Crash

by Fishpaste

Summary

Stranded in the Yorkshire Dales, at midnight, in a snowstorm and with an injured friend. James's day is not going well.
Chapter 1

The snow drifted down gently, beautiful and peaceful and quiet. A sight to be savoured while sitting in a chair with a glass of whiskey and a roaring fire, watching the flakes dance past a window. Not a sight to be enjoyed at midnight while driving an unreliable and elderly car through a freezing cold snowstorm after spending two hours delivering a dead calf. No, James decided, he would be very happy to leave this particular festive scene behind and return to bed. A glance to his left showed his passenger was probably thinking the same thing.

Tristan was glowering out the window at the snowy scene, darkly picking at the dried blood and other assorted muck staining his trousers. He had not appreciated being pulled away from his ‘studying’ in order to provide assistance for a long, arduous and ultimately thankless task. He was even less happy when, emerging from the barn; they had seen the covering of snow everywhere. Now, as the car rattled and slid on the dangerous roads and threatened to break down whenever they went uphill he was positively grumpy.

James suppressed a smile at Tris’s air of wounded dignity and turned his attention back to the road. He hissed through his teeth as he felt the car skid on yet another patch of ice hidden by the snow and wished for the thousandth time that Siegfried would see about getting the brakes serviced. This car was an accident waiting to happen! Tristan glanced at him, distracted out of his sulk.

“You alright there James?”

“Fine, just about.”

“I still say we should have just taken the Rover.”

“After last time? Your brother would skin you alive, and me with you!”

“But we’d probably still back in the warm by now while he did so.”

“Tempting as it is Tris, I’ll stick to my own car.”

“I’d say it’s your life, but it’s mine as well here!”

“Oh stop panicking Tris—“

“I am not panicking! I just have a perfectly reasonable fear of crashing and dying in a flaming wreck because you wouldn’t take the better car!”

“We’re not going to crash!”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you.” Tris muttered, turning back to his mournful watch out the window. “Anyway, we’ll freeze before we get back at this ra-CAREFUL JAMES!”

“Sorry!” The car had slid quite dramatically then, nearly skewing sideways. James struggled to straighten it out avoid plummeting over the drop to the side. Once the car was back on the road properly he let out a breath and looked over to his friend. Tris was glaring at him, having gone alarmingly pale and holding onto the dash with a death grip.

“Good grief James! Watch the bloody road will you? There’s a good chap!”

“Stop whining Tris, do you want a turn at the wheel?”
“In this death trap? I bow to the driver of experience!”

“Thanks.” James said dryly as he coaxed the car up a gear. Tristan grinned in response and fell quiet again, allowing James to concentrate. They were at the top of a reasonably steep hill now, with a nasty drop on one side. The wind was picking up now too, driving the flakes harder into the windshield, so thick the visibility was almost down to nothing. James squinted, trying to make out the boundaries of the road; everything was a sea of shifting white.

The car was drifting now, the wind shoving at its metal body. James tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Tristan shot him a look but didn’t say anything. He felt the car shudder as he left the road and ran up onto the hidden grassy verge and twisted the wheel to compensate. That turned out to be a fatal mistake. The wheels twisted, found a patch of ice and skidded out of control, the car spun wildly to the left and James slammed on the brakes instinctively. The wheels locked, the car continued sliding and with a pang of absolute horror James realised he’d lost control. He fumbled desperately with the pedals and gear stick, trying to force the car away from the edge he knew was just feet away but there was no response.

Dimly he heard Tristan shouting something but it was drowned out by the pounding blood in his ears as the out of control car reached the steep slope and began hurling itself downhill, gaining speed rapidly. There was no time to stop it, no time to react, no time to think! The car shuddered and jolted and James hung onto the steering wheel for his life. Suddenly a dark shape loomed out of the white storm and the car slammed into it, coming to a halt with a speed that snapped James’s neck forwards. Everything went dark.

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Siegfried sat in his customary armchair by the fire. The dogs were sprawled around on the floor, a carpet of fur and waving tails. He chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully as he browsed through the veterinary journal. A tumbler of whisky sat on the low table to his side, next to a newspaper open at the crossword and an elegant fountain pen. The clock chimed midnight quietly and Siegfried looked up in mild surprise as the door opened gently.

Helen came through, bearing a pot of tea and biscuits. She placed the tray on the small table, moving aside the discarded newspaper and poured for herself and Siegfried who thanked her with a smile. She walked over to the French windows and watched the falling snow.

“Nasty night.” Siegfried commented from behind her.

“Yes. I don’t envy poor James and Tris. Where did you say they’d gone?”

“Up to Partridges’ place.”

“That’s right up in the hills! Will they be alright?”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine. They’ll be back soon, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worrying, I’m just concerned!” Helen came and sat down on the sofa, picking up the newspaper distractedly. “Not finished the crossword yet?”

“No.” Siegfried sighed. “Tristan’s better at it than I am. Don’t ever tell him I said that!”

“As if I would!”

“Good. His ego’s healthy enough already.”
“Oh, you are hard on that boy.”

“Nonsense, he’s practically coddled living here! Food laid on, my drinks available…”

“Being sent out late at night to a difficult calving in a snowstorm?”

“The price of being the younger member of a veterinary practice, my dear!” Siegfried laughed. “Can I tempt you with a sherry?”

“No thank you, I’m heading to bed now, I just came to say goodnight really.”

“Goodnight Helen. I’ll send your poor frostbitten husband up when he arrives.”

“Thank you very much! Goodnight Siegfried.”

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James regained consciousness slowly. His head hurt abominably, as did his hands and chest. He shifted slightly and hissed as a hundred thousand agonies woke up and started demanding his attention. Breathing shallowly the vet ran a quick self-diagnostic, headache, yes, ribs; bruised but not broken, hands, oh, possible broken fingers it felt like…legs, sore but seemingly alright. Neck was very painful. Passenger? That would require opening his eyes. Which sounded like a lot of effort at the moment. But Tristan might be injured, no time to focus on his own pains, check his friend first.

