

Thirteen Hours

Maegan Simpson

It was the fourth day of Levi's elk hunt. It had snowed again during the night, and our early morning start dissolved as we drove over the unplowed roads high in the mountains. Everywhere we went we saw ridiculous amounts of people but no elk.

A little after noon we found what we'd been looking for: a road without tire tracks. Virgin territory! As we started down the road Mom uttered a prayer for God to keep us safe, as we knew we'd be alone down there. We were smiling as we drove down into the canyon, spirits high as we searched the hills for life. As we approached a corner near the bottom of the canyon, Mom spotted what we'd been searching for.

"Elk! There, over on that ridge."

"I don't see it," Levi said, leaning forward to get a better view.

"Right there!" Mom pointed to the hillside. "She's standing up, and there are others laying down."

By then I'd spotted the animals as well, and I helped Levi find them as Mom drifted to a stop in the eight-inch snow coating the road. As soon as we were stopped, Levi jumped out and got ready to shoot. But the elk had seen us. They stared at our Suburban, and as Levi got out the other elk stood and the herd walked over the ridge. Levi looked back at Mom, not sure what he should do.

"Walk to the bottom of the canyon and try and see them again," Mom instructed.

Levi turned and started toward the hillside. Mom had me roll down the window and shout at him "put the safety on while you're walking down the hill!"

The area was a burn scar, and fallen trees cross-crossed the landscape. Large ones he had to step over, but there were many smaller diameter logs that hid under the snow. It would be easy to trip. Mom and I watched him walk and prayed that God would slow the elk down so he could get a shot off.

Half-way down the hill, Mom commented "He can't shoot with that scope while his glasses are on." But he was already too far away for us to shout to him. All we could do is watch.

In the center of the canyon, Levi sat down in the snow and took up the sitting position, his favorite. Mom and I continued praying as we watched him take aim. His shot rang through the canyon, but as soon as it went off Levi dropped the rifle. What was wrong? After a few seconds, he picked the rifle out of the snow and waved for us to come down. Mom called out asking if he hit anything, and Levi replied that he didn't know. Mom and I grabbed our jackets and the cleaning kit before heading down to join him.

As we approached, we talked more. Levi had the crosshairs on the elk, and we knew the rifle was accurate, but he didn't know if dropping the rifle had made the shot go wide. When we got

closer, we could see why he'd dropped the rifle: the scope had come back and knocked into his glasses. Blood dripped from a cut over his forehead, and his face was red.

Mom handed me the cleaning kit while Levi put his jacket on. They would go up on the ridge and look for the elk Levi shot at while I stayed in the bottom. If I saw anything moving, I would tell them. I stood in the snow and watched them make a weaving path toward the hillside. The sun was out and my jacket was warm, but standing on the snow made my feet cold. I stomped on the ground and kicked my toes against rocks to work some heat back into them, all the while listening to Mom and Levi's voices echo off the hills. Clouds had started blocking out the sun by the time I saw someone coming down the hill toward me. I raced through the snow, impatient and worried because I only saw one person.

By the time I reached the creek, I could see Levi was crying. At the top of the ridge they'd found what looked like blood in the snow, and Mom went to follow it. Levi was supposed to come back and tell me to drive the Suburban up the road and pick up Mom, but on the way down he'd found the elk. His shot hit her in the brain and dropped her instantly, but she was against a log and hard to see from a distance. He didn't know what to do. Mom was already too far away to catch up to her, and how we had to figure out what to do with the elk. I tossed Levi the cleaning kit and reminded him of the first steps of gutting animals, then headed back to the Suburban.

The situation continued to spiral when I realized the keys weren't in the Suburban...Mom had them with her. Now Levi and I were alone, no way to contact Mom, no way to find her. We had a downed elk that we had to gut. After some talking Levi and I decided that he would walk up the road to try and meet Mom, and I would do what I could to gut the elk. We took off to our respective tasks, but almost immediately I started having my doubts. I'd never gutted an animal by myself. Watched? Yes. Helped? Sure. But I'd never actually *done* it. I prayed for strength as I circled the elk and tried to figure out how to best go about this.

