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**THE HOLLY WREATH MAN by Christopher Scanlan and Katharine Fair
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CHAPTER 2: FOUND AND LOST

"Come on, Mom. Pick up," Jeff Henderson said into the receiver as he listened to the phone ring again and again.

He imagined his mother drying her hands on the red-checked dish towel draped over the refrigerator handle, checking the gas burners on the stove, then walking through the dining room and into the front hall where a new phone rested on the oval table where a black rotary model had sat for 40 years.

"I get her a portable so she can carry it with her," he said to the police officer that Rachel summoned to investigate their kids' disappearance. "So what does she do? She leaves it in the cradle. That's it; I'm buying her a phone for every room -- and one for the barn, too. Ah, finally! Mom, are the kids there?"

Jeff gave a thumbs-up. Rachel sighed in relief, and the cop folded her notebook. But Jeff's mouth tightened as he listened.

"Why didn't you call to let us know? We were scared to death. Rachel called the police," he said. "No, Mom, we didn't put them on the bus. Let me talk to Will." He lowered the receiver and thanked the police officer. Rachel saw her to the door.

"What do you mean he doesn't want to talk to me? You tell him he's in big trouble if he doesn't get to the phone." Rachel tapped Jeff on the shoulder, and held out her hand. He gave her the phone, and smelled her hair's lemony scent.

Knowing her kids were safe transformed Rachel. She chatted with Jeff's mother, her tone changing only slightly when Will got on the phone.

It always amazed Jeff how Rachel was able to control her temper, even when the children pulled a stunt like this. Will talked to her because he knew his mother wouldn't jump down his throat.

Jeff held out his hand, and motioned for the phone; he would try her approach.

"It's OK, son. I'm not mad. I love you, and I'm glad you and your sister are safe," he said. "No, I don't know what we're going to do yet, but your mother and I will figure out something. Tell Katie I love her."

Jeff hung up, but before he could say a word, Rachel said, "The answer is no."

"Rachel, please. I'm in a jam. I've got to finish this report tonight."

"I'm sorry, Jeff, but I've made plans for the holidays. We agreed you'd have the kids for Thanksgiving, whether or not you went to your mother's."

Plans? he thought. With who?

"Fine then," he said. "They can just stay with my Mom in Tennyson. I'll drive down on Thanksgiving."

"Jeff, they missed school today; they have one more day before Thanksgiving, and they're not missing it. If you leave now, you can make it back by morning. They can sleep in the car."

From the familiar chill in her voice, he knew she wouldn't relent; 15 years of marriage had a way of teaching you the signs, even when the most important signals passed you by. He was going to Tennyson after all.

"OK, Rachel, you win. Would you at least call and tell them I'm coming?"

"I'll be happy to. Now don't drive and talk on the phone. It's dangerous."

But Jeff was already heading out the door, punching auto dial for the office.

"Cheryl, something's come up with the kids," he said, backing out of the driveway and turning toward the interstate. "They're fine. But I'm not going to make it back in today. No, you don't have to get Susan, or anyone else, to fill in. And don't tell the big guy. Here's what I want you to do. E-mail me those spreadsheets. Thanks, you're a lifesaver."

He spotted a 7-Eleven; he'd need fortification.

"Oh, one more thing. Rachel's going out of town for the holiday and I forgot to get the number where she's staying. Can you call her and e-mail it too?"

He filled up the gas tank and got a jumbo coffee. He had five hours of driving ahead of him. Five hours to unplug. No meetings, no e-mail, no voice mail messages. Five hours alone. Enough time, perhaps, to figure out why his wife and children were slipping from his grasp and what, if anything, he could do to keep from losing them forever.

NEXT CHAPTER: HOMECOMING

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