With a mental sigh of resignation James blinked and forced his eyes open. The first thing he saw was white; the white snow was everywhere, all over the car inside and out. He blinked again. The car must have slammed into a tree, if the gnarled branch smashed through the windscreen was any indication. The cold air was blowing freely through the shattered glass and James realised to his surprise that he was shivering.

He managed to twist his head to squint past the tree branch the car was impaled on. He could just about make out a silhouette on the other side of the car. He looked harder, mentally cursing the poor lighting. Tristan was slumped backwards, a thin trickle of blood running from his nose. Was he breathing? Impossible to tell, it was so dark without the headlights reflecting off the snow.

“Tris?” He said softly. “Tristan? Can you hear me?” To his utter relief he heard a faint moan and the sound of somebody shifting. “Tristan?”

“James?” Tristan’s voice was cracked and painful. “You alright?”

“Not too bad, I can move at any rate. How are you?” There was an awkward silence. James felt his anxiety, which had faded when Tris had proved to still be alive, rise again.

“Tris?”

“I’m…not too good.” Tris admitted finally.

“Oh God. What’s wrong?”

“I think…I’m rather…ah…stuck.” Tris said, that edge of pain in his voice becoming more audible. James felt the anxiety turn into cold hard dread. They were stranded, in the middle of the Yorkshire Dales in a snowstorm and Tris was injured. Badly it seemed. He forced his fear aside in favour of action.

“Right. I’m going to try getting out. I’ll come around to you. Don’t try and move.”
“Beli…believe me. That, ahh, won’t be a…problem.” James smiled, even though Tris couldn’t see it and started trying to extricate himself from the twisted metal the front of the car had turned into. He was able to slowly pull his legs out of the well, until he was crouched entirely on the driver’s seat, ribs protesting painfully. The door was hopelessly stuck; after a few good tugs failed to make any difference James turned his attention to the windshield. The glass had shattered entirely, leaving plenty of room for an adult male to crawl out. If he didn’t mind risking the broken glass.

James pulled off his scarf and used it to sweep as much of the glass as he could see out of the way. He hauled himself onto the dash and immediately felt his hands and knees be lacerated by all the thousands of pieces of broken glass he hadn’t seen. He swore.

“Language, James!” At least Tris still seemed to have his sense of humour intact. Cursing under his breath James managed to wriggle out of the car and dropped to the snowy ground. He lay there, breathless and feeling the blood soaking into his sleeves and trousers.

“James?” Tris called worriedly.

“M’okay. Coming!” He levered himself painfully upright. The snow seemed to be slowing now, the cloud cover parting slightly to allow a pale moonlight to light the scene up starkly. The car had sped down the steep incline and rammed into one of the twisted old trees at the bottom of the valley. The thick branches had punched through the metal of the car as easily as if it were paper.

Limping around the back of the car, James paused to reach in a grab his vet’s bag from the back seat. With a bit of luck there would be enough in there to deal with whatever injuries Tristan had managed to receive. He circled the rear of the car and stopped at the passenger door. Crouching and peering through the broken window, James got his first good look at Tristan’s injuries.

“Oh. Oh dear God.”
Chapter 2

Moving slowly and carefully, feeling rather as though he was in some terrible dream, James tried the car door. To his relief it opened easily, allowing him access to the injured student before him. Tristan watched him with glazed eyes as he flicked on the spare torch from the car and examined the wound more closely.

The tree branch had had no difficulty at all in ripping through the solid metal of the car. Evidently it had had even less trouble puncturing through human flesh. Tris was pinned by the gnarled branch like a moth in a display case. It must have been an inch thick, running diagonally into the soft flesh under the ribs and sticking grotesquely out of Tris’s back, red and dripping.

“Oh dear God, Tris…”

“I kno...know. Not pleasant is it?” Tristan grinned macabrely, his face deathly pale and his hands clenched into fists.

“Right.” James pulled himself together with an effort. He was a vet; he’d seen badly wounded animals before. The only reason this was different was because it was a human being, and one he knew at that. He just needed to push that aside and focus on solving the immediate problem. He could collapse in a shocked and terrified heap later, when Tris was out of danger.

“Any other injuries?” He asked in the most professional tone he could muster at that moment.

“Don’t, ahh, think so. Few bruises.”

“That’s good. Good. Right.” He leant over the younger man, careful not to touch him and examined the branch more carefully. It wasn’t the main branch, the one that had shattered the windscreen; it was an offshoot of that, about an inch thick and maybe eight inches long. He bit his lip and glanced at Tristan. The blond was watching him expressionlessly. Damn, Tristan knew as well as he did. At the moment the branch was stemming the blood flow, but it was also forcing God knows how much dirt and filth into the ragged wound. The branch needed to come out and the wound needed closing.

Well, it wasn’t as though he could do much here, on a snowy hillside in the pitch black. James stood up again and shone the torch around in the gloom. It had stopped snowing at least. He finally made out a building in the distance, impossible to tell what it was from here though, could be a barn, a ruin or an occupied farmhouse. He prayed for the latter, and one with a working telephone. Well, whatever it was, it was the only sign of shelter and would simply have to be good enough.

“What d’you see James?” Tristan asked.

“Shelter. About half a mile away though. Do you think you can make it?”

“M’gonna have to right? How’re we g...going to get it off though?”

“I’ve got a knife here.”

“Oh.” Tristan bit his lip. James looked away, unable to meet his friend’s eyes. The angle of the branch and the seat meant there was no way to just pull Tristan off the protrusion and there was no chance of quickly snapping the frozen wood. It would have to be sawn off, slowly and painfully.

James fetched the knife and held it in painful fingers. Then he paused and put it back in the vet’s
“Here Tris, bite down on this.” Tristan grimaced unhappily but accepted the worn leather. James picked up the knife again and began to determinedly rasp through the gnarled wood. Each movement of the knife rattled the offending branch, tearing through Tris’s flesh. He grunted around the belt, eyes screwed shut and fingers digging into his legs. James worked as fast as he could, ignoring his passenger’s distress.

