

ZONDERVAN

Beyond the Reflection's Edge
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THE FIRST SIGN

Nathan watched his tutor peer out the window. She was being paranoid again. That guy following them in the Mustang had really spooked her. “Chill out, Clara. He doesn’t know what room we’re in.”

She slid the curtains together, casting a blanket of darkness across the motel room. “He parked near the lobby entrance. We’d better pack up and leave another way.” She clicked on a corner table lamp. The pale light seemed to deepen the wrinkles on her face and hands. “How much more time do you need?”

Nathan sat on the bed nearer the window, a stack of pillows between his back and the wall, and tapped away at his laptop. “Just a couple of minutes.” He looked up at her and winked. “Dad’s slide rule must’ve been broken. It took almost an hour to balance the books.”

Clara slid her sweater sleeve up an inch and glared at her wristwatch. Nathan knew that look all too well. His tutor’s steely eyes and furrowed brow meant the Queen of Punctuality was counting the minutes. They were cutting it close, and they still had to get the reports bound at Kinko’s before they could meet his parents at the performance hall for the company’s quarterly meeting. And who could tell what delays that goon in the prowling Mustang might cause? His father had noticed the guy this morning before he left, and he looked kind of worried, but that could’ve been from the bean and onion burrito he had eaten for breakfast.

Nathan frowned at the spreadsheet. "This formula doesn't make sense. Dad's trying to divide by zero."

"Can you call and ask him on the way? We have to hit the road."

Nathan pushed the laptop to the side. He knew how his father would respond. He'd just grin and say, "Dividing by zero reflects my creativity." Nathan laughed. Dad knew a lot more about math than he ever let on; he just concentrated on spying and research and let Nathan do the number crunching.

As Clara peered out again, he looked over her shoulder. The driver of the black Mustang was parked under a tree, sloppily eating a sandwich as he watched the front door of the motel. An intermittent shower of leaves, blown around by Chicago's never-ending breezes, danced about on the convertible's ragtop.

"Don't worry about him," Nathan said. "He's too obvious to be a pro."

"True enough. But you don't have to be a pro to frighten an old lady."

As she turned toward him, he gave her the goofiest clueless stare he could conjure. "I'm not an old lady!"

He waited for Clara's infectious laugh that had brightened a hundred mornings in dozens of strange and lonely cities all over the world. But it didn't come. A shadow of worry passed across her face, draining the color from her cheeks.

He squinted at her. "Something else is bugging you."

For a moment, she just stared, a faraway look in her eyes. Finally, she shook her head as if casting off a dream. "Did you pack the mirror your father gave you?"

"I think so." He jumped up and walked over both beds before bouncing to the floor in front of the shallow closet. A towel-wrapped bundle sat on top of his suitcase at the very peak of a haphazard pile of clothes. Carefully unfolding the towel, he revealed a square, six-by-six-inch mirror with an ornate silver

frame. His father had entrusted this mirror to him just yesterday, calling it a “Quattro” viewer and warning him to keep it safe.

Nathan pondered the strange word that represented his father’s latest assignment, something about retrieving stolen data for a company that used reflective technology. Dad had been tight-lipped about the details, but he had leaked enough clues to allow for guessing.

He gazed at his reflection in the mirror, the familiar portrait he expected, but something bright pulsed in his eyes, like the split-second flash of a camera. Clara’s face appeared just above his blond cowlick, suddenly much closer.

He spun his head around. Strange. She was still near the window. When he turned back to the mirror, her image was no longer there.

As she walked up behind him, her face reappeared in the glass. Nathan glanced back and forth between the mirror and Clara. The inconsistent images were just too weird.

The opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth chimed from his computer—his custom sound for new email. Still holding the mirror, he leaped back to his computer and pulled up the message, a note from his father.

Your mother is rehearsing with Nikolai, and that reminded me to remind you that she’s going to call you to the stage to play your duet for the shareholders. She’ll have your violin, all tuned and ready to sizzle. Since it’s the Vivaldi piece, you shouldn’t have any problem. Just don’t mention your performance to Dr. Simon. Trust me. It will all work out.

