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"Where's Junior?"

"He's supposed to be dropping the twins off, but he should have been back by now."

"We need to be leaving. How long are you going to wait for him?"

"If he's not here by the time we're finished loading the minivans... we'll do what we have to do."

"Right."

"Kids! Hurry up and get your things packed and loaded! Anything or anyone not ready to go in five minutes is getting left behind!"

"You talk big, but you'd never really do it."

"Under normal circumstances, you'd be right. But things being as they are, all we can do is save as many as we can."

"How bad is it?"

"Andy, we should have left as soon as Ben called to warn us. I'm afraid that it may already be too late."

"But you really wouldn't leave anyone behind, would you?"

"I wouldn't *choose* to leave anyone behind, but if they refuse to go with us, I'm not going to have time to argue with them... I can't further endanger the rest for the sake of one person."

"Mr. Cooper! Do we *have* to?!"

"Yes, Princess. Go ahead and get into the blue van. We'll be leaving in just a minute."

"You suck!"

"Let's save that discussion for when we're on the road."

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"Is that everything?"

"It will have to be, because we're leaving."

"What about Junior?"

"I hope he's alright. I really do. But whether he is or not, we're not going to do him any good by sitting here."

"Get down! Kids! Get down, someone's coming!"

"That's Junior's car, isn't it?"

"I think so, but it looks like there's someone in the passenger seat. Everyone! Stay down until we're sure it's safe!"

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"The vans are still here, but I don't see anyone. Stay right here until I can see what's going on."

"If it's someone hostile, I can't see what difference it will make if I stay in the car or not."

"Grandma, just this once please do what I say and stay here."

"Just this once."

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"Junior?"

"Mr. Cooper?"

"Oh! Thank God it's you! We were just about to pull out when we saw you pull into the parking lot. Where were you? What took you so long?"

"After I dropped the twins off, I stopped by the assisted living center and picked up Mrs. Usher."

"It's going to be hard enough taking care of the kids..."

"You two took care of me when I didn't have anyone else. I couldn't just leave her here. Now, we can talk or we can drive. What's it going to be?"

"Is your car up to this?"

"If it isn't, we'll ride the rest of the way in one of the vans with you. I really think we need to hurry."

"Yeah."

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"Mr. Cooper? Where are we going?"

"To my uncle's house."

"Is it safe there?"

"I don't know. I've only been there a few times. But it's remote and isolated so hopefully we'll be able to stay there long enough to wait this thing out."

"Why couldn't we stay back at the home?"

"Because people are being taken away by the Army and the police and they're never seen or heard from again."

"Emily, maybe it'd be better if you saved your questions until we're out of town. Mr. Cooper needs to be able to concentrate on his driving."

"Shut up, Mike! And don't call me Emily! My name is Dog!"

"Alright then... um... down girl."

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"Andy, Dianne's getting carsick. Did you bring anything for that?"

"We've only been on the road for four minutes."

"If she pukes, I don't think it's going to matter how long you've been driving."

"Crack open a window for some fresh air. I don't have any medications with me, Hendrix. Now that I think about it, that's probably why Mr. Cooper wanted you to ride in *this* van."

"You don't have to be a dick about it. I've been clean for almost two months."

"Yes. But it wasn't *your* choice. Until you've really committed yourself to *staying* clean, Mr. Cooper, Dr. Ortiz and I are going to do our very best to keep you from harming yourself."

"Dr. Ortiz? Why don't you just call him Junior, like everyone else does?"

"Because, although he had every reason in the world to feel sorry for himself and give up, he worked hard and went to college and earned his PhD. For that reason alone, I would show him respect and call him by his title. But after that, he passed up more lucrative job opportunities and came back to the children's home where he was raised and took a job, helping others to achieve as he did."

"Um, I think Dianne's about to spew."

"Empty one of the plastic shopping bags. We're not going to be able to stop for anything until we're out of town."

"Brian! Hurry and hand me a bag! She's gonna blow!"

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"You should have just left me behind."

"I couldn't do that. I haven't told Mr. Cooper about it yet, but I've heard that the Army is targeting certain groups of people."

"Yes. Back at the center, I heard whispers about them targeting the homosexuals and the liberals, but I'm neither of those."

"There are stories going around about them gathering up the elderly and the handicapped on the other side of Tallahassee. They're taking them away and no one knows what they're doing to them. I couldn't take the chance of them doing anything to you."

"Thank you, Junior. Out of all the children that I've helped over the years, I never would have guessed that you'd be the one who would come back and watch after me in my twilight years. Now that I look back on it, there's so much more that I should have done for you."

"When my life fell apart, you gave me a place to live and let me know that someone cared if I did something with my life or not. I don't know what else you think that you could have done, but what you did was enough. I never would have had the chance to accomplish anything if it weren't for you."

"I'm so proud of you. I don't know if you saw it, but I was there for every one of your graduation ceremonies, from high school on."

"I saw it, Grandma. You and Cliff and Ben were there with me, every step of the way."

"Have you heard from Cliff and Ben? How are JD and Jody doing?"

"I talked to them last week and they were fine. But Ben called Mr. Cooper yesterday and warned him that the military was moving into place, setting up for something big. I was going to call to check on them but Mr. Cooper said that I shouldn't, since it's likely that our calls are being tapped or traced."

"I can't believe that the world has come to this."

"I know."

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"Mr. Cooper, I gotta pee."

"You're going to have to wait until we're out of town."

"If you don't stop the car right now, I'm going to scream!"

"Scream if you must. But I'm not stopping."

"Eeeeeeeaaaya!!!"

"Princess, you do that one more time and I'm going to slap the ever lovin' shit outta you!"

"Mr. Cooper! Did you hear what Dog just said?!"

"Yes."

"Well."

"Well, what?"

"Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"No. I don't think I will."

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"Andy, can I sit up front with you? Dianne and Kevin are asleep."

"Yes. That will be fine, as long as you don't distract me from my driving, if things start getting intense."

"Brian's crying again."

"Hendrix, you've got to understand that he recently lost his whole family. He's grieving. Just give him some time."

"Anyone else would just put him on 'Happy Pills' and forget about him. But somehow we ended up in the one place where they don't believe in 'better living through chemistry'."

"While it's tempting to medicate someone like Brian to keep him from being unhappy, the fact of the matter is that it's better for him to feel what he's feeling and learn how to deal with the pain so that he will eventually be able to move on. In the long term it will make him stronger."

"I don't know. After the chaos of the trial, then the rehab and being put in the home... all I wanted was to not think about it. What's so wrong with that?"

"Not thinking about it doesn't solve anything. If you ignore it long enough, the problem *might* go away on its own, but you didn't do anything to resolve the situation. So, the next time you have to face something like that, you won't have a coping strategy to deal with it. And some problems *can't* be ignored."

"You sounded just like Mr. Cooper there for a minute. You're not a psychologist, too, are you?"

"I have a master's degree in psychology with a focus on child and adolescent studies, but I never went on to get my PhD."

"Oh. I kind of figured that you were just some regular guy who answered a want ad and got a job."

"I am, for the most part. I'm not a psychologist and I don't pretend to be one. But when one of you kids comes to me with questions, hopefully I'm in a better position to help you than some random Joe off the street would be."

