

The Rider

By Troy M. Larson

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The driver rubbed his eyes with one hand, then pinched the bridge of his nose. It was still early autumn, but this night was colder than normal, and the heat blowing from the vents wasn't helping to keep him awake.

"Been a long shift?" the male passenger in the back seat asked.

"Yeah," the driver answered. "I drove all night last night. Took some time off for breakfast and went right back to it." He raised his head, looked in the rearview mirror, and mustered a weak grin for the passenger and his female companion. "Hope you still feel like I got you here safely."

"It's the white one on the left," the male passenger said.

The driver's red Ford Explorer slowed to a crawl as he scanned for the right driveway to pull into in a college neighborhood that was coming to life as prime drinking hours approached.

The male passenger leaned forward to get a look at the driver's phone which was attached to a suction-cup mount on the windshield. The "Rider" app was open, and the vehicle's location was displayed on a map. Rider had just launched 8 months earlier as a startup competitor to ridesharing outfits Uber and Lyft. The driver's name, Patrick, was displayed in the lower right corner of the screen beside a stylized logo of the word "Rider", next to a driver rating that showed 4.87.

"I hope that rating is out of five, Pat," the passenger joked.

"Nah," Patrick said, as he cranked the steering wheel and pulled into the passenger's driveway. "That's 4.87 out of 10." He paused for a moment then guffawed in a loud voice that was likely a little too obnoxious.

The passenger and his female companion opened the back door and climbed out.

"Thanks, Pat," the man said. "Hope you get some sleep," he finished, and slammed the door without leaving a tip.

"It's Patrick," the driver said to an empty car, and finished the thought in his head. *You cheap sonofabitch.* It was a hint of the crass, bombastic personality which, when coupled with his tendency to respond to questions impulsively, in knee-jerk fashion, and a resistance to apologize when he was wrong, had served to run him out of nearly every real job he'd recently held. He pressed the "Climate" button on the dashboard, deactivating the heat.

Patrick waited for a group of college students to pass on the sidewalk, then put the Explorer in reverse and backed into the street. A group of intoxicated young people were sitting on the roof of a house across the street, and one of them howled at no one in particular.

If I lived in a neighborhood like this, I'd be in jail.

His phone sounded a mechanical, repeating chirp and the letter "R" appeared on the screen in a large, science-fiction-style font. It was an incoming ride request.

Patrick waited fifteen seconds for the request to pass, then reached up and pressed his thumb to the screen in the spot where the Rider app displayed "online," and it promptly changed to "offline." He grabbed his Rider placard from his window and stuffed it under the seat, then accelerated away and headed for the freeway. His eyelids were heavy and he blinked slowly. He knew forty-some hours online was too long, and Rider would suspend his driving privileges if they knew,

but he had bills to pay and had to drive when the demand was hot, and it had been nonstop for the last day and a half.

He hopped on the freeway and headed for home in the twilight. The streetlights were on but the horizon still glowed with the faint pink and indigo light of the day's last rays. In the flat, remote section of the city's southern edge, he took the off-ramp toward the truck stop where he could get on the bypass loop that would take him to his home on the north side.

The light was red but Sunday evening traffic was nonexistent. Patrick's SUV was the only vehicle on the ramp and he slowed to a crawl as he approached the intersection and reached up to press the button to open his moonroof. *The cool air will help keep me awake.*

It was the last thought he would have before his life changed.

On the other side of the freeway overpass, a motorcycle approached. The young rider leaned back on the seat of his Kawasaki and twisted the throttle. The bike, a modified green and black crotch rocket, responded with a loud buzz from the exhaust, and the front wheel came off the ground. The rider leaned forward and balanced his body weight over the bike's center of gravity, and that's where he was, with his headlight pointed skyward, when he crossed the crest of the overpass.

Patrick hit his right turn signal as he approached the stop line at the end of the off-ramp, but he didn't stop, and he didn't look to his left, either. If he had, he would have seen the underside of the Kawasaki that was closing rapidly on one wheel. Like so many drivers had done so many times before, Patrick rolled through the red signal light and into the intersection.

The rider never saw it coming. Patrick heard a motorized whine in the distance, coming from his left, but too late. He turned to look as the sound of the bike, revving at high RPM, went from distant to deafening in just over a second.

The underside of the Kawasaki impacted Patrick's Explorer right where the driver's door met the front quarter-panel. There was an explosion of plastic and glass as the front wheel rolled over the top of the Explorer's hood, bike and rider separated, and both went airborne. The sound of the crash was incredibly loud, and after it happened, Patrick could only hear a high-pitched ringing in his ears. The collision was violent, and he swayed left in the impact, then back to the right. For one instant, he caught a glimpse of the rider going over the hood amidst a thousand micro-satellites of debris.

Like a bank shot in a game of billiards, the motorcycle ricocheted off the Explorer, crossed two lanes in midair, crashed to the ground, then briefly stood itself back on its damaged wheels before it crashed into the median guardrail. The front forks, already heavily damaged in the collision, broke off, and both pieces of the bike rebounded into the street with the back half spinning like a top until the rear wheel stopped turning.

Patrick was momentarily dazed. The ringing in his ears ended and the first thing that occurred to him was how quiet it was. The broken bike smoked in the street, but there was no sound at all. He looked around for the rider but didn't see him anywhere. There was no moaning, no cries for help. It was deafeningly silent.

He attempted to open his door but struggled with it. There was a sound of metal on metal where the door rubbed against the damaged quarter panel. He put his shoulder against the door and there was a pop as it swung open and he nearly fell out of the vehicle, stumbling in an attempt to keep his footing. Shattered plastic crunched under his feet as he walked into the street and looked for the rider.

Although the bike had gone left, the rider had not.

"He went over the hood," Patrick thought. The sound of his heartbeat pounded in his head.

He turned his head to the right and looked toward the grassy ditch on the other side of the off-ramp. In a city that was struggling with budgetary issues, the grass in the ditches had grown long and untended, but there was one noticeable gap in the grass, where it looked to have been mowed down.

Patrick stepped to the edge of the ramp and looked in the ditch. The grass was smeared with copious amounts of blood, and the sound of Patrick's own heartbeat grew louder.

Keep it together, man.

He followed the mowed-down patch of grass a surprising distance into the ditch, looking for any sign of the rider.

"Could it really be this far?" he wondered, but no sooner had he thought it, he saw a boot.