Get her head downhill and slit the throat so the blood drains out...but her head's uphill. Can I turn her around? A couple tugs at her head told me there was no way I was going to get her turned around by myself. Okay...I can still slit her throat. Not sure that's where I was supposed to do it, but oh well. Next I need to get her rib cage open...where do I cut again? Need to saw through the breast bone...dang that's hard. Take a break from sawing, breathe and pray for strength.

"Oh Lord, I can't do this," I cried. "Please give me Your strength. Please help me. Please protect Mom and Levi."

Over the next three hours I alternated between working in silent determination and crying out to God in fear and frustration. Barely an hour after I started my task, a snow storm had blown in. I had to keep dumping snow off the cleaning kit so I didn't lose the knives, and for a while the suburban was hidden from sight. All through it I would work on what I could until I hit a snag, then switch to something else. Every time I would hit a wall in my strength, or in my knowledge, I would cry out again asking for strength and guidance. When I started up again I always found I had a little more strength, or I thought of a way to use leverage to get it done, or

I remembered another step. Throughout the process, I asked God to protect Mom and Levi. I didn't like that we were separated. I didn't like that I had no idea what was happening to them.

With God's help, three hours later the elk was gutted and I'd finished what I could do by myself. But Mom and Levi were still gone. I searched for more things to do, not wanting to go back to the suburban when I was alone. But after laying in the snow to get the right angle for something, I realized how cold I was. My jacket and jeans were soaked with blood and snow, and a little voice in my head wanted to just sit there for a few minutes...just a short rest. Oh, a nap would be wonderful.

That scared me. I knew what happened to people who fell asleep in the snow. I knew that I had hypothermia, and I needed to get warm before the drowsiness became irresistible. I gathered up the knives and started down the hillside, realizing just how cold I was as my fingers fumbled and my body shuddered. Back at the suburban, I struggled out of my bloodied jacket and frozen jeans, switching boots to an extra pair that wasn't wet. My leggings were damp too, but I wasn't about to take them off. I sat in the driver's seat with our extra jackets wrapped around as much of me as I could.

Being out of the wind helped, but the suburban wasn't any warmer than the outside, and I didn't have the keys to run the heater. I huddled around myself and shivered, praying and looking for anything that would help. I knew I was way too cold, and after a while I knew that a few jackets weren't going to warm me up. I didn't want to be one of those stories they tell in hunter's safety to show the dangers of the cold. But I was alone, and that hurt the most. I didn't know where Mom and Levi were, and I had no way of finding out. I was too cold to go and find them. I had to wait for them to come to me. I rocked back and forth in the seat and prayed, my cries reaching new desperation as I begged God to protect them, to bring them back to me, to bring them around that corner in the road, to not let me lose them. I was scared to die, but oh...losing Mom and Levi would be so much worse.

My fear grew as the light disappeared, but at dusk I saw a light coming around the corner. My heart soared, and I jumped out of the suburban. Going outside wasn't a good idea, but I didn't care. They were safe! The dread swiftly returned when I realized there was only one person walking toward me.

"Levi?" I called.

"Maegan?" He replied. "Maegan!"

He started running, and I ran too. We were both crying as we raced toward each other.

"Where's Mom?" I asked.

"I don't know." His voice cracked as he spoke. "I need to get in the suburban."

He was shivering violently, and I could see frost on the hairs on his chin. We stumbled back to the vehicle, and there was such a paradox of relief and horror swirling through me I wanted to scream. Levi was here, Levi was safe...but we had no idea where Mom was.

Inside the vehicle, Levi struggled out of his wet boots and jacket. I handed him some of the jackets, and we scooted close together to try and share body heat. After a few minutes we realized our position wasn't working.

"We need to get our feet off the floor," Levi said, teeth chattering.