"Well, since you're all college educated and stuff, maybe you can tell me... what's really going on?"

"Right now most of what we're basing our decisions on is rumor and speculation. Everything indicates that something very bad is coming. The only thing I really *know* at this point is that a lot of people are scared."

"What's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know. I guess that we're just going to have to put our trust in Mr. Cooper."

"Why are we turning off?"

"Because Mr. Cooper is. He's the one who knows where we're going. Go ahead and put your seatbelt on. This could get bumpy."

"Yeah."

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"How are you doing, Grandma? Is the road too bumpy for you?"

"Are you saying that you can make it less bumpy?"

"Noooo. I'm just worried that it might be hurting you."

"I'm fine at the moment. If I'm going to have a problem, it will probably be after I've had a chance to sleep. I'll most likely be all crippled up with stiff joints and sore muscles in the morning."

"Do you need any medicine or anything to help you with that?"

"If you'll just remind me to take an aspirin before I go to bed tonight, I'm sure that will be enough."

"Yeah. Okay."

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"Um, Mr. Cooper? Are you lost?"

"I know *just* where I'm going."

"It doesn't look like it."

"I'm simply taking back roads as a precaution."

"Hey, you're not taking us out to the middle of nowhere so you can rape us and kill us, are you?"

"Danny! Why would you even imagine something like that?"

"I don't know. You're single. Never married. You work hard all the time and you're always nice to everyone. You just seem like the type."

"So are you saying that you think someone who's loud and vulgar, sleeping around indiscriminately, is the type of person that you can trust?"

"I don't know about 'trust' but I think that I can understand them a whole lot better than someone like you."

"Hopefully, when you get a little older, you'll learn to get to know people and judge them on their merits."



"I'm twelve. How much older do I have to be? I've been around long enough to know that it's the creepy quiet ones that you have to watch out for."

"Would you feel more comfortable if you traded places with someone from the other van, when we stop?"

"No. Andy's even creepier than you are."

"What about Junior?"

"No. He's not creepy. He's just a hard ass."

"Please don't use foul language."

"Seriously?! You're out here driving us through the middle of nowhere trying to get us away from the Army and the police and you're worried because I said ASS?"

"I just don't care for that type of language."

"I was wrong. You're probably going to kill us *then* rape us."

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"Andy, can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Why don't people like me?"

"Well, I can't speak for everyone, but I like you just fine."

"No. You're just like everyone else, always watching me to see if I'm doing something wrong."

"Oh. Now I see. We do that *because* we like you. We don't want to see you get hurt, so we watch out for you."

"But you don't do that for everyone else."

"Hendrix, we *like* you but we don't *trust* you. If anything were to happen to you, we'd all be heartbroken and wishing we'd done *even more* to protect you from your self-destructive behavior."

"Don't hold back. Tell me how you *really* feel."

"Are you denying that it's true?"

"I guess not. I don't *mean* to do stuff like that. It's just that sometimes what sounds like a good idea turns out not to be."

"That's perfectly understandable. You've picked up some bad behavior patterns along the way. Now we're doing our best to break you out of them so that you'll be free to enjoy a future of endless possibilities."

"You know, the last time I was in court the judge said that if I failed one of my court ordered drug tests or got busted for PI one more time, that she's going to stick me in juvie till I'm eighteen."

"Actually, I *did* know that. While you were in rehab, Mr. Cooper had a talk with the entire staff and he explained that we were all going to have to go to extra lengths to keep you clean. Before the judge would release you to us, we had to *prove* to her that we were sincere in our commitment to help you."

"I don't get why Mr. Cooper even bothered."

"Listen. If he didn't like you, if the judge didn't like you... if anyone along the way didn't think you were worth the effort, you wouldn't be here right now. Face it, you've practically got a fan club."

"So, what you're doing for me, you don't do that for everyone?"

"Nope. Think about it. Usually we get a kid in, we find some foster parents who will be willing to take them, then we ship them out. For most kids we're just a rest stop on the way to their destination. But in your case, Mr. Cooper made a choice. He told the judge that he'd *keep* you at the home and that all of us would watch over you."

"I figured that he just got stuck with me."

"No. He fought to give you the chance for a future."

"I guess when we stop, that I need to thank him."

"I think the best way that you could thank him is to prove that he was right."

"How do I do that?"

"Commit to making a change and when you're presented with a challenge, face it instead of finding ways to avoid dealing with it."

"I don't think I know how to do that."

"Of course you don't. *That's* why you're here with us. So we can teach you."

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"There's something that I've been thinking about."

"What would that be?"

"Well, in all the time that I've known you, you've never talked about your husband or said if you have any kids."

"I suppose that's true."

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay. I was just kind of curious."

"There's nothing to talk about. In some sense of the word, I was married to my job. After a certain age, people assumed that I was married and began calling me 'missus' and I didn't bother to correct them."

"So you *never* got married?"

"No. I don't recall ever making the decision to remain single, but I also never felt the *need* to search for someone to fill an emptiness in my life. My work with the children was always quite fulfilling. I would go to work each day and enjoy the time I spent with them. Then, every night I would go home and enjoy the peace and quiet."

"I guess... as long as you're happy..."

"I am. But I can see that something about it bothers you. Can you tell me what it is?"

"I guess that I grew up thinking that life worked a certain way. That everyone followed the same set of rules. I never even *thought* about not getting married someday."

"As I said, it's not necessarily a decision that I made. Things simply worked out so that I was satisfied with my life and didn't feel a desire to change it."

"So, I guess this means that you never had any kids."

"I've had hundreds... probably thousands, over the years. Just because I didn't give birth to them doesn't mean that I loved them any less."

"It's a lot to take in... I don't *have to* find someone. I don't *have to* get married. I don't *have to* have kids."

"Considering the career field that you've chosen, I doubt that you'll have any shortage of children in your life. As far as the rest, just be true to yourself and listen to your own heart. If you find someone special, be with them. If you don't, then be content in your own company. Love your life."

"I guess I'm going to have to think about it. There's a part of me that believes that I should be going out every night trying to meet that 'special someone'. But a more cynical part of me keeps telling me that all that's out there are the dregs of the dating pool. If they're out there and they're single, there's probably a really good reason for it."

"A handsome young man with a doctorate is likely to draw some rather *enthusiastic* admirers. Be sure that you're on your guard for that."

"So far, all that anyone sees when they look at me is some Latino guy working at a children's home. If they look down their noses and aren't interested in getting to know me *before* they find out that I'm educated, then I'm not interested in getting to know them *after* they find out."

"I know that it probably isn't my place to ask, but I think someone should. With college and everything, how are you doing... financially?"

"I'm good, Grandma. Do you remember all the scholarships and grants that you found for me? Well, when you retired and Mr. Cooper took over, he kept right on helping me. Cliff and Ben helped me, too. I never asked them

for money, but somehow they always seemed to know when I was coming up short or had just run out of food. They'd invite me over to dinner or make up some excuse for me to babysit and then they'd pay me way too much money for the little bit of work that I did for them."

"Even so... how deep of a hole are you in?"

"I'm free and clear. The money I make at the home covers my living expenses with a little bit left over."

"Are you saying that you're twenty-five years old, you've got a doctorate degree *and* you're completely out of debt?"

"That's right."

"If word gets out about that, every gold-digger within three states is going to be trying to get a ring on your finger."