Two words embedded in Nathan’s mind, *Trust me*, the same words he had heard so many times before. With all the narrow escapes his father had engineered over the years, what else could he do but trust him?

Clara flung a pair of wadded gym socks that bounced off his chin. “Where is your tux?” she called as she searched through his crumpled clothes.

"I hung it on the shower rod." He patted a shiny motorcycle helmet sitting on his night table. He had hoped to ride their Harleys through town. With Clara in her new dress and him in a tux, they would've looked as cool as ice. But, no, they had to hitch a ride in the company limo. With their chauffeur, Mike, at the wheel, they'd be better off in a hearse. He wouldn't do more than thirty, even in a forty-five zone.

Clara disappeared into the bathroom and returned in a flash, brushing lint from his tux. "Aren't you going to help me?"

"Sure." He picked up his elastic exercise strap and karate belt and threw them into the suitcase. They were essential items. Since his dad was planning to rent an RV for a month-long trip out West, with all that driving, he had to do something to stay in shape. They'd have a whole month with no wild getaways, no running from crazed neo-Nazis, no dodging bullets from Colombian drug dealers. Sometimes those scrapes with death gave him a rush, and decking a thug or two with a well-placed karate chop was always a thrill, but . . . He gazed at his motorcycle helmet and let out a sigh. It was probably better to avoid trouble than to dance with it. That's what his father always said.

Clara peeked out the window again. "The driver just got out, and I think he saw me."

"Here we go again." Nathan slapped the suitcase closed and zipped it up. "You got an escape plan?"

She snatched up her own suitcase. "There's an emergency exit down the hall. I'll call Mike and tell him where to pick us up when we find a place that's not so dangerous."

Nathan tucked the computer under his arm and grabbed the strap of his red backpack. "Yeah, like ground zero at a nuclear test site."

As the sweet tones of a divinely played violin faded, applause exploded from the audience. Two hundred exquisitely dressed ladies and gentlemen leaped to their feet, volleying a hailstorm

of “Bravos” toward the stage. A beautiful, raven-haired woman tucked her violin under her arm and bowed gracefully.

Her ivory face slowly reddened as the cheers rose to a climax, the scarlet hue a stark contrast to her satiny black gown. Her smile broadening, she focused her eyes on a man in the crowd, the tall gentleman standing next to Nathan—his father, Solomon Shepherd, clapping madly. His old Nikon camera bounced against his chest, dangling from a long strap.

While his mother’s strings still sang in his ears, Nathan clapped until his hands ached. Would anyone ever match such a virtuoso performance? She bowed again, now laughing joyfully at the adulation. Nathan clapped even harder, his heart leaping into his throat as he added a loud “Brava!” His own mother, Francesca Shepherd, the greatest violinist in the world!

When the applause finally settled and everyone took their seats, Nathan noticed a change in his mother’s countenance. She glanced around the stage, two familiar worry lines now etching her brow as her cheeks paled.

Nathan looked at his father. On his opposite side, Dr. Simon, short and bald with owl-like eyeglasses, stared at a text message on his cell phone. Dr. Simon angled the tiny screen toward them, but it was too far away to read. He said with a hint of a British accent, “Mictar is on his way. There is no time to lose.”

Tensing his jaw, Nathan’s father lifted a hand and displayed four fingers. His mother nodded, then stepped forward, her long dress sweeping the platform. After pulling a microphone from its stand, she cleared her throat and spoke with a trembling voice. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I’m overwhelmed by your response.” She pointed her bow toward someone in Nathan’s row about a dozen seats over. “I want to thank my first music teacher, Nikolai Malenkov, for being here today. Without him I would not be playing violin, nor would I even be alive. When my mother died, he took me into his home, and he and

his dear wife gave every bit of love a grieving ten-year-old could ever want.”

The crowd clapped again. His face beaming, Dr. Malenkov nodded, spilling his familiar unkempt gray hair over his signature large ears.

She turned toward Nathan. “I hope you have saved some warmth for our next performer, a young man who is on his way to stardom. I find no greater musical pleasure than to accompany him in our favorite duet.”

His father leaned over and gave Nathan a one-armed hug. “Play your heart out, son, and never forget how much your mother and I love you.”

As he returned the hug, Nathan peeked over his father’s shoulder at Dr. Simon. The shorter man pursed his lips tightly but said nothing. Nathan whispered, “What’s going on?”

“Please welcome,” his mother continued, “my son, Nathan Shepherd.”

Applause erupted again. His father pushed him back and gripped his shoulders firmly. A strange tremor rattled his voice. “Remember what I’ve taught you, and everything will be fine. If you ever get into big trouble, look in the mirror I gave you and focus on the point of danger. Nothing is more important.”

Out of time to ask more, Nathan rose and headed toward the aisle on the right. As he squeezed past Clara’s silk-covered knees, she patted his hand, her eyes glowing with pride. Her bright face, beautiful smile, and lovely white evening gown made her look half her age.

With his father’s strange words echoing in his mind, Nathan felt as though he were floating outside his body, watching himself climb the four steps to his mother’s level. The arched windows to his left cast filtered sunshine into his eyes as his shoes clicked along the hardwood stage.

When he drew near, his mother took his hand and pulled him close. She whispered in his ear and laid his violin and bow

in the crook of his arm. "Just take a deep breath, my love, and follow my lead. Let your heart take over your hands, and your strings will sing with the angels." She kissed him on the cheek, then blew softly on his bow fingers, a ritual she began when he first took up the violin at the age of three. "To bless your playing," she had said. The warmth of her breath always calmed him down.

The audience quieted to a hush. Nathan raised the bow to the strings, his eyes locked on his mother's. He pressed his calloused fingers against the fingerboard, peeking out of the corner of his eye to catch his dad.

Strange. He was gone. And so was Dr. Simon.

Nathan shivered for a moment but refocused on his mother as she laid her own bow on her strings. With a long, lovely stroke, she began, her violin singing a sweet aria that begged for another voice to join it. As if playing unbidden, Nathan's hands flew into action, creating a river of musical ecstasy that flowed unhindered into the first stream of joy. The couplet of harmony joined in a celebration of life, part of Vivaldi's dream of four perfectly balanced seasons played as a sacred offering to their Creator.

His mother leaned close to him, as close as their vibrating bows would allow. As their strokes slowed, bending the music into a quiet refrain, she reached a rest in her part of the piece and whispered, "It is time for a very long solo, my love. Play it with all your heart." He glanced up at her, his fingers playing on their own. A tear inched down her cheek as she continued. "I will join you again when the composer commands me."

She backed away and lowered her bow. Nathan played on, closing his eyes as he reconstructed Vivaldi's theme, building measure upon measure until the composer sang spring into birth, new melodies sprouting forth from earth's womb in all their majesty.

His heart sang along. This was the best he had ever played

the piece, but he was glad it would soon be time for his mother to rejoin him, an arrangement they had created a dozen weeks ago to showcase his talents. But when the expected note from his mother didn't arrive, he flashed his eyes open, his bow scratching out a warped reflection of the notes.

Where was she? He laid his bow limply on the strings as he stared into the audience, scanning the dumbfounded faces row by row. His father's seat was still empty. Now Clara's was vacant as well. The auditorium seemed to swell in size, making him feel like a shrinking mouse, all alone up on stage with a toy violin and bow.

The onlookers buzzed with whispered words. Nikolai rose to his feet and pointed at a door to the side of the stage. "Your mother went that way, Nathan." He spoke in a kind, soothing voice. "Do you think she is ill?"

"I . . . I don't think so." Nathan cleared his throat. Now he was even sounding like a mouse. "She didn't mention anything."

A muffled pop sounded. Nathan flinched. What could it have been? A blown circuit? But the lights were all still on.

The audience grew restless in the awkward silence. The side door opened, and Dr. Simon walked to center stage. After lowering a microphone stand to his level, he wrung his hands nervously. "Ladies and gentlemen," he called, his British accent now amplified, "please pardon the interruption. Nathan's parents had to leave unexpectedly. We will have a short break and then hear from our guest pianist." Shifting away from the microphone, he nodded toward Nathan. "Please come with me, and I will escort you home."

Nathan stayed put, staring blankly into the performance hall. As the audience filtered toward the back, a loud "Excuse me!" sounded from his left.

Clara stood at the side door Dr. Simon had just entered. "I will take Nathan home," she said.

Dr. Simon pushed his glasses higher on his nose, his eyes

darting all around. "Well . . . I suppose that will be suitable." His gaze locked on the room's main entrance behind the last row of seats. Two men stood near the doorway, their arms crossed as they stared at the stage; one, a tall white-haired man with a thin, pale face, and the other, a man of average height wearing a navy blue blazer and khaki pants.

Dr. Simon tugged on his collar. "Clara, please meet me in the main lobby in fifteen minutes. I have some important information to give you." His hands wringing again, he pattered off the stage and hurried toward the exit.

Nathan hustled to his tutor. "What's up?" he asked, glancing back at Simon. "Everyone's acting so weird!"

Clara yanked him through the doorway and into a dim hall. "Come with me!"

She led him briskly down the short corridor and flung open a door on the left. Inside, a steep staircase descended into darkness. Laying a finger on her lips, she set her foot on the top step and gestured for him to follow. Once inside, she closed the door and whispered so quietly he could barely hear. "While you were going up on stage, your father and Dr. Simon took off toward the exit in the back, so I followed."

A dim glow from somewhere on the lower level gave them just enough light to see each other's faces. Holding on to his elbow, she descended the creaking steps slowly and hurried through her words. "When I got into the foyer, I caught a glimpse of your father and Simon ducking into the hall, and I managed to stay close enough to watch them go down these stairs. I tried to listen from up here, but I could only hear violin music and a lot of whispering. Then I heard a gunshot."

"A gunshot? Are you sure?"

"Positive. Right after that, Dr. Simon ran back up the stairs, so I ducked behind the door. I don't think he saw me, so I just followed him back to the stage."

When they reached the bottom, they came upon two open

doors, one in front that led into darkness and one to the left, the source of the dim light. Carrying his violin by its neck, Nathan peered into the darker room in front. A glow from a hidden source revealed a system of large air ducts hanging from a low ceiling and a narrow wooden catwalk leading away from the door.

Nathan took a step through the door on the left. A bare bulb in an old lamp sat atop an antique desk, illuminating a hodgepodge of items in the eight-by-eight-foot chamber—hard-shell suitcases, sports equipment, wicker baskets, ancient typewriters, and two unvarnished coffins, each sitting on a low table in front of a head-high, tri-fold mirror. He blinked at the odd collection. Were the coffins stage props? Maybe they had recently put on a vampire skit.

He took another step. As he closed in, a body in each box came into view, barely visible in the lamp's weak glow. His legs suddenly weak, he stumbled into the gap between the two tables that held the coffins. Even in the dimness, their identities were unmistakable—Solomon and Francesca Shepherd.

Clara grasped his arm. Her mouth dropped open to speak, but she said nothing.

His heart racing wildly, Nathan could only clutch the coffins and stare at his parents. The bodies inside lay still, pale, and quiet. A dark blotch covered his father's breast pocket, and a hideous cut ripped open his mother's throat. Blood soaked her lovely gown, the same one she had so gracefully worn onstage only moments ago.

He shook his head and dug his nails into the wood, dizziness swirling his vision. "It . . . it can't be . . ."

Pain streaked Clara's voice. "It is." She pointed at an ornate gold band on his mother's finger. "Look at her ring. There's not another one like it in the world."

As a creaking stair sounded from above, a familiar British voice carried into the room. "Clara, I distinctly told you to meet me in the lobby. Coming down here was a big mistake."

She looked at Nathan and whispered, "Dr. Simon?"

Nathan didn't answer. He just bit his lip and drilled a stare right through the wall in the direction of the voice. If that creep had anything to do with this, he would—

"I intended to explain what happened here without exposing Nathan to this carnage." Simon reached the landing and aimed a flashlight beam into the room. "It is most unfortunate that events have played out this way."

Clara pointed a shaking finger at a coffin. "What do you know about this?"

"Everything. I arranged it. You see—"

"You *what*?"

"If you could understand the circumstances . . ."

Nathan raised his stiffened arm and pointed at his mother's body. "They're fake, right?" He felt a trembling smile grow unbidden on his lips. "They have to be fake."

Dr. Simon let out a sigh. "I'm afraid they're quite real. Their deaths are a most unfortunate—"

"You monster!" Clara cried.

Raising a finger to his lips, Dr. Simon glanced at the doorway and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Now that my plan has gone awry, I need to make sure that your accidental discovery doesn't hinder our pursuits. I had planned for Nathan to join his parents, but if you continue shouting, we could all end up in coffins."

Nathan pointed at himself. "You planned for *me* to join them?"

"In order to protect our secrets, Dr. Gordon and I decided—"

"Who cares about your secrets?" Sucking in quick breaths, Nathan balled a fist so tight, his fingers throbbed. "Just back off. I'm walking out of here, and I'm taking my parents with me."

Clara picked up a baseball bat. "You'd better not try to stop us if you know what's good for you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Dr. Simon said, "but you have far greater obstacles to overcome." With beads of sweat dotting his bare head, he nodded toward the tri-fold mirror standing behind the coffins. "We will soon have company, a man we must not rile. I insist that you remain silent and let me do all the talking."

Nathan gritted his teeth. "Why should I do what you say? I'll just—"

"Look in the mirror," Dr. Simon said, pointing at the reflection. "You will see."

Nathan stared at the crystal clear image—the three of them, standing in the dim props room, but two other figures had joined them, the two who had stood at the performance hall exit, the tall man and the guy in the blue blazer. Nathan swung his head back toward the door. The other men weren't there.

Grabbing his mother's coffin with one hand, Nathan wagged his head, trying to watch reality and the reflected image at the same time. Dr. Simon was just trying to distract him. The mirror couldn't show—

Footsteps clopped along the hall above their heads. Nathan glanced up. Could the men in the mirror really be coming? Tightening his fingers around the neck of his violin, he flexed his muscles. He was ready. One way or another, he and Clara were going to make a getaway.

Dr. Simon folded the mirror, hiding its reflective surface. As he slid it behind a bookshelf, the door at the top of the stairs swung open, singing a low creak. He waved frantically at Clara, whispering, "Hide your weapon!"

As she laid the bat at her feet, heavy footfalls rumbled down the steps, drawing closer. When a man entered the prop room, Dr. Simon's flashlight beam illuminated the emblem on the newcomer's blazer—three infinity symbols in a vertical stack, close to each other so that their lines intermeshed.

Nathan took a deep breath. Bad guy number two would be tougher than Simon.

"Dr. Gordon," Dr. Simon said, flashing a nervous grin. "You have come just in time. Where is Mictar?"

"He's nearby." Stroking his chin, Dr. Gordon scanned the room, first eyeing Nathan, then Clara before calling out, "It's safe."

More footsteps sounded from the stairs, slower this time, more like the tiptoe steps of a child rather than a man of any gravity. When Mictar finally entered, his thin pallid face seemed to hover over Dr. Gordon's shoulder. With his slick white hair pulled back into a collar-length ponytail, he looked like a lost hippie who forgot to die of old age.