He took a couple more steps forward and the leg that was attached to the boot came into view. It was bent at an angle that no leg should bend. Patrick began to hear a familiar rhythmic thump echoing through his brain--a familiar sound he didn't want to remember but couldn't forget. The rider's leg was broken between the knee and the hip, and the femur protruded through the skin in a compound fracture. Patrick knelt down next to the rider, reached out with one trembling hand and flipped the rider's visor open. His eyes were open, and Patrick recoiled in shock. He stood again and watched the rider intently for any sign of life. The rider's chest did not rise and fall. There was no writhing, no moaning. He looked at the rider's face again. He was lying head-down in the ditch and his eyes were not moving. Patrick began to shake and his breath rushed in and out in ragged fits and starts.

Patrick forced himself out of his stupor, turned to run back to the road, hesitated for a moment, unsure, then retreated anyway. On the road, he looked back and forth. There was no traffic, only cars passing at highway speeds on the freeway below.

His door creaked again as he climbed back into his Explorer and grabbed his phone. He dialed a "9" and a "1" on his phone when a voice interrupted in his head.

You rolled through that red light.

His thumb hesitated over the final "1" on his keypad.

You've been awake for nearly 48 hours.

Patrick looked around again. There hadn't been any witnesses, he was sure of that.

How long have I been here? Two minutes? Three?

How long before another car comes along?

“He was riding a wheelie for fuck’s sake,” Patrick said out loud. “If he didn’t hit me, he would have hit someone else.”

He dropped his phone in the passenger seat, punched the start button on the dash of his Explorer, and the engine roared to life.

It was only ten minutes later that he found himself pulling into his driveway. It was dark by that time and his neighborhood on the north edge of town was dark too, with only a few streetlights on the corners of each block. He pulled his car further up the driveway than he normally would and parked next to the house. If anybody were to drive by, the damage to his vehicle wouldn’t be readily visible.

He was about to go in the house when the voice in his head was back.

That’s not good enough.

He thought about it for a moment before agreeing. He went to the shed at the head of his driveway and retrieved a gray canvas drop cloth which he threw over the windshield. He was about to pull the dropcloth over the damage on the driver’s side of his vehicle when he noticed something for the first time. His sideview mirror was gone.

Lieutenant Danny Dunn exited his car amid the din of radios from the emergency vehicles already on-scene. A call for a traffic accident wouldn’t normally come to him, but in this case, one of the involved parties had left the scene.

A patrol officer in a yellow and orange reflective vest stood at the crest of the overpass, ready to direct traffic away should anyone come along, and the lights from the responding ambulance illuminated the night in alternating flashes of brilliant blue and red. A department staffer took photographs of the scene while another officer used a tape measure to record the distance between the apparent scene of the impact and the broken motorcycle.

Lieutenant Dunn approached a uniformed officer and asked, “Santos, whaddya got?”

“Fatal,” Santos answered.

Lieutenant Dunn looked over the officer’s shoulder and saw the ambulance crew loading a body covered in a sheet into the back of the ambulance. A tow-truck hoisted broken parts of a destroyed Kawasaki onto a trailer.

“The other party left the scene, unknown vehicle make at this point,” Santos continued. “Looks like the rider came over the top of the overpass,” he said, pointing, “and broadsided a vehicle at the ramp, here.”

Lieutenant Dunn had investigated a number of traffic accidents when he was still a patrol officer, but this one immediately struck him as odd. He looked toward the apex of the overpass and his eyes traced the path he assumed the motorcycle must have followed.

“No skid marks?” he asked. Officer Santos didn’t answer because he knew it wasn’t a question for him. It was just Lieutenant Dunn working it out in his head.

“What about the deceased?” Lieutenant Dunn asked.

“Either he didn’t have his ID on him, or his wallet is somewhere in the grass,” Santos responded. “We’re still looking.”

“Any witnesses?” Lieutenant Dunn asked. Santos shook his head.

Lieutenant Dunn pointed at a red and black sideview mirror lying in the street at the point of impact. “Well, we got a color,” he said. “Let’s get that matched with a make and model as soon as possible, OK?”

Officer Santos nodded and picked up the mirror as Lieutenant Dunn walked to the edge of the freeway ramp and peered down into the ditch.

The television flashed in the darkness, intermittently illuminating the bedroom walls. A police procedural show played on the screen, but the sound was muted. Patrick tried to sleep, and although he had been awake for far too long, he slept only fitfully. He tossed and turned in his bed and dreamed of the trauma he had just experienced. In his nightmare, he replayed the events of the night with his imagination offering new, horrifying details. His head rocked back in the impact and he caught a glimpse of the rider, visor open, staring back at him through the moonroof as he sailed toward the ditch where he would die.

Patrick jolted awake and sat upright in his bed, sweating. He looked around the room, then at the TV, half expecting to see a breaking news report about a hit and run accompanied by a photo of himself, a wanted man, but no such news came. He got out of bed and went to the fridge where he grabbed a bottle of water, then sat down in a dining room chair. He sipped the water and stared out the window, but soon, his eyelids were heavy, and he again fell asleep.

The sun had risen by the time he awoke, still sitting in the dining room chair. He got to his feet and groaned as he raised one hand and rubbed the back of his neck. In his bedroom, he retrieved a towel from the linen closet and prepared to take a shower, but as he turned toward the bathroom, he caught a glimpse of the TV. The local morning news show was on and video of an ambulance was on the screen with a graphic that read “Fatal South Side Hit & Run”.

Patrick grabbed the remote control and pressed the mute button. The sound resumed.

“...are asking potential witnesses to contact law enforcement at...” the newscaster said.

Instantly, he remembered the full impact of what had happened the previous night. He strode to the window and pulled back the curtains. His Explorer was parked outside in the driveway and the canvas dropcloth had slid off the vehicle sometime in the night. It lay on the ground in a heap, the damage to his vehicle now frighteningly visible in the daylight.

Patrick sat down on the sofa, opened his laptop, and tapped “auto body repair” into a search engine. There were dozens of results and he was compelled to call the first one he found as the panic inside drove him to remedy this situation as soon as possible. He just wanted to erase all evidence of what he had done, but there was one problem -- that sideview mirror.

It's only a matter of time. They'll be checking with local repair shops for repaired Ford Explorers by the end of the day.

He continued to browse and scrolled further down the list of results until one caught his eye. "Dirty Dave's Auto Body and Salvage" was the name of the place, but it was the location that attracted his attention. It was in Brookhaven, about 120 miles down the highway. He had dated a girl from Brookhaven once. They had their own TV and radio stations and it would be less likely that the accident would be on the news there.

