

DETOUR

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Mike Stanton saw the cars begin to slow down just past Clearlake Oaks on RT 20. His heart sank. He could see cars backed up for at least a mile. He put his flashers on and shifted the car into park. Ten minutes went by, then twenty, then forty. No one was moving.

A traffic jam in the middle of nowhere. How is that even possible?

He saw several emergency vehicles and several Highway Patrol cars zoom past him on the shoulder. He got out when a local deputy stopped his car to tell everyone what was going on. A tanker truck containing some chemicals had jack-knifed and overturned on the highway. The road was shut down until they could get a trained HAZMAT crew out here to clean up the mess. They had started rerouting traffic in Clearlake Oaks, but some cars had gotten through. He was one of them. They were in the process of turning everyone around. A semi had gotten stuck trying to turn around and was now blocking both lanes. In the Army, Mike's superiors would have called this mess a "Charlie Foxtrot." Mike just called it another lost sale. He had to get up to Redding today to sign those papers for his divorce. His wife had finally agreed. He didn't want to miss the date and then have his ex-wife change her mind again. He tried to find any information he could on the Cal-Trans website about the wreck, but they would only confirm that the highway was closed. He checked a few other websites on his phone to try and find an alternate route close by. None of them were any help. He had an old road atlas from the 1990s in his car and gave it a look. He noticed an unmarked dirt road that connected to Route 162. All he had to do was follow the dirt road to 162 that would dump him in Maxwell about twenty miles down the road. He could see some kind of road sign back down the road. He had just enough room to turn around and squeeze by the rows of cars. This had to be the same road. It would take about an hour, but he would be back on track. There were cones up around the entrance, but Mike ignored them and went right through. A deputy spotted him and thought about stopping him, but a fight had broken out between two truckers and he was needed here. A few minutes later the highway department had closed off the dirt road. About fifteen miles up ahead, the road was washed out. Mike was headed nowhere fast.

He was getting tired of swimming upstream. Too young to retire, too old to start over. Hell of an age to be.

The dirt road was well maintained, at least for the first few miles. Its condition steadily deteriorated the further along he went.

Mike was officