

Flashpoint [Function: noun]1: the lowest temperature at which vapors above a volatile combustible substance ignite in air when exposed to flame 2: a point at which someone or something bursts suddenly into action or being 3: TINDERBOX: a potentially explosive place or situation
--merriamwebster.com

CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS IT, WE'RE HERE. CLIMB THE SLOPE ON THE RIGHT shoulder. Hide in the beams as best as you can. Whatever you do, stay under the bridge. If you come out, the cameras will spot you and all this will be pointless."

The highway overpass loomed ahead. My father continued, "The car can't be hidden under the bridge too long or they'll figure out where you went. You're gonna have to jump out while we're moving."

It was time.

"Sometime, someplace, I know we'll see each other again. Use your freedom well. Now!"

That single word launched me out the door. As it swung shut behind me, Dad screamed at Jen, "Go!" I stumbled into a run watching her bail-out. The Geo Aphid speed off.

Jen had sprawled on the street. I helped my kid-sister to her feet. She'd hurt herself, but the bleeding amounted to pink smears on the palms of her hands.

"C'mon, let's hide."

"Dave!" She whimpered my name, but followed.

We clambered over the rough, fist-sized stones that covered the

slope. At the top, the slope met the girders that supported the road above us. I pulled off my t-shirt and cleared the I-beams of spider webs and bird droppings. We slumped on opposite girders facing each other.

Jen's wide eyes glinted shell-shock madness. "We'll save them! Whoever comes for us, if they'll help us, we could get them out!"

"We don't even know where they'll be taken," I grumbled.

"I'll hack that off the Web!" She reached for anything to pull herself from calamity's quicksand.

I was in no mood to do this. "You don't have a com-vision, Sis."

Tears welled-up in her eyes again. I didn't want to start an argument, and I definitely didn't want to shatter the kid's hopes. "I want our family back too, Sis, but Rehabs are usually guarded."

We'd do well just to avoid the peacekeepers that had to be looking for us. Who could Dad trust to help us? How would they get us out from under the bridge without anyone seeing? Where could they hide us from searching peacekeeping units? How would we even get food? The hum of a motor grew near and we both shrank back against cold steel. A car passed beneath.

I tried to turn the conversation to something else. "I hope Mom and Jeff are okay."

Jen buried her face in her hands, her shoulders rocking with sobs.

Real smooth. Nice going, fool. "I'm sorry Sis. Like Dad said, we gotta have faith—" I kicked myself.

When her tears ran out, Jen scowled and whispered, "If we're His children, why's He doing this to us?"

I left her in silence. Like I could answer that. How could He even allow a world where belief in the Bible made one a terrorist? Ripping apart our family would teach, what? What kind of lesson was this? I finally thought about how parents treat children. "I think it's like when we're kids. Mom or Dad punished us, and made us try things we didn't want to. Having fun or being happy all the time isn't the most important thing. I guess God's like that too. Dad said we're being taught something, remember?"

"Yeah. How to miss your mom, and worry if you'll ever see her again," she pouted.

Little sisters out there, I speak for big brothers everywhere when I ask please don't stick us with hard questions that you've already answered. Very annoying.

I dug my pack of Winterfresh Extra out of my jeans' pocket and let the conversation die. We moped into a sullen silence, our hopes shredded by our thoughts.

Spattering raindrops came and went. So did tears. Minutes piled into hours. Tracking time became impossible. That made me think of

my e-wallet with the broken watch function. I powered it up and clicked past the com-vision white and yellow homepages. I selected the picture frame feature. Jen and I passed it back and forth, watching our party vids. Jen's driver's license and Jeff's twenty-first birthday last month. My high-school graduation party two years ago. Jeff and I moving into our first apartment . . . Bad idea. I pocketed the e-wallet. Our thoughts spiraled into deep gloom, leaving Jen to weep her way out, and again we sat in silence.

My gum had lost its Extra-long-time flavor for what must have been hours before I realized the building I'd been staring at was a church. The bridge cut off its steepled roof. The One State allowed only one kind of church. Dad told me about people who called themselves Christians, but believed the Bible to be myth, and equal to the Koran, Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita. With no truth to argue over, 500 years of church splits healed overnight. They called themselves the One Church. No points for creativity, but I guess it represented their unity.

Dad said when he'd once asked a One Churcher how he knew that love was any better than hate. The man had said the answer's in our heart. Dad then asked what was wrong with the hearts of criminals. There, next to the bridge, out in the open, people were being taught to find love in a broken heart. Here, forced to hide under the bridge, were children of the Heart Surgeon.

If I leaned down I could see a sliver of eastern sky. I began watching for dawn's light brush to paint the clouds. Pigeons roosting under the bridge started their morning cooing. Cool dampness raised goose bumps on the backs of my arms. Finally, my shivering grew worse than my t-shirt's filth. I shook it out and put it back on.