Patrick pulled out his phone and prepared to dial but stopped suddenly. *There was blood on his phone.* He grabbed a paper towel from his kitchen counter, wetted it under the faucet, and wiped the phone down. When he was done, he was about to throw the blood-stained paper towel in the trash, but he hesitated. Instead, he went into the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet. With the phone clean, he dialed.

"Hi, Lorraine, it's Patrick," he said. "Yeah, um, I'm... I'm not gonna make it in today," he said, feigning a cough. "I'm not feeling so well." He had just started this job and he thought he could get away with missing one day of work. He hadn't overused that privilege, yet.

There was a pause while he listened to Lorraine express her concerns and well-wishes.

"Yes, thank you," he said. "No, I'm sure it's nothing serious," he continued, even though in reality, it was *very* serious. Deadly serious.

When the phone call was done, he put on his shoes, then went back to the computer and wrote down the address for Dirty Dave's Auto Body and Salvage in Brookhaven. He grabbed his keys out of the dish on the kitchen table and was just rounding the corner, into the living room, when he encountered the rider--a tall slender man in a black motorcycle helmet, standing in his living room.

Patrick flinched and cried out in surprise. He recovered a moment later, clenched a fist and held it to his chest, looked again, and saw only his dark coat hanging on a hook on the door of the living room closet. He smiled. Not the smile of someone who just heard a joke, but the kind of teeth-baring smile that looked like a wince. An *I can't believe that just fucking happened* kind of smile. He regained his composure and, with keys in hand, headed out the door.

The desk where Danny Dunn spent little of his time was nothing like the desks of detectives you see in the movies. There were no piles of manila folders, no ring-shaped coffee stains or stacks of paper. He prided himself on organization and kept his desk as a reflection of his neatness, which wasn't much of a challenge, since he spent most of his time pounding the pavement and chasing down leads.

On this morning, he arrived for work and found a large plastic evidence bag on his desk. The red and black sideview mirror was in the bag, and there was a sticky note attached.

"2013 Ford Explorer," the note read.

Danny set down his shoulder bag, took a seat at his desk, picked up the receiver and punched a button on his black desk phone.

“Jerry,” he said. “I need to send out a request for information. Do you still have that auto body repair distribution list?”

He grabbed the sticky note off the evidence bag.

“Great,” he said. “2013 Ford Explorer, red and black. Left side body damage.”

By the time Lieutenant Dunn put out the word for the damaged Ford, Patrick was already two hours down the road, right on the outskirts of Brookhaven. For the entire drive, he had been traveling at precisely nine miles per hour above the speed limit. He had been wary of speeding, but he was more worried about other travelers passing him on the left, where the damage to his vehicle would be plainly visible. He had settled on 69 miles per hour as a happy medium. Fast enough to make sure that only a few cars would pass him on the drive, and when *he* had to pass someone, they would only see the right side of his car.

Patrick’s fatigue was showing. There were dark circles under his eyes and his shirt collar was ruffled. He entered a speed zone as he approached Brookhaven and he disabled the cruise control as the speed limit dropped from 60 to 40. He glanced in his rearview mirror as he slowed and his heart skipped a beat.

A biker’s black helmet, visor down, occupied the space right in the middle of the Explorer’s rear-window. He was right on Patrick’s bumper.

“Jesus!” Patrick said. The biker tailgated him for a moment that seemed to go on forever.

The exhaust from the bike buzzed loudly as the biker pulled into the passing lane and sped past on a brown street bike.

Beads of sweat dotted Patrick’s forehead.

Pull it together, man.

His tires crunched on gravel as he pulled into the parking lot of Dirty Dave’s Auto Body and Salvage minutes later. It looked like it was more salvage and less auto body to Patrick. The “fence” around the place was made of old, steel car rims that had been welded together to form a barrier ten feet tall, then painted silver. A shop with a single vehicle bay was off to one side.

Just the kind of place I was looking for.

He shut off his car and looked in the mirror on his sun visor. *I look like shit.* He ran his fingers through his hair and straightened his shirt collar before getting out and heading for the door.

Sergeant Santos strode into Danny’s office with a thick manila folder in his hand. It was overflowing with what looked to Danny like half a ream of paper.

“Danny. I got the info on your rider,” he said as he laid the folder on the desk.

Danny opened the folder and thumbed through the paper.

“Looks like we got ourselves a daredevil,” Danny said.

“He has citations going back six years,” Santos added. “His social media is loaded with photos of him doing wheelies, standing on his seat... all on public streets.”

Lieutenant Dunn gathered up the folder, got up from his desk, walked into the hallway and went down to the garage.

“Where’s Charlie?” he asked in a loud voice as he entered the garage. A man in greasy coveralls pointed.

Charlie was a former investigator who had transferred to the garage a few years earlier, after a back injury incurred in a high-speed chase began to interfere with his work. Danny found him working on a police cruiser at the back repair bay.

“Charlie,” Danny called out, “Did you get a chance to look at that Kawasaki?”

“Yeah, I did,” Charlie said in his thick Texas drawl. “Why?” The word came out with a “Hw” sound, like the proper pronunciation everyone had been taught in school but only practiced in the south.

“What did the bottom of it look like?” Danny asked.

Charlie furrowed up his brow, not sure what Lieutenant Dunn was asking him.

“Let’s take a look,” he said and beckoned for Danny to follow.

In the back room, a holding area for auto parts that might be needed in trials and such, Charlie led Danny to a wooden crate that contained the remains of the Kawasaki. Charlie grabbed an engine hoist, wheeled it over to the crate, and hooked a metal chain to the head tube of the bike’s mangled frame. He grabbed the hoist’s handle in one meaty fist and pumped it up and down as the bike rose from the crate.

Danny stepped forward and grabbed the remains of the bike with one hand. He spun it counter-clockwise to bring the underside of the bike into view, and his suspicions were confirmed. There was extensive damage to the bike’s underside, and red paint transfer. Charlie looked at Danny, puzzled, but Lieutenant Dunn had a look of recognition.

“This guy had the nose of the bike in the air at the time of the collision,” he said. “That’s why he didn’t brake. He didn’t see it coming.”

It was a holiday weekend and the coffee shop was nearly empty. Even so, a skeleton crew of staff members struggled to keep up with the few customers in the place. Patrick stood in line, waiting to order a large coffee with a double shot of espresso. If he was gonna get back to driving...

And you need to.

...he had to be alert, on top of his game.

