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As she maneuvered her SUV along the winding road that led to their gated community, the lake that ran alongside the road looked like a black canvas. The two lane road they traveled was smothered in the darkness brought on by the setting sun and dirty brown colored rain clouds.

“Val, I have some decisions to make.”

“Nina, stop being overly dramatic. There will be other auditions. I'll stay at home and watch Chrissy the next time, and you can take Precious by yourself.”

She turned and looked at Val, and then looked out the front windshield again. With her eyes squinted and a firm grip of the steering wheel, Nina attempted to brave the elements.

A few landmarks alerted Nina that her home was less than five minutes away. As she struggled to see through the wall of rain outside of her window, Nina envisioned pouring a glass of wine, sinking into a nice hot bubble bath, and then retreating to her bedroom.

Suddenly, her daydream was interrupted by a set of bright dots that appeared to be suspended in midair. The dangling dots appeared to get closer and closer; so close that Nina soon realized the dots were actually headlights that belonged to an oncoming SUV.

Nina jerked the steering wheel to the right in a desperate attempt to avoid the vehicle. Unfortunately, the response of her high priced vehicle was too good. The car maneuvered so well that her reflexes weren't fast enough to

readjust before she crashed through the frail wooden railing that stood between the road and the edge of the cliff.

The tree that protruded from the lake's surface was probably one hundred years old. Its branches were massive and spawned smaller curvy branches that were the width of a toddler's arm. Only an inanimate object such as this could ignore the urge to flinch as Nina's 2007 Range Rover hurled through the rain filled sky and landed on top of it.

The screams that filled the air were silenced instantly as the huge branch shattered the front windshield, cut into the deployed driver's side airbag like a hot knife through butter and pierced Nina's right shoulder. Val was knocked partially unconscious by the force of the crash. As blood streamed from her scalp and along the bridge of her nose, she slouched in the front passenger seat like a blood soaked rag doll. The right side of the vehicle was partially submerged as the left side relied heavily on the tree branch to keep it propped above the water. The rain seemed to relish this carnage as it came down harder – seemingly out of spite.

As the creaking sound of metal subsided, the only thing that could be heard were the soft moans of a child – make that two children. Precious was positioned in the passenger seat directly behind her mother. Like Nina, she was benefiting from the position of the tree branch. Her right foot was the only part of her body that touched the surge of water that was starting to fill the vehicle.

Chrissy wasn't as lucky. Much like Val who struggled in the front passenger seat, being positioned on the right side of the vehicle brought her one step closer to death. With her face partially submerged, Chrissy was able to

manage a moan. Precious joined in as the sounds from the two children served as the only indication of life inside the demolished vehicle.

“Mommy!” Precious called out in a barely audible tone. “Help me, Mommy!”

“Uhh, uhh,” Chrissy moaned. Her limited speech capabilities combined with injuries from the crash made it impossible for her to utter anything else.

Nina’s maternal instincts must have kicked in because she awakened from her unconscious state at the sound of her daughter’s cries for help.

“Precious!” Nina screamed as she twisted and moved around in her seat. “Mama’s here, Precious! Mama’s right here!”

“Help! Help me, Mommy!”

“Val, are you okay?” Nina asked.

Val didn’t reply. Truth be told, Nina didn’t wait for a reply. She used her right hand to release the seatbelt and her left hand to push the tree branch more towards Val. At that moment, Nina had one thing on her mind – getting to Precious.

When Val regained consciousness she realized the severity of their situation, “Nina, I think my arm is broken. Grab Chrissy – the car is sinking on this side.”

Nina didn’t respond to Val, but she did scream as she maneuvered her body so she could look over her seat to see her child. The tree branch had taken a hunk of flesh from Nina’s right shoulder, and she was in excruciating pain.

“Nina, grab Chrissy; she’s going to drown!” Val shouted a second time as water started to invade her mouth and nostrils.

Nina watched Chrissy as she struggled to keep her head above water.

Nina's gaze was interrupted by the sound of Precious' voice.

"Mommy, help me!" Precious screamed. "I'm scared Mommy, help me!"

"I see you baby – mommy's coming."

"Nina, the branch is in my way. I can't reach Chrissy – grab her before she drowns."

"Okay," Nina replied, as she started to push the branch out of her way so that she could get a better angle at Chrissy.

The force from her push was all the branch could take. The snap of the branch sounded like a firecracker exploding in a closed closet. The entire rear end of the vehicle dipped and the front portion went up like a see-saw. Nina was nearly thrown over her seat and into the water when the car shifted. Val was the biggest beneficiary of this event because her head and shoulders were now elevated above the water.

"Lord, please help us," Val prayed aloud.

Nina screamed as she witnessed the girls heads slowly disappear beneath the surface of the water that now dominated the car. Val looked helpless as her severely broken arm prevented her from helping.

"Precious!" Nina screamed.

As if on cue, a tiny arm emerged from the water. The attached hand wiggled while the stretched fingers desperately searched for something or someone to hold on to.

"Nina look – its Chrissy's hand! Grab her Nina, she's alive!"

Nina looked at Chrissy's outstretched hand. She wanted to grab the child's hand and pluck her from the water, but all she could think about was saving Precious.

"Hold your breath, Precious!" Nina screamed. "I gotta save my baby!"

"Nina, grab Chrissy's hand!"

Nina climbed over the seat and reached along the side of the seat Precious sat in and released the seatbelt. Fortunately, Precious had developed into a pretty good swimmer for her age. Nina's insistence that Precious take swimming lessons as early as the age of five paid off. The moment Precious went under water she started holding her breath the way her swimming instructor taught her.

With her child cradled in her arms, Nina managed to open the passenger door. Like two rubber ducks bobbing up and down in a bath tub, she and Precious appeared, disappeared, and then reappeared in the water. On the other side of the car a splash could be heard. Suddenly, a light shined brightly on Nina and Precious. From the shore, silhouettes could be seen pointing and moving towards them.

"I got one," shouted a man.

"I got two," shouted another man as he drug Nina and Precious towards the shore.

Nina and Precious were gasping for air as they sat on the shore surrounded by unfamiliar faces. Val's voice could be heard as two women attempted to apply a makeshift splint to her compound fractured arm.

"Get Chrissy!" Val screamed.

“What is she saying?” asked a rescuer.

“Chrissy is in the back seat!” Val blurted out.

“Oh my GOD – she said someone was in the back seat.”

As the car became totally submerged, a half dozen bystanders dove into the water and swam towards the old tree that once cradled the Range Rover. Seconds turned into minutes as the swimmers risked their lives to reach the car. Within minutes, five of the would-be rescuers returned gasping for breath and looking dejected. The last diver seemed to be lost in the unforgiving water like the vehicle.

“Honey!” screamed the wife of the final rescuer.

As he appeared from the murky water carrying a small lifeless body, the man's tears were disguised by the dirty lake water that saturated his face. No one had to ask, the look on the rescuers face and the child's limp limbs said it all – Chrissy was dead. Val put her head down and cried, “No, no, Lord – not Chrissy. She's just a child!”

Nina sat just a few feet away holding Precious as she watched a total stranger carry her now deceased stepdaughter to the shore. She grabbed the back of Precious' head and pressed her face up against her chest and breast so that the child didn't have to witness the horrible scene. The emotion and drama that filled the air was suddenly replaced with a chilling silence.

As if on cue, every head bowed as Chrissy's body was placed on the ground – every head but Val's. Val's anguish and tears were on full display as she planted a gaze on Nina that was so steely it would have scared Satan.