As Mictar gazed across the room, a half smile turned one of his hollow cheeks upward. "What have we here, Dr. Simon? I hope you have not acted too hastily." His words echoed, though the room seemed to dampen everyone else's voice.

Nathan shuddered. This guy seemed more like a ghost than a man, a walking corpse fresh from the graveyard. He gripped his instrument once again. Now he had three guys to get past.

Dr. Simon laughed nervously. "I wanted to wait for you, but they were getting suspicious. I had to make sure they didn't run."

As if floating along the floor, Mictar padded up to the coffins and leaned his tall body over the lifeless forms, studying them from top to bottom. "A bullet in the heart and a slashed throat," he said, caressing Francesca's colorless cheek. "This is lovely work, Simon. Did you do the deeds yourself?"

Folding his hands behind him, Simon raised up on his toes, blinking rapidly. "Of course. No one else knows of your plan."

Nathan boiled inside. He watched for a good opening, maybe when at least two of the creeps had their backs turned.

"Is that so?" Mictar licked the end of the finger that had touched Francesca's cheek. "Show me your palms."

Dr. Simon lifted his hands. Mictar drew close and latched on to each of Dr. Simon's wrists with his spindly fingers. After taking a long sniff of Simon's palms, Mictar furrowed his brow. "I smell the blood of your victims as well as the gun's residue, but the sweet aroma of residual fear is missing."

Simon cleared his throat. "The Shepherds displayed no fear at all."

Mictar nodded slowly. "Ah! I see. But your fear is now so strong, I would wager that even the ungifted can detect its odor."

"Is that so unusual?" Dr. Simon jerked his hands away and wrung them more vigorously than ever. "Anyone who has seen your power would be frightened at your displeasure."

"That is true of my enemies. My loyal friends have no reason to fear me." Mictar reached into Nathan's mother's coffin and lifted her eyelid. "Her light is extinguished. They no longer have value."

"No value? I don't understand."

Mictar pulled away from the coffin. "You disappoint me, Simon. I wanted her eyes while they still breathed the light, her eyes above any others. And I was hoping to keep at least one of the Solomons alive long enough to learn their secrets."

Simon squirmed like a scolded schoolboy. "I didn't know. I mean, if I had known, I would have—"

"You have no need to explain." Mictar turned to Nathan and smiled, though his pointed yellow teeth revealed ravenous hunger rather than joy. "You have brought one of the offspring to replace what has been lost. An excellent gift, indeed, for he will likely possess what I wanted from her."

Mictar's gaze flooded Nathan's body with icy shivers. As weakness buckled his knees, he braced himself on the side of a coffin.

"Of course I brought him," Simon replied. "Never let it be said that Flavius Simon leaves any task undone."

Mictar's rapacious smile returned. "You have spoken well, for your tasks are now complete. With the four adult Shepherds dead, I no longer have need of your services. The fewer people who know, the better. The seeds of interdimensional disharmony are best sown by the hands of the ignorant."

Dr. Gordon grabbed Simon and twisted his arm behind his back, while Mictar glided closer and raised his splayed fingers. His cadaverous body seemed to become a shadow, darkening with each step.

Nathan heaved deep breaths, trying to keep from shaking uncontrollably. What was this . . . this thing? He slid between Clara and the shadowy phantom. "Just stay cool," he whispered. "We'll get out of here somehow."

As Mictar drew within an arm's reach, Dr. Simon thrashed. "Just give me another assignment!" he cried. "I'll do anything you want!"

Dr. Gordon yanked Simon's arm up toward his neck, freezing him in place.

"Anything I want?" Mictar covered Dr. Simon's eyes with his dark hand and spoke softly. "I want you to die."

Dr. Simon's body stiffened, his mouth locked open in a voiceless scream. As Mictar kept his hand over his victim's eyes, sparks flew around his fingers, and the two men seemed to hover a few inches off the floor. Simon quaked violently, while Mictar's body gradually regained its light.