The line moved and Patrick stepped to the counter to place his order. As the barista went to make his coffee, there was a clatter on the counter and Patrick turned, startled, just in time to see a

gloved hand place a black motorcycle helmet on the display case. He turned quickly to look at the customer standing in line behind him, and perhaps his head snapped around a little too fast, because the young man smiled a slightly uneasy grin.

“Sorry,” the young man said.

Patrick just nodded at the young man in the trendy, European style motorcycle jacket, retrieved his coffee from the barista, and took a seat in the corner of the shop. He sipped his coffee and browsed through his social media feed on his phone while a group of three young people chatted two tables away.

The TV mounted in the corner of the room played a local newscast and one of the young people shouted to the barista.

“Hey, can you turn this up?”

Patrick looked up to see what was going on and was horrified to see a new story about the rider on the news.

The barista held a remote in the air and pressed the volume button.

“...are looking for a red and black 2013 Ford Explorer,” the announcer said.

Patrick glanced out the front window of the coffee shop. His Explorer was parked at the curb, in plain view.

“The motorcycle rider killed in a hit and run accident last week has been identified as 25-year-old Logan Bailey,” the news anchor intoned. “Bailey had an extensive history of citations with local police, including speeding and exhibition driving.”

A photo of the young man flashed on the screen and Patrick made a conscious effort not to flinch. The eyes of a young man he had last seen under a bloody helmet along the highway were staring back at him.

A young man in a hoodie turned to one of his friends and said “I guess that’s what happens when you ride like a fucking moron.”

Patrick was focused on the television.

His name was Logan Bailey.

A friend of the young man in the hoodie said, “You need to stop vilifying bikers.”

“Just because he was doing wheelies doesn’t mean he deserved to die,” a young woman chimed in.

Patrick got up from his seat, tried to look casual, and headed for the door. He rounded the front of his freshly repaired SUV, climbed in, and with shaking hands, placed his coffee in the cupholder and his smartphone in the mount on the windshield. He leaned back in his seat and took a deep breath. It was possible someone in the coffee shop, or elsewhere on the street, might be watching him, so he made an effort look calm, unhurried. He was nervous about still driving his Explorer, but he took a little comfort in the popularity of the vehicle. There were a lot of ‘em on the road, and the red and black color scheme was the most common of them. As long as he took it easy, obeyed the rules of the road and avoided getting pulled over, he rationalized, he should be OK. They couldn’t pull over every red and black Explorer on the road.

When he had calmed down, he leaned forward and tapped on the stylized “R” on his smartphone desktop to open the Rider app. The app opened with an animated flourish and he slid his thumb across the switch to go online.

I just need to get back to work. Put this behind me.

He started the car, looked in his sideview mirror, cranked the wheel to the left, and prepared to pull out of his parallel parking spot. Just as he stepped on the gas, a city bus blared its horn and screamed by on his left. It missed him by inches.

“Jesus!” Patrick cried out.

You almost blew it, right there, Bubba.

Patrick leaned forward, steadied his hand, and slid his thumb across the Rider switch again. The display changed to “offline”.

You’re not ready.

Sergeant Santos was on the phone when Danny came into his office and sat down in the worn orange chair on the other side of his desk. There were stacks of paper everywhere, a computer printout of a road sign with the word “DRAMA” inside a slashed circle, and a string of Christmas lights Santos had hung 10 months prior.

“So, nothing like that in the last 30 days?” Santos questioned the person on the phone.

“Ok, yes. If you could send that to me, I would appreciate it,” he said. “Thanks”.

He hung up the phone and spun around in his chair to face Lieutenant Dunn.

“What’s the word?” Danny asked.

“I got nothin’, boss,” Santos answered. “I have 19 auto body shops in the database, I’ve called every one of them, and I have negative confirmations from 16 of them. No Ford Explorers since the accident.”

Danny raised his eyebrows. “What about the other three?” he asked.

“One no answer,” he said, “and two who wouldn’t release the information until they could talk to the boss. I expect to hear back on those soon.”

“Alright,” Danny said with a sigh. “Let me know the minute you hear,” he continued as he got up to leave.

“Will do, boss,” Santos said.

“And clean up this office, will you?” Danny said. “It looks like a Mexican yard sale in here,” he said as he headed out the door.

Santos looked around and said, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

His office door was closing as he shouted after Danny.

“Santos is Portuguese!”

In monotone tan battledress that matched the Iraqi landscape, Patrick looked like a soldier, but he didn't carry a weapon. He wore a headset with a microphone and carried a backpack loaded with cameras and audio gear. His photojournalist rode behind him on a military Humvee with a large HD camera perched on his shoulder, a Kevlar battle helmet on his head, and his press credential dangling from a black lanyard around his neck. His name was Cameron, and he was a cameraman, so many of the embedded journalists had taken to calling him "Cameron Man". It wasn't a nickname he was fond of, but the rest of them thought it was a riot.

The streets in Fallujah weren't like any streets Patrick had seen prior to his time in Iraq. The narrow, unpaved surface was rough and passed between two and three story buildings made of sun-dried mudbrick, not unlike the adobe structures of the early American Southwest. The Humvee kicked up clouds of dust from the dry surface as it passed through the war-torn city. Iraqis lined the street and peered back from every window and doorway.

Without warning, one of the armored vehicles in the convoy suffered a mechanical breakdown and the caravan ground to a stop in the rutted street. The soldiers walking alongside the vehicles dropped to one knee and trained their weapons toward the surrounding rooftops. Soldiers scrambled to the broken down vehicle and barked orders echoed off the walls of the buildings that lined that narrow street.

"Move it, men! We can't stay here."

Patrick's heart began to pound. *This isn't good. This is not good.*

He climbed off the Humvee and Cameron followed him to the rear of the vehicle, where a muscled soldier stood guard.

"What's going on?" Patrick asked, extending a hand held mic toward the soldier.

"Breakdown," the bearded, tattooed Marine answered. "We got about thirty seconds to fix this, or we're gonna have to leave it behind," he hissed.

Cameron moved around the passenger side of the Humvee to get a better angle and when he turned around to shoot the interaction, found Patrick right in his face as he moved toward the front of the convoy. Patrick had been fearless when he first came to Iraq, but he had seen too many people killed and had started to believe what he was doing was way too dangerous.

"The APC," Patrick said, pointing. "Let's go." They had been instructed, if anything were to go wrong, to take shelter in the armored personnel carrier.

He squeezed past Cameron and they had begun to move up the line of vehicles when a Marine shouted.

"RPG!"

An insurgent crouched on a nearby rooftop with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, trained on the convoy.

