

## Pursuit

“Lie still. Help’s coming.”

Those words penetrated the darkness Jess was lost in. It was a horrible darkness, riven with screams and pain and an explosion of hot, leaping flames. Warm strong fingers touched her neck, her cheek, and she swam even closer to full consciousness.

*My God, my God....*

“I need some help over here! There’s an injured woman!”

The shout, uttered in the same deep, drawling male voice that had told her to lie still, sent terror stabbing through her.

*No, no....*

“Shh,” she breathed, because that was the best she could do. He was crouched beside her, bending over her, she realized, and realized too in that moment when she saw stars swirling through the ink-black sky beyond the dark shape of his head that her eyes were now open.

*Not dead then.*

The reality of his large body looming so close caused her heart to leap. Her stomach cramped with fear. She sucked in air....

The pungent smell of something burning filled her nostrils. It stung her throat, curled down into her lungs.

*Please God no.*

“Hey! We need help!”

“Be quiet,” she whispered, clutching desperately at his trouser leg. She tried to make the caution urgent, sharper and louder, but it came out sounding more like a sigh. A deep, pain-wracked sigh. With reason: she hurt. All over.

*Cold. So cold. Freezing cold.*

“It’s gonna be okay. There’s an ambulance here.”

The man stood up. Her grip on his trouser leg tightened. He’d made no move to hurt her

- he couldn't be one of the demonish wraiths from her dream. Could he? Her instincts said no. He felt - safe, somehow. Like she could trust him. Her hand made a tight fist around the cloth near where it broke over his shoe. Conviction coalesced inside her: whatever happened, he mustn't leave her here in the dark alone.

"We had a wreck." The words hurt her throat as they emerged. She remembered it now, the tires screeching, the car skidding then leaving the road....

*What car?*

Slow motion flip-flops, end over end....

*The others. Where were they?*

She started to shake.

"Damn it, move your asses! Get a medical crew over here *now!*"

That wasn't a shout, it was a roar. Loud enough to shatter the night. Loud enough to pull her head out of the terrible vision she seemed to be watching from a distance. Loud enough to make her cringe. Loud enough to penetrate the sounds - the deep rhythmic thumping overhead, the jumble of voices, the clang of metal, the hum of motors, of which she was just becoming fully aware. Loud enough to be heard. Thanks to him, they would know where she was now without any possibility of concealment.

*They?*

Her pulse pounded. Panic shot through her veins.

*Have to escape, have to escape, have to....*

She was, she realized, curled on her side on damp, cold ground. Her cheek rested on something that both cushioned and prickled - dead grass? Something large and sharp that she guessed had to be a rock jabbed into her hip. Her head felt like it was lower than her legs because she lay twisted like a discarded doll on a hillside. She had only to push herself up and....

Gathering all her forces, she tried to get to her feet, to scramble away, to run until the darkness swallowed her up and hid her and she was safe once more. Pain shot everywhere, zigzagging along her nerve endings like white-hot lightning bolts, making her want to scream at the intensity of it - only she couldn't. It hurt too much.

*I can't move.*

The realization stunned her.

Only her head moved, and her arms, with a great deal of effort. Getting them beneath her, she found she could push her torso a few inches from the ground - and that was all. She was trapped, immobilized in her own body. As she fell back, terror turned her insides icy. Her thoughts went fuzzy. All she knew for sure was that she was in pain, quickly intensifying pain. Her ribs, her legs, her head - they all hurt. She couldn't get away. And she was afraid.

*I should be dead.*

Certainty laced the thought. The crash had been bad. Flying out into darkness, into nothingness, the car rolling over and over, end over end.... and screams, multiple screams. Soul-shattering screams. She was screaming, too. She could still hear the screaming in her head.

*Are the others dead?*

That's what she tried to ask him, when he crouched beside her again. Either she was making no sense, or he didn't hear. She clung to his trouser leg. The material was smooth and cool and sturdy. A lifeline.

"Help's coming. Try not to move."

He must have felt her grip on him, or maybe he sensed her desperation through the darkness, because he patted her hand in clumsy comfort. *If he wanted to hurt you, he's had plenty of time to do it by now.* Instead she felt - protected. *Thank God.* Letting go of his trousers, she clutched his hand instead.

*Warm strong fingers....*

"Don't leave me," she begged, her voice a hoarse, dry rasp in her throat. "They - they...."

But her mind fogged up again, and all of a sudden she couldn't remember who 'they' were. Wasn't even sure she had ever known in the first place.

*They?*

*Dark shapes rushing through the darkness, silhouetted against the flames....*

"What?" He leaned closer, clearly having heard her voice but not understood what she was trying to say. "Who are you? Were you in the First Lady's car?"

