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NO EXIT

A NOVEL

TAYLOR
ADAMS

NO EXIT

A gripping thriller full of heart-stopping twists

TAYLOR ADAMS



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DEDICATION

For Riley.

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DRAFT EMAIL (UNSENT)

EPILOGUE

FREE KINDLE BOOKS AND OFFERS

OTHER BOOKS BY TAYLOR ADAMS

Sent: 12/23 6:52 p.m.

To: Fat_Kenny1964@outlook.com

From: amagicman13@gmail.com

We'll do it tonight. Then we'll need a place to sleep for a few weeks. And I need to know — for sure — that you're good for what we talked about. Send me the numbers. Then delete this email and I'll delete yours.

I'm stuck out in a rest stop in Nowhere, Colorado, the blizzard is getting worse, and I'm about to do something that can't be undone.

Oh, and Merry Christmas.

DUSK

7:39 p.m.

December 23

“Screw you, Bing Crosby.”

Darby Thorne was six miles up Backbone Pass when her windshield wiper broke, and that bass-baritone voice was just kicking into the second chorus. It was official: he’d be getting his white Christmas. He could shut up about it now.

She thumbed the radio dial (nothing else but static) and watched her left wiper blade flap like a fractured wrist. She considered pulling over to duct-tape it, but there was no highway shoulder — just walled embankments of dirty ice crowding her right and left. She was afraid to stop anyway. The snowflakes had been big and soppy when she’d blown through Gypsum ninety minutes ago, but they’d grown smaller and grittier as her altitude climbed. They were hypnotic now in her racing headlights, a windshield of stars smearing into light speed.

Chains mandatory, warned the last sign she’d seen.

Darby didn’t own snow chains. Not yet, at least. This was her freshman year at CU-Boulder and she’d never planned on venturing any further off-campus than Ralphie’s Thriftway. She remembered walking back from there last month, half-drunk with a gaggle of half-friends from her dorm, and when one of them asked her (only half-giving a shit) where she’d planned to go for Christmas break, Darby had answered bluntly: that it would require an act of God Himself to make her come back home to Utah.

And apparently He’d been listening, because He’d blessed Darby’s mother with late-stage pancreatic cancer.

She’d learned this yesterday.

Via text message.

SCRAPE-SCRAPE. The bent wiper blade slapped the glass again, but the snowflakes were dry enough, and the car’s speed fast enough, that the windshield stayed clear. The real problem was the accumulating snow on the road. The yellow lane markers were

already hidden by several inches of fresh white, and periodically Darby felt her Honda Civic's chassis rake the surface. It returned like a wet cough, a little worse every time. On the last one, she'd felt the steering wheel vibrate between her knuckled fingers. Another inch of powder and she'd be stranded up here, nine thousand feet above sea level with a quarter-tank of gas, no cell coverage, and only her troubled thoughts for company.

And the brassy voice of Bing Crosby, she supposed. He crooned the final chorus as Darby took a sip of warm Red Bull.

SCRAPE-SCRAPE.

The entire drive had been like this — a blurry, bloodshot charge through miles of foothills and scrub plains. No time to stop. All she'd eaten today was ibuprofen. She'd left her desk lamp on in her dorm room, but she'd only noticed this as she left the Dryden parking lot — too far to turn back. Stomach acid in her throat. Pirated Schoolyard Heroes and My Chemical Romance tracks looping on her (now dead) iPod. Racing green signboards with faded fast food decals. Boulder had vanished in her rearview mirror around noon, and then the foggy skyline of Denver with its fleet of grounded jets, and finally little Gypsum behind a screen of falling snowflakes.

SCRAPE-SCRAPE.

Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* faded, and the next holiday song queued up. She'd heard them all twice now.

Her Honda bucked sharply left. Red Bull splashed in her lap. The steering wheel went rigid in her grip and she fought it for a stomach-fluttery second (*turn into the skid, turn into the skid*) before twisting the vehicle back under control, still moving forward and uphill — but losing speed. Losing traction.

"No, no, no." She pumped the gas.

The all-weather tires gripped and released in the sludgy snow, heaving the car in violent contractions. Steam sizzled off the hood.

