

The Encounter

By

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Barry Carter had a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel. Sheets of rain streaked from the gray, winter sky. Taillights were all that he could see of the car in front of him. He leaned forward slightly as if by the force of his will he could make everyone drive faster, or at least get out of his way.

At last he came to his exit and took the ramp to the interstate. Squinting to make out an opening through the rain and spray, he accelerated, signaled, and merged into the traffic headed out of town. He relaxed a bit, leaned back in his seat, and turned on the radio for a weather update. He pushed the button for KMOX, “The voice of Saint Louis.” After a maddeningly long string of advertisements, the weather report finally came on.

“This is shaping up to be one of the worst winter storms in years. A low-pressure cell, now centered over Joplin, will track east-northeast along the I-44 corridor. Expect steadily falling temperatures for the rest of the day with rain changing over to freezing rain, sleet and finally heavy snow. Look for 12 to 15 inches of total accumulation before it all ends. This system will move quickly to the east and arctic high pressure will push in behind it. The low tonight will be near zero. Tomorrow will be clear and sunny, but frigid with a high only around 20. This has been.....”

With a sigh, Barry jabbed the power button. He was heading directly into the storm; and when the road started icing up, it would get bad in a hurry. With any luck he might make it to the cabin before that happened. If not, he would just have to put the Blazer into 4-wheel drive and creep along at a safe pace. He had grown up driving in the Ozark hills and knew how to get around when the roads were slick. That didn’t mean that he enjoyed it.

Traffic gradually thinned as the distance from the city increased. He remembered that he hadn’t called his wife yet to tell her about his plans. Glancing at the cell-phone he scrolled down to his home number and pressed the “send” button. He was inwardly relieved when no one answered after 5 rings and the answering machine finally picked up.

“Hi Hon, it’s me.” He tried to sound cheerful, though he knew that Laura wouldn’t buy it. She knew him too well. “I’m heading up to the cabin for a couple of days to work on this project. I’ll call you when I get there to let you know I made it.”

He hoped she wouldn’t be too worried. It wasn’t unusual for him to “hide out” for a couple of days when he had to meet a deadline. He would explain it all to her when he got home; but for now, he needed some space to sort things out. Still, he felt like a heel deceiving her this way.

Barry ended the call and reached across the seat to drop the phone into his briefcase for safekeeping. A discarded, newspaper lying on the floor caught his eye. The headline was an accusation.

"Crane Collapse Kills 2, Injures 5"

A renewed sense of dread washed over him. He shook his head in disbelief as he considered his own role in the tragedy. Could it really be his fault?

"I can't think about it now," he muttered to himself as he turned his attention back to the road. There would be time and solitude at the cabin, but for now he had to concentrate on driving.

He shuffled through a stack of compact discs, picked one, and slid it into the Blazer's stereo. The music started and he gently stretched his neck and shoulders. Visibility was miserable, but the road, for now, was still clear.

Forty-five minutes later, a familiar sign emerged through the mist and announced that his next turn on the road to the cabin was one mile ahead. He exited the interstate and headed south toward the Mark Twain National Forest.

Sleet began to mix with the rain. Barry switched off the music and he could hear the tiny ice pellets tick against the windshield. A quick glance at the radio antenna confirmed that the temperature was now below freezing. His Dad had told him many times, "Keep an eye on your antenna, son. That's the first place ice forms and it means the road will get slick before long."

Mile after mile, conditions got worse. Tree limbs and power lines sagged under the weight of the accumulating ice. The road surface, not yet frozen, grew slushy with half melted sleet. A snowplow passed, going the other direction. Within a mile the road was covered again.

Barry switched on the headlights and put the Blazer in 4-wheel drive. As he wound his way deeper into the woods, the road grew ever more crooked and narrow. Leafless trees leaned inward from both sides, their limbs lacing like fingers overhead.

When he reached the county road that would be the final leg of his journey, heavy sleet forced him to fight the steering wheel for control. Four-wheel drive wouldn't help if he slid off the road now.

The Blazer slid sideways, first one direction, then the other, but Barry skillfully maneuvered it back on course. He almost didn't make it up the last hill on the long driveway between the county road and the cabin. At last he stopped in his own driveway and heaved a sigh of relief.