Finally the knife was through, and the branch separated from the tree. Tristan slumped forward, breathing harsh and desperate in the chilled air. James stuffed the knife back in his bag and angrily wished he’d brought morphine or something with him today. He reached into the car, gripped the branch still embedded in Tris and drew it out in one fast motion. Tristan screamed and collapsed limply forward.

“Sorry Tris, I’m so, so sorry! It h…had to be done. Sorry. Come on, wake up. We can’t stay here. We’ll freeze.” James pleaded as he roughly bound up the wound. The bandage was crude, but should suffice until they got to shelter. Tris whimpered and pushed himself upright again. Heart twisting with guilt and empathy, James helped him out of the car. He pulled Tris’s arm over his shoulder, hefted up the vet’s bag in his other hand and started the long slow trudge towards what he hoped was safety.

The walk was agony. For both of them. Tris was in clear and obvious pain every step he took, eyes tight shut and jaw clenched. James was feeling his own injuries, minor in comparison yes, but still exquisitely painful and getting worse with every torturous step. His ribs were aching and his fingers, locked around the handle of the vet’s bag were screaming at him. Any movement of his neck sent a lance of pain straight down his back. The building didn’t appear to be getting any closer and he didn’t dare stop and double check the direction because of the very real fear they’d never start walking again.

Just focus on one step after the other. Step, step, step, and compensate for Tris’s stagger. Step, step, trip, balance, step, step, step, just continue. The mantra was numbing and the pain overwhelming. James didn’t notice they’d reached their destination until they almost walked into it. He felt like bursting into tears of sheer relief.

It wasn’t a farmhouse, as he’d so desperately hoped for. It was a barn, empty of animals or feed but with four solid walls, a stout door and a thick coating of rather musty straw on the ground. He hauled Tris in and collapsed next to him on the floor the moment the door was shut, blocking out the wind and snow and leaving the two men lying there in the dark. He breathed heavily, sheer exhaustion taking over. He should sit up, check on Tris, see if there was anything useful in this barn, and see to his own injuries. Unheeded, his eyes slipped shut as he lay there against his friend. Just one second to rest and then he’d start again. Just one second. One second…

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Siegfried woke with a start. He must have dozed off, waiting for Tris and James to get back. He stretched, pushing a sleeping dog’s head off his foot. The fire had burnt down to embers by now and the half full tea pot was stone cold. Rubbing his eyes, Siegfried pulled out his watch and checked the time. Ten past three! Heavens, James and Tris must have been back hours ago. He must have slept through their entrance. Bit harsh of them to leave him there, he decided, his neck was very stiff.

Best head up to bed now, grab a few hours shut eye in an actual bed before the daily grind of surgery and visits. It wasn’t an easy life, being a country vet, but it was one Siegfried wouldn’t change for the world. He stood up and quietly put the teapot and cups back into the kitchen for Mrs Hall. Ascending the stairs quietly he glanced at the telephone; it would be just his luck if it
rang at that moment. Mercifully it didn’t and the elder Farnon made it upstairs without incident.

He paused at Tristan’s room and nudged the door open to check inside. He didn’t know why he felt compelled to check on his little brother at night, just to make sure he was actually there and breathing. It was an almost paternal urge. Well, he did sometimes wonder if Tris saw him as a father figure, he definitely felt like one on occasion when he had to scold Tris about chasing girls or tell him off for drinking too much. Siegfried had never really thought about having children. He already had a Tris.

The room was empty. The bed was still made up; no one had slept in here yet. Siegfried stared, his heart suddenly dropping into his shoes. Tristan hadn’t come back. Which meant James hadn’t either. They should have been home hours ago, Partridge’s wasn’t that far away, and no calving should take over six hours. Something had gone wrong, badly wrong.

Closing the door quietly Siegfried climbed the extra set of stairs to James and Helen’s rooms at the top of the house. He hated to wake her, and James too if he was back, but he had to be sure, before he did anything rash. He tapped softly on the door. Almost immediately there was a rustle and the sound of padding feet. The door opened quietly and Helen stood there in her dressing gown.

“Siegfried? What’s wrong?”

“Is James there?”

“No, he’s not back yet.” She frowned. “It’s very late, what time is it? Surely they should have been back by now…”

“It’s a quarter past three. Yes they should be here; Tristan’s bed’s not been slept in. They never came back.” Helen’s eyes were wide and horrified.

“You mean they’re out there? In this weather?”

“They must be, unless…”

“Unless what?”

“Perhaps the Partridges offered them a bed for the night? If the weather was really bad by the time they were finished?” Helen shook her head adamantly.

“No, James would have telephoned. He would have told me.” Siegfried sighed.

“You’re right, my dear. James at least would have let us know.”

“So they are out there somewhere.” Her tone was frightened. “They’ve had an accident.”

“It seems likely.” Siegfried said. He didn’t like stating the thought so baldly but Helen would not thank him for attempting to shield her from the truth.

“Then we’ve got to find them.” She continued determinedly. “Just let me get dressed.”
“James? James, come on. Time to wake up.”

James frowned and resolutely turned his face away from the voice. The telephone hadn’t gone off, so there was no emergency requiring him. He was tired and curled up next to a warm body. He had absolutely no intentions of getting up.

“Come on…no sleeping on the job remember?”

Be quiet voice, the vet thought. I’m not at work. And you’re not Helen. He rolled closer to the body next to him, throwing an arm around his wife’s waist.

“Ooof. Ow. Not that I’m not flattered James but I don’t think Helen would take too kindly to it.”

The voice sounded an odd mixture of pained and highly amused. James furrowed his brow. Despite his determination to remain asleep and comfortable the insistent conversation was slowly waking him up, aided by a nagging sense that something was wrong, something he had to fix.

“James. Up. Please!”

The voice was sounding urgent now. James heaved a resigned sigh and opened his eyes, expecting to see his rooms at Skeldale house and Helen asleep next to him. Instead he found himself staring at the inside of a dark shed, lit only by a pale moonlight through gaps in the door. He was lying on a carpet of old and dusty straw, not on the double bed in the attic rooms and the warm body he was embracing was his partner’s younger brother, rather than his wife. A deep blush spreading across his face, James snatched his arm back hurriedly.