"Good idea."

Both of us turned so that my back was to the door, and Levi was half sitting on me. Levi arranged the jackets over our feet and spread them out to cover as much of us as possible. We sat like that for a while, discussing ideas to help us get warm.

"I think you're going to need to take your jeans off," I told Levi. They were crusted with snow and frozen solid. They were making my legs even colder, and I couldn't imagine what they were doing to Levi.

"I think you're right," he replied. He sat up and struggled out of his jeans, then tossed them in the back and resettled the jackets over us.

"Just to let you know," he said as he got resettled, "I'm not embarrassed about this because it's necessary, but I don't ever want to do this again."

I laughed through the shivering. "Why ever not? You don't like being this close to me?"

We continued the joking as we waited for our shared body heat to do *something*. We continued along that strain: joking as much as we could, shifting jackets so no air got in, talking about whatever random things we could think of... How much we hated the cold, how we now understood why people live in Florida, how nice it would be when Mom came back and we could turn the heater on... When, not if. We could not deal in if.

We didn't say it, but we were both thinking the same thing: it was dark, and the temperature kept dropping. Levi had walked five miles up the road and hadn't found Mom...what if she hadn't made it to the road yet? Was she okay? How long were we going to be there? We didn't voice our fears, though...distractions, ways to keep warm, words of hope...that's all we could handle. I continued to pray silently and constantly for God to protect Mom, to give her His warmth and strength, to keep her moving and protect her. Levi and I mused that she might've gone into Willow Creek to get into a cabin. That's what she'd told Levi and I to do if we were ever stuck and needed shelter.

Hours passed. We alternated between huge shudders wracking our bodies, and eerie stillness. We like the shivering more...at this point, getting warm was beyond us, and not shivering meant we were sinking deeper into hypothermia. As time passed, I became more and more sleepy. I told Levi, and we both worked harder on coming up with things to talk about. I needed to stay awake...we didn't know how long we would be there, and if I fell asleep there was a chance I wouldn't wake up again. We talked about the most ridiculous and random subjects...: did I tell you about this character? Have you heard of such-and-such an element? The frost on the inside of the window looks like a chicken with a hobo bindle. What time is it

now? Privately, I had to wonder...were we going to be stuck out here all night? Would we last that long? What would we even do if we did?

At ten o'clock, I grabbed my phone off the dash and opened my picture gallery. Maybe reading memes I'd saved would keep us alert. I had to wipe frost off my screen to read the words. Half-way through a long post on Eowyn's character development, Levi stopped me.

"Maegan," he said, elbowing me. I looked up from my screen and saw light reflecting off the window. Headlights! A door slammed. Levi and I sat up, and I pushed the door open. Dad appeared, a smile on his face.

"There you are..."

"Dad, Mom's not with us," I said, tears already filling my eyes. We weren't alone. We were safe. Dad had come for us. But Mom was still missing.

Horror replaced relief on his face. "What?"

Levi and I haltingly explained what had happened, talking over each other and struggling to speak with our renewed shivering. Another man in a game warden uniform appeared behind Dad and asked what was going on. Dad explained what we'd told him: we hadn't seen Mom in eight hours, we knew where she'd been headed but not where she was.

Dad talked to the game warden, Kacy, while Levi and I got into the school suburban that Dad was driving. The heater was blasting blessed warmth, thawing out our feet and intensifying the shudders. There was such a strange mix of relief and dread. Dad had come for us. We were warm. We weren't going to be stuck all night in the suburban, shivering and fighting to stay awake. Now there were people who could look for Mom. But the very fact that she wasn't with us scared me. It had been eight hours since we'd last seen her, and she had no suburban to crawl inside if she got hypothermia like we did. There were no roads over the ridges she'd headed towards. How in the world were we going to find her?