Barry's father had been a carpenter who built houses for others, but ironically, not for himself. He understood that if he wanted steady work, he had to be where the work was. That meant moving a lot. He spent a lot of time on the road, driving to job sites, because he refused to uproot his family more often than necessary. He never rented. When work dried up in one area he would put his house on the market and buy a new one where the work was. He had lost a lot of money over the years, selling when real estate prices were down, but he wanted his family to have a place that felt like home.

The one thing that Everett Carter had built for himself was this cabin. To some it seemed like an indulgence, but his father had understood that it was much more than that. Through all the moves, new schools, new friends and new jobs, one thing had remained

constant. The cabin, secluded as it was in the Ozark Mountains, was a timeless sanctuary.

Barry had briefly considering selling it when his dad passed away. His mother wasn't up to taking care of it; and with a family of his own now, it had seemed a selfish to keep it for himself. In the end it had been Laura who helped him see it the same way his father had.

Now, its comforting presence reassured him. Barry grabbed his briefcase and headed for the door. Icy wind swirled around his face. Ice pellets sliding down his collar sent cold shivers along his spine. He slipped and slid, nearly falling several times before he reached the cover of the porch.

Barry unlocked the door, stepped inside and savored the homey, familiar smell of the place. He shrugged off the heavy, wet coat, and hung it on the wall peg beside the door. In a routine familiar from long practice, he went through the cabin tripping switches that would send power to the lights, deep-well and water heater.

A cavernous, native-stone fireplace dominated the living area. Barry laid a fire and in short order had the room toasty warm against the storm outside. He could relax now. Barry mixed a drink and sank into his Lazy-Boy to think.

It had all begun a few months ago. The construction company that Barry worked for, Barclay Engineering, had a contract to install an overhead bridge-crane in a local manufacturing plant. Barry had been the superintendent in charge of the project. During the 3 years he had been with the company he had handled numerous projects, but not one like this.

When completed, the crane consisted of two rails that ran the length of the building, one along each side of the plant floor. A trolley-mounted truss that spanned the rails supported a 20-ton electric hoist. Using a remote control an operator was able to pick up an object anywhere in the plant. By moving the hoist from side to side along the truss, and by moving the truss along the rails, the object could then be placed anywhere the operator chose.

The owner of the plant had needed the crane as soon as possible so the contract set a tight deadline with stiff penalties for late completion. For weeks Barry had practically lived on the job, working through the multitude of problems that always crop up on a complex project.

The truss was manufactured off-site by a specialty subcontractor. When it arrived at the plant and the workers began to assemble it, Barry noticed a problem. Having never built one before, he had called his boss, Hamilton Quinn, to get advice.

"Mr. Quinn, our supplier sent the wrong fasteners. I called them and they said it would take 10 days to get the right ones to us."

"You've got a sharp eye, Barry, but those are the fasteners I ordered. You can go ahead and use them."

"I don't understand, Mr. Quinn. They aren't what the subcontractor specified."

"It's okay, son, I can get a higher strength bolt than the ones they specified for two thirds the cost. It's a conservative substitution so you don't need to worry."

Barry was relieved that the project wouldn't be delayed. "That's great news! If you

say it's okay, I'll approve the change."

"We do this all the time, Barry. Those bolts will be fine."

It had been close, but the project finished on schedule.

Barry had been stunned by the headline in this morning's newspaper. With trembling hands he read the article that followed, searching for details. The authorities were still investigating the cause of the crane collapse, but an eyewitness speculated that plant workers might have tried to move a piece of machinery that exceeded the rated capacity of the crane.

"What's wrong?" Laura asked.

Quickly Barry composed himself, folded the newspaper, and tucked it under his arm. "Probably nothing, but I have to get to work and check something out."

"Don't you want something to eat?"

"No, I'll grab something later."

Laura filled his travel cup with coffee as Barry pulled on his coat. He bent to kiss her goodbye.

As he went through the door Laura called after him, "Be careful! It's supposed to rain later!"

Pausing in the driveway to look back over his shoulder he shot her a playful grin.

"Yes, Mom"

Barry drove straight to his office at Barclay engineering. The secretary wasn't in yet so he pulled the file himself.

At his desk he flipped quickly through the pages and jotted notes on a pad. Next he grabbed a reference text, thumbed to a chart and added more notes to the pad.