“Awake then?”

Tristan’s smirk was audible, the smug idiot. James glowered through his embarrassment. His hands were still very painful but his head was clearer now.

“Yes. I’m awake.” He hesitated. “Sorry…I wasn’t…erm.” Tristan huffed out a laugh.

“I’m very certain you were asleep James. What time is it anyway? How long have we been here? I was asleep too.”

James looked at his wrist and sighed. The watch face was shattered, the hands missing. He squinted at his companions watch instead, which Tris held up obligingly to a shaft of moonlight. When that wasn’t quite bright enough he turned on the torch again, thankful it had survived the journey from the ruined car.

“About half three it looks like. We’ve been asleep for a couple of hours.”

“Oh.”

Tristan had closed his eyes again. He was much too pale and had barely moved since James had awoken. Accepting the inevitable James pulled himself into a kneeling position.

“Let’s take a look at you then, now we’re indoors.”

When Tris made no reply James went ahead with his examination. He gently pulled back Tris’s coat, jumper and blood-stained shirt. The rough bandage he’d put on earlier was soaked through
with blood and the skin next to it felt warmer than it should have. Biting his lip, James peeled back
the sodden bandage, hardening his heart against the almost inaudible whimpers of pain from Tris.
The wound was still bleeding slowly and the area around the puncture was red and inflamed.

“It’s not good Tris.” He said finally, voice grave. Tris watched him silently. “Infection’s already
setting in and you’re still bleeding, you’ve lost too much as it is.” James’s stomach clenched as he
realised the necessity of his next statement. “I’m going to have to try and close it.”

“What? H…here? But…” Tristan tailed off into silence. Operating on a bad injury like this, in a
dark and cold barn with little to no light, no sterile surfaces or adequate equipment and no
anaesthetic or painkillers. It was madness. But it was necessary. The young Farnon swallowed in
dread. He breathed in deeply and nodded sharply, not looking at James as he did so. Dimly, he felt
James squeeze his shoulder in a futile attempt at comfort all the same.

James pushed himself to his feet, brutally forcing back a sudden surge of dizziness. It wouldn’t do
to let Tris see how bad he still felt, the lad was nervous enough as it was. He made a quick tour of
the barn and to his delight found a rusted old pump that still worked. The water was icy cold but it
was cleaner than he’d dared hope for. He washed his hands as best he could, enjoying the cold on
his throbbing fingers and hunted around for a bucket or something. He found a wooden pail in the
corner. It would have to do.

Tristan meanwhile had been worrying about another problem. He felt his eyes drawn to the
darkened corner again and again as he tried to work out how to phrase it. In the end he just
decided to state it baldly. Hell, it wasn’t like James was going to judge him or laugh at him.

“You’re going to…to have to tie me down James.” The other vet paused, following Tristan’s gaze
to the thin coiled rope in the corner. “We’ve no painkillers. I won’t be able to keep still an…and
you can’t knock me out.”

“But…No. You’re right.” God, how he hated this. Hated it all, the necessity, the urgency, the
entire situation. He gathered the rope and bound Tristan’s hands above his head, hooking the other
end of the rope around an ancient ring set in the stone wall. The knots had to be firm enough to
hold him, couldn’t have Tris flailing in agony and making the injury worse, but he tried not to
overtighten them. It wouldn’t do to have Tris end up with damaged wrists or hands. Tris shifted
uncomfortably at the vulnerable position he was in. He bit his lip as James tied his legs too, to
prevent him kicking during the brutal surgery. Unable to move he watched wide eyed as James
fished around in his vet's bag, pulling out a variety of instruments.

James laid the scalpel down on his jacket next to the other items. He checked everything over a
final time and double checked that he had the water close to hand, the surgery area was as clear as
he could make it and his patient was securely constrained. His thoughts shuddered to a halt.

His hands were shaking he realised and breathed deeply and calmly in an attempt to steady them.
The entire situation terrified him, the overwhelming responsibility. Hell, how could he ever face
his partner again if Tris died at his hand? How could he ever face Helen? Or Mrs Hall? How could he
ever face himself again if this went wrong? But equally, how could he ever face himself if he did
nothing, if he hesitated and refused to try and Tris died a slow and painful death due to blood loss
or infection that could have been prevented? To act or not to act, either one was a choice that
could lead to a terrible conclusion.
James chose to act. He gathered his instruments, screwed up his courage and firmly pushed all emotion aside. There would be time for that later. Right now he needed to concentrate on his work. He picked up the scalpel again.

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Helen hurried down the stairs, fully dressed and with hair roughly brushed. Siegfried was standing by the door looking stricken.

“What’s the matter?” Helen asked, aware of the note of worry in her voice but unable to stop it. Siegfried started a little, just noticing her. He sighed and gestured to the door. Unsure, Helen approached and opened it. She closed it again hurriedly as a thousand snowflakes swirled in, dancing through the air so thickly and in such amounts that visibility was reduced to absolutely nothing. She stared, horrified at Siegfried. He nodded grimly back.

“There’s no chance we can go out in that, Helen dear. Not in the dark at any rate.”

“But James! And Tris! Siegfried, they could be hurt, they might need us!”

“Helen, these are not condition we could possibly drive in!”

“Then I’ll walk!”

“Don’t be ridiculous Helen; you’d freeze to death before you found them.”

“But if they’re out there and injured Siegfried...every second might be vital!”

“We wouldn’t do them a blind bit of good if we ended up in an accident ourselves. We’ll just have to wait until its light and we can see again.”

“I can’t bear it!” Helen walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa, dropping her head into her hands. She heard Siegfried following and felt a touch on her shoulder. Opening her eyes she saw Siegfried kneeling in front of her, her strain and fear reflected on his face.

“I know. I know Helen, but there’s still a chance they’re alright. If the driving became impossible they might have stopped somewhere for shelter, perhaps somewhere without a telephone.”

“But what if they haven’t Siegfried? What if they’re out there waiting for us?”

“Then we’ll go out the very second its light enough to see. If the weather’s too much for the car I’ll take the mare out and find them, she doesn’t mind a bit of snow.”

