

**Last Stop
on
Desolation Ridge**

A NOVEL

**by
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Prologue

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"I won't do it," Logan Gifford, Tekram Corp's Comptroller, said emphatically. He stood up and started to walk out of the conference room.

Before he reached the door, two of Security Chief Everett Lipton's men grabbed him and forced him back into his seat.

"Wrong answer," Lipton said.

"Take your hands off me," Logan yelled, squirming to get out of their grip.

"Hold him still," Lipton said. One of the men put Logan in a headlock. Ignoring his screams, Lipton took a syringe off the table and jabbed the needle into Logan's neck.

Logan went slack as the chemical entered his blood stream. While one of Lipton's men secured his hands behind his back with plastic handcuffs, Lipton and the other man set up a video camera mounted on a tripod pointed at Logan. A computer monitor was placed on the conference table. When everything was in place, Lipton used his cell phone to call his boss. "He's ready."

Things were happening too fast for Logan Gifford's brain to keep up. He looked around the room trying to make sense of what was happening to him. Then he looked at the monitor. It showed the outside of a large house. His house!

Three men entered the conference room. One was his brother-in-law Craig Harkness--the man who'd gotten him the job with Tekram Industries. Lawrence Zander, Tekram's CEO, followed with a third man--an African-American gentleman whose face looked familiar, but whose name Logan couldn't place.

Logan realized that Zander was talking to him, but he had trouble parsing the words.

"Mr. Zander. I don't understand what you--"

Zander leaned over in front of Logan. "Logan! Listen to me."

He wanted to tell him there was no need to shout. Zander was saying something about his family.

"I know you care about your two little girls, Logan."

He thought of his daughters--Meghan and Sissy. He nodded, still not understanding.

"Look carefully at the TV screen. Do you recognize that house?"

It looked like his house, but why would they be showing it to him?

"If you do not do exactly what I tell you," Zander said, "something very bad is going to take place in your house."

Nothing made any sense to Logan. His head was swimming. He closed his eyes.

Zander motioned to his security chief to move out of Logan's hearing. "He seems pretty out of it. Won't he come across that way on the video?"

Lipton looked at his watch. "The tranquilizer hasn't worn off completely. We can wait a few minutes."

"So what are you going to do with him afterwards?" the African American asked.

"We're still debating that," Zander confessed.

"I thought we'd agree to make it look like he jumped off one of the bridges," Craig Harkness said.

"That might work in theory, Craig," Everett Lipton replied, "but they've got cameras on all those bridges now. No one has explained how I'm supposed to pull that off without someone seeing me doing it."

The African American gentleman stepped forward. "I have a suggestion."

"Okay," Zander said. "What would you have us do with him?"

"I had an nephew who tried to blackmail me when I wouldn't give him a job he wanted managing one of my clinics. He was a drug addict and would have brought the feds down on me so fast, I'd have turned white."

Lipton and Zander laughed.

"So how did you handle him?" Lipton asked.

"I sent him to a mental hospital in the Adirondacks and he's still there."

"You had him committed?" Harkness asked.

"No. My sister would have gone nuts if I'd gone through legal channels. No, I made it look like he committed himself voluntarily to deal with his drug problem. I drove him up to the hospital. It costs me a few bucks each year for them to keep him there, but it's worth it."

"I like it," Zander said.

"Hey, it looks like he's coming around," Harkness said, pointing to where Logan Gifford was trying to stand up.

Logan wanted to get up, but something was preventing him from getting out of the chair. There was a strap across his chest and his arms were tied behind his back. "Mr. Zander. Please. I have to use the bathroom."

Zander looked at Lipton. The security chief nodded his approval. "He should be okay by the time he gets back."

"Okay, Logan," Zander said. "These men will go with you to make sure you get back here safely. There's some business we need to take care of."

The men escorted Logan to the men's room. They stood behind him while he used the urinal. "May I?" he said pointing to the sink. They move aside. He washed his hands, and then splashed some water on his face.

"I feel strange," he said aloud.