All hell broke loose in an instant. The Marines surrounding the convoy opened up with their weapons, and hundreds of rounds blistered the mudbrick facade of the building where the insurgent had been waiting for the right moment to strike.

A burst of smoke obscured the insurgent's face as the grenade came off the launcher and rocketed toward the Humvee. A fraction of a second later, the insurgent was felled by a round to the head from an American Marine, but it was a fraction too late.

"C'mon! C'mon!" Patrick shouted, beckoning frantically for Cameron to run, but it was too late. The grenade closed the distance to the Humvee in a moment and Patrick had barely enough time to pitch himself face down on the side of the street where he came to rest in a foot-deep rut. He threw his hands over the back of his neck as the grenade passed through the windshield of the Humvee and exploded in the passenger seat. The passenger door came off in the explosion and hit Cameron, and the shockwave propelled the door and the cameraman through the already shaky front wall of the adjacent building as a huge yellow and orange fireball rose skyward.

Patrick raised his head just after the blastwave passed over him, in time to see the front facade of the building crumble into a heap of rubble, followed by most of the second story. A cloud of dirt rolled out of the wreckage and enveloped the convoy.

He got to his feet and staggered toward the spot where the building had stood moments before. The burning wreckage of the Humvee cracked and popped as unspent rounds cooked off, but Patrick couldn't hear it. He couldn't hear anything. There was a high-pitched steady ring in his ears, and he recognized it as one of those moments you see in war movies, when an attack renders the hero deaf while images of grizzled, bloody soldiers shouting and pointing play silently in slow-motion on the screen. Except this wasn't a movie. It was real life.

He inhaled a combination of dust and toxic vapor from the burning debris and immediately coughed. Patrick pulled his shirt over his nose and mouth and picked his way into the rubble.

"Cam!" he shouted. His voice rang muffled in his head like someone yelling underwater.

He hesitated at the threshold of the partially-collapsed building and surveyed the portion of the building which still stood. A stream of glass and debris rolled from the sagging upper floor onto the ground at Patrick's feet.

"Cam!" he shouted again.

He stepped over the threshold into what had once been the interior of the building, and made his way into an open area of the lower floor. A pool of blood expanded on the floor near a pile of rubble which had been the exterior of the building only moments before. Patrick stepped carefully around a twisted shard of metal and a boot came into view. He took a couple more steps forward and the leg that was attached to the boot came into view. It was bent at an angle that no leg should bend. There was a rhythmic thump echoing in his head as his hearing began to return. Cameron's leg was broken between the knee and the hip, and the femur protruded through the skin in a compound fracture. Patrick started to become aware of soldiers shouting outside, yelling for him to evacuate, but he couldn't take his eyes off Cameron. He had a gaping chest wound where the door of the Humvee had hit him, and it was obvious he had not survived.

Patrick knelt down next to Cameron's body and, with both hands, grasped the lanyard which held the now-sooty and bloody press credential around his cameraman's neck. Cameron's head was turned to the side, his helmet still fastened tightly under his chin, and as Patrick tried to lift the

lanyard, it caught on the back of the helmet and the dead photojournalist's head rotated around to face him. The face, and accusing eyes, of Logan Bailey were staring back at him.

Patrick began to scream, and he was still screaming when he sat up in his bed in a hot sweat. He looked around the room and tried to clear the cobwebs in his head. The house was dark and quiet, but it took him a few minutes to calm down and accept his reality. *This isn't Iraq. You're home. You're safe.*

In the kitchen, he opened a bottle of prescription medication, popped two pills in his mouth, took a bottled water from the fridge and swigged on it liberally. How many times had he done this since coming home from Iraq? How many sleepless nights had he endured? He had lost count. The consequences, though, were plain. He had lost his fiancée, many of his friends, and his job as a journalist at a local newspaper. The only jobs he could hold were jobs where he mostly worked alone.

From the darkened living room came the sound of a mechanical, repeating chirp. His phone lit up on the coffee table and illuminated the room in a dim, spooky light, like a candlelit room in a power outage.

Someone was requesting a ride. Patrick furrowed his brow and walked slowly toward the phone as the chirp from the Rider app continued for the customary fifteen seconds. He was two steps away when it stopped chirping. He picked up the phone and swiped right with his thumb, then tapped the "R" to open the Rider app. There was a momentary pause while the app opened with the usual animated flourish and then the normal user interface appeared on the screen. In the top corner, right next to the switch, the app displayed the word "OFFLINE".

Patrick dropped the phone like it was hot to the touch and it clattered on the coffee table. He immediately thought better of it, picked it up, and powered it off before dropping it again.

There were three new emails in Lieutenant Danny Dunn's inbox when he arrived that morning, all from Santos.

"Last Three Body Shops," read the subject line. There were PDF files attached.

Danny opened the first, then the second, and reviewed the attached files. They were spreadsheets with the transaction details of customers who had patronized the body shops since the accident, but Danny didn't see any that stood out.

He opened the third document and found a scan of a note, handwritten on a sheet of letterhead in a non-standard size, with a list of 9 customers. Danny noted whomever had written the note was a working stiff, because there were greasy fingerprints on the note, which had come through in the scan. He reviewed the entries on the page. Where the previous two documents had been spreadsheets with detailed information, this note was just names, vehicles, and method of payment--no dates or phone numbers.

There was a Toyota, two Hondas, a number of domestic sedans, a van, and one RV, but entry number 6 caught Danny's eye. *Ford Explorer*. The customer's name was listed as "Cameron" and the method of payment read "Cash".

Who pays cash for auto body repairs?

The letterhead was from "Dirty Dave's Auto Body and Salvage" in Brookhaven.

Ninety minutes later, Danny stood in the empty, working-class reception area at Dirty Dave's. The door to the workshop opened and a huge man in a gray work shirt with blue stripes and a name patch that read "Dave" waddled in, wiping his hands with a well-used crimson shop towel.

"How can I help you, sir?" he asked.

Lieutenant Dunn introduced himself and produced a printout of the customer list.

"I'm investigating a hit-and-run accident, and I have a few questions about this customer," he said, pointing, as he slid the printout across the counter.

"Mmmm, yeah," the mountain of a man said. "I remember him."

"What kind of repair was this?" Danny asked.

"Uh, driver's side damage," Dave answered. "Mirror busted off. Took 2 days."

"You don't have a last name listed here," Danny said. "Do you have any more information on him? A phone number maybe?"