For the rest of the morning, Barry was lost in thought as he sketched rough drawings of the crane. His fingers flew over the calculator keys and one page of calculations spilled over to the next. Like pieces of a horrifying puzzle, a picture began to take shape.

He needed one last piece of data to be sure, and for that he turned to his computer and launched the internet browser. With a few clicks he went to the website of the *St. Louis Post* and scrolled through the photos of the accident. The last one sent a chill through him.

In the foreground, paramedics were bent to the task of freeing an injured plant worker from a tangle of twisted steel. It was a touching image, but Barry's keen eye focused on a gusset plate lying on the floor in the background. He shook his head in despair. The metallic sheen on the ends of the broken bolts confirmed his worst fear.

Barry printed the photo and took it, along with his notes, to Hamilton Quinn's office. His boss was on the phone, but when he noticed the ashen look on Barry's face, he motioned for him to sit. He said, "I'll have to call you back," and hung up.

"What's wrong, son? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Have you seen the paper?" Barry asked, a slight tremor in his voice.

"Yes, of course, but they tried to lift a 30 ton press with a 20 ton crane. It's hardly our fault that it collapsed."

"But it is our fault," Barry answered. He showed Hamilton the photo and explained what he had discovered that morning.

"The bolts the subcontractor specified are fatigue resistant. That's why they are so expensive."

Hamilton countered, "Yes, but we used a higher strength bolt. That would have compensated."

Barry explained, "But the higher strength bolts are brittle. They have very low fatigue resistance. I did the calculations and the bolts we used would have had strength to spare."

He handed his boss the photo and circled the gusset plate with a pen. "Look at those bolt ends, Mr. Quinn, they didn't break because of high stress. They broke because of fatigue"

Hamilton's jaw dropped as he realized that Barry was right. The two men stared at each other, silently contemplating the situation they were in.

"What do we do now?" Barry asked.

"Nothing," Hamilton answered.

Barry blinked in stunned silence.

"It's a terrible thing that happened," Hamilton went on, "But nothing is going to bring those people back. There is nothing to be gained by us falling on our swords."

"But there will be an investigation," Barry argued. "They'll figure it out eventually."

"No, they won't. The crane was badly overloaded. There'll just be a cursory investigation."

Barry leaned back in his chair, his head swimming in disbelief. Finally he looked at his boss and said, "It isn't right, Mr. Quinn. The families of the people that died deserve to know the truth."

"Son, let me tell you about the truth. Your signature is on the substitution approval. Are you prepared to lose your engineering license? How are you going to support your family when Barclay Engineering is sued into bankruptcy and your career is ruined?"

"But Mr. Quinn, you told me there was nothing to worry about."

Hamilton leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his desk. His voice was sickly sweet. "Oh, did I?"

Barry reeled from the implied threat. Without a word he left Hamilton's office and headed for the cabin.

The heat from the fire slowly drove the chill out of the room. Barry's stomach growled and he realized that he hadn't eaten anything all day. He got up and went to the kitchen to fix supper.

As he slid the bowl of canned beef stew into the microwave, he remembered that he needed to call Laura and let her know he was safe. He picked up the handset, but there was no dial tone.

"Lines must be down," he muttered to himself. As if in answer to his remark the lights flickered.

Barry walked into the living room and fetched his cell phone from a coat pocket. The display indicated that there was no service. "That's strange", he said to himself. There was a tower only a few miles away on the state road and he usually got a good signal here.

Making a mental note to try again later, he stirred his stew and put it back in the microwave to heat some more. While he waited he swallowed the last of his drink and mixed another.

Barry threw another log on the fire and settled back into his chair to eat. The wind howled and he could see through the frosted window that the sleet had changed into wet, heavy snow. The cabin was cozy. His simple meal tasted like a feast.

He was nearly finished eating when he heard a thump at the door. He paused, the spoon halfway to his mouth and listened. He heard it again. Someone was knocking.

Barry set his plate on a side table and strode across the room, trying to imagine who it might be. No one knew he was here. The road had to be impassable and his nearest neighbor was miles away.

He opened the door. A little girl stood shivering before him, her thin coat wet from the snow. She clutched herself against the wind and silently gazed up at him, a pitiful, helpless look on her face.

"Oh my!" Barry cried out; "Get in here before you catch your death of cold!"

He took her by the hand and led her to the fireplace. "I'll be right back," he reassured her.

