

THE END

1:12 p.m., Tuesday before Thanksgiving

“STEP OUT OF THE VEHICLE WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!”

Clouds of steam billowed from under the crumpled hood of the Lexus. Glass from the driver-side rear window lay strewn along the road, sparkling like diamonds on the glistening blacktop. Two police SUVs encircled the wreckage, their lights ricocheting around the snow-laden trees that hugged the edges of the road.

Jim slowly lifted his aching head and squinted through the window at the scene outside the car. Through the iced front windshield he could see the shadowy silhouettes of three officers with drawn pistols. They shielded themselves behind their open car doors. A thick hot strand of blood meandered slowly down Jim’s face from a ragged cut above his left eye. His head throbbed.

One of the police officers was bellowing something, but Jim couldn't make out the words. He slowly rolled his eyes over to the driver seat to see if Malik was okay.

Malik was alert, wide-eyed, as the red and blue lights refracted onto his face like a kaleidoscope. His hair was littered with broken glass. Clouds of breath emerged from his open mouth in the frozen air. An abrasion on the side of his face was spotted with blood. Probably the airbag. He glanced for a moment at Jim out of the corner of his eye before leaning forward and fumbling around the brake pedal.

"Come on, Malik," Jim said with a hoarse whisper. "It's all over now, son."

Malik ignored Jim. His eyes flashed as his hand found what he was looking for. As he pulled the black handgun from the floorboards, he groaned.

Jim looked at the gun, now resting in the young man's lap, and then at Malik. "Think, son," Jim said, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder. "This is not a good idea. It's over."

Malik frowned as he stared out the window.

"Get out of the vehicle with your hands in the air. Now!" the officer hollered again.

"You're right, Jim," Malik said in a near whisper. "It *is* all over—for me at least."

Jim swallowed and shot a nervous look at the police cars. Malik continued to stare out the front window with a grim face.

“Just give me the gun, Malik,” Jim said. He placed his open hand in front of Malik’s chest. “Those men outside will kill you if you step out with that.”

Malik exhaled a deep sigh but said nothing.

“Give me the gun, Malik, and we both walk out of here alive today.”

Malik took a long look at the gun in his hand. He shook his head. “Man, too much has happened. Too much. I’m dead no matter what.” A slight smile emerged at the corner of his lips as a lone tear fell from his eye. He stuffed the gun into the front waistband of his pants. The handle was barely visible. He pressed the button to unlock his door.

Jim grasped frantically for Malik’s shirt, but the young man opened the door and stepped out of the car into the frigid air before he could catch him.