

newlywed brother, and hit the road, hoping to make good time despite the rain. Augusta to Pensacola was a good seven hours on a good day. Today wasn't one of those.

Four hours into the drive, the storm only worsened. Rain pounded the windshield in relentless sheets, and Andy's knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel. His eyes strained through the wall of water ahead, while the wipers thrashed furiously, barely holding their own. Each passing truck sent waves crashing over his Jeep, and the tires skidded briefly before finding their grip again.

His team was already out there, he was sure of it—gearing up, responding to calls, doing their part. The thought gnawed at him, a frustration that he was still hours away, trapped on this endless, storm-ravaged stretch of highway.

Then, the gas light blinked on.

"Damn it." He hadn't expected to burn through fuel this fast. The downpour had turned the drive into a slog.

For fifteen tense minutes, he watched the needle drop dangerously low, silently willing it to hold on. He scanned the rain-slick highway for a sign, any sign.

Through the torrent, he finally spotted one, a wavering green exit marker up ahead. No guarantees, but he didn't have a choice. Running on fumes, he veered off onto the ramp, the Jeep's tires sending sprays of water as he turned. His mind churned with urgency: refuel, get back on the highway, make it home.

The rain smeared everything: the windshield, the road, even the city he now drifted through.

His phone buzzed. His eyes flicked down for a heartbeat.

When his gaze snapped up, a twelve-ton problem filled the lane. The truck tore through the rain like a moving wall. Andy yanked the wheel. The Jeep fishtailed across the slick asphalt.

Then he saw them, a woman, a boy, blurred figures in the storm. Too close. Too sudden.

He slammed the brakes, his hands locked on the wheel. He fought for control. The tires refused to grip the road.

The truck smashed into his side with a deafening crunch. Metal screamed as the impact sent his Jeep spinning out of control. His head struck the window. Pain exploded across his skull. The force crushed his body against the airbag, driving the air from his lungs.

Time fractured into cruel, jagged moments. The Jeep careened toward them.

The thud came next. Sickening, hollow. It reverberated through the vehicle. Through him. His breath caught as the Jeep lurched over something—someone. Nausea surged.

The world slowed, becoming surreal and distant.

Then everything stopped.

Pain radiated through his head and chest, but it barely registered.

*Go. Help them.* His mind spun. His pulse hammered in his ears. Were they alive? Was there still time to do something? He had to help. He had to fix this.

His door was crushed, mangled beyond any chance of opening. Blood trickled from a gash on his forehead, mixing with the rainwater pooling in his lap from his shattered windshield. He tried to move, to go help them, but he was

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trapped by metal, by pain, by a body that refused to cooperate. The nausea, the blinding headache, the blurry vision consumed him. All he could see was the broken figure of the woman, lying motionless in the street. The boy, face down on the asphalt, crumpled beside her, impossibly small against the vast, indifferent storm.

His vision swam, and the world dissolved into darkness.