Helen sighed shakily and turned her attention to the French windows, watching for the first tinge of dawn light. Prayers for her husband’s and Tris’s safety ran endlessly through her head. Siegfried sat next to her quietly and she could tell his thoughts were identical to hers.

Please let them be alright, don’t let them be hurt, or worse. Let us be on time, let them be safe, God please let them be safe...
James pulled the last suture shut and sat back on his heels. It was over. He couldn’t believe it. It was over and Tris was still alive. The younger Farnon had lost consciousness some time ago for which James was utterly thankful. The rough surgery had been excruciating and barbaric and Tris had screamed himself hoarse as James had washed out the wound and then dug through it with a pair of tweezers to remove all the splinters of wood. He’d finally passed out when James had poured a generous amount of iodine into the open wound, unable to bear the overwhelming agony. The ropes had done their job though and James had managed to complete the work as quickly as possible.

He carefully wiped down Tristan’s torso with the wet cloth, wishing the water was warmer. His fingers had gone numb a long time ago, from a combination of pain and cold. Hopefully the wound would stay closed now, without any internal bleeding. He’d done his best to repair the punctured gut and thanked heaven repeatedly that the branch hadn’t been anywhere near the lungs or heart. Infection was still likely unfortunately, but he’d cleaned the wound out as thoroughly as he was capable of under the circumstances. It would have to do. Pulling Tris’s shirt closed again he draped Tris’s discarded coat over his prone form. Then he reached out and awkwardly untied the restraints. The knots had been pulled tight though and he eventually resorted to his knife. Tristan’s wrists were bloody and cut. His ankles too. James sighed wearily and went to fetch fresh water. He gently dabbed at the ragged cuts and wrapped them in gauze. He’d done this to him. This was all his fault. He’d been the one driving, the one who’d managed to lose control and drive them off the road. James sat miserably next to the far too still body of his best friend and shivered in the cold air. He was too unhappy to notice the temperature. If he’d been a better driver, if he’d insisted on taking the better car, or stood up to Siegfried about getting those damn tyres fixed… there had been so many chances for him to prevent this, but every time he’d turned away. And now Tris was paying for it. Tristan, who hadn’t wanted to come out in the first place but had because James had asked. Who’d trusted the ‘driver of experience’ on the bad roads and had paid the price for it.

A stifled sob pushed its way out of James’s chest. He hadn’t cried in years, he wasn’t a child any more. But right now he was cold, exhausted and in pain and he was so much better off than Tris. Why couldn’t he have been the one injured? He deserved it. Tris hadn’t done anything. A tear broke free and ran down his face. Angrily he brushed it away. What right did he have to sit here and feel sorry for himself? It was his fault they were in this mess in the first place! He shivered again, more violently and looked over to Tris. The student was far too pale and cold still. The barn, while still much better than outside, was not designed to function as an effective shelter for two injured people in a snowstorm.

Help would not be coming for a while. That much was clear. Even if Siegfried had noticed them missing, he wouldn’t be able to drive out to find them until morning at least. And he might not realise the urgency of their situation, might think they’d just stopped off somewhere because of the weather. They had a long wait ahead of them. Not that they had any choice about waiting. James didn’t even consider the notion of leaving to find help. Tris wouldn’t be able to walk two steps, even if he did wake up soon and he wasn’t going to leave him alone. He turned off the torch in order to conserve the batteries for as long as possible. The darkness was nearly solid now, the moonlight long since blotted out by the heavy clouds and snow.

Stretching out a hand, James pressed the tips of his fingers to Tris’s wrist, comforting himself with the steadily beating pulse. Tristan was far too cold for comfort, even under both his own and James’s coat and with as much of the musty straw and James had been able to gather into a makeshift bed. He moved stiffly until he was sitting right next to his friend then lay down, curling
around the wounded man. Hopefully body heat would be enough to get them through however much was left of the night. He lay there, listening to Tristan’s continued heartbeat, running over everything that could still go wrong with his attempted surgery and feeling the waves of guilt wash over him.

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The first thin rays of dawn touched the windows in the living room. Helen stared at them dully for a second, still clutching a long cold cup of tea she had made hours earlier. Beside her Siegfried was looking blankly at the empty fireplace, his mind clearly miles away from Skeldale house. She straightened abruptly as the significance of the light hit her.

“Siegfried! It’s dawn!”

“What? Oh, yes!” He jumped to his feet, grimacing as his stiff back protested and helped Helen up too. “I’ll get the car. Would you go and fetch my bag my dear? There’s equipment in there we might need.”

Firmly turning her mind away from thoughts of what they might need the vet’s equipment for, Helen hurried to comply. She put on her coat and hat and, as an afterthought, gathered a few spare blankets as well. She prayed with all her heart they wouldn’t need them, that James and Tristan had stopped somewhere on the way back and were right now fast asleep in bed, or enjoying a hearty breakfast before making their way home. What she wouldn’t give to have the front door open right now and James to walk in with that sheepish expression on his face, the one that said ‘I’ve done something wrong and I’m sorry but I’d do it all over again anyway’.

The door opened quietly and Helen whirled, heart in her mouth. But it was only Siegfried, coming to fetch his coat and winter-wear before they left.

“The snow’s deep, but I think we’ll manage.” He said as he took the heavy bag from her. He nodded approvingly at the blankets. “We’ll drive along the route they would have taken, see if you can spot the car next to any of the houses we go past, I’m going to have to concentrate on watching the road.”

Helen nodded and followed him out to the waiting vehicle. The snow had laid a soft white blanket over all of Darrowby, making it seem still and peaceful and muffling any sound. The dawn light gave a golden tint to the pristine covering, giving it an ethereal look. The noise of the car starting up seemed obscenely loud in the tranquil scene. Everything felt rather unreal, like she was in a dream, or a fairy-tale. Only the tense worry on Siegfried’s face and the leaden feeling in her own stomach grounded her to reality. She peered with slowly fading hope at every house, cottage, barn and stable they passed but there was no sign of the beaten up old car James regularly drove around the country. No sign of an exhausted Tris and James trekking back home after a breakdown either. Her hope grew slimmer and slimmer with every foot closer to Partridges farm they got. When they finally crested the last hill and saw the sprawling farm before them she felt entirely numb. There had been no sign of the car. No sign of the boys. They couldn’t have stayed here; James would have telephoned, even if Tristan might not have. So where were they?