Then the end came.

CHAPTER TWO

POWERFUL BIOFUEL ENGINES SOUNDED, AND GREW LOUD fast. In as much time as it took me to sit up straight, four peacekeeper Humvees jerked to a stop under the bridge. Jen's tear tracked face twisted in panic's horror. Hugging our knees, we flattened ourselves against the girders trying to become part of them. A door squeaked open to eject a uniformed man, his face glued to a flip-com screen. He paused for a moment before looking right up at us. My stomach did ugly things as he pointed, yelling in German. Green uniformed peacekeepers poured from the vehicles to line up on our side of the road. Captain Flip-com barked an order and six of them started up the stony slope.

Save Jen! Defeated, I stood. "You found me." I started toward them, hoping they'd somehow miss her.

Then movement from the corner that Dad had turned. A figure in an oilskin duster and thick-soled boots strolled down the sidewalk toward the scene. The rain fell in a light mist, but his hood was down. A black Samurai-style ponytail swung with his every stride. His face betrayed oriental blood even though mirror-shades hid his eyes. Walkin' in the rain. Wearin' sunglasses. You know—just in case the sun rose in this overcast pre-dawn sky.

A few peacekeepers turned rifles in his direction. Waving their free hands, they ordered him away.

To my disbelief he actually smiled and continued right toward them.

I decided this was either the first time he'd left the desert island he'd been raised on, or he'd lost his mind and was out looking for it.

More peacekeepers noticed him and fanned out to face the newcomer. Captain Flip-com shouted orders, and the soldiers coming toward us stopped. One close to the stranger yelled an English word known by all peacekeepers: "Freeze!"

Lured by sounds and my surprise, Jen slid from her perch.

Still smiling, the stranger stopped, folded his arms, and said something in their own language. They looked to each other, muttering in

angry tones. Three started toward him. All held their rifles more seriously.

The stranger touched the fingertips of both hands to his forehead and spread his arms. Air between the stranger and the soldiers shimmered — heat off a July blacktop. Peacekeepers flew backward as though a truck had plowed through them. They tumbled to a stop and lay still. Whatever he'd done had downed nearly half of them, including the six on the slope.

Captain Flip-com barked an order and rifles cracked, but bullets passed through empty space. The stranger leapt as though he'd been launched from a trampoline. Turning somersaults in the air, he landed on his feet near the top of the slope between them and us. He'd just jumped more than ten meters. Uphill.

Again, he touched his forehead and swept his arms wide, cartwheeling more soldiers into another time zone. Only a handful remained. By the time the survivors swung their rifles he was dive rolling down the slope, a human cyclone, his duster and ponytail whipping behind him.

Peacekeeper rifles tracked him, but without warning the stranger came up in a crouch, a pistol in each hand. Twin guns gave off quick dull thumps and soldiers spun to the ground without getting off a single shot.

He stood and the guns were gone from his hands as though they were never there. "Call off the heat 'cause you guys are done," he announced, polishing fingernails on his coat's lapel. Wit died on the deaf ears of senseless opponents. It looked as though some giant child had left his green army men strewn across the driveway.

The stranger stared at one of the empty Hum-Vees they'd left running. It drove out from under the bridge to park sideways in the street just beyond the fallen peacekeepers. Then the next one did the same. One at a time, the other two vehicles blocked off the street on the other side of the bridge. All at once, their light bars lit up the area in wildly flashing blue. He turned and made straight for us, smiling again.

"We don't want anyone to get run'ded over," he explained.

The last vehicle had parked just in time. A yellow rental truck pulled up to the intersection, paused a long while, then turned away.

The stranger stopped before us, and bowed deeply at the waist and neck. "David and Jen Williams, you may call me Legacy. I'm sorry but the closest thing I have to a password is: Your *Flashpoint* was dirt-cheap."

CHAPTER THREE

H-HOW'D YOU D-DO ALL THAT?"

"I was reformed when I joined the Body." He said it as though it answered everything.

"Huh?" came my clever response.

All I got was a scrunched-up look. "I know you've got questions, but the PKs have backup units rolling, so we gotta move fast. For now, do what I say and give your tongues a rest." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "That yellow truck driving away behind me is gonna circle the block once. Next time it pulls up to the stoplight, we're gonna jump in back. Hold out your left hands."

Jen and I looked at each other and did as ordered. "We can't leave the bridge."

He ignored my objection, unclipped a black object from his belt, flipped a switch and touched it to the backs of our hands. "This'll fry your I.D. chips. Most people don't know it, but there's a tracking signal built into them. That's how they found you. Your dad was smart to hide you under this bridge. It razzed your signals and bought you time. They had to physically retrace his route in order to find you.

"Just a sec, I gotta check somethin'," he angled his head up and away from us, doing a mime impression of a satellite dish, and went stone still.