"No, I'm sorry about that," Dave said, the word "sorry" coming out with a long "O" sound. "I do the best I can with the paperwork, but I'm better with the tools if you catch my drift."

"Do you record the license plates or anything?" Danny asked.

"No, I'm sorry."

Danny looked around the reception area and noticed a surveillance camera with a lit, red LED mounted near the ceiling.

"What about the cameras?" he asked, frustrated.

"That's a tape-based system I installed in the 90s," Dirty Dave answered. "Mostly it keeps the neighborhood kids from stealing candy while I'm in the shop, but the tape overwrites itself every 48 hours," he finished, and shrugged.

Danny took a more serious tone.

"Listen, Dave, this vehicle might be the one I've been looking for," he said. "It was involved in a hit-and-run accident with a kid on a motorcycle, and the kid didn't make it."

Dave's hands stopped working the shop towel.

"Is there anything you can tell me to help locate this customer?" Lieutenant Dunn asked.

"Gosh, I am sorry," he said, again, then stopped. "Wait a minute..."

He opened the shop door and shouted.

"Luke! Bring me that thing you found in the Explorer last week," he yelled.

Through the window to the shop, Danny could see a skinny kid in coveralls cross the workshop and retrieve something from a toolbox.

“We like to give our customers the best possible experience, you know?” Dave said, “So we always make sure to do a really good vacuum job before we return a customer’s car. Under the seats and everything.”

The skinny kid came through the workshop door into the reception area and held out a thin piece of cardboard.

“Luke was vacuuming the dirt outta that Explorer and he found this under the seat,” Dave said as he took the piece of cardboard and handed it to Danny.

“Forgot to put it back in the car. I thought the guy might come back for it, you know?” Dave finished.

Lieutenant Dunn flipped the piece of cardboard in his fingers and examined it. It was a professionally-printed placard with double stick tape in the corners, and it bore a stylized logo of the word “Rider” with “Driver” printed underneath in black block letters.

“It’s for one of those taxi things you can call with your phone, you know?” Dave said.

“Can I keep this?” Danny asked.

“Sure,” Dave said. “I wish I could have been more help...” he began to say, but Danny interrupted him.

“This will do just fine, Dave,” he said as he turned to leave. “Thank you.”

The sidewalks of the Saloon District were thick with tourists, eager to take in a night of drinking and dining amidst the gas lamp streetlights and historic buildings, and partiers who were just desperate for a buzz. Patrick wandered among them, already buzzed and looking for more, but he was flirting with danger. Alcohol amplified the side effects of his medication--nausea, weakness, fatigue--but he didn’t know how to cope. He was self-medicating with booze.

He headed north, past Memorial Square, where a crew was setting up a stage for a festival, and continued on beyond the trendy, upscale clubs and pubs, to a neighborhood where the pubs were a little dirtier and the drinks a little cheaper. He was feeling a little queasy and his head was lightly swimming. He began to cross the street to duck into an Irish pub he had previously patronized, but stopped when he saw something on the other side. In the dimly lit archway of the pub, beyond the bobbing heads of pedestrians passing on the sidewalk, a dark figure stood wearing a black motorcycle helmet.

Patrick hovered at the curb, indecisive, then turned back.

“Stop it,” he said out loud. A passing pedestrian looked at him and wondered who the man with the prodigious bags under his eyes was talking to. Patrick ducked into the first place he came to, a dive bar called The Empire.

He found a seat at the bar as the sound of country rock music and the smell of beer spilled three nights ago washed over him. He ordered a beer as the singer on the overhead speakers pleaded for repentance.

*Baby, say you're sorry
Please tell me you were wrong
Tell me why I've been so blind and loving you so long*

*Promise me that next time
You'll do better than you've done
Lie to me and make me believe that I'm the only one*

The bartender delivered his beer, and as he set it down, he noticed the tattoo on Patrick's arm. "Iraq" was lettered on a banner above a map of Iraq, and the words "and Back" were on a banner at the bottom.

"Thank you for your service," the bartender said.

Patrick simply nodded and the bartender went about his business. He had long ago stopped correcting people when they asked him about his "service" in Iraq... about the same time he discovered that embedded wartime journalists didn't get the same reverence as soldiers who had served. He would say "*Thank you, but no, I wasn't enlisted. I was a war correspondent for the AP,*" and they would simply say, "*Oh,*" and go on talking to someone else they deemed more deserving of their respect, or they wouldn't say anything at all, and Patrick would be left to think about all the horrible things he had seen and the people he had lost. Even though he had put his own life on the line, he hadn't killed anyone, plus he was a member of the "media", so somehow, he didn't deserve the respect. It made him angry to think about it.

He finished one beer and then another, perhaps a little too quickly because the bartender, with the experienced eye of a veteran, spoke up.

"You drinking for someone tonight?" he asked.

"I guess you could say that," Patrick responded in an emotionless voice.

"Mind if I ask who?" the bartender questioned.

"My best friend," Patrick answered. "Lost him in Fallujah."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the bartender replied.

"We went through a lot of stuff together," Patrick said.

The bartender just stared back at him, listening, as a good bartender does.

"It wasn't supposed to end like this, you know?" Patrick asked. "We used to joke about how we were gonna marry sisters and buy houses in the same neighborhood, raise our kids together and take them to soccer practice..." he trailed off.

"All that's gone, now," he finished.

"I'm so sorry, buddy," the bartender said. "Sounds like he was robbed of a beautiful life. I can only imagine how his family feels."

The bartender grabbed a towel and proceeded to the opposite end of the bar as Patrick ruminated on his words and finished his beer.

Lieutenant Dunn was halfway back from Brookhaven when his phone rang. Sergeant Santos was on the other end.

“Boss,” he said, “I have some good news for you.”

“Hit me,” Danny said.

“Guess how many Rider drivers in this town drive a 2013 red and black Ford Explorer?”

Santos said.

“How many?” Danny asked.

“One,” Santos said.

“You’re shittin’ me,” Danny answered. “Who is it?”

“Local guy, Patrick Michael Elliott,” Santos answered. “32 years old.”

“Gimme the address,” Lieutenant Dunn said.

“I’m two steps ahead of you, boss,” Santos said. “I went by his last recorded address and the place is empty. Landlord says he evicted him two months ago, didn’t leave a forwarding address.”

“And?” Danny asked.

“I called Judge Hanlon at home,” Santos said. “He doesn’t like to be bothered after-hours, but I sent him a box of Cubans when his daughter had a baby last year...”

“Santos...” Danny said.