Siegfried drove up to the farm. Alan Partridge, a tall, dour man in his early fifties stepped out of the house at the sound of their approach. He watched expressionlessly as Siegfried stepped out, closely followed by Helen.

“Ah, Mr Partridge.”

“Veterinary.”
“You had my brother and my partner up here last night, isn’t that right?”

“True enough. Useless pair though. Calf died anyway.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that Mr Partridge, but they did arrive here then, what time did they leave?”

“Is this about the bill?”

“No, this has nothing to do with the bill. What time did they leave?” The farmer scowled at the pair before him but couldn’t seem to find a reason not to answer.

“About midnight. After the calf was already long dead. Took off in that old car of ‘is.”

“Midnight.”

“Aye.” Siegfried turned to Helen.

“We must have missed them. If they’d gone off the road…” He had turned quite pale now. Helen swallowed and nodded. She climbed back into the car without another word and they drove off, without saying goodbye to Partridge, who watched them leave unsmilingly.

This time as they drove she watched the country, looking for signs of a wreck or an abandoned car. They hadn’t been driving for more than ten minutes when she saw it, snow covered but still unmistakable. A car, slammed against a twisted tree at the bottom of an incline. She cried out and gripped Siegfried’s arm, pointing shakily at the sight. Siegfried slowed and stopped the car, almost throwing himself out the door in his haste to find out what had happened. Helen paused long enough to grab the blankets and vet’s bag and followed him down to the crashed wreck.

She caught up with him, her heart in her throat. Siegfried was leaning through the passenger door, blocking her view. She could clearly see the branch the car was impaled upon though, and curse her vivid imagination as horrific scenarios began rushing through her mind.

“Are they there? Siegfried? Is James there?” The older vet withdrew from the car. He was very white and his eyes reflected a deep fear and horror. Helen felt an icy fist close around her chest.

“Oh, please no.”

“They’re not there Helen.” Siegfried held her gently by the shoulders. “They were alive after the crash, they must have been, they got out and left to find shelter.”

“Not there?” The relief was dizzying, as though the world had stopped and now only just began moving again. But that look on his face… “What aren’t you telling me?” When he looked away she frowned. “Siegfried, tell me. I need to know.”

“I’m sorry, my dear. I don’t want to upset you.”

“Please, Siegfried, I need to know. Please tell me.” He sighed.

“One of them is hurt. Badly. There’s a lot of blood, all over the seat. I think it was probably Tris, James would have been driving.”

“Hurt? Late at night, in this weather? Oh, oh no. Siegfried…” She was trembling now, the sheer uncertainty of it all wearing her down. Siegfried clasped her shoulders again reassuringly.

“They’re both resourceful, intelligent people Helen. They had supplies with them, and training. The blood might look worse than it is.” She sniffed and drew herself upright again.
“You’re right Siegfried. We must find them. Where would they have gone, especially if they were h…hurt?” Siegfried peered into the distance.

“There’s a barn or something over there. Seems the most likely place. Let’s go.” She followed him obediently towards her best hope of finding her husband and the man she’d come to regard as something of a younger brother.
Chapter 5

The cold was bitter as Siegfried and Helen trudged determinedly through the snow, but Siegfried hardly noticed the chill biting at his exposed hands and ears. His mind was full of the image of the blood stains on the passenger seat, and the gore covered branch discarded nearby. It didn’t take a genius to realise what had happened and the thought of something like that happening to his little brother made Siegfried’s throat close in worry and dread. Part of him hoped Tris had been driving, and it had been James who was injured but that was a wicked and cruel thing to think and he suppressed the thought firmly.

They were nearly at the barn now and then Siegfried would know one way or another if he still had a little brother left on this God given earth. He didn’t want to know, he realised suddenly, didn’t want to push open that stout wooden door and find out he was alone. For now he could pretend, he could hope and he could pray that Tristan, and James of course, were both alive and not too badly injured. But the moment he entered the barn, that hope would be dashed and broken and he would have to face reality.

Standing in front of the door at last, Siegfried couldn’t put it off any longer. He looked to his side to see Helen standing there, white faced and thin lipped with worry but determined and resolute to face whatever would come. Her courage gave him courage too and he rapped twice at the door before opening it and peering into the gloomy space beyond.

The first thing to strike him was the smell, of blood and iodine and dust and sweat. It smelt like the surgery at home, like pain and desperation and fear. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he could make out two slumped figures in the middle of the space. Tristan was lying flat and still, mouth slightly open. Siegfried couldn’t tell if he was breathing, his face was terrifyingly pale and there were bandages visible beneath the two coats he was wrapped in. James lay curled up next to him, one hand resting against the blond haired student’s neck, where he had clearly been monitoring his pulse. Behind Siegfried Helen let out a shocked gasp and pushed past him, rushing towards the figures and kneeling next to her husband. Siegfried just stood numbly in the doorway, too afraid to take those final few steps and discover if Tris was…was…

Helen reached over and shook James, her voice shaking as she pleaded with him to wake up, wake up and talk to her. Siegfried felt some of the icy numbness in his heart thaw as the other man blinked groggily and sat upright stiffly, wincing as he moved. Helen threw her arms around him and he caught her automatically, still looking lost and confused at the entire situation. Siegfried shook off his paralysis and stepped forward, crouching down next to the pair. Tristan hadn’t moved, hadn’t so much as twitched. James was speaking quietly to Helen now, reassuring and soothing her. Ignoring the reunited couple he reached out to touch his brother. The skin was icy cold; Siegfried snatched his fingers away in horror, and then determinedly replaced them against Tristan’s neck. He was just cold, he wasn’t, he couldn’t be… no, he was just cold. That was all.