Nathan spread out his arms, shielding Clara. All he could do was try to protect his tutor. There seemed no way to stop whatever was happening to Dr. Simon.

After a few torturous seconds, Mictar pulled his hand back, revealing Dr. Simon's eye sockets, now blackened by emptiness; something had consumed his eyeballs and left behind nothing but gaping pits. With the sickening odor of charred flesh now permeating the room, Dr. Simon collapsed on the floor.

Mictar took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The combination of fear and death is an aroma surpassing all others." He turned to Dr. Gordon. "Collins and Mills stayed on guard in the hallway upstairs. Call them down. You will need help to dispose of all five bodies."

Nathan cringed. Five bodies?

Gordon pulled a cell phone from his pocket and pressed a button on the side. "Collins. Get down here."

Again tightening his fingers around the violin, Nathan whispered to Clara. "It's now or never."

Clara slowly crouched toward her bat. "You get the tall one."

Nathan lunged and swung wildly at Mictar's head. The wood smashed against his thin cheek with a loud crack, and the tightly wound strings sliced into his skin. The violin shattered into a dozen varnished shards, leaving only the fingerboard in Nathan's hands.

Mictar fell against the wall, covering his mouth as dark blood poured between his fingers and dripped onto the floor. Clara bashed Gordon in the groin. He collapsed to his knees and let out a loud groan, his eyes clenched shut.

Nathan latched on to Clara's arm and pulled. "Run!" They stormed out of the prop room, sidestepped a man with a gray beard as he neared the stairwell landing, and dashed through the other doorway into the dim air-duct room. Lowering their heads, they clattered along the narrow catwalk under a maze of interconnected duct work.

A muffled voice called behind them. "Don't worry about us. Get them!"

When they reached the end of the room, a single bulb attached to the low ceiling shone on a gray double door that rose no higher than Nathan's chest. He gave the door a hefty push with both hands. Although it bent outward a few inches, it

snapped right back. He dropped to his bottom and thrust his feet against the latch. The wood cracked but didn't give way.

Behind them, footsteps rattled the catwalk. Nathan kicked again. The door splintered and banged open, revealing a four-foot drop to a hallway below. He sprang to his feet, ducked into the opening, and dropped to the ground. Clara followed. Her white evening gown poofed out like a parachute as she bent her knees to absorb the impact.

Nathan pointed at a sign over an alcove opening just a few paces away. "A fire escape!"

They dashed into the short corridor that ended abruptly at a tall window. Nathan threw the sash open, letting in a blast of cool air. After stepping out onto the wobbly fire escape landing, he helped Clara through. Just as he pushed the window closed, Mictar's henchmen turned into the alcove, the gray-bearded one drawing a pistol.

Nathan thrust his finger downward. "Go!"

Clara kicked off her high-heels and clambered down the steps. A bullet shattered the glass and zinged past Nathan's ear. He leaped halfway down the first flight, shaking the entire framework as he landed. "Faster!"

As his footfalls rang through the metal stairs, a shout sounded from above. "You follow. I'll get the car."

Scrambling across a landing, Nathan caught up with Clara as she turned down the next flight. Another gunshot cracked through the whistling wind. Nathan hopped up on the railing, slid past Clara, and dropped feet first to the landing. "Come on!" he shouted as Clara caught up. "He can't get a good shot through the steps!"

As they closed in on the ground level, they dropped below the top floor of the parking garage across the street. Nathan glanced up. Their pursuer was galloping down the steps two levels above.

Seconds later, Nathan halted at the final stretch, a long,

horizontal ladder that would swing them down to the sidewalk as they added their weight to the stairs. He leaped out, grabbed the railing, and rode the metal bridge to the ground. When the supports smacked against the concrete, Clara hopped on the rail and slid down, almost beating Nathan to the bottom.

They jumped from the stairs. As the rusty span sprang back up, Clara pointed down the road. "The limo's that way!" They broke into a mad sprint, Nathan intentionally staying one step behind, glancing back constantly. Suddenly, the black Mustang careened around a corner three blocks to their rear and thundered toward them.