“Ok, Ok,” Santos said. “I have a warrant for the Rider data.”

“What exactly are you telling me?” Danny asked.

“I checked the historical data and Elliott was at the scene of the accident,” Santos said.

“He’s the guy,” Danny said.

“But it gets better,” Santos said. “I also got the live data.”

“You can find him?” Danny asked.

“The Rider app tracks driver locations even when they’re not online,” Santos said. “As long as he hasn’t deleted the app, when he turns his phone on, we’ll know exactly where he is.”

“Good work, Santos,” Danny said. “You’re gonna make Detective yet.”

“Thanks, boss,” Santos said proudly.

“Keep me posted,” Danny said and hung up. He put his foot down on the gas pedal and sped for home.

If he was honest, Patrick would have been forced to admit he was pretty fucked up when he left The Empire. The sun had gone down, the air smelled of combustion and natural gas from the gas lamps, and the crowd outside had gotten rowdy. Patrick picked his way through the revelers as best he could, but the alcohol combined with his medication and made him feel dizzy. When he got back to Memorial Square he found himself in the middle of a nighttime parade called “Light the Night”. It

was a celebration of the city's diverse cultural makeup and it was the kind of thing Patrick would normally enjoy, but in his present state, it was something of a nightmare.

A Latin band with steel drummers pounded out uptempo music from a float as puppeteers worked giant puppets in the street. Stiltwalkers strode by with elongated, careful steps, perched atop five foot stilts covered by baggy, colorful pants. In Patrick's inebriated state, they all looked like monsters from a twisted carnival funhouse.

The stiltwalkers and puppets had passed when Patrick saw him again. The rider.

Is it Logan?

He was standing across the street in his black motorcycle helmet, looking off in another direction, but when Patrick took notice of him, the helmet turned and the rider faced Patrick, looking back at him.

How can it be Logan?

Patrick crossed the street, hopped a guardrail, almost fell, then proceeded into the park that made up the bulk of Memorial Square. It was quieter *and darker* in the square with only a few party hounds and horny couples about. A drunk here. Some teenagers there. And the rider.

He was standing under a street lamp, dressed all in black, watching Patrick. When Patrick saw him, he changed course again and headed for the other side of the square. The rider...

Logan.

...changed course with him and followed.

Patrick picked up his pace and hurtled the guard rail at the opposite side of the square. His adrenaline was pumping and he was beginning feel somewhat sobered up. He looked back as he ducked down a dimly lit alley and the rider in black still followed. He picked it up even more--he was running, now--and accidentally plowed into a man who was dumpster diving in the alley.

"Hey!" the man exclaimed.

Patrick spun around on his heel and kept moving without saying a word. He was beginning to pant, and kept looking over his shoulder to see if the rider was still following. When he reached a t-shaped intersection, he went left and almost ran right into the rider, came face to face with him.

"Oh!" Patrick cried out as he spun around again and went the other direction.

"Stop it!" he yelled as he ran. "Leave me alone!"

The rider stepped out of a doorway, again, somehow, not pursuing, but in front of Patrick, who peeled off to his right and rambled into an open area of the alley behind a restaurant, where he ducked behind the dumpster and sat down on the ground, curled his knees up to his chest, and whispered to himself.

Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone.

A restaurant employee stepped out the back door with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips and was just about to light it when he saw Patrick sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth and whispering to himself.

"Hey, man. You OK?" he asked.

"Yeah, um," Patrick stammered, "I'm... I'm OK."

The employee turned around and went back inside without lighting his cigarette and it occurred to Patrick that he was probably going back in to alert a supervisor, or worse, call the cops. Thunder rumbled in the distance. He took out his phone to check the time and realized it was still powered off after his phantom ride request the previous night.

He turned his phone on and the moment it had booted, the sound of a mechanical, repeating chirp burst forth from the speaker and the stylized “R” appeared on the screen. The name of the customer requesting the ride was listed at the bottom of the screen.

“Logan”.

Patrick stared at the screen and the chirp continued, accompanied by an animated swirl that got smaller as seconds passed. A drop of rain fell on the screen, then another. He had 15 seconds to decide whether to accept the ride.

Logan is requesting a ride.

Patrick’s thumb tapped the screen and the word “Confirmed” appeared on the screen before it disappeared and was replaced by a map.

A map to Logan’s pickup location.

Rain gradually began to fall accompanied by the *pock pock pock* sound of the raindrops hitting the dumpster as Patrick scrambled to his feet and took off running toward the street.

Lieutenant Dunn had been at the precinct for ten minutes, just long enough to grab a newspaper and pour himself a hot cup of coffee, when Sergeant Santos burst in with a tablet strapped to one hand.

“He’s online!” he said.

“Where is he?” Danny asked.

Sergeant Santos held out the tablet so Danny could see. A map of the city was zoomed to the east side and a blinking green dot moved along a street.

“82nd and McMillan,” Santos answered. “Heading east.”

Danny jumped to his feet and grabbed his suit coat.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Patrick followed the Rider navigation to the pickup point. The rain had stopped but the streets were wet, and the city above was periodically reflected in flat, glassy pools of water below. On his phone, a flashing arrow represented his car, and a blue dot inside a white circle indicated the pickup point, and when the two came together, the map disappeared and the words “You have arrived” displayed on the screen. The location itself wasn’t a place any normal person would want to be after dark. It

was an abandoned service station under a graffiti-clad freeway overpass. The windows of the garage door had been broken out at some point in the past, then boarded up.

He opened his Explorer's door, got out without closing it, and the door ajar chime sounded repeatedly as he walked away. His buzz had faded and had been replaced by a headache. A single white-yellow light atop a power pole in the potholed parking lot buzzed faintly.

Patrick looked around and caught movement out of the corner of his eye, near the garage door. The rider in the black helmet...

Logan.

...stood near the corner of the service station. When Patrick caught sight of him, the rider slowly turned and walked around the corner, out of sight.

Patrick followed.

"You can't be here!" he yelled as he approached the corner where he had last seen the rider. "You're not real!" He rounded the corner, expecting to see the rider, but nobody was there.

He scanned his surroundings, searching for the rider in the dark.

"You called me here," he shouted. "What do you want?" he questioned and recognized the insanity of calling out to someone he had insisted was not real only moments before.

In the distance, Patrick saw the rider. He was about hundred yards off, standing under a flickering streetlight near the base of an antiquated spiral freeway off-ramp. The rider pointed at Patrick with one slender finger and again walked out of sight.