He went back to the porch to see who had brought a child out on a night such as this, and so poorly dressed for the weather. His outrage quickly faded when he saw that no one else was there. A single set of small footprints emerged from the snowy night.

He closed the door and turned back to the little girl. She looked to be about the same age as his daughter, perhaps seven years old, blond with big blue eyes. Wet hair clung to her face. Her lips and fingers were blue from the cold. She was obviously terrified.

Barry smiled and sat beside her on the hearth. "How did you get here, Sweetheart? Where are your parents?"

"We got stuck in the snow," she answered, her voice barely above a whisper. "Mama said wait in the car, but I got scared. I don't know where she is."

Barry considered this. The woman would be in real danger on a night like this. He had to try to find her.

"I want you to wait right here by the fire," he told the little girl. "I'm going to look for your mama. Okay?" She shivered silently next to the fire, her eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry, sweetheart; I'll only be a few minutes." He hoped that he sounded more confident than he felt.

Barry hurriedly pulled on a coat and overshoes and stepped into the storm. The blowing snow had already hidden the girl's footprints. The Blazer was half buried. He slogged through the drifts and climbed behind the steering wheel.

The engine started on the first try. "So far, so good," he mumbled to himself. "Now let's see if it'll actually go somewhere."

He slid the gear shifter into drive and gently pressed the accelerator. All four wheels spun, but the Blazer didn't move. He shifted into reverse and tried again, but it was no good. The snow and sleet were just too deep.

He looked in the rearview mirror at the driveway, now barely visible under the snowdrifts. It would be madness to try to walk into town for help. He shuddered as an image flashed through his mind of a frantic mother, lost and freezing, stumbling forward until she collapsed.

"Stop it, Barry!" he scolded himself. "She's probably someplace safe. It'll do her

good to spend the night afraid for her kid. What kind of damn fool would drag a child out on a night like this anyway?"

Disgusted and shivering, Barry went back inside. He smiled at the little girl. "I expect she caught a ride into town with the snowplow. For now let's get you some dry clothes. How would that be?"

She nodded, "Yes."

Barry found a warm pair of his daughter's pajamas and a thick robe. He led her to the bathroom. "There are towels on the shelf. When you're changed we'll have some hot chocolate beside the fire. Okay?" She gave him the tiniest smile.

Barry busied himself preparing food for her with the provisions that he had on hand. From a loaf of frozen bread he separated two slices and popped them into the toaster. Peanut butter and jelly were in the refrigerator. He put a mug of instant cocoa in the microwave to heat. While he waited he checked the phones again. Still no signal.

When the little girl came out of the bathroom her color was much better. The clothing fit her perfectly. Her hair, now dry, hung softly against her cheeks. She walked timidly across the room and climbed onto the sofa near the fire.

Barry gave her the hot chocolate and covered her with a blanket. She didn't speak, but her smile was warmer. She looked so helpless and innocent it nearly broke his heart to think of her cold, alone and afraid.

"When you get sleepy, just stretch out there where it's warm. If you need anything I'll be right here."

He had just settled into his own chair when the lights flickered and went out. He looked across at the little girl, her face illuminated by flickering firelight. "The wind must've blown a tree across the power line," he said to her in a voice that he hoped was soothing. "We have plenty of wood to keep us warm."

She returned his smile but this time it seemed somehow different. The change was subtle and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He shook his head and decided it was a trick of light.

It was quiet now, and late. The strange little girl would surely fall asleep soon. Barry poured himself a glass of bourbon from the bottle he had brought from the kitchen. He no longer bothered to mix it with Coke. It was time to think.

Again and again he played back in his mind his conversation with Hamilton Quinn. Something his boss said had caught his attention at the time; but in the heat of exchange, it had slipped his mind.

Mr. Quinn was probably right. If he kept his mouth shut, no one would ever know the truth. He could go on with his life as if nothing had ever happened. It would be easy except for his conscience.

If, on the other hand, he came forward with the facts, his world would come crashing down around him. Certainly he would lose his good job. He might well lose his license, as Mr. Quinn pointed out. If that happened he couldn't even get a new job in his profession.

The room was quiet except for the crackle of the fire and howling of the wind. The snowflakes were smaller now, and dry. Barry knew that if he looked at the old *RC Cola* thermometer on the front porch, he would find that the temperature was plummeting toward zero. He sat in his chair, wrestling with his conscience, and refilling his glass. He had almost forgotten about the little girl when he heard her soft voice.

