

White Out

The traffic slowed to a standstill. The snow was getting heavier. The sun, low in the December sky would be gone by four o'clock. Ameer looked at the Satnav: still 55 minutes to reach the steading and workshop near Alness. In this weather, it would take longer.

Pressing the phone button on the steering wheel, she rang Derek. The sounder rang and rang and went to his message:

'Hi, McNaughton Tractors and HGVs for Rent by the day, week or month. Leave a message at the Beep.'

'Derek, it's me. I'm stuck on the A9 near the turn off for Aviemore. It's a white-out here. Scary. How are things where you are? Ring me when you get a chance. Please.'

She knew what he was like when he became absorbed in a task. This made her worry about Hannah, her seven-month-old. And the trip to Perth to see her Gran had been a sad affair. The poor old soul had no idea who she was.

Looking through the screen at the white out, she shuddered. She turned up the heater and noted she was low on petrol. She should have enough to make Inverness, where she could top up.

The traffic began to move and slithering at first, she crept forward. Unseen, the Gritter travelling south skidded towards her. The side edge of its snow plough blade scythed into the driver's door. The white Mini was thrown backwards into the stationary monster Artic behind then bounced over the edge, tumbling down a steep embankment into a ditch.

Unaware, the Gritter was already one hundred and fifty metres away.

In the high cabin of the Artic, the driver stabbed at his screen wash button to clear the slush. The traffic ahead increased speed and he revved hard, crunched the gearbox and drove on while continuing his FaceTime call to his wife back home in Cumbernauld.

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When Ameer came round, the Mini was upside down. Her head was jammed into a corner, her legs trapped by the steering wheel. Her left arm was aching. Her right hand was bleeding, a deep cut at the heel of her palm. As a nurse, she went through the routine, checking her vital stats, as best she could. The pain in her groin soared up off the scale and she passed out.

Time passed. The car cooled down. The snow fell. The little car was now invisible.

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Somewhere far away the car speakers were ringing and ringing and ringing.

Amee drifted up to consciousness but could not reach the phone button on the steering wheel to accept the call. The ringing stopped then started again a few seconds later.

Amee fumbled for the overhead light switch. Her handbag was inches from her head. After a struggle, she found her phone. Weeping with relief, she dialled Derek. The sounder rang and rang and went to his message:

'Hi, McNaughton Tractors and HGVs for Rent by the day, week or month. Leave a message at the Beep.'

'Derek, I've been in an accident. The car was knocked off the road. . . .'

'Amee, Hi honey. Sorry, I was fixing a leak in the roof of the shed. Did you get my messages?'

'Derek, I've been in an accident. The Mini is upside down. I'm trapped. I think I was hit by an oncoming vehicle and thrown off the road. I'm bleeding. I think my left shoulder is dislocated. The most worrying thing is that I have no feeling in my legs. I'm freezing. My hands and face are like ice. What time is it?'

'Ten before midnight. Where are you? I've been frantic.'

'Near the turn off for Aviemore. Derek, I need an ambulance. Can you see me on that App thing you have on your iPad?'

'Hold on. Yes, I have you. I'll ring off and get the police and ambulance service on the job. I'll ring back asap.'

'Derek! Is Hannah alright?'

'Yeah, yeah, she's great. I fed her formula at six and heated your breast milk at nine. She's sleeping like a top.'

'Derek, I'm scared to death. I feel so, so cold. And there is a smell of petrol.'

'OK, OK. Hold on, I'll ring you back.'

A few minutes later Amee's phone rang. Not Derek. After a struggle, she managed to press down on the button.

'Hello, is this Mrs Amee McNaughton?'

'Yes.'

'Mrs McNaughton, this is PC Daniella Fortune. I've just left the police station at Aviemore. I have you on my screen. I'm about ten minutes away. An ambulance is on its

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way from Raigmore Hospital. How are you coping? Tell me everything about your situation as best you can. My colleague PC Tom Wright is listening in to us on speaker and he'll type out a message for the incoming ambulance.'

Amee gave her triage assessment. At the end of her report she could feel her energy levels dropping. Everything was becoming woozy.

'Well done. That should be a big help.'

Amee's phone shuddered. Derek was in a queue, trying to connect.

'My husband is trying to ring me. I want to call off just for a minute.'

'Right. I have your location and I'll ring again when we reach it. The ambulance reckons about twenty minutes, so not too long. Back soon.'

Her phone rang and after a delay, she managed to connect.

'Hi, honey. The Police are on their way.'

'Yes, I've just been speaking to them. They say they'll be here in ten minutes and an ambulance at twenty minutes.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Not good. The numbness has reached my left arm now. I feel so, so cold.'

'Amee, honey, just hang on in there. Help is at hand.'

'Derek, I love you.'

'And I love you too. Give me a minute, Hannah is crying. I'll go and get her.'

'Here she is, Amee. Say hello to Mummy, Hannah.'

Silence.

'Amee, are you alright?'

Silence. The line was dead.

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An hour and forty minutes later, the ambulance set off through the blizzard for the hospital. Its lights were not flashing.

'Well, Tom, you or me?'

'I'll do it.'

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He looked up the number and dialled.

The chirpy voice replied:

'Hi, McNaughton Tractors and HGVs for Rent by the . . .'

'Derek McNaughton here.'

'Mr McNaughton, this is PC Tom Wright from Aviemore Police Station.'

'How is Ameer?'

'I'm sorry, Mr McNaughton but we were too late.'

'Too late. She was fine when I spoke to her. What happened?'

'I'm sorry, we don't know. She was icy cold so probably hypothermia but the ambulance crew think there were serious internal injuries too. Did you wife have any underlying conditions?'

'No, she is as fit as a fiddle. She is a triathlete. She is. . . *Oh God!*. . . I begged her not to go to see her Gran.'

'Mr McNaughton, is there somebody you can call to sit with you?'

'No. No. I don't want anyone here. Just Ameer.'

The line went dead.

'Well, Tom, that went well. I'll call it in to Control in Inverness, shall I? They'll send someone to check on him.'

'Even on Christmas Eve?'

'Yes, even on Christmas Eve.'

'This is a crap job, isn't it?'

'Yes, Tom, sometimes it is.'

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