"That's why I don't spread it around."

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"Mike! Front and center."

"Huh?"

"Take the passenger seat. I need your help with something."

"Do you want me to drive for a while?"

"Yeah... in your dreams. Listen, I know that you're only twelve..."

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen, right. Anyway, even though you're younger than Princess and Dog, I think that you're probably the one who can help me the best. This trip is likely to get a lot more uncomfortable before we reach my uncle's house."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just do what you can to help keep everyone positive."

"Um... Have you *met* these people?"

"I know, I know, but just do your best to make Princess feel like she's special and Dog feel like she's smarter and more progressive than you are. That should keep them both happy."

"What about Danny?"

"I'm pretty sure that he's sufficiently motivated not to provoke me. Somehow he got the idea that I was going to rape and murder all of you... not necessarily in that order."

"Where did he get an idea like that?"

"I blame television."

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"Hey! Kevin! I can see that you're awake back there. I haven't heard a peep out of you since we left. How are you doing?"

"I don't think he speaks English."

"Sure he does. He may be of Filipino descent, but he's one hundred percent American."

"I've talked to him a couple times and he always acted like he didn't understand me."

"I've heard that he does that at school, too... especially with new teachers and substitutes."

"That's kind of a dickish thing to do."

"Kevin! How. Are. You?"

"Fine."

"Good. Let me know if you're not fine for some reason."

"Okay."

"See? He speaks English."

"And he's a dick."

"I never said that he wasn't."

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"I'm getting thirsty. Would you like some water?"

"I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"As long as we're on flat roads I can grab us each a bottle with no problem. Want one?"

"Yes. Thank you. I thought it might be rude to ask before, but I was curious to know if you had thought to bring food and water."

"I brought a case of water, but not much food. I only brought things that we could eat without cooking. I don't know how often we'll be stopping or when we'll be around a stove."

"I'm ashamed to say that it didn't even occur to me before we left my apartment. I'm sure that I could have contributed something, had I thought to do so."

"Don't worry about it, Grandma. Let me take care of you for a while. It's the least I can do after all the years that you took care of me. Watch out, I opened the lid for you."

"Thank you. Do you remember that Christmas when you were... thirteen, I think? I got you that collection of 3D puzzles."

"That was you? For some reason I thought it was from one of the foster parents. I guess I should have known that they wouldn't get me anything, since they sent me back."

"When I realized that you were holding on to the hope that one of your foster parents still cared for you, I didn't want to disabuse you of the notion. It seemed to bring you some sort of comfort."

"Yeah. You can only take so much rejection before it starts eating at you."

"I regret that I wasn't able to find a stable home for you. It wasn't for a lack of trying, I can assure you of that."

"There were some dark days, but I don't regret any of it. And even though I didn't have a 'traditional' home, I eventually realized that I was in a place where I was appreciated and loved. I know a lot of kids who lived with their birth parents who never had that."

"Yes. I helped as many as I could. Sometimes I miss it... not the paperwork, but helping the children."

"Let's see how this thing shakes out. Technically, I'm just the staff psychologist. But when everything settles down, Mr. Cooper and Andy are probably going to need both of our help taking care of the kids."

"I'm surprised that I didn't think of that. I was so focused on you coming to get me that it didn't occur to me that there might be something useful that I could do to contribute."

"I think it's going to take all of us. Since Ben's warning, Mr. Cooper and I have been breaking our backs trying to get every kid placed. What we're left with are the kids that no one else will take."

"I've noticed that as times change, the prospective foster parents have different preferences and tolerances. Have you noticed the children having anything in common?"

"I hadn't really thought about it in those terms. But I guess if I had to come up with just one thing it would be that they're all self-centered. Some of them seem to feel more entitled than others, but all of them tend to think only of themselves."

"Well, I haven't had your years of academic training, but I've had a lifetime of experience watching after children. What you're describing isn't unique. Young teenagers are often self-centered and young teenagers with family difficulties are that much more so."

"I'm sure you're right about that. I suppose that I'm just used to encountering one or two difficult children a day, mixed in with several others who have relatively minor issues. Seeing this group together and



knowing that I'm going to have to try and help them deal with a situation that I'm probably going to have trouble dealing with..."

"We'll all help each other to help the children to the best of our abilities. What more can we do? And what more could be expected of us?"

"But is it going to be enough?"

"It's going to have to be."

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"Mr. Cooper?"

"What is it, Danny?"

"Why did you jump on me about cussing and not Dog?"

"Do you want a long psychological explanation or a short answer?"

"A short one, I guess."

"You and I were engaged in a conversation. You said something inappropriate so I asked you to refrain."

"Yeah. But why didn't you yell at Dog?"

"Because I didn't think it was worth it. She was angry and if I engaged her at that moment, she would have turned that anger on me and it would have escalated. Sometimes you just have to choose your battles."

"So if I was really mad at someone and cussing at them, you wouldn't say anything about it?"

"It depends on the circumstances. There are times when swearing and venting your frustration is a healthy expression of your feelings. In a case such as that, I'm less inclined to intervene. But swearing in casual conversation or swearing for the sake of swearing is not acceptable. In those cases I will ask you to demonstrate some self-control."

"So how am I supposed to know when it's okay and when it's not?"

"That's something that you have to learn for yourself. But until you do, I'm here to help guide you and give you my opinion."

"If Mr. Cooper isn't around, I can help you, too."

"What can you do?"

"Think about it, Danny. I've noticed that Mike is very good at controlling his temper. If I'm unavailable and you're uncertain about what's the right thing to do, he might be able to help you consider your alternatives."

"Yeah. I'll be happy to help..."

"Okay. Thanks... but first, there's something I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"I don't get why you're at 'The Home' to begin with. You're all athletic and get good grades. I figured that foster parents would be all lined up to take in a guy like you."

"It's because I'm a black teenager in foster care. It doesn't matter how good or bad I am at school and sports. All they have to do is take one look at me to know that they don't want me."

"Wow! That sucks!"

"But since you brought it up, why haven't the foster parents chosen you? I thought that every family wanted a white kid with red hair and blue eyes. You're like their dream kid."

"Yeah. I guess they do, at least until they find out about my criminal record."

"Danny, will you go back and wake Dog and Princess? We're going to be stopping up ahead and I don't want for Princess to miss her chance at the bathroom."

"I'll help you."

"Thanks, Mike."

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"Hendrix, wake up. It looks like we're about to stop."

"What? Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes. But that's fine. Would you see that everyone else is awake?"

"Um... yeah. Okay. Is everything alright?"

"Yes. As far as I know. It looks like we're just going to stop at this gas station, probably to refuel and give everyone a chance to use the bathroom."

"Oh, good. I need to go."

"Wake everyone up, first."

"Yeah."

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"Grandma. We're stopping."

"Did I fall asleep?"

"Yeah. For a little bit. How are you feeling?"

"A little stiff, but I'll be alright."

"Hold it right there for a minute and I'll help you out of the car."

"I think I'll be able to manage it on my own."

"Yeah. Probably. But why take the chance? Give me a second and I'll help you."

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"So, Ron, what's the plan?"

"I thought that we could get the gas tanks filled, then take the kids to that restaurant for something to eat."

"Everything's so quiet here, do you think that we might have overreacted?"

