

RUNNING to cover

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a Nathan Parker novel part 3 of a trilogy

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Chapter 1

I couldn't breathe.

I tried raising my head. But pain shot down my neck and spine like a bolt of lightning.

My muscles felt knotted and stiff, unable to flex. I fought through their tightness to twist my neck sideways, and finally found air. My body greedily sucked it in. I coughed it out. And coughed again. Breathe in, cough it out. Breathe in, cough it out.

The air smelled foul, thick with smoke and charred ashes. It tasted rank, burning my tongue and leaving a gritty coating inside my mouth. I coughed again to clear my throat of the burned stench.

My whole body felt battered, as if I'd been in a fight. And it felt compressed, like something had run over me.

What happened? My brain refused to remember. *Concentrate.*

Before I could focus, ringing filled my ears. It started as a distant high-pitched tone, but rapidly grew louder, filling my skull until I thought my head would burst open. I tried to bring my hands up to block out the sound, but my arms wouldn't move. Somebody, please, stop that obnoxious sound.

But it didn't stop. The ringing just grew louder, until I cringed from the pain in my ears.

I realized then that the ringing was coming from inside my head. It was as loud in my left ear, the one that was pressed against the floor, as in my right ear, the one that was exposed. Coming to that conclusion felt like a small victory. I could reason. So my brain still worked.

Open your eyes, my brain commanded. I slit them a crack. Even that trivial movement felt like an enormous effort, sending stabbing fingers of pain jaggedly splintering within my head.

Through my slit eyelids, everything looked out of focus. And the light was so bright that I squeezed my eyes shut for several seconds before squinting them open again.

I saw grass. I wasn't lying on the floor. It was the ground.

"Mr. Parker?" A gravelly voice. It sounded far away, just barely audible above the roar of the ringing in my head.

"Mr. Parker?" Swiveling my eyes toward the sound brought a fresh wave of pain. But I had to look, because I recognized that voice.

"Mr. Parker!" The ringing had finally subsided. I heard her voice more clearly. I looked into the face of an older woman. I knew her. My neighbor. Mrs. Bigelow.

She jabbed my shoulder with a gnarled finger and asked urgently, "Is Amber OK?" As an afterthought, she added, "Are you alive?"

I looked at her dully, but couldn't manage a response. All around me, I saw debris. Everywhere. Was I still in Oklahoma, still surrounded by the destruction from the tornado?

But what was my neighbor from Ohio doing in Oklahoma? And the other people running toward us. I couldn't remember their names, but recognized their faces. More of my neighbors.

On the street, I saw movement and turned my head painfully in that direction. A car driving past, a face looking down at me. Did I know that face? Maybe. But who is he?

The car stopped. The driver opened his door and put one foot on the street. Then he abruptly stepped back into the car and drove away.

I tried to reach up with a hand toward the man. But my arm still wouldn't move. It felt like anchors held it down on the ground.

And my legs were unresponsive. I tilted my head to look at them. I couldn't find them.

No, they're not gone, I told myself. They're still there. The pain shooting up through them told me that. But something was on my legs, pinning them to the ground.

That something was a door. A familiar door.

My front door.

Finally regaining mobility in my arms, I rolled onto my side. I reached down and shoved the door aside a few inches. Underneath was something else pressing me to the ground.

At the sight of it across my lower legs, I moaned, "Ohhhh." Then I flopped back down to the grass. The last thing I saw was the pale and wrinkled face of Mrs. Bigelow before everything went dark.