Jen elbowed me and turned her palms upward as if to say huh? I shrugged, shaking my head. Shivering and hugging herself, she frowned at distant siren screams.

Legacy turned those mirrored shades back at us. "When I say run, we've got one minute to be in the back of the truck with the door closed, but don't leave the bridge till I say, kay?"

"No! We can't leave the--"

Legacy cut me off. "A Hack friend of mine just recorded the truck at that intersection. She'll feed the image back into the street cams the moment the truck stops. The cameras will be blind."

He looked up the road. "I was almost too late and for that I'm sorry.

I left as soon as I could. Even prepped on the fly. Razz, this is gonna be close." The sirens wailed dangerously close when the truck finally rolled up to the light.

"Run!"

He ran away from me like fast-forward. Even in my years on the high school track team I'd never seen anyone move like that. The guys who'd placed at the state meet were said to have world-class speed, and even they couldn't have kept up. Not even close. We splashed through puddles and sodden grass in a straight line to the truck. He'd opened its rear door and stood waiting inside when I leapt in. Jen, fast for a high-school com-vision geek, slid in on her belly just steps behind me. Legacy slammed the door, plunging us into darkness. The truck lurched. Thrown off-balance, my rump found floor the hard way. The truck turned away from the bridge and trundled up the hill. We were still picking up speed when the sirens screamed past us. By doppler effect, I counted six more PK Hummers, and something I couldn't place, all fly past the truck.

I scooted, shoes squishing rainwater, until I bumped into the truck's inside wall. "What was that weird siren?"

"Federal Bureau of Terrorism ready team," he spat the name as though just saying it tasted bad.

That made no sense to me. "Why would the FBT be called in for a couple of runaways?"

"They're not here for you. There's been no response from four peacekeeper units since they found you. Not to brag, but the only time that happens is when a Sandman dozes the whole patrol."

You could feel ice forming in the black silence. Jen's voice squeaked small and afraid, "Sandman?" From what the com-vision said about terrorists, Sandmen were the venom in the viper.

"That's my job as a Saint. Sandmen are the muscle in the Body of Christ."

"Oh, goody gumdrops," Jen's tone found him guilty, "I can't believe our father left us with a man whose job is killing peacekeepers." A true CV-geek with sister-manners, Jen rubbed people like rough wool on sunburn.

More silence. It reminded me of sand in my swim-trunks: very uncomfortable. It ended when Legacy calmly stated, "He didn't."

"Don't lie!" she cried. "I saw you pull guns and shoot those men back there!"

His tone stayed gentle, "You gotta trust me when I say your father put you in the best hands he knew of. He's a well-mannered man. Pity he hadn't passed that on to his daughter." The last part was a blade over a whetstone in the blind dark. "The men I shot will wake up in about two hours. The tranquilizer rounds I use affect the nervous system in-

stantly. I'm called a Sandman because I only put people to sleep."

Now it was Jen's turn for awkward silence. If she could rub a genie out of a lamp I knew her first wish would be that she hadn't said that. "I'm . . . I'm sorry."

"Accepted—and thanks. Your family's just been slagged so I'm sure you're not quite yourself. Besides, I know the com-vision makes us sound like monsters. They want folks to fear us so it's not really your fault. Don't believe everything you find on the Web."

I came to her rescue and changed the subject, "How do you know our dad? He'd always said he knew someone who'd help if we were in trouble, but he'd never say any more."

"Mmm . . . I'll just say we go way back and leave it at that. We've got some time, though. Let's hear some a' those questions."

Jen spoke right up, "Did they get Dad? What happened to our family?"

"I did some checking on the way to get you. Nothin' on your dad, but your family and all the others arrested in the raid were headed to Rehab-Nine. That is, Rehabilitation Ward Nine, run by the Ash Corporation. They'll be questioned, uploaded, and forced to work twelve hour days in one of the Ward's factories."

"Uploaded?" she pressed.

"For the last fifteen years, makers of biochips have been using DNA strands in biochips to carry —"

Jen cut him short, "—the binary code used in com-visions. These biochips can even be inserted into living creatures and mesh with their biology more effectively than synthetic chips, I know. I mean what do they upload?"

"Our father calls her e-girl," I explained.

"Heh, I see why. The chips are loaded with programmes that monitor body chemicals and brain waves. In other words, feelings and thoughts. Prisoners' minds are broken then fixed so they're, um . . . better citizens. It doesn't work on some inmates."

That one rested on us both for a while. Legacy didn't push us. It was worse than we'd thought. If we ever saw them again, they'd be strangers.

New topic time. "What will you do with us?"

"That depends on you. What should I do with you?"

Jen spoke my mind, "Teach us to do what you do."

"Yeah. Make us Sandmen," I added.

"You'd have to become part of the Body of Christ," he warned.

From what I understood, we already were, "Okay."

"I know your father, but I don't know either of you. Why should I do that? What makes you part of the Body of Christ?"