He couldn't explain why. He looked at himself in the mirror. He looked much like he always did--an all-too-average looking businessman in a navy blue suit with a white shirt and a red patterned tie.

There were times when Logan was on the train going home from work when he felt invisible. He'd sit there worrying whether he'd be able to find his car among all those cars that looked so much alike, whether he'd remember the way to the street where he lived, and whether he'd be able to pick out his house from

all those look-alike houses. What if he pulled into the driveway of what he thought was his house and some other man who looked just like him was getting out of a car that looked just like his car and kissed a woman at the front door who looked just like his wife?

"Let's go," one of the men said.

He looked for the towel dispenser. "You can go back," he told the man. "I don't feel well. I think I'll go home."

The larger of the two men shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Gifford." He was built like a football lineman and he wasn't smiling. The other one was taller, but thinner. He had a crew cut and a nasty scar on the side of his nose that matched the nasty look he was giving Logan. The men grabbed Logan, lifted him off his feet, and shoved him out of the bathroom.

"Help. Someone help me," Logan screamed, but the entire floor was empty. He remembered wondering why he had been told to come to a meeting at this location. Everett Lipton had met him in the lobby and escorted him to the 17th floor. When they got off the elevator, the entire floor was vacant. When he asked what was going on, Lipton told him he'd find out when the rest of the people arrived.

The men forcibly ushered Logan back into the conference room and dumped him in the chair in front of the camera. They secured a strap around his chest, but left his hands free.

"Craig," Logan said, looking at his brother-in-law who stood in the corner looking out the window. "Tell them to let me go home."

Craig Harkness came over and stood in front of Logan. "They will, Mac, as soon as you do what Mr. Zander wants you to do."

Zander came over and handed Logan a sheet of paper. "Logan, listen to me. Are you paying attention?"

Logan nodded.

"This will all be over as soon as you memorize and read this statement for the camera."

Logan took the paper on which was one paragraph typed in all capital letters.

I, LOGAN GIFFORD, BEING OF SOUND MIND, FREELY ADMIT THAT I KNOWINGLY AND FRAUDULENTLY OVERCHARGED THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT FOR TEKRAM'S SERVICES SO THAT I COULD EMBEZZLE THAT MONEY FROM MY COMPANY.

I APOLOGIZE TO MY FAMILY AND TO THOSE WHO PUT THEIR FAITH IN ME. WHAT I DID WAS WRONG. NO ONE ELSE AT TEKRAM WAS AWARE OF MY DECEIT. I CAN'T BEAR THE THOUGHT OF GOING TO JAIL.

GOOD-BYE, DEBBIE. FORGIVE ME IF YOU CAN.

He read it a second time. "What does this mean, Mr. Zander? I didn't negotiate that contract. In fact, I was the one who told you the numbers were off."

"And, that's what you planned to tell the Congressional Ethics Committee next Thursday, right?"

"Of course. It's the truth."

Zander laughed. "If you do that, then Congressman West here and I will be on our way to prison. That just can't happen. It's either you or me, Logan, and it's not going to be me."

That's who the third man was. Logan remembered being introduced to Congressman West several months ago when he'd been asked to analyze a bid proposal. The New York City Congressman chaired the subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations that had jurisdiction over Tekram's bid.

Logan read the statement a second time. "No way. I'm not going to do this."

"Logan," Everett Lipton interjected. "Do you see what's on that TV screen? That's a live feed of your house. Some nasty people are in the bushes outside your house right now waiting for me to give them the go-ahead to do some nasty things to your wife and children. If you don't do what Mr. Zander is asking, I'm going to tell them to have a field day."

"Craig," Logan said, appealing to his brother-in-law "Help me. They're talking about your sister and your nieces."

"Half-sister," Harkness replied. "Look, Logan, there's nothing I can do. You're the only one who can save them."

Logan tried to take it all in. "I don't believe this. If this is someone's idea of a joke, it's gone way beyond funny."

Zander moved close, inches from Logan's face. "It's no joke, and if you don't wise up Everett is going to call those men and tell them to do their worst."