"No. I think that this place is just so remote and off the beaten path that the chaos hasn't reached it yet. We need to get the kids fed and get back on the road before it does."

"May we join you?"

"Mrs. Usher! It's wonderful to see you. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing very well. And before I forget to say it, I'm very happy with the way you've carried on my work. You've done a fine job."

"Thank you. I had a very good example to follow."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Well, Junior, right now the plan is to get the tanks filled, the kids fed and to get back on the road. I have the sense that what we left behind in Tallahassee is following us."

"Right. Well then, I'd better fill my tank, then check out the car to make sure that it's fit for extended travel."

"Are you going to need any help with that?"

"Yeah. If you wouldn't mind. The only reason I know anything at all about auto mechanics is because I bought such an old, used up beater."

"While you two are doing that, Mrs. Usher and I will keep an eye on the kids and get them herded into the restaurant. We'll meet you there."

"Thank you, Mr. Cooper."

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"Oh my! Are you guys having a school trip or something?"

"Yes. Something like that. May I assume that we can order our meals 'to go'?"

"Yeah. That's no problem. Do you know what you want?"

"Yes. For the kids, I'd like seven orders of the number one burger plate and one vegetarian burger meal, no cheese. The adults can each tell you what they'd like."

"But I want a double bacon cheeseburger!"

"Your choices are a regular burger or nothing. What will you be having?"

"You suck!"

"Yes. You've mentioned that before."

"The meals each come with a fountain drink, do you know what you'd like?"

"May we have bottles of water instead?"

"We don't... yeah. Just don't tell my boss. What about everyone else?"

"Thank you. For myself, I'll have a number one burger meal and water..."

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"Any idea of how long it's going to take to get to your uncle's house?"

"I could probably give you a better estimate if we had taken the main roads, but with taking back roads, my best guess is sometime around midnight."

"Do they know you're coming?"

"No. I didn't want to risk calling ahead. I've been cautioned about the phones being bugged and traced. I didn't want to take the chance that there might be someone awaiting our arrival."

"Do you think that your uncle is going to be alright with taking us all in?"

"Actually, no. But the thing is, as much as Uncle Darin likes to whine and complain, he has a strong sense of duty. If I show up with a group of kids, I'm sure that he'll do the right thing... after bitching about it and acting put out."

"I guess, at this point, it's the best option that we have."

"If I could think of a better one, we'd be doing *that*."

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"Mr. Cooper?"

"What is it, Mike?"

"I'm starting to freak out a little bit. I mean, what we're doing is starting to sink in."

"I'm taking you to a place where I believe that we'll all be safe and where we can hopefully wait out whatever it is that the Army seems to be putting into place."

"That doesn't make me feel that much better."

"I'm sorry. I feel it's better to tell you the truth rather than lie to you and tell you what you want to hear."

"Yeah. Thanks for not treating me like a little kid. You're about the only one who treats me like a thirteen year old."

"I do my best to be honest with all of you, but some of the others don't want to know the truth. They avoid hearing what they don't want to hear, and allow someone else to deal with all the unpleasantness. The fact that you're up here talking with me about it tells me that you're old enough to deal with the inconvenient facts."

"The people that we left back in Tallahassee, you know, my friends at school and my teachers, do you think that they're going to be alright?"

"There's a good chance that they will be. I think that people who lead relatively 'normal' lives are probably going to be told what to do, and so long as they do it, they'll probably be fine. By all that I heard before we left, it's the people on the fringes that seem to be most targeted. Unfortunately, orphaned and abandoned children would seem to fit into that category."

"I still don't think that I was abandoned."

"If you feel like talking about it, I can be a pretty good listener."

"There's not much to it. My parents always loved me and were always there for me. Then one day they weren't. I came home from school and no one was there. If my parents didn't love me or didn't care about me, I would have seen it before then."

"It's possible that you're right. Running the children's home, I've heard quite a few stories. Yours isn't the first case of 'disappearing parents' that I've heard about. The strange thing is that when I've tried to discuss it with anyone in the courts or law enforcement, they immediately ended the conversation. Anyone who knows anything isn't talking about it."

"Do you think that my parents are alright?"

"If someone had intended to kill your parents, they would have simply done it. There wouldn't be any need for a conspiracy of silence. The fact that they took them away may mean that they're still alive, wherever they are."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"It's not much to hold on to, but at least it's a chance."

"Thank you, Mr. Cooper. What you said makes sense."

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"Can I ask you something, Andy?"

"Sure. I guess so."

"Have you ever thought about... I mean, working at the children's home, you've seen a lot of kids get fostered out and adopted. Did you ever think about doing something like that?"

"Yes. Of course I've thought about it. But there's no way that I could. I'm a single man and I don't have enough income to be able to properly take care of a child."

"But if you could... would you?"

"As long as it didn't force me to neglect my other responsibilities, I probably would."

"Do you think that, when we get where we're going... maybe things will be different?"

"I don't know what things are going to be like, Hendrix. But let me ask *you* something, if you don't mind talking about it. If things were to work out so that I *could* adopt or foster a child, what kind of things do you think that I should do with him or her?"

"I don't know. Maybe you could talk to them and let them know that you care and stuff. Then maybe you could help them figure out stuff that they don't understand and stuff like that."

"Yes. I suppose that I could do that, as long as the child that I was helping would be willing to meet me halfway and let me know what they needed from me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just saying that I can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. But even if I know that they want help, I'm not a mind-reader. If I start offering what *I think* will help, I'm as likely as not to drive them away by not getting it right."

"But what if someone needs help, but doesn't know what kind of help they need?"

"Then I suppose that they could just tell me that and I could do my best to help them figure it out."

"Yeah. I guess if you told your adopted kid or your foster kid that upfront that they'd know that they could come to you, but also, if they didn't, that you'd let them try to figure stuff out on their own."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I can't see any reason that they would have to be my adopted or foster child for me to help them and be there for them like that."

"But how would that be any different from what you already do?"



"I'm a human being. I form attachments and bonds, just like anyone else. While I try to treat everyone equally and fairly, were I to form that type of bond with one of the children, I would be more likely to go out of my way and make an extra effort to help someone that I felt close to."

"How would you do that? I mean, get close to someone like that?"

"I'm sure that there are many ways that it could happen, but I think the best way would be for us to talk honestly with each other. That emotional sharing would allow us to form a bond."

"Does that mean that you'd want them to tell you all their secrets?"

"I'd want them to feel comfortable enough that they'd be able to share certain things that are troubling them, but I wouldn't insist on them telling me *all* their secrets. People need to be free to have things that are private."

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"What can you tell me about the children?"

"What do you want to know?"

"From what I saw at the restaurant, they appear to be a rebellious bunch, and it wouldn't surprise me to find out that the heavyset boy has an eating disorder."

"The heavyset boy likes to be called 'Dog' and he happens to be a she. Her real name is Emily."

"Oh, dear."

"Yeah. The thing about Emily is that she's always looking for a reason to be offended. She's loud, antagonistic and just plain mean."

"I haven't seen too many children like that who ended up having a decent future. She's chosen a very difficult path."

"Actually, in the short time we've had her with us, I've seen some slight improvement. When I discussed it with Mr. Cooper I recommended that before anything else, we try to demonstrate the point that she's accepted

by us. We'll correct inappropriate behavior, but we won't try to control her moods."

"How did she come to be like this?"

"Who's to say? She came from a broken home, got passed around from relative to relative, there were a few instances of sexual abuse documented... any or all of that could have guided her in this direction."

"I haven't been following what's been happening at the home, do you still have a number of female staff workers?"

"Leona and Cathy are still there. Before we left, each of them took in two kids to watch after. Beyond that, we have several part-time workers, both male and female. Mr. Cooper and I both feel that it's important for children to have a balance of male and female adults consistently in their lives, not only to provide for the children's emotional needs, but also to serve as role models."

"Yes. I've always believed that, too. That's one of the main reasons that I hired Mr. Cooper, back in the day."

"Let's see. I suppose the next one I should tell you about is Princess."

"What's her real name?"

"That *is* her real name."

"Oh, dear."

"Actually, it suits her."

"Is she the little black girl?"

"Yes. Although, she's a bit small for her age, she's actually fourteen."

"Just from the few minutes that we were in the restaurant, I got the sense that she's an entitled and demanding little girl."

"What you see is what you get. Princess has been pampered and coddled every day of her life. Her parents essentially infantilized her by providing

her everything that she ever asked for. When her parents were convicted of dealing drugs and put into prison, Princess was sent to us."

"Have you been able to do anything to help her?"

"I've estimated that her socialization skills are roughly that of a five or six year old. It's our hope that by including her with her own age group she might adopt a more mature attitude. Beyond that, we let her know when we believe that she's behaving inappropriately."

"It's hard to imagine any parent believing that raising a child that way was a good idea."

"I doubt that they ever considered what was best for *her*. To them, raising a child was akin to pampering a pet or playing 'dollies'."

"Disgusting."

"The third and final girl that we've got with us is Dianne."

"I'm sorry. I don't recall seeing a third girl."

"I don't know if she went into the restaurant with us or not. You see, the thing about Dianne is that she's a hypochondriac. When you look at her history, it makes perfect sense. Both her parents contracted a fatal disease and died horrible lingering deaths. Now she's continually terrified that she's going to become infected with something and die the same way that her parents did."

"Is there anything you can do for her?"

"We've only had her at the home for a short time. I've been doing my best to get her comfortable in her new situation and I've encouraged her to make friends. If all of this hadn't happened to make us have to relocate, I probably would have started having formal sessions with her this week."

"It's hard for me to remember that you're a fully qualified doctor. I can't help but think of you as that skinny little boy who was brought to us, thinking that he was being sent to juvenile prison."

"Hold on. Look at that."

\*\*\*

"Do you have your seatbelt on, Danny?"

"Yeah. What's going on?"

"I don't know. Everyone! Make sure you have your seatbelts on. Something strange is going on up ahead!"

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It looks like the entire town is blacked out."

"What are we going to do?"

"All I can do is keep driving. We've still got a few hours before we'll reach my uncle's house. Everyone! Keep an eye on what's happening as we drive through town! With it being pitch black like this, I'm going to need all your help."

"This is scary! I want to stop!"

"Princess, I promise you, stopping won't make it less scary. Now, everyone, be quiet so I can concentrate."

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"What's goin' on, Andy?"

"A blackout, maybe. I really don't know."

"Do you think everything's alright?"

"Yes. I'm sure it is. See? Mr. Cooper is continuing on, so it must not be dangerous."

"Who are you trying to convince, you or me?"

"Both of us."

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"What catastrophic thing might have happened to cause a blackout like this?"

"I don't know, Grandma. But it looks like Mr. Cooper and Andy are going to keep going."

"Do you mind if I turn on the radio?"

"Go ahead. But with the power being out, you might not be able to get much."

"I'm sure that one of the neighboring communities must have an active transmitter and maybe we'll be able to find out what happened."

"Then again, maybe not."

"Do you think that every radio station in broadcast range has been blacked out?"

"I don't know. It's set on FM, try the AM stations. Maybe you'll have more luck."

\*\*\*

"This is creepy."

"I know. But we just have to go a few more blocks and we'll be out of this town."

"Where are we?"

"Hold on. We've ended up on the highway, we need to get back on the county roads."

"Are you sure that you know where we're going?"

"Having to avoid main roads is making it a little more challenging, but I'm familiar enough with the area to get us there."

"This would be a lot easier with GPS."

"I suppose that it might be, but Junior already warned us that cellphones could give away our location to anyone who might be interested in where we're going."

"That sounds kinda 'conspiracy theory' to me."

"I agree. And it might end up being wasted effort on our part. But I'm doing everything in my power to protect all of us."

"Yeah. I can see that. Thanks."

"Would you mind checking with the others to be sure that none of them brought a cellphone with them?"

"You already told us not to."

"I know. But it's possible that they might not have understood the importance of it when I asked them. Seeing this blackout might drive home the point that something serious is going on."

"Do you think that the blackout has something to do with what was going on back in Tallahassee?"

"I can't be certain, but I think the safest thing for us to do is assume the worst and do as much as we can to prepare for it."

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"Dianne? Are you alright?"

"I think I'm coming down with the flu."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Can I have a blanket or something? I'm getting cold."

"You could just close your window."

"No. I need the fresh air to keep me from being carsick."

"Kevin, would you reach into the back and see if you can find a blanket for Dianne?"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

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"It's funny. I can feel my heart racing."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. I'll be fine. I'm just realizing that I'm feeling alive for the first time in many years."

"Don't worry, Grandma. I'll make sure that you're kept safe."

"I'm not worried. Whatever happens, I'm at peace with it. No matter what we do, I'm coming to the end of my days. I rather like the idea of going out during a glorious adventure."

"Don't talk like that! You're going to be fine!"

"Of course I am. I'm just saying that I'm not looking at this as a bad thing. Even though there might be some hardships along the way, we're doing the right thing and making sacrifices for a good cause."

"I guess we are. But don't talk about dying, okay? You're the only family that I've got. I plan to keep you with me for a long time."

"I'll try not to dwell on the subject, but death is a part of life. Since you've claimed me as your grandmother, it's part of my responsibility to help you understand certain things, so that when you reach this stage of life, you'll have an idea of how to cope with it."

"Thank you, Grandma. You never treated me like some Hispanic kid who should be shipped back to his own country. You always treated me just the same as everyone else... and as I got older, maybe a little bit better. You made me feel special when the rest of the world was telling me that I was trash."

"The color of your skin was never a consideration. It was the content of your character that compelled me to put forth an extra effort on your behalf. The day that I first met you, I could tell that you were a good boy. After that, I did everything in my power to be sure that you had everything that you needed so that the spark of goodness within you would never be lost."

"Mr. Cooper and Andy helped me out a lot, mostly when I got older. But if it wasn't for you, I would have given up on myself before I ever had a chance to accomplish anything."

"The experience that you had is the experience that I was trying to provide for all the children. As I saw it, my job was to match each child given into my care with a family that could love and nurture them, so they could become well rounded, stable adults. There were failures, of course, but also many successes. I like to think that due to my efforts, many of those children, that wouldn't have had a chance otherwise, were able to break out of the cycle of neglect and abuse and become productive members of society."