"They have wheels now!" Nathan shouted.

"So do we!" Clara turned down an alley where the black stretch limo idled. A stubby man in a chauffeur's cap leaned against the front fender, tipping back a bottle of Mountain Dew.

"Mike!" Clara waved her hands as she slowed down. "I'll take the car!"

Mike spun around and opened the door for them. "In trouble again?" he asked.

"Big time!" Now puffing heavily, Clara slid behind the wheel. Nathan leaped on the hood and vaulted to the other side. Throwing open the passenger's door, he dove in and jerked upright in his seat.

The Mustang, its convertible top now folded down, skidded to a stop in front of them, blocking the alley's exit. Clara lowered the window and glanced between Mike and the Mustang, her eyes wide as she tried to catch her breath. "How do I get to the expressway?"

Mike pointed at the street in front of them. "That's Congress. Turn right, cross the bridge, and you're there."

As the window hummed back to the top, Clara smacked the floor stick into gear. "Get buckled!"

Nathan clicked the buckle and grabbed the hand rest. "Let's do it!"

She slammed down the accelerator. The limousine roared away, the tires squealing as she angled toward a narrow gap between the Mustang and a lamppost.

As they closed in, the bearded man stood on the seat, propped a foot on the window frame, and aimed his gun.

Clara ducked behind the wheel. "Get down!"

Nathan scrunched but kept his eye on the action. A bullet clanked into their limo as it clipped the Mustang's fender, shoving it to the side. The gunman toppled over and rolled onto the pavement.

Clara barged into traffic amid a hail of honking horns. "Maybe they learned their lesson and won't follow."

As he rocked upright, a tight lump squeezed into Nathan's throat. "Think we can somehow sneak back and get Mom and Dad?"

Clara grabbed his shoulder. "Nathan, they're—" She released him and spun the wheel, wedging the long car into the left lane between two yellow taxis. "Watch my back and tell me if you see them."

Nathan wheeled around. The black Mustang roared into view, weaving back and forth as it darted past car after car. Setting his fists on top of the windshield, the gray-bearded man aimed his pistol.

"He's going to shoot!" Nathan shouted. "Step on it!"

Clara jerked the car through traffic, zigzagging from lane to lane. They bumped a Mercedes on one side, then a pickup truck on the other. Tires squealed. Horns blared. A bullet ripped through the rear window and into the dashboard, shattering the radio.

Clara stomped the accelerator to pass a city bus, flattening Nathan against the passenger seat. He pushed back up and peered over the headrest. The Mustang careened around the bus but slowed as a car swerved in front of it.

Clara slowed the limo to a halt and pointed ahead. "The drawbridge!"

Nathan glanced between the shattered rear window and the windshield. Red-and-white crossbars lowered about four car lengths in front, while a pickup truck pulled behind them, preventing any escape to the rear. "Any ideas? We're sitting ducks!"

"Not if I can help it!" Clara jerked her thumb toward the rear. "Keep watching."

"What do you have up your sleeve this time?"

She clenched her fingers around the steering wheel. "Survival!"

He peered back again. The Mustang angled its front grill toward the left, inching back and forth to get enough room to go around the car that blocked it. Nathan lowered his head. "Looks like he's trying to push over the median!"

Clara scrunched down. "Perfect!"

"Perfect?" He spun around. "But they'll catch us for sure!"

"Only if we go back. We always go forward."

"But going forward puts us in the river."

"Tighten your strap, Kiddo! We're taking off!" She jerked the wheel to the left and floored the pedal, sending the limo lurching across the median and into the oncoming lanes.

Nathan grabbed his seat belt and pulled it tighter. "You can't jump the gap! There's no way this tank can make it!"

"And neither can that Mustang!" They crashed through the crossbars and zoomed up the steep metal incline. The limo launched over the edge and into the air, flying for a brief second before falling toward the river below.