and chin while large teardrops ran unhindered down her cheeks.

Captain Reynolds made a quick assessment of the situation and stepped ahead of the point man who was still holding Dale at gunpoint. "SWAT unit, stand down," he said, looking at the forlorn Dale who slowly put his hands on the back of his head. "Area clear," he said into the microphone on his collar.

Getting the all clear, crisis counselors and several paramedics entered the classroom with two stretchers. They were soon busy checking up on Jeremy - who wasn't particularly pleased with being poked and prodded by strangers - and wanted to look at Ricki, but a sharp glare by Jessie made them wait.

Behind them, Special Agent Conrad arrived with her whole team and several city police officers. The chief negotiator immediately went over to the far wall of the classroom and studied the man she had spoken to during the day. "Hello, Dale," she said in her trademark cheery voice. "Thank you for ending this the sensible way."

"Don't thank me... thank her," Dale said, nodding at Ricki who was still holding onto Jessie like she never wanted to let her go.

"Oh, I will," Melissa said and left Dale to be formally arrested by one of the officers from the city police.

By the time Jeremy had been stretchered away - under considerable complaints from the young gentleman - and Dale had been taken out of the classroom in handcuffs by the city police, Ricki was still clinging onto Jessie.

Chuckling, Melissa leaned in and tapped Ricki's shoulder. "Hi, I'm Melissa Conrad. I don't want to rush you or anything, but there's a press conference going on outside and I'm actually supposed to participate."

Ricki reluctantly pulled back from her partner and wiped her red eyes and her running nose on her sleeve. "Hi... I'm Ricki Warbeck. Nice to meet you again," she said and put out her hand.

"Dale said we should thank you for the peaceful way this horrible mess ended," Melissa said, shaking Ricki's hand.

"The words of the Lord convinced him, I was merely the vessel. Dale was going to shoot himself, b- but I couldn't... I just couldn't allow that to happen. I asked if he wanted to pray with me... he did... so we recited the Lord's Prayer together," Ricki said in a trembling voice that prompted Jessie to pull her into a new hug.

"Mmmm," Melissa said, smiling at the display of love. "Oh, just one more thing... I heard the weapons were on the table when the SWAT unit came in... how did you get him to give them up?"

Shrugging, Ricki shook her head slowly almost like she couldn't believe it herself. "I... I don't know. I just asked him."

"Oh! That's not in our manual. Nor in yours, eh?" Melissa said, nudging Jessie's shoulder.

"Definitely not. But I've learned that Miss Warbeck here can be quite persuasive when she wants to be," Jessie said and leaned in to give the top of Ricki's head a little kiss.

"I'll bet. Anyway, I better get out to the press conference. Miss Warbeck, please talk to the crisis counselors. Even though it's obvious you have a pillar of support here, those guys are professionals. Okay?" Melissa said and put a warm hand on Ricki's shoulder.

"Yeah... I will. Thanks."

Melissa put out her hand and waited for Jessie to do the same. "Bye, Jessie. Let's hope it'll be a while before we see each other again... I mean, for this kind of thing," she said as she shook Jessie's hand.

"Yep," Jessie said, moving her arm back around Ricki's shoulders. "Off you go or you'll only catch the press conference in a rerun."

Once Melissa had left the classroom, the paramedics came over to Ricki but she turned them down again and relied on Jessie's strong frame for support as she began to shuffle out of the room where she had spent the last three hours as a prisoner.

"Sanders, wait up," Captain Reynolds said just as Jessie and Ricki were about to turn the corner in the hallway.

"Captain?"

"I haven't had the pleasure," the usually so gruff Captain said with a broad grin on his face. "Captain A.J. Reynolds, Miss. It's good to see you in one piece," he continued, putting out his hand and waiting for Ricki to shake it.

"Uh... right. I'm Ricki Warbeck, Captain. Thank you for making sure I'm still *in* one piece..."

"All in a day's work, Miss Warbeck... though Sanders here had more to do with it than I did. I, uh-" the Captain looked around and leaned in towards Ricki when he was sure no one was close enough to listen in on the conversation. "I gather the two of you register slightly higher on the social scale than merely passing acquaintances...?"

"We're quite a lot more, Captain Reynolds," Ricki said with a solemn nod.

"Right. Thought as much. Well, do you want to go out the back door so you don't have to go past the press conference? There's a million TV cameras and just as many hungry reporters out front."

"Well..." Ricki said and looked up at Jessie. "We'd like that very much, Captain, thank you," she said after feeling Jessie giving her a squeeze with her strong hands.

"Okay. By the way, Miss Warbeck... for insurance purposes, I'm afraid you have to see a crisis-"

"I know, I know, Captain Reynolds. I will... the first one I meet, I promise," Ricki said with a tired laugh.

"Well, that's good because I happen to know they're taking a coffee break out back with the EMS personnel," the Captain said with a wink.

Jessie chuckled and gave Ricki's hands yet another squeeze. "I'll make sure she sees one, Captain."

"Good. You're dismissed for the day, Sanders. In fact... I'm going to put you on suspension without pay for not telling me that you knew one of the hostages personally. Let's say... four days. That should give you plenty of time to rue your decision not to tell me... and to pamper Miss Warbeck. Yep," the Captain said with a broad grin that was answered by a matching one from both Ricki and Jessie.

"Oh, and don't forget to give your MP5 to the Sergeant and retrieve your Remington before you leave for the hospital," Captain Reynolds continued and saluted Jessie.

Once Jessie had returned the salute, she hurriedly swept her arm back around Ricki's shoulder like she was afraid her partner would keel over if she didn't hold onto her. "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir," she said with a nod.

Turning back around, Ricki and Jessie shuffled towards the back door that would take them to the smaller parking lot at the rear of the school. "I think he's right, hon..." Jessie said, sighing deeply. "I'd feel a lot better if you spent the night at the hospital. I know all too well that once the

reaction comes, it'll hit you like a ton of bricks. All I can do is to make you some tea with honey... I'd rather you had access to immediate, professional help."

"I know," Ricki said with a sigh. She suddenly noticed they were all alone in the corridor that led to the back door. "Hey..." she said, stopping dead in her tracks and putting a hand on Jessie's elbow.

"Hon... is something wrong?"

"Yes..."

"What?!"

"God... I need to kiss you so badly... so badly I can't even think straight," Ricki said and grabbed hold of Jessie's black uniform to get the taller woman to come down to her. "I love you... I love you with all my heart... and what happened here today has only made me love you more..."

Jessie's head started swimming at the heartfelt declaration of love, and at first, she could only smile goofily at Ricki. "I love you so much it hurts, hon," she finally whispered.

For a few seconds, Jessie and Ricki were content to simply gaze deeply into each other's eyes, but their hearts took over and they claimed their partner's lips in a deep, ferocious kiss that swept away another chunk of the fear and terror that had grown in Ricki during the day - and it all happened with the full blessing of Jesus who was looking down upon the two kissing women from a black-and-white charcoal drawing hanging on the wall above them.

THE END.

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