"You did a great job, Grandma. And when you retired, Mr. Cooper did his best to follow in your footsteps and keep on doing your good work. I don't think that there's any way to count the number of kids that you've helped. I just know that there's lots of them."

"After my retirement, I thought that I was done, that I didn't have anything more to give. I suppose that now I'll have the chance for one last 'hurrah'."

"One *more* 'hurrah'. It ain't over till it's over."

"Yes. Of course."

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"Everyone! You might want to hold on."

"Mr. Cooper! I'm tired! Can't we stop?!"

"No. Hold on, Princess. Sharp turn ahead!"

"Is this safe?"

"Don't worry, Mike. This is kind of a shortcut."

"Wait! Where have I heard that before? Oh yeah! In every single horror movie ever made! That's where!"

"I told you that he was going to rape and murder us."

"You mean murder and rape, don't you?"

"Yeah."

\*\*\*



"This is the creepiest place I've ever been."

"What do you want me to tell you, Hendrix?"

"Tell me that everything's fine and it's going to be alright."

"Everything's fine. Everything's going to be alright."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't believe me, either."

"What *do* you believe?"

"That this is the creepiest place I've ever been in my entire life. We're on a deserted dirt road, in the middle of the night, deep in the woods, in the middle of nowhere. No one knows where we were going. And no one's expecting us to arrive."

"Thanks. That makes me feel better."

"It does?"

"Yeah. Knowing that you're as scared as I am makes me feel like I'm not the only one."

"Misery loves company?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

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"Are you doing okay, Grandma?"

"Yes. Yes. This takes me back to the first time I ever drove a car. I was fearless, back then."

"From what I've seen, you've always been fearless."

"Nonsense. I eventually settled into a role and became complacent. There's nothing brave about that. There were injustices that I witnessed and I never said a word."

"I bet that if you *did* say something about them, that it would have come back to hurt the home or the kids."

"Perhaps. But someone who was *really* brave would have spoken up, anyway."

"If that's true, then I'm glad that you were only as brave as you were. Because I wouldn't have wanted for anyone else to be in charge of things. A lot of people would have been a lot worse off if that had happened."

"I changed what I could."

"And you made a difference."

\*\*\*

"Hang on!"

"What now?"

"Holy Shit!"

"You're going to flip us over!"

"Are you out of your fucking mind!"

"Stop the car! Let me out! I'm not riding with you anymore!"

"Yeah. I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Everyone! Please calm down! We needed to take that sharp turn to get onto the right road."

"You know, after this, getting murdered and raped is sounding less bad."

"Hang on!"

"What?"

"Oh fuck!"

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"Do you know if Mr. Cooper used to be a race car driver before he became a psychiatrist?"

"Psychologist, and no. Not that I'm aware of."

"It looks like he's taking those turns a little bit too fast."

"Yes. His speed does seem a bit excessive, especially with it being so dark."

"Why do you think he's doing that?"

"I don't know. Maybe the kids in his van enjoy roller coaster rides or something. Either way, I'm not going to take these sharp turns at dangerous speeds."

"What if he gets too far ahead of us?"

"Once he realizes that he's lost us, I'm sure that he'll slow down until we catch up."

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"Is your car going to be able to handle these rough roads?"

"Yeah. I didn't buy this old car just because it was cheap. This was made back in the day when cars were built so that you could work on them yourself. There's not one computer chip in the whole thing and it's built like a tank."

"I didn't realize that you had an interest in auto mechanics."

"I didn't either. But sometimes when I'd go over to visit, Cliff and Jody would go out to the garage to check the oil or something like that and I'd tag along with them. I never got into it in a big way, but talking with them made it interesting to me, when it never had been before."

"I suppose that I still think of Jody as a little boy, but he must be in his teens by now."

"He's thirteen. He's written nearly a dozen children's books."

"Yes. I know. I'm sure that some of the other residents at the assisted living center must think that I've entered my second childhood, but I have every

one of the 'Benny Bear' books proudly displayed in my bookcase, right alongside JD's books."

"Have you read them?"

"JD's books? Yes. Many times. And each time I read them, I find something that I didn't notice before."

"Every time he'd send me one of his books, I'd know that I'd be going for one or two days without sleep because I'm incapable of putting them down."

"They're enthralling... what's going on up ahead?"

"It looks like Mr. Cooper is waiting for everyone to catch up."

"Serves him right for driving so fast."

"He's motioning for us to pull over."

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"It's not far, now. When we get there, stay in the cars and let me do the talking. My uncle Darin is kind of an ass, so I may need to talk to him for a few minutes before he'll let us stay."

"Are you sure about doing this?"

"It's a little late to be asking that. Just have everyone wait in the cars until I've had a chance to talk to Uncle Darin. If he sees all of you at once, it might spook him into refusing."

"Hey, can we ride with one of you guys? He's crazy!"

"Get back in the car, Danny!"

"He's going to kill us."

"My uncle's house is just a few miles from here."

"Yeah. Right."

"Dissent in the ranks?"

"We'll talk about it once we have all the children tucked in."

"Right. Let's go."

\*\*\*

"Where are we going? Didn't you say it was on that road, back there?"

"Technically, it is. This is the driveway."

"Where's the house?"

"At the other end of the driveway."

"You know what I mean. How much longer?"

"Why? Did you have someplace important that you needed to be?"

"Yeah. I've got to get to a bathroom. After riding with you, I need to go wipe!"

"Thank you for sharing, Danny. The house is just up ahead, maybe five minutes away."

"Why did they build the house so far from the road?"

"I think the better question would be, why did they build the road so far from the house?"

"What do you mean?"

"This house is about two hundred years old. I think the roads were put in sometime later. My uncle bought this place about twenty years ago and he uses it as a winter home."

"Rich, huh?"

"Yes. And when you meet him, be sure that you notice what a truly miserable person he is. He's proof that having money and a nice home doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be happy."

"Well, I can tell you that being dirt poor and living in a roach infested hell-hole won't make you happy, either."

"Good point."

"Hello, Frank. I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Mister Ronald? It's so good to see you! You didn't wake me. I was just up checking to see if the power was still out and making sure that nothing was wrong around the house. It's so damned quiet, it's making me skittish."

"Have you heard anything about why the power is out? Do you know when they're expecting it to come back on?"

"No. We haven't been able to get any radio or TV stations to tune in. The phones are out, too."

"Could you wake Uncle Darin for me? I need to ask him if me and my friends can spend the night here."

"Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove aren't in residence. They rather abruptly decided to take an extended European vacation."

"Oh. I never thought about them not being here. They always winter at the plantation."

"Well, since you're family, I'm sure that Mr. Hargrove wouldn't mind if you spent the night."

"To be honest, I was originally planning on us staying longer than that. I wanted to talk to Uncle Darin about it before deciding just how long."

"Why don't you and your friends come in and get settled, right now, and we can worry about the longer term in the light of day."

"Yes. Thank you, Frank. That sounds like a very good idea. We're all exhausted from the trip. I'll go and get them."

"How many are we talking about?"

"Four adults and eight kids."

"I'll need to get Nola up to get the rooms spread up for that many."

"If you can just show us where the linens are, we can take care of it ourselves."

"I'd never hear the end of it, if I did that. You go and get your friends together while I let Nola know that we have guests. I'll also fire up the genny so we won't all be stumbling around in the dark."

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"Is everything alright?"