*The First Lady. Annette Cooper. Oh God oh God oh....*

She could hear a flurry of movement not too far away: the crunch of dried grass, the shuffle of footsteps, a fragment of conversation. People approaching.

Jess caught her breath. Terror grabbed her heart and squeezed.

"Please...." she begged.

"Over here," he called, releasing her hand with a quick compression of her fingers and standing up. Jess realized that the forest of swaying bushes surrounding her probably blocked her - both of them - from the view of whoever was approaching.

Until now.

Desperation sent her heart pounding against her ribcage like it was trying to beat its way to freedom.

"Gotcha," a man called back.

Her rescuer crouched beside her again. Jess caught his hand.

"The paramedics are almost here," he said before she totally panicked.

Of course. Paramedics were coming. He wouldn't be yelling like that at anyone else.

But her thundering heart wouldn't be calmed.

More footsteps, drawing closer and closer. Rustling branches. Crunching grass. As a spotlight found her in the darkness she couldn't help it: she cringed. Half blinded, she felt like a small animal in a trap, helpless to save herself. All of a sudden she was ruthlessly exposed, visible to everyone, vulnerable. Her pulse pounded. Her heart raced. Her hand tightened on her rescuer's fingers. He glanced down at her. She saw the dark gleam of his eyes shift so that they were once again focused on her. Though the spotlight was on *her*, the glaring white beam pinioned *her*, the shadows enshrouding him receded slightly so that he was more visible, too. Her vision was all blurry - her contacts, she must have lost them - and he was still mostly in darkness, but she was able to absorb the broad strokes. He was a big guy, wide chest, broad shoulders, thick neck, short thick fair hair. White dress shirt, no tie. Black suit coat....

*One of them.*

Recognition flew through her consciousness with the swift, fierce speed of an arrow. She gasped - gasping hurt - and dropped his hand.

"So what've we got here?" It was a new voice, another man, and, contrary to the terror she'd felt a moment before at the idea of being discovered by anyone else, Jess welcomed it now. Welcomed him. There was safety in numbers - right?

*Safety from what?*

“She’s conscious. She must have been in the car.”

He moved back, out of her line of vision, as paramedics bustled around.

“Hi, there, what’s your name?” Another man crouched beside her. Fingers found her pulse.

“Jessica.” She closed her eyes against the light. “Jessica Ford.”

“We’re going to take good care of you.”

“Get a cervical collar on her,” someone else said.

Then she stopped listening, stopped thinking, stopped doing anything, really, except feeling, or trying not to feel, the pain that came in waves. Her attitude was fatalistic: whatever happened, happened, because there was nothing she could do to change any of it now. There were two men, both EMT’s she thought, both seeming dedicated to making sure she would survive. The man who had found her stayed back, mostly just out of her sight, although she caught the occasional glimpse of him with her peripheral vision as the EMT’s stabilized her, then loaded her onto the stretcher and carried her up the hill.

“Keep her away from the press.” The drawl in his voice was unmistakable. He had found her, and stayed with her. She realized that he was with them still, walking near the stretcher. She was afraid of him, now. *One of them*. That was the thought that kept darting through her mind. But she couldn’t - quite - justify the fear.

He hadn’t hurt her. And he didn’t feel like a threat.

But still she was afraid.

Waking up in the ambulance as they were threading an IV into her vein, Jess realized that she must have lost consciousness sometime during the latter part of the ascent.

Not that it mattered. Now that she was out in the open, now that *they* knew where she was, now that she was hurt and helpless and trapped in her own body, there was nothing she could do to help herself even a little bit. Except maybe....

“Call my boss.” With what she feared were her last few seconds of clarity before sedation claimed her, she summoned every bit of strength and determination left to her and spoke to the paramedic securing the needle to her arm with tape. At first her voice was a mere thread of sound. She strained to make it louder. The paramedic heard, because he met her gaze with a questioning look. “John Davenport. And my mother. The numbers are in my phone....” which had been in her jacket pocket. She remembered feeling the solid shape of it bumping against her thigh as they put her on

the stretcher; but she wasn't wearing the garment now and - there it was, her jacket, in pieces on a shelf; they must have cut it off her..." which is in my jacket pocket. Over there."

She tried to cut her eyes toward the remnants of her jacket, but already her lids had grown heavy. With a rush of panic so strong it almost countered the effect of whatever drug was now being pumped into her system, she realized she was going under.

*Helpless....*

But there was nothing she could do to save herself. Even as darkness overwhelmed her, even as she sank bonelessly into the void, she found herself back in the speeding black Lincoln as it shot off the roadway, and screams, her own included, once again echoed in her ears.