After Dad finished talking with Kacy, we all drove up the road to look for Mom. For the first few miles we followed Levi's tracks. I was amazed at how far he'd walked. We stopped several times to look at tracks in the road, but each time they were from elk. We told Dad more of what had happened as we watched for Mom or any tracks that would show us that she'd passed through. As Dad drove through the snow fast enough to make me grab for the handle on a normal day, I continued praying.

Lord, please help us find her. Keep her safe, keep her warm, keep her moving. Please help us find her. Please protect her. I don't want her to be gone. Please...I want her to meet my kids. I want her to read my books. I want to sit beside her in the mornings and drink coffee. Please bring her back to us.

We drove all the way to the locked gate...still no Mom. We turned around and started back to catch up with Kacy (he was driving slower and using his flood light to check the sides of the road for any sign of Mom.) As we went back, I glanced over at the road to the Bearwallow Lookout. Should we drive out to see if Mom was *there*? But the road is rougher than the main

road, and we were already pushing snow with our bumper. By the time I thought to mention it Dad had already driven past it.

We met up with Kacy and Dad told him how far we'd gone. After more discussion, we drove back to the other suburban in case Mom made it back to the road, while Kacy drove into Willow Creek to check if Mom was in one of the cabins. Dad turned the headlights so they shown on the hillside, to light Mom's way if she came back the way she'd come. While we waited, Levi and I tried to explain where the elk was, but mostly we were silent. I kept praying. Occasionally Dad would whisper things, asking why Mom would go off on her own and theories about what she would do when it reached dusk.

We spotted Kacy's floodlight reflecting off the hillside behind us and turned to watch him drive up. For a split second, I thought I saw Mom in his truck. But it was just his hat and some equipment. No Mom. Dad got out to talk to him again, and by now I suspected he was doing that to protect Levi and I. By now it had been nine hours. Levi and I had hypothermia even sharing each other's body heat in the shelter of the suburban. Could Mom have lasted this long? It kept getting colder... No. I refused to go there. I would keep praying. I would still have hope.

Dad got back in the suburban and explained that Kacy had radioed for more help, but it would be hours until they arrived. He wasn't sure now what to do. After a few minutes of discussing the possibility of snowshoes and following Mom's tracks, Dad said that Kacy had a map out and suggested that we go show him where Mom was headed when she left. I stepped outside, Levi followed shortly after. Within a minute we were both violently shivering again, and Kacy had us climb back in the suburban and roll down the window to talk to him.

As Kacy showed us the map and Levi explained the route Mom had planned, my heart sank a little further. There was no way she was going to make it to the road where she'd said. It was the wrong angle...it was too many miles. There was a little good news mixed in, though...there were cabins near Mom's path. If she came at the right angle, if she didn't turn down the canyon too soon, she might've found the cabins and taken shelter. Another option was Indian Creek: all the canyons Mom was crossing fed into it and then led to the road. Kacy took off to check the mouth of Indian Creek and sound his siren in case Mom was nearby. We waited beside the other suburban.

I kept praying, but by now they had changed. *Lord keep Mom alive. Please keep her alive. Breath Your warmth into her. Let her find shelter or keep her moving. Please help us find her.*

Kacy returned. No Mom. He checked when the others were supposed to arrive, but it was still going to be hours. By now it was well after midnight. Levi and I watched from the warm cab as Kacy put snow chains on his truck. Dad got out to help, and after they were finished, he and Kacy discussed our next move. The suburban Dad brought was getting low on gas...we couldn't sit idling for much longer without risking running out of gas on the drive out. Dad, Levi, and I would go to the game warden cabin in Willow Creek and wait for news. Kacy would drive out to the cabins and see if she'd taken shelter there.

The game warden cabin was small and colder than the suburban, but it was warmer than the outside and it had beds. After Kacy left, Dad came over and gave me a half hug, reaching out

for Levi's hand. And he prayed. He asked God to be with Mom, and to protect her. It was the first time I have ever seen him initiate prayer. It's only the second time I've seen him near tears.