"It turns out that my uncle's not here. But the household staff know me and said that we can stay for a while. Why don't we get everyone settled in and we'll worry about what to do next after we've had some sleep?"

"Help me get the kids inside before they start wandering off."

"We'd better hurry."

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"Is this some kind of a museum or something?"

"No. This is an old plantation house, but don't be fooled by the appearance. This is all put on for show. My aunt's had this place remodeled so many times that there's probably not much that's left of the original structure."

"Everything looks really old. I think I'd be scared to touch anything."

"I think most of the furnishings are antiques. In fact, I remember my aunt buying a period musical instrument, something like a piano, for the conservatory. After she bought the thing, she had the entire room remodeled and redesigned to match it. The funny thing is, no one in her family even plays the piano. It's completely for show, just like everything else around here."

"Do we get to stay here?"

"We're going to spend the night. I don't really know what's going to happen beyond that."

"What do we do now?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Jeffers are getting the rooms ready, so why don't we go into the lounge and wait for them to be ready for us."

"This place is ginormous. How many people live here?"

"My aunt and uncle and my cousin Darin."

"Didn't you say that your uncle's name was Darin?"

"Yes. My uncle is Darin the Second, my cousin is Darin the Third."

"Are we going to get something to eat pretty soon?"

"No, Dog. We'll have breakfast in the morning, you'll have to wait until then."

"But I'm hungry now!"

"Remember what we've talked about? There's a difference between being hungry and wanting to eat for emotional reasons. I think that if you'll examine your feelings, you'll realize that what you're actually feeling is probably some sort of anxiety."

"I'm hungry!"

"Too bad. You'll have the opportunity to eat when meals are provided. I'm not going to enable the unhealthy lifestyle and eating patterns that you've adopted."

"I hate you!"

"Well, I don't hate you. That's why I won't give in to your demands. I'd rather you hate me and be healthy than to allow you to continue with self-destructive behaviors."

"May I?"

"Yes. Of course. Dog, this is Mrs. Usher. She used to be in charge of the children's home."

"Your name is Emily, isn't it?"

"Yes. But I like to be called Dog."

"Out of the hundreds of children that I've cared for over the years, I've done my best not to speak of any of them in a demeaning or pejorative manner."



If you would allow me the honor, I'd like to show you respect by calling you by your last name Miss..."

"Fields."

"Thank you, Miss. Fields. You may call me Mrs. Usher."

"Could you call me Ms.? I really don't like being called Miss."

"Yes. I think that's a reasonable request. Would you like a butterscotch candy? If you're feeling a bit peckish, it might help to take your mind off of it."

"Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Usher."

"You're very welcome, Ms. Fields."

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"Here you are, Ronald! It's so nice to see you again. Now, I know that you all must be tired. Everyone, I'm Mrs. Jeffers. If you'd like to follow me, I have rooms made up for everyone."

"Come on, kids. Bedtime."

"Do we have to?"

"Yes, Princess. It's after midnight."

"Brian's asleep. Do you want for me to wake him up?"

"Yes. He'll get a much more restful sleep in a proper bed."

"Let him sleep. I'll carry him up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Go on ahead and I'll be right behind you."

"Thanks, Junior. Come on, kids."

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"Did you get everyone tucked in?"

"Yes. For all her bluster, Princess fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow."

"Did Brian wake up?"

"No. He hasn't been sleeping well since he's been with us. He must be exhausted."

"A good night of sleep is probably the best thing for him right now."

"What is his problem, if I may ask?"

"Yes. Of course, Mrs. Usher. Since you're going to be helping us with the children, you need to know what they're facing."

"I'll do whatever I can."

"After seeing how you handled Dog, I have no doubt that you're going to be tremendously helpful."

"So, what about the young man... Brian, was it?"

"Yes. His parents and his identical twin brother, Ryan, were killed in a car crash nearly a month ago. When Brian was released from the hospital, he didn't have any relatives who were fit to take him in, so he was put into state foster care."

"How awful."

"Junior and I have just started working with him, helping him to deal with his depression. It's my hope that when he's a little more recovered, that he'll be stable enough to be placed in a good home, so that he can continue on with his life."

"Please let me know if there's anything that I can do to aid in his recovery."

"I think that Junior and I are best equipped to help Brian. But we'll be more than willing to accept whatever help you can offer with the others."

"Actually..."

"What is it, Andy?"

"On the drive here, I was able to have a long talk with Hendrix."

"Really?! That's wonderful! I've been trying to get him to open up since he got out of rehab. He's one tough nut to crack. Did you make any progress with him?"

"I think that we're beginning to lay the foundation for communication between us. I wanted you to be aware of that. If the opportunity arises, I'd like to spend a little extra time with him."

"Just let us know if there's anything that we can do to help."

"Right now, I think what Hendrix needs most is to sort things out in his own mind. To do that, he needs someone who will listen to him without judgement as he puts his feelings into words."

"And he's chosen you to be that person?"

"I think that I've been selected for consideration. I'm probably going to have to undergo rigorous testing before I'm 'officially' chosen."

"We'll steer clear and let you handle things with him. Just let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

"Yes. I think that's the best way to proceed."

"There's another situation developing that we might want to keep an eye on."

"What's that?"

"It looks like Mike and Danny have started laying the groundwork toward friendship."

"I'm sorry, I don't know who you're talking about. Is that a good or a bad thing?"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Usher. Mike is the African American young man and Danny is the redhead. As far as it being a good thing or not... actually, it could go either way. Mike is an athletic, respectful, well-adjusted young man. Danny... well, not so much. It's my hope that Mike will help to guide Danny onto a more productive path for his life."

"Excuse me for asking, but 'not so much' doesn't really tell me much about his personality."

"True. I'm always on guard, trying not to speak negatively about the kids. The fact of the matter is that Danny has had problems with truancy, petty theft, shoplifting and has been an incorrigible runaway. When he was remanded to our custody, the judge told him that if he ran away from the children's home, that he would be put in juvenile detention."

"I've run into cases like this before. Usually when a child acts out like this, there's a very good reason for it. What do you know about his home?"

"Not much. CPS did an investigation, but didn't collect much information. They concluded that Danny's parents couldn't control him and were past the point of even trying."

"What does the child have to say about it?"

"He'll talk openly about his problems at school, with the teachers and the other kids. He's a lot more guarded when he speaks about his time on the streets. But he absolutely refuses to say anything about living with his parents."

"Mr. Cooper's been working with Danny. I've been working with the kids who've arrived since I was hired on at the home."

"And you say that Danny has started to form some sort of a relationship with another boy?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't call it a relationship, as such. Mike is a very open and friendly person. Danny isn't. However, when Mike offered his help, Danny responded positively. I think that by any measure, that could be considered progress."

"What do you think the chances are that Danny is going to be a bad influence on Mike?"

"That occurred to me. I'd appreciate it if all of you could help me keep watch for any signs of that."

"What about the others? Is there anything that we all need to be aware of?"

"Just try to keep in mind that Princess is fourteen. Regardless of how she acts, do your best to encourage her to behave in accordance with her age."

"On the way here, Dianne only complained of car sickness and mentioned that she might possibly be coming down with the flu. A month ago she would have complained of at least one asthma attack, a low blood sugar fit, an allergic reaction and probably an exotic disease that only three people have been afflicted with in the past century. I think she's come a long way."