Logan tried to fight back the tears. "If I do what you say, what will happen to me?"

"After you read the statement, you will disappear," Zander replied. "The government will find evidence of your crimes. Tekram Industries will survive and Congressman West will continue his illustrious career. Your sacrifice will save Tekram and the hundreds of people who work for us. If we were to let you spill the beans, I would go to jail, the company would go out of business, our investors, including Craig here, would lose their money, and everyone who works for us--all nine hundred--would lose their jobs."

Whatever Lipton had injected in him had almost worn off. Logan was beginning to understand his predicament. "You can't fool me into thinking you care about those people. All you care about is that you won't have to go to jail."

Zander shook his head. "Whatever. The fact is that I'm not going to jail. I'm going to cooperate with Congress and come out smelling like a rose while your name will go down in history as another greedy accountant."

Logan tried again to clear his head. None of this made any sense to him. Maybe he could appeal to their sense of decency. "Why me?"

"Let me answer that," Lipton replied. "You're the logical choice. You manage all of the data--the contracts and the bank accounts. You are the only person with the ability to hide things from upper management. Plus, you're a pussy--constantly watching what the rest of us are doing, trying to make us into goodie-goodies like yourself. Me, I'm enjoying seeing you take one for the team."

"Well, I'm not doing it. I don't believe you'd do those things you said to innocent people just to save your own skin."

Zander stared at Logan for a minute. "You leave me no choice," he said. He nodded to Lipton. The security chief picked up his cell phone.

"Put it on speaker," Zander said, "so Mr. *Goodie Two-Shoes* can hear both ends of the conversation."

"707 here."

"This is 101," Lipton said. "Are you in position?"

"Affirmative."

"The home security system is off-line?"

"Affirmative. We cancelled their contract last week. I tested it when we got here. No response."

"Excellent. Here are your instructions. There are three occupants in the house at 11745 West Bright Woods Lane: a woman and two female children--ages 3 and 6. You are to terminate all three without remorse. You and your men may take your pleasure with the woman before you terminate her. Do you understand my instructions?"

"Affirmative."

"Also, make sure that the camera records the entire procedure so that her husband can watch what you do to them."

"Got it."

"Over and out."

"Stop," Logan yelled. "You're crazy. You can't mean that. Stop him."

Zander shook his head. "Too late, Logan."

Logan tried to turn his head away so he couldn't see the TV screen. He struggled to get out of his seat, but the restraints were too tight. "Help. Help. Someone. Help."

"Hold his head," Lipton said to his men, "and, if he tries to close his eyes, you have my permission to pry them open."

The person holding the camera started moving towards the front of the house. Logan heard him talking to a man dressed as a mail carrier. "Ring the door bell. Keep the woman occupied until I confirm that we're inside. Then push your way into the house and lock the front door." The man nodded and walked towards the front of the house.

The man with the camera panned the house. Logan saw two men dressed in black with hoods over their heads with holes for their eyes and nose waiting at the edge of the woods. The men moved in a crouch towards the back of the house. One of them held a crow bar while the other carried a large heavy gym bag.

Logan kicked out trying to connect with the legs of Everett Lipton who was watching the monitor. Craig Harkness pushed Lipton aside. "Read the statement," Harkness said. "Please, Logan. Agree to what they're asking."

Logan watched the man with a crowbar approach the back door of his half-a-million dollar house. He inserted an end into the door and gave it a yank. The door gave way.

"Okay," Logan screamed. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it."

Harkness looked back at Zander. Zander smiled. Almost reluctantly, he nodded to Lipton.

Lipton picked up his phone.

"101 here. Abort," Lipton said, "Abort, but remain in position."

"Abort. Affirmative."

The person with the crow bar turned and moved away from the house. The camera showed the two men moving behind the bushes on either side of the back door.

Zander turned to Logan. "Ready?"

Logan's heart beat so rapidly he feared he would have a heart attack. The sweat poured down the back of his neck. His hand shook as he held up the script and tried to memorize it. Finally, he nodded, indicating that he was ready to read what he was certain amounted to a death sentence--his own.