There was a pulse beating steadily, if slowly. Tristan’s heart was still beating, his brother was alive. Siegfried sank bonelessly onto his knees, the sheer rush of relief making him giddy. Oh thank God. Thank God. He didn’t know if he could have borne it if Tristan had passed away, all because of a stupid car crash. Hands shaking, he tapped Tris’s cheek urgently.

“Tris? Come on Tris, wake up. Show me those eyes.” Tristan moved; rolling his head to one side and screwing his eyes tight shut. Siegfried fought back yet another wave of relief, responding to stimulus, excellent. He glanced up at his partner. James was sitting up, looking much more awake and alert. Helen had wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and was fussing over a swollen and painful looking hand. Feeling eyes on him, James looked over.
“Is he okay?” James asked quietly.

“He’s alive.”

“Thank God.” James said fervently. “I’m so sorry Siegfried, I had to…the car, and it just went, but I did what I could but we had no equipment and I, I’m sorry but I—”

“James, stop babbling. How bad is it?” As he spoke, Siegfried ran practised hands over his brother’s torso, easily finding the wound and pulling away the coats and shirt.

“Bad.” James replied tersely. “I did what I could but…” he trailed off as Siegfried peeled back the bandage to see the injury. The area around the damage was red and hot to the touch. Infection had clearly set in. Siegfried bit the inside of his lip as he carefully examined the puncture himself. It ran straight through Tris, and was far too wide and ragged for comfort. The infection would have been inevitable considering the circumstances, but if they could get him to a hospital quickly it might not be too bad.

“You operated?”

“I had to; there was too much blood loss. Siegfried, I’m sorry…” Siegfried blinked.

“What have you got to be sorry for? Never mind, right now we’ve got to get him out of here. He needs proper professional care.”

“I think he’s waking up.” Helen cut in anxiously. Siegfried’s head snapped around to Tristan so fast his neck hurt. Sure enough, Tristan was blinking groggily at the three of them.

“Si-Siegfried?”

“I’m here Tristan, it’s going to be alright. Don’t try and move.” The corner of Tris’s mouth twitched into an approximation of a smile.

“Knew you’d come,” he breathed.

“Of course I came. Who else would keep you out of trouble?” Siegfried said past the growing lump in his throat. He grasped Tristan’s hand tightly. “Everything’s going to be fine, understand. We’ll get you to the hospital and all your pretty nurses can patch you up. You’ll be back to haunting the Drover’s and avoiding the surgery in no time at all.” The younger Farnon squeezed his hand back and closed his eyes again, grimacing at the ever present pain. Siegfried took in a shuddering breath of mingled relief and fear and turned to James. “How bad are you hurt? Can you make it back to the car?”

“I’ll make it.” James said firmly, feeling Helen’s hand resting gently on his shoulder.

“Good. I’ll have to carry Tris, there’s no way he could walk in this condition. Helen my dear, you’ll help James, of course?”

“Of course.” Helen said, surprised he would need to ask. Siegfried nodded once then drew in a deep breath and prepared to lift Tristan up. His little brother whimpered with pain as he slid his arms beneath his back and legs, the sound stabbing through Siegfried like a knife. He hauled Tristan up into his arms properly, staggering slightly as he adjusted to the weight. Younger brother maybe, little brother not so much!

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The strange little procession made its way slowly back towards where Helen and Siegfried had
left the car. Helen walked in front, with James leaning heavily on her. Siegfried walked behind
them, cradling Tris to his chest. Tristan was shivering in the chilled air despite the two blankets he
had draped over him and the trembling was clearly causing him further pain. He bit his lip until it
bled and tried to focus instead on Siegfried’s reassuring heartbeat, thudding clearly next to his.

Everything hurt, breathing hurt, thinking hurt and every single step his brother took was nothing
but exquisite agony. Bloody car, thought Tris morosely, why did things like this always happen to
him? Absently he began trying to count how many car crashes he’d been involved in, but lost
count when Siegfried staggered slightly in the snow. The flare of white hot pain drove all other
thoughts from his head very effectively.

When he felt able to think again they were almost at the car. Tris glanced at Siegfried’s face, he
looked completely relieved as Helen opened the car door and helped James get in. Poor old James,
the younger Farnon thought through the haze of pain, he’d been hurt in the crash too hadn’t he?
Then he could focus on nothing but trying not to scream in agony as Helen and Siegfried
manoeuvred him into the passenger seat and fastened the seatbelt. Helen sat next to James as
Siegfried put the car in gear and drove carefully away from the accident site.

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While Tristan was in rather too much feverish pain to really care about his surroundings, James
was clearly nervous about being back in a car on the treacherous and icy roads. He was tense and
kept glancing out the windows and checking his seatbelt was fastened securely. Helen watched
him anxiously.

“Are you alright James?” She asked.

“Fine, fine. How long until we get there?”

“About twenty minutes, given the state of the roads, I’m going as fast as possible.”

“Right. How are the roads? And the tyres?”

“Roads are manageable, the tyres are good.” Siegfried glanced over at his partner. “Is that why
you crashed? The tyres?” James fixed him with a hard look.

“Yes. They couldn’t handle the conditions out here. I’ve told you time and time again Siegfried
that they needed changing!”

“You’ve never-“

“Yes I have! Repeatedly! But you just weren’t listening. That car was a heap of junk from the
very beginning and everything on it was failing! It’s a miracle it’s lasted this long!” James realised
he was shouting and tried to lower his voice. “That accident might have been preventable
Siegfried; you can’t scrimp on money when safety is concerned.” Siegfried opened his mouth,
possibly to defend himself, possibly to apologise, James would never know, he ploughed straight
on. “You do this all the time Siegfried; neglect to sort out problems before they become a
catastrophe! The car couldn’t handle this weather and-“ He halted as Helen put her hand gently on
his arm.

“Calm down dear, let’s just get to the hospital and get you and Tris patched up alright?”

“…Right, yes. Sorry darling.” James muttered.

“No, it’s fine,” Siegfried said. His voice cracked slightly. “I’m sorry James, I didn’t…” He trailed
off. What was there to say really?
The car pulled up to the hospital without another word being said. Tristan had spent the entire journey semi-conscious, only waking enough to moan in discomfort at any sharp corners or sudden decelerations that jolted him too much. James was exhausted now, his short rant having taken all his energy and was simply sitting and staring at the back of the seat in front. Beside him Helen sat with her hands entwined with his undamaged one. Siegfried braked gently and climbed out of the car.