"Don't celebrate just yet. Dianne has good and bad days. Tomorrow she could wake up complaining of Bubonic Plague, Ricketts, Meningitis and Ebola."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"What about Kevin?"

"Oh. I forgot about him."

"He's easy to forget about."

"Who is Kevin?"

"He's the Filipino boy... young man, I guess."

"It depends on whether you're talking chronologically or developmentally."

"I take it that he's not the most popular resident at the home these days."

"He's kind of stand-offish and rude. Not only is it hard to get to know him, it's hard to *want* to get to know him."

"With his attitude and body language, he gives every indication that he doesn't want to be bothered. When you talk with him, he won't hold up his end of the conversation. He'll give one or two word answers, then act like it was a waste of his time to do even that much."

"Have you evaluated him for autism or Asperger's?"

"Yes. More than once. The conclusion has always been the same, he's a perfectly normal boy with slightly less than average intelligence and a bad

attitude. Please forgive me for speaking poorly of him in his absence but in my considered opinion, the only thing wrong with Kevin is that he's a moody little prick."

"How very lonely that sounds."

"Mrs. Usher, if there's any way that you can think of to reach him, you're more than welcome to try. None of my strategies for dealing with difficult children seem to work with him."

"I can't make any promises, but if you'll help structure events so that I might be able to spend some time with him, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

"I don't know about anyone else, but I think I'm ready for bed."

"Yes. It's been a very long day."

"Don't forget to take your aspirin."

"Thank you, Junior."

"Mrs. Jeffers already showed me which rooms we'd be using. I'll show you the way."

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"Did you hear that?"

"Yes. I thought I heard knocking."

"What time is it?"

"Five fifteen."

"There it is again."

"Is someone going to answer that?"

"I'm sure that Mr. Jeffers is probably already on his way, but I'd like to go down and see who it is."

"Whoever it is, they sure *do* want in."

"What's with all the knocking?"

"Go back to sleep, Hendrix. We'll go downstairs and see who it is."

"Wait. You guys are worried about it, aren't you?"

"Only in the sense that it's not often that someone knocks on your door at five in the morning."

"I'm going with you."

"Then come on."

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"It's okay, that's my cousin Darin. He lives here."

"Ronnie?! What are you doing here?"

"I should be asking you the same thing. I had heard that you had joined the Army. I naturally assumed that you'd be stationed on the other side of the world."

"More like the other side of the state. Let's go to the library where we can sit down. I'm wiped out."

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"Can I get you anything, Master Darin?"

"No. Thank you, Frank. I'm fine."

"I'll go see to starting breakfast, then."

"Darin, I'd like for you to meet Junior, Andy and Hendrix. Guys, this is my cousin, Darin."

"Nice to meet you."

"What are you doing here, Darin? From what I've been hearing, the military has been quite active, lately."

"Active... yeah. To tell you the truth, as soon as I caught wind of what was going on, I started looking for an opportunity to get away... Where's Mom and Dad? I need to warn them."

"They're not here. From what Frank was saying, they decided to take a European vacation, all of a sudden."

"I should have known..."

"Can you tell us about what's going on? We've heard rumors and seen troop movements, but we haven't heard anything about *why* this is happening."

"I don't know anything about that, either. They just tell us *what* to do, not *why* we're doing it."

"So, what do you know?"

"Not much. We were ordered to prepare what we would need to detain and relocate the 'disruptive elements' from Savannah, Georgia. That's about the only thing I personally witnessed. But I heard that the same thing was happening at bases up and down the East Coast and probably farther away than that. I was already thinking about running, but when I saw the Army turning its guns on unarmed citizens and capturing them, I started looking for a chance to escape."

"Where were the people being taken?"

"I don't know that. We just loaded them up in troop transports and watched them go. No one was talking about what was being done to them next. It was all very hush hush. We'd sweep in, gather them up, then clear out."

"What do you think the chances are that someone is going to come here looking for you?"

"I don't know. The operation was on such a massive scale that they *could* just assume that I was killed in action. But even if they don't come looking for me, there's a good chance that they'll eventually come here, anyway. It looked like they were setting up for that. The Army was prepared for the power outage, they knew it was coming. Whatever they're doing, this thing is big and it's not limited to the cities."



"If that's the case, then we should probably be going."

"Where can we go?"

"North and west."

"Tennessee?"

"I was planning to come here and get my parents, then head west. From what little bit of research I could do, based on what I was able to discover at that moment in time, it looks like not *all* the military bases are following President Ashwood's orders to capture American citizens. Some of them have allied themselves with President Bryce. The farther north and the farther west we go, the more likely we will be able to continue to live free."

"We're not equipped to drive across the country. It's remarkable that we were able to get here from Tallahassee unmolested."

"Listen, Ronnie. The decision for me is really simple. I'm AWOL. If I stay here and they find me, they'll execute me. If I go west, I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Right now, I need to go change out of this uniform. You guys make your own decisions."

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"Let's look at our options."

"Stay or go."

"There's a lot more to it than that, Junior."

"No. I really don't think there is."

"Andy says that it's wrong to not do anything and pretend that there isn't a problem. When you do that, it likes to come back and bite you in the... butt."

"Thank you, Hendrix. But I think that this situation might have nuances that need to be considered."

"Actually, now that I think of it, Junior and Hendrix may be right. Darin seems certain that, at some point, the military is probably going to sweep through here. I have no reason to disbelieve him. We can either stay here and do nothing, or we can go west and at least *try* to do the right thing for the children."

"So, I guess it's settled."

"Well, we've decided what we'd *like* to do. But I think that it's also important to consider what we realistically *can* do."

"We're going to need food, water and fuel. Where can we get those things?"

"I can ask Mr. and Mrs. Jeffers what they'd be willing to spare. And even if we can't get every single thing that we'd like to have, we might be able to pick up supplies along the way."

"What about gas for the cars? With the power being out, how much of a problem is that going to be?"

"That's a good question. I've got under half a tank."

"Me, too."

"What did I miss?"

"Welcome back, Darin. We've come to the decision that you're right. We should leave, too. We're just trying to consider the logistics of taking a group of children all the way across the country."

"A group? How many do you have?"

"Eight children in total, plus four adults."

"I can't stay here. I'm just going to get something to eat, load the car and head out. If you guys want to come with me, do what you're going to do and you can follow along. I've got a route planned out that *might* get us past the biggest population areas, but that's about all the help that I'll be able to give you."

"What about Mr. and Mrs. Jeffers? Shouldn't we invite them to come with us?"

"I'll explain things to them at breakfast. Anyone who wants to follow me is welcome to, but everyone will have to carry their own weight."

"What happened to my timid little cousin who wouldn't hurt a fly?"

"I grew up. I suggest that all of you do the same. Unless I'm severely mistaken, things are about to get real."

"Excuse me, Master Darin. Breakfast is being served in the family dining room."

"Thank you, Frank. Would you and Mrs. Jeffers please join us? We have something important to discuss with you."

"Yes. I'll go and get her. We'll join you shortly."

"So, is it for sure? We're doing it?"

"Yes, Hendrix. Thanks, in part, to your contribution. You've made me very proud."

To Be Continued... in APOC, Chapter 2