We dispersed and each took up residence on a cot with blankets covering us. I doubted I could sleep, but I was so tired that laying down with my eyes closed was a temptation I couldn't resist. The cabin was quiet. I'd had a thought for a while now, I think an encouragement as an answer to my prayers. The odds were against us. It had been over ten hours now since Mom had left, and the temperature kept dropping. But bad odds didn't mean we were without hope. God is more than able to beat the odds. He is more than able to preserve Mom's life, and to help us find her. I struggled to break the silence, but I had to say it. I had to share the hope that was keeping me from falling apart.

"We serve the same God who preserved the Israelites in the desert for forty years and saved Paul after three nights on the open sea," I whispered, struggling to make my voice loud enough to be heard. "He can save Mom."

I was faced away from Levi and Dad, so I didn't see their reactions. They didn't say anything. I laid there for a while, huddling under the blanket and trying to keep my regained warmth. I kept praying. I took out my phone and opened the Bible app. The first thing that showed up was a verse image Mom had made that morning. Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." A future. A hope.

I kept scrolling and came to a verse I had highlighted: Psalms 9:9-10 "The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You." I know Mom seeks God with all her heart, that I do, and Levi does. God had not forsaken us. We can trust in Him. But it was hard, because I knew that trusting in God didn't automatically mean Mom was going to be okay. I knew there was a possibility that the Lord was going to take her home. Would I still trust Him if Mom didn't come back? That was a hard question...the hardest I'd faced in quite a while. I wanted Mom to come back. I didn't want to live without her.

Yes. I trust You. I trust You to take care of Mom, and I trust You to take care of us no matter what follows. But I'm scared. Please help me. I trust You, Lord...I trust You. Please, if it is Your will, save Mom. Please bring her back to us.

Time passed, I alternated between praying and dozing. Sometime around three in the morning, the phone rang. I was asleep enough that by the time I registered that it was for us, Dad was already halfway across the room. He picked up the phone. I waited, awake again with renewed praying.

"You've got her?" Dad said. "Oh, hallelujah, oh thank God. Alright, thank you."

He hung up. I was sitting up in bed staring at Dad. "She's okay?"

"Yes," Dad said. "Kacy found her in the cabins. He's bringing her here now."

Thank You, Lord! I flipped my feet over the edge and dropped off the bed, the concrete floor jolting the bones of my feet. I didn't care. Mom was alive. Mom was coming. A string of praise and thanksgiving rang through my head as I hugged Dad and started pulling my shoes back in.

Thank You, God! Thank You so much, You are so good! Thank You for saving Mom! Thank You that she's safe!

We still had to wait for Kacy to bring her to us, but this wait was a happy one. Mom was okay, that's all that mattered. I sat in a chair next to the heater, huddled in a blanket and continuing my constant praises. The entire ordeal was thirteen hours from start to finish. Thirteen hours of fear, pain, dread, horror...and unshakable hope. Those were the hardest thirteen hours of my life thus far. I hope they remain that way. I would not repeat it for the world, but even so there is a joy mixed with the pain in the memory. In those thirteen hours I thought I would lose my brother and my Mom, and I thought I would lose my own life. I was completely helpless, unable to do anything to save myself, to save Levi, or to save Mom. I hated it. I railed against it. But in the end, I trusted. I trusted God, Creator of the universe and my Lord and Savior, to protect us each just as He does every other moment of our lives. I trusted Him to work a good end to the whole mess when all I could see is darkness and fear. And I am so very very grateful that I do not have to know what would've happened if those thirteen hours had ended differently. I'm so grateful that as I am writing this I sit beside my mom, in the same room with my brother and my dad.

I pray that I don't forget those thirteen hours and the lessons they taught. I pray that God uses this story for His glory, and that I can use the life He gives me every day to serve Him completely. Every day, every moment, every breath is a gift from God. And I pray that God helps me live like it. Thirteen hours made an impression on me that will last a lifetime. Now I ask...what does God have for me in the next thirteen hours? How can I use this time to the fullest living for the One who gives me breath, warmth, and life?