"No one has to know."

Barry sat in stunned silence. Did he really hear it or did he imagine it? He stared at the child's face, trying to tell if she was awake. She stirred slightly.

"No one has to know you caused that accident."

Barry looked at the glass in his hand. He hadn't drunk that much had he? He spoke softly to her, "It's okay, Sweetheart, you just had a bad dream. Go back to sleep now."

It was quiet then. Barry rose, tended the fire, and refilled his glass. He leaned against the mantle and stared, mesmerized by the dancing flames.

Again she spoke. "The bolts. You used the wrong bolts. No one has to know."

Barry turned to look at the child. In the flickering light of the fire he could see that she was smiling at him. It was no longer an innocent smile, but one of mischief and ill purpose. It was smile that had no place on a child her age.

"But I would always know," he heard himself answer. He took another sip of the amber liquid, and it burned its way down his throat.

"What's the point?" she asked. "Nothing you do will bring those people back."

Barry rubbed his face and shook his head. This had to be a dream. He went back to his chair and sat, facing the child. "Who are you? How do you know about this?"

She didn't answer his question but instead continued, "You know what will happen. You'll lose your job. You'll lose your house. Why should your family suffer so you can ease your conscience?"

Barry turned to look at the photo on the mantle piece. From it, Laura smiled back at him. His daughter sat on her lap, her head thrown back in wild laughter as their dog licked ice cream off her face. His vision blurred with tears.

He regained his composure and turned back to face the girl. "It's not that simple. The families have a right to know the truth. I couldn't look in the mirror every morning knowing that my life is a lie."

The child's smile was now a sneer. Her voice was bolder now. "Well, that will make it all better when you have to move back in with your mother. And speaking of Mom, won't she be proud?"

The question struck Barry like a blow. He had wanted to quit college when his father died, but his mother insisted that he continue. She'd been so proud the day he graduated. This would break her heart.

It was quiet again. Barry drained his glass and brooded over his plight, searching desperately for a way out. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something, but it eluded him.

The girl's voice came again, this time soft, and soothing. "You know, Barry, there is another way." She nodded slightly toward the kitchen.

When he realized what she meant, he gasped in revulsion. He spat out, "Never! That's a coward's way out!"

"Perhaps," she purred; "But think about it. It does solve all your problems."

Barry did think about it. Now that the idea had been planted, he couldn't stop himself from playing out the scenario in his mind. The kitchen stove was fueled by propane gas. He'd only have to crack a valve. The gas was heavier than air. It would hug the floor until it reached the level of the fireplace.

"It would be quick and painless," the child coaxed him gently. "It would look like an accident."

He buried his face in his hands and sobbed. "Why me? What did I ever do to deserve this?"

The girl was sitting upright now, cross-legged, and leaning forward. Her voice was laced with cruelty. "You got careless, Barry. That's what you did." She nodded again toward the kitchen. "It's really an elegant solution when you think about it. Your family gets a fat insurance check and you are remembered as a saint. It isn't that hard, Barry, people do it all the time."

Then it hit him. He sat up and stared at the child as he realized the implications of the thought that had so eluded him.

Seeming to sense that the tide had somehow turned, she hissed and glared back at him.

"We do it all the time," Barry said to her.

"What are you talking about?"

"That's what Hamilton said when I questioned his decision to change the bolts. 'We do it all the time.' Barclay Engineering installed that same crane in other plants, but I wasn't the superintendent on those projects. It's proof that it was Hamilton's decision, not mine."

The child unleashed a chilling screech that revealed her frustration.

Barry continued, his voice gaining strength as his confidence rose. "If the same bolts are in those other cranes, they have to be replaced before something like this happens again. I have no choice now. I have to tell the truth."

The child stood and looked up at Barry. "You can't blame me for trying. It's what I do." She turned and walked to the door. "You won this time, but I'll be back."

The little girl closed the door behind her when she left. Barry grabbed his coat and rushed out to see where she went. Her footprints led from the edge of the porch across the driveway. In the shimmering moonlight he could see that they were not made by a child's bare feet, but by cloven hooves.

Barry gazed up at the gleaming moon and he understood. The storm had passed.

The End