As he opened his brother’s door and unbuckled his seat belt James’s accusing words kept ringing in his ears. Was this whole thing his fault? He’d known the tyres were bad yes, but he hadn’t thought they were dangerously bad. And, he frowned in thought as he gently eased Tris upright, he honestly couldn’t recall James pestering him about getting them fixed. Didn’t mean it hadn’t happened of course, Siegfried was ruefully aware of his own tendency to instantly forget what he’d just been told, not that he’d ever admit it out loud of course!

He managed to get Tristan out of the seat and leaning against the car when a pair of nurses came hurrying out of the building pushing a wheelchair through the snow towards them. One of them veered off to examine James as he clambered slowly out of the vehicle and the other got Tris settled in the wheelchair with the minimum of fuss. Tristan seemed to have decided that the world was too painful and cold and confusing to deal with right now and was remaining stubbornly in a listless doze, barely aware of his surroundings. Siegfried squeezed his brother’s shoulder gently and he and the nurse manoeuvred the awkward wheelchair across the driveway towards the hospital, James and Helen trudging along behind.

Once inside the building Tristan was whisked off in one direction, James in another and Siegfried and Helen were directed to the tiny waiting room. They sat on the uncomfortable chairs in awkward silence. Finally Helen decided to acknowledge the elephant in the room.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it Siegfried.”

“What?” Siegfried replied unhappily, ‘He had every right to mean it. I should have seen to those tyres months ago. I just didn’t think. And now Tris and James are hurt and it’s my fault.” Helen hated how flat and dead his speech had turned.

“It wasn’t your fault Siegfried, not entirely.” James’s voice cut in softly. He was standing at the door to the waiting room, looking a good deal cleaner and with his hand neatly bandaged and tucked into a sling.

“How was it not my fault?” Siegfried asked heavily as Helen jumped to her feet and embraced her husband. “It was my responsibility to get that car fixed and I didn’t. It was my responsibility to ensure your safety and I didn’t. It was always my responsibility to look after Tris and I didn’t.”

“You couldn’t have foreseen it Siegfried. You’re not omniscient.” Siegfried looked at his partner. James looked tired but earnest. “I didn’t mean what I said earlier, it was more my fault than yours anyway.” Now James looked guilty.

“Your fault?” Siegfried asked in amazement. “How on earth was this your fault?”

“I was driving,” said James simply. “I was the driver and I lost control and crashed.”

“Well you hardly did it on purpose-“

“I should have listened to Tris and borrowed the better car. I knew the tyres were bad and I still risked us both. It’s a miracle we weren’t killed.”
“Hang on a moment James! You were hardly to blame for the snow! If I recall correctly it started snowing after you’d already left.”

“Then I should have stayed at Partridges!”

“You couldn’t have known you would crash!”

“Boys! Settle down!” Helen said waringly. “Remember where we are.” Both Siegfried and James looked suitably abashed. “Now, this whole mess was nobody’s fault. Yes, Siegfried you should have replaced the tyres and James you shouldn’t have risked taking a dangerous car on snowy roads, but neither of you intended this to happen and I’m certain neither of you will repeat the same mistake again! Both you and Tris are going to be fine, and the car will have to be replaced anyway.”

“Yes, with a much better one.” Siegfried vowed. “I absolutely refuse to suffer through another night like this one!”

“Hear hear!” James said fervently. “One night spent in a shed during a snowstorm is quite enough thank you very much.” Helen smiled at them both and the three fell into a much more comfortable silence as they waited for news on Tristan. Eventually a doctor emerged, with untidy ginger hair and spectacles.

“Hullo, anyone here for Tristan Farnon?” He asked.

“How is he?” Siegfried questioned anxiously, striding forward.

“Well, it was a bit tricky at first, we had to reopen and clean the wound again, but the blood loss wasn’t too bad and we’ve got the infection under control now. He’s sleeping currently but I’d venture to say he might be able to go home in a week or so, provided he gets adequate care when he’s there.”

“Of course he will!” Helen put in firmly. “Can we see him now?”

“Just for a minute or two. Try not to wake him, the injury’s put his body under a great deal of stress, he needs all the rest he can get.”

“Yes Doctor.”

They followed the doctor through the winding corridors to a small private room in the west wing. Tristan was indeed asleep, hair mussed and injuries wrapped in clean white bandages. Helen pressed a kiss to his forehead and smoothed the hair back from his brow.

“Get well soon Tris, we’ll be waiting for you.” She said softly. James didn’t touch his friend, just stood back and observed him, feeling the rush of relief and thankfulness the young student would recover fully. He felt Helen take his hand again as she stepped back to allow Siegfried room next to the bed. The married couple left the room quietly to give the brothers a moment alone.

Siegfried gently took his brothers hand, fingers lingering over the steadily throbbing pulse. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply, finally relaxing properly for the first time since about three am when he’d opened his brother’s door and found his room empty.

“Oh Tris, how do you get yourself into these messes?” He said resignedly.

“Someone’s got to keep you on your toes.” Came the murmured reply. Siegfried blinked and stared at the prone figure on the bed. Tristan’s eyes remained closed but the corner of his mouth...
had lifted in a tiny smile.

“Tris, you’re supposed to be asleep.”

“Mmmmm.”

“Come on little brother, you need to rest.”

“I will. Thanks Siegfried.”

“You’re welcome, er, what for?”

“F’coming and finding me.”

“I could hardly do anything else.” Siegfried retorted truthfully. He simply wouldn’t be able to not go and dig Tris out of whatever trouble he’d managed to find this time.

“I know. Thanks.”

“Go to sleep Tris.”

The hand holding his relaxed again as Tris succumbed once again to sleep. Siegfried smiled at him, he always looked so innocent when asleep, you’d never believe just how much mischief he got involved in when awake.

“Sleep Tris, you’ll be back home soon enough.”

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