"Come on, Blue—"

SCRAPE-SCRAPE.

She'd called this car *Blue* since she got it in high school. Now she feathered the gas pedal, searching for the sensory feedback of traction. Twin spurts of snow kicked up in her rearview mirror, lit vivid

red by her taillights. A harsh rattling sound — Blue’s undercarriage scraping the snow’s surface again. The car struggled and fishtailed, half-boat now, and—

SCRAPE—

—The left wiper blade snapped off and twirled away.

Her heart sank. “Oh, *shit*.”

Now the incoming snowflakes stuck to the left hemisphere of her windshield, rapidly gathering on the unguarded glass. She’d lost too much speed. In seconds, her view of State Route Seven had narrowed into tunnel vision, and she punched her steering wheel. The horn bleated, heard by no one.

This is how people die, she realized with a shiver. *In blizzards, people get trapped out in rural areas and run out of gas.*

They freeze to death.

She sipped her Red Bull — empty.

She clicked off the radio, leaned into the passenger seat to see the road, and tried to remember — what was the last car she’d seen today? How many miles back? It had been an orange snowplow with CDOT stenciled on the door, hugging the right lane and spouting a plume of ice chips. At least an hour ago. Back when the sun had been out.

Now it was just a gray lantern slipping behind jagged peaks, and the sky was dimming to a bruised purple. Frozen fir trees becoming jagged silhouettes. The lowlands darkening into lakes of shadow. The temperature was 4° according to the Shell Station signboard she’d passed thirty miles back. Probably colder now.

Then she saw it: a half-buried green sign in a snow berm to her right. It crept up on her, catching the glow of her Honda’s dirty headlights in a flash: 365 DAYS SINCE THE LAST FATAL ACCIDENT.

The count was probably a few days off due to the snowstorm, but she still found it eerie. One year, exactly. It made tonight some sort of grim anniversary. It felt strangely personal, like one of her gravestone rubbings.

And behind it, another sign.

REST AREA AHEAD.

* * *

Seen one? You've seen them all.

One longhouse structure (visitor center, restrooms, maybe a volunteer-run convenience store or coffee shop) nestled among wind-blasted firs and chapped rock faces. A bare flagpole. A drum-like slice of an ancient tree. A crowd of bronze statues buried to their waists; taxpayer-funded art honoring some local doctor or pioneer. And an offshoot parking lot with a handful of parked cars — other stranded motorists like herself, waiting for the snowplows to arrive.

Darby had passed dozens of rest areas since Boulder. Some bigger, most better, all less isolated. But this one, apparently, was the one fate had chosen for her.

TIRED? Asked a blue sign. FREE COFFEE INSIDE.

And a newer one, stamped with the Bush-era Homeland Security eagle: SEE SOMETHING? SAY SOMETHING.

A final sign, at the end of the off-ramp, was T-shaped. It directed trucks and campers to go left, and smaller vehicles to go right.

Darby almost ran it over.

Her windshield was now opaque with heavy snow — her right wiper was failing, too — so she'd rolled down her side window and palmed a circle in the glass. Like navigating while looking through a periscope. She didn't even bother finding a parking space — the painted lines and curbs wouldn't be visible until March — and she nuzzled Blue in beside a windowless gray van.

She cut the engine. Killed the headlights.

Silence.

Her hands were still shaking. Leftover adrenaline from that first skid. She squeezed them into fists, first the right, then the left (*inhale, count to five, exhale*), and watched her windshield gather snowflakes. In ten seconds, the circle she'd wiped was gone. In thirty, she was sealed under a wall of darkening ice, facing the fact that she wouldn't make it to Provo, Utah, by noon tomorrow. That optimistic ETA had hinged on her beating this blizzard over Backbone Pass before midnight and reaching Vernal in time for a 3 a.m. power nap. It was almost 8 p.m. already. Even if she didn't stop

to sleep or pee, she wouldn't be able to speak to her mom before the first surgery. That window of time was CLOSED INDEFINITELY, like yet another mountain pass on her news app.

After the surgery, then.

That's when.

