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Vicki screamed as the oversized truck clipped the rear of the car, sending them into a gut-wrenching tailspin. As the rear wheels ground in protest against the spongy mud shoulder, the front of the vehicle curled sideways into the roadway. She glanced behind them as the truck backed off, but before she could catch another jagged breath it gained speed once more and rammed into the driver's side door. The sound of metal against metal was deafening in its intensity, ferocious in its onslaught.

The two vehicles were locked together while the truck continued its forward momentum, crumpling the driver's side as Brenda shrieked in terrifying agony. Then it shook them off like a lioness loosening its grip on prey too weak to fight. As the truck sped past them, their vehicle crisscrossed the roadway before coming to an abrupt halt.

The air was forced out of their lungs as though they'd both been violently punched in the gut. Then there was nothing but silence.

Vicki stared out the cracked windshield at the flat terrain and straight, two-lane road. The truck was visible less than a mile in front of them, but only because the truck's stark white color stood out against the darkening sepia skies. Nighttime was

approaching fast and she had no clue where they were or how they could find help.

Then the car began to drift of its own accord. She shook Brenda by the shoulder, urging her to open her eyes. Blood trickled down her face in a silent response. As Vicki looked down, she realized her sister's body was covered in blood, as was the steering wheel that was wedged against Brenda's abdomen.

Frantic, she swung around to peer out the passenger side window. The car was almost completely off the road, the rear wheels sinking ever deeper into thick muck above a ravine. The swamps were sucking them down; the water swirling around the cypress knees below them as if waiting to consume them. The car tilted and as Vicki hurled back around, she realized the tires on the driver's side were lifting up.

"Brenda!" she shouted, punching her sister's arm in a frantic attempt to awaken her.

Her eyes skimmed the terrain just outside the door in her growing frenzy: the water cypress rose high on either side of the road, their giant branches twisting in the growing wind like gnarled fingers; the swamp just feet from the vehicle, gaping as if ready to swallow them whole. There were no homes in sight; no sign of life. Her screams simply evaporated in the intensifying wind.

Looking down at the console where they'd both laid their cell phones just moments earlier, she realized they'd been violently ejected, landing somewhere else in a vehicle that now resembled an accordion. She turned around to search the floorboard and back seat, but as the car began to slide, she froze. With her heart in her throat, she realized every moment brought them closer to the sharp ravine above an untamed swamp that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Whirling back around, she realized the white truck had stopped and was turning around.

"He's coming back!" she shouted.

Brenda murmured something incomprehensible, her eyes still shut and the blood still seeping from wounds on her forehead.

Fighting against a rising hysteria, Vicki grabbed her by the arm and tried unsuccessfully to pull her across the console. But

her sister remained wedged between the crumpled door and the dashboard, which now rested on her bloody knees.

“He’s coming back!” she shouted again, shaking Brenda. “We’ve got to get out!”

The truck was now facing them. It seemed to sit there, calmly watching them with intense headlights that felt like unblinking, evil eyes.

“Save yourself,” Brenda managed to croak, the effort so labored that Vicki could feel the anguish in her voice.

“I won’t leave you,” Vicki argued, her own voice raspy. “You have to get out. You have to find the strength!”

“I can’t,” her sister said in an uncharacteristic sigh of resignation. Her head lolled forward so she could no longer see her face but only a mountain of copper hair drenched in blood. In a brief moment of lucidity, she continued, “He’s after me, not you. Get out. Follow the swamps—they’ll lead you to a farmhouse on the other side. He won’t follow you.”

“I won’t leave you,” Vicki repeated.

“Think of the baby!” Brenda urged, gritting her teeth against the agony. “For God’s sake, think of your baby!”

Vicki sucked in her breath sharply as her eyes, now widened with surprise, were drawn to her belly. Her unborn child kicked within her as if to spur her to action.

She glanced up as the truck lurched forward. It rushed toward them as she stared wide-eyed, clearly gaining in speed as it barreled straight for them. Yet in her mind, it felt as if it was moving in slow motion. Her sister or her unborn child—

Then somehow she was sliding feet-first against the uneven bank, the mud propelling her away from the car. She caught a glimpse of her shoe wedged above her, yet she didn’t remember opening the door or climbing out. As she continued to peer upward, she caught sight of the small vehicle sitting helplessly, its rear wheels now dangling precariously above her.

With a start that jolted her heart, she realized the car would be pushed over the bank and directly atop her. She tried to scramble out of the way as sheer panic swept over her but something slapped her back into place. The cypress trees had somehow grown closer until they surrounded her, and now they

taunted her unmercifully with heavy, wet branches that reached down to strike her. Somewhere in the back of her mind she realized her cheeks were soaked from her own tears and yet she was powerless to stop them.

The storm had grown to a fever pitch. It seemed to shout her name over and over again as sobs wracked her body. And as the roar of the truck's engine grew in terrifying intensity, the violent screams that escaped her lips were drowned out by the excruciating sound of metal against metal.