"You've got a lot of nerve, man," Patrick shouted as he pursued. "You were reckless!" he yelled. "What happened to you wasn't my fault."

He approached the off-ramp and kept his gaze fixed intently on the spot where he expected the rider to be when he cleared the support column that obstructed his view, and, as expected, there he was. The rider, in a black helmet, astride a black motorcycle, stopped in the middle of the seldom-used off-ramp. The bike pointed in the other direction, but the rider had his head turned, looking over his shoulder at Patrick.

"What do you want from me?" Patrick shouted. "You were reckless!" he continued. "It wasn't my fault!"

The rider raised the visor on his helmet and Patrick got a look at his eyes. Even from a distance, he could tell it was Logan Bailey. The streetlight flickered over Patrick's head and his face signaled recognition.

An 18-wheeler exited the freeway above and began to rumble down the off-ramp.

"The are old daredevils, and there are bold daredevils," Patrick said, "but there are no old, bold daredevils."

"You were asking for it, Logan," he finished.

The streetlight overhead flickered once more then went out altogether. Patrick and Logan stood in darkness near the bottom of the off-ramp. Patrick looked down at his feet. The worn concrete of the off-ramp lay beneath his sneakers. He realized only then that he was standing on the

road. He became aware of the sound of the approaching truck. Logan stood motionless, stared at him.

“Sounds like he was robbed of a beautiful life,” the bartender had said. “I can only imagine how his family feels.”

Logan, just like Cameron, had also been robbed of a beautiful life. He would never go to a wedding or anniversary party. He would never get married or have kids he could take to soccer practice. But Patrick had been thinking only about himself. He had lost everything... his friends, his fiancée, his home, his life. He hadn't wanted to lose his driver's license or go to jail.

The 18-wheeler came into view on the cloverleaf behind Patrick and closed quickly.

Patrick had been thinking only about himself. He hadn't spent a moment in consideration for Logan's family or all they had lost. Only himself.

For the first time, the rider...

Logan.

...showed emotion. Patrick could see a smile in the eyes behind the helmet. They had an unspoken connection in that moment. Patrick understood, and Logan knew it.

Logan reached up with one black-gloved hand, flipped his visor down, turned, and twisted the throttle on his bike. The rear tire spun on the pavement and the black bike rocketed away.

“I'm sorry,” Patrick said. “I was wrong.”

The 18-wheeler was maybe 20 feet away when the streetlight over Patrick's head flickered back to life and the driver let loose a deafening blast from the truck's air horn.

Lieutenant Dunn and Sergeant Santos arrived at the same time, accompanied by a small entourage of police vehicles. They stopped behind Patrick's Ford Explorer which was parked in the lot of an abandoned gas station, still running, with the door open.

Danny's attention was drawn toward the freeway by the sound of a motorcycle revving. He saw the streetlight flicker to life and a man standing on the off-ramp with a big rig approaching quickly from behind. The truck blasted its horn but the man did not appear to move. The rig closed the gap in an instant and then the man disappeared and all Lieutenant Dunn could see was truck.

The back of the ambulance was open and the stretcher had been taken out. The rotating lights illuminated the night in alternating flashes of brilliant blue and red.

Lieutenant Dunn stood on the pavement beyond the end of the off-ramp and stared at the ground. There was a thick stripe of black rubber, about the width of a motorcycle tire. Anybody watching would have been able to see the wheels working in his mind.

“Have you had chest pains before?” the paramedic asked. She was talking to the truck driver and listening to his heart with a stethoscope while he reclined on the stretcher with a blood pressure cuff on his arm.

“No,” he responded. “Not until this jerk decided to take a stroll on the freeway at night,” he finished and motioned with one thumb toward Patrick, who stood nearby, his hands behind his back. “I swerved and jammed on the brakes,” the trucker said, “but this guy didn’t move.”

“I got out of the truck and confronted him, but he just stood there staring at me,” he continued. “Didn’t say a word. So I called you guys, and that’s when my chest started to tighten up.”

Nearby, Sergeant Santos peppered Patrick with questions.

“Why’d you run?” he asked as he snapped the cuffs shut. Patrick didn’t answer.

“What were you doing out here?” he asked. “Trying to kill yourself?”

“Apologizing,” Patrick said.

“To who?” Santos asked, puzzled. “For what?” He looked from Lieutenant Dunn to Patrick and back again.

Danny just shrugged, turned and looked at the black rubber mark on the pavement again, then gazed into the distance, beyond the end of the exit ramp.

It was a brilliant, sunny day when they buried Logan, the kind of not-too-hot day that makes most people roll down their windows, open the moonroof, and turn up the radio. It was unusually warm for that time of year, and his mother could only think that it was the kind of day where Logan would have brought his bike out for one last ride before the snowy season began.

The service had been beautiful, Mrs. Bailey thought, and the Minister had chosen the perfect selection of verses to remember her son. She looked around at the gathered mourners, all dressed in black, as the pallbearers lowered Logan’s casket into the ground. There was barely room for everyone. At the back of the crowd, Mrs. Bailey saw someone she recognized. Lieutenant Danny Dunn.

“Thank you,” she said when she caught up with him later.

“I wish I could have done more, faster,” Danny said, apologetic.

“You did fine, Danny,” she said, then added, “You know, I always told Logan to keep his wheels on the ground, but he was a young man and he was gonna do what he was gonna do.”

Danny nodded.

“So, I know what he did, and I accept responsibility for his part in it,” she said, “but thank you for making sure that driver has to accept responsibility for himself.”

And with that, she hugged him.

The sunlight streamed in through the window of Patrick's cell and shone on the stainless steel countertop where he wrote on a sheet of notebook paper. It was a letter to Mrs. Bailey in which he apologized for leaving the scene of the accident. He told her how he was getting therapy in prison for his PTSD, how a new medication was helping him greatly, and how, through therapy, he was learning to take responsibility for his actions, have empathy for others, and live by a moral code. He concluded the letter with a few short paragraphs.

I have learned that life is precious and that it is too short to go on blaming others. I have learned to live life on life's terms. I live by a simple philosophy. Admit you were wrong. Say you're sorry, and do better next time.

Mrs. Bailey, I am sorry for what happened to your precious son. I was wrong to leave the scene of that accident. And when I am released a few years from now, I promise to do better.

I hope you can forgive me.

Sincerely,

Patrick Elliott

Patrick signed the letter, folded it twice, and slipped it into a prison-supplied legal envelope which he addressed and sealed. He got up and went to the door, rapped on it a couple times, and a guard appeared and collected his letter.