Now her Honda was pitch black. Snow packed against the glass on all sides like an arctic cave. She checked her iPhone, squinting in the electric glow — no service, and nine percent battery. The last text message she'd received was still open. She'd first read it back on the highway around Gypsum, crossing some causeway slick with ice, hauling ass at eighty-five with the little screen trembling in her palm: **She's okay right now.**

Right now. That was a scary qualifier. And it wasn't even the scariest part.

Darby's older sister Devon thought in emoticons. Her texts and Twitter posts were allergic to punctuation; often-breathless spurts of verbiage in search of a coherent thought. But not this one. Devon had chosen to spell out *okay*, and end the sentence with a period, and these little details had nested in Darby's stomach like an ulcer. Nothing tangible, but a clue that whatever was happening at Utah Valley Hospital was less than *okay* but couldn't be expressed via keypad.

Just four stupid words.

She's okay right now.

And here Darby was, the underachieving second-born, trapped at a lonely rest stop just below the summit of Backbone Pass, because she'd tried to race Snowmageddon over the Rockies and failed. Miles above sea level, snowed in inside a '94 Honda Civic with busted windshield wipers, a dying phone, and a cryptic text message simmering in her mind.

Mom is okay right now. Whatever the hell that meant.

As a girl, she'd been fascinated by death. She hadn't lost any grandparents, so death was still an abstract concept, something to be visited and explored like a tourist. She loved gravestone rubbings — when you tape rice paper against a headstone and rub black crayon or wax to take a detailed imprint. They're beautiful. Her

private collection included hundreds of them, some framed. Some unknowns. Some celebrities. She'd jumped a fence in Denver last year to capture Buffalo Bill's. For a long time she'd believed this little quirk of hers, this adolescent fascination with death, would better prepare her for the real thing when it entered her life.

It hadn't.

For a few moments, she sat in her darkened car, reading and re-reading Devon's words. It occurred to her that if she stayed inside this cold vault alone with her thoughts, she'd just start to cry, and God knows she'd done enough of that in the last twenty-four hours. She couldn't lose her momentum. She couldn't sink into that muck again. Like Blue bogging down in this heavy snow, miles from human help — it'll bury you if you let it.

Inhale. Count to five. Exhale.

Forward motion.

So she pocketed her iPhone, unbuckled her seatbelt, slipped a windbreaker over her Boulder Art Walk hoodie, and hoped that in addition to the promised free coffee, this dingy little rest area would have Wi-Fi.

* * *

Inside the visitor center, she asked the first person she saw, and he pointed to a cheaply laminated sign on the wall: *Wi-Fi for our guests, courtesy of CDOT's proud partnership with RoadConnect!*

He stood behind her. "It . . . uh, it says it'll bill you."

"I'll pay it."

"It's a bit steep."

"I'll pay it anyway."

"See?" He pointed. "\$3.95 every ten minutes—"

"I just need to make a call."

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

"Because if it's going to be more than twenty minutes, you might want to do their RoadConnect monthly pass, which says it's only ten dollars for—"

"Holy shit, dude, it's *fine*."

Darby hadn't meant to snap. She hadn't gotten a good look at this stranger until now, under the sterile fluorescent lights — late fifties, a yellow Carhartt jacket, one earring, and a silver goatee. Like a sad-eyed pirate. She reminded herself that he was probably stranded here, too, and only trying to help.

Her iPhone couldn't find the wireless network anyway. She scrolled with her thumb, waiting for it to appear.

Nothing.

The guy returned to his seat. "Karma, eh?"

She ignored him.

This place must have been a functioning coffee house during daylight hours. But here and now, it reminded her of an after-hours bus station — over-lit and bare. The coffee stand (Espresso Peak) was locked behind a roll-down security shutter. Behind it, two industrial coffee machines with analog buttons and blackened drip trays. Stale pastries. A blackboard menu listed a few pricey frou-frou drinks.

The visitor center was one room — a long rectangle following the spine of the roof, with public restrooms in the back. Wooden chairs, a broad table, and benches along the wall. Nearby, a vending machine and racks of tourism brochures. The room felt both cramped and cavernous, with a sharp Lysol odor.

As for the promised free coffee? On Espresso Peak's stone-and-mortar counter was a stack of Styrofoam cups, napkins, and two carafes on warming plates guarded by the shutter. One labeled COFEE, one labeled COCO.

Someone on state payroll is zero for two on spelling.

At ankle-level, she noticed the mortar was cracked and one of the stones was loose. A kick could dislodge it. This irritated a small, obsessive-compulsive part of Darby's brain. Like the need to pick at a hangnail.

She heard a low buzzing noise, too, like the thrum of locust wings, and wondered if the site was on backup power. That could have reset the Wi-Fi, maybe. She turned back to the goateed stranger. "Have you seen any payphones here?"

The man glanced up at her — *oh, you're still here?* — and shook his head.

“Do you have a cell signal?” she asked.

“Not since White Bend.”

Her heart sank. According to the regional map on the wall, this rest stop was called Wanapa (roughly translating to *Little Devil*, courtesy of the local Paiute tribe). Twenty miles north was another rest area — the similarly named Wanapani, for *Big Devil* — and then ten miles further, downhill, was the town of White Bend. And tonight, on the eve of Snowmageddon, or Snowpocalypse, or Snowzilla, or whatever meteorologists were calling it, White Bend might as well be on the moon—

“I got a signal outside,” said a second male voice.

Behind her.

Darby turned. He was leaning against the front door with one hand on the knob. She'd walked right past him when she first came inside (*how did I miss him?*). The guy was tall, broad-shouldered, about a year or two older than her. He could be one of the Alpha Sig guys her roommate partied with, with a slick mop of hair, a green North Face jacket, and a shy smile. “Just one bar, though, and just for a few minutes,” he added. “My carrier is, uh, T-Mobile.”

“Mine, too. Where?”

“Out by the statues.”

She nodded, hoping she still had enough battery for a call. “Do you . . . hey, do either of you know when the snowplows are coming?”

Both guys shook their heads. Darby didn't like standing between them; she had to keep turning her head.

“I think the emergency broadcasts are down,” the older one said, pointing to a nineties-era AM/FM radio buzzing on the counter. The source of the staticky insect-noise she'd heard. It was caged behind the security grate. “When I got here, it was playing traffic and ESA stuff on a thirty second loop,” he added. “But now it's just dead air. Maybe their transmitter's covered with snow.”

She reached through the grate and straightened the antenna, causing the garbled static to change pitch. “Still better than Bing

Crosby.”

“Who’s Bing Crosby?” the younger man asked.

“One of the Beatles,” the older one answered.

“Oh.”

Somehow, Darby liked the older one already, and regretted snapping at him about the Wi-Fi.

“I don’t know much about music,” the younger one admitted.

“Clearly.”

On the big table, she noticed a deck of dog-eared playing cards. A little Texas hold ’em apparently, to bond two strangers stranded by a blizzard.

A toilet flushed in the restrooms.

Three strangers, she tallied.

She slipped her phone back into her jeans pocket, realizing both men were still staring at her. One in front, one behind.

“I’m Ed,” said the older one.

“Ashley,” said the younger one.

Darby didn’t give her name. She elbowed out the front door, back into the subzero chill outside, and stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets. She let the door swing shut behind her, hearing the older man ask the younger one: “Wait. Your name is Ashley? Like the *girl* name?”

He groaned. “It’s not just a girl name—”

The door closed.

The world outside had darkened under shadow. The sun was gone. Falling snowflakes glittered orange in the visitor center’s single exterior lamp, which hung over the doorway in a big pan. But Snowmageddon seemed to have thinned out for a few moments; against the descending night she could see the outlines of distant peaks. Craggy shards of rock, half-shrouded in trees.

She drew her windbreaker up to her neck and shivered.

The crowd of statues that the younger guy — Ashley — had mentioned were to the south of the rest area, past the flagpole and picnic area. Near the off-ramp she’d taken. From here, she could barely see them. Just half-buried forms in the snow.

“Hey.”

She turned.

Ashley again. He let the door click shut and caught up to her, taking high steps in the snow. “There’s . . . so, there’s a really particular spot I had to stand. That’s the only place I could pick up a signal, and it was just one bar. You might only be able to send a text.”

“That’ll still work.”

He zipped up his coat. “I’ll show you.”

They followed his old footprints out there and Darby noted that they were already half-filled with several inches of fresh powder. She wondered, but didn’t ask, how long he’d been stranded here.

Gaining some distance from the building, she also realized this rest area was nestled on a precipice. Behind the back wall (the restrooms), scoured treetops marked an abrupt cliff. She couldn’t even see exactly where the land started to drop, as the blanket of snowpack disguised the verticality. One misstep could be fatal. The flora up here was equally hostile — Douglas firs whipped into grotesque shapes by powerful winds, their branches jagged and stiff.

“Thanks,” Darby said.

Ashley didn’t hear. They kept lurching through waist-deep snow, arms out for balance. It was deeper here, off the footpath. Her Converse were already soaked through, her toes numb.

“So you go by Ashley?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Not, like, Ash?”

“Why would I?”

“Just asking.”

Again, she glanced back to the visitor center, and spotted a figure standing in the amber glow of the building’s single window. Watching them from behind the frosted glass. She couldn’t tell if it was the older man (Ed), or the person she hadn’t seen.

“Ashley is not just a girl’s name,” he said as they trudged. “It’s a perfectly viable man’s name.”

“Oh, definitely.”

“Like Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*.”

“I was just thinking that,” Darby said. It felt good to bullshit a little. But still, the wary part of her brain that she could never quite disengage wondered: *You’re familiar with that old-ass movie, but you don’t know who the Beatles are?*

“Or Ashley Johnson,” he said. “The world-famous rugby player.”

“You made that one up.”

“Did not.” He pointed into the distance. “Hey. You can see Melanie’s Peak.”

“What?”

“Melanie’s Peak.” He seemed embarrassed. “Sorry, I’ve been stuck here a long time, reading everything in the information center. See the big mountain over there? Some guy named it after his wife.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Maybe. Unless he was calling her frigid and inhospitable.”

Darby chuckled.

They’d reached the icicled statues now. A crowd of them. There was probably a plaque detailing what it all meant, under the snow somewhere. The sculptures appeared to be children. Running, jumping, playing, cast in bronze and coated with ice.

Ashley pointed at one wielding a baseball bat. “There. By the little leaguer.”

“Here?”

“Yeah. That’s where I got a signal.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you . . .” He hesitated, his hands in his pockets. “Need me to, uh, stick around?”

Silence.

“You know. I mean, if—”

“No.” Darby smiled, a genuine one. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. It’s cold as *balls* out here.” He flashed that easy grin of his and walked back to the orange lights, waving over his shoulder. “Have fun out here with the Nightmare Children.”

“Will do.”

She didn’t realize how unsettling the statues were until she was alone with them. The children were missing chunks. It was an art

style she'd seen before — the sculptor used raw hunks of bronze, fusing them in odd and counterintuitive welds that left seams and gaps — but in the darkness, her imagination rendered gore. The boy to her left, the one swinging a baseball bat that Ashley had called the *little leaguer*, had an exposed ribcage. Others waved spindly, mangled arms, missing patches of flesh. Like a crowd of pit-bull-mauling victims, half-gnawed to the bone.

What had Ashley called them? *Nightmare children*.

He was twenty feet away, almost a silhouette against the rest area's orange light, when she turned and called to him. "Hey. Wait."

He looked back.

"Darby," she said. "My name is Darby."

He smiled.

Thanks for helping me, she wanted to say. *Thank you for being decent to me, a total stranger*. The words were there, in her mind, but she couldn't make them real. They broke eye contact, the moment evaporating . . .

Thank you, Ashley—

He kept walking.

Then he stopped again, reconsidering, and said one last thing: "You do know Darby is a guy's name, right?"

She laughed.

She watched him leave, and then she leaned against the statue's baseball bat, frozen mid-swing, and held her iPhone skyward against the falling snowflakes. She squinted, watching the screen's upper left corner.

No service.

She waited, alone in the darkness. In the right corner, the battery had fallen to six percent. She'd left her charger plugged into an outlet in her dorm. Two hundred miles back.

"Please," she whispered. "Please, God . . ."

Still no signal. Breathing through chattering teeth, she re-read her sister's text: **She's okay right now.**

Okay is the single worst word in the English language. Without context, it's an utter non-thing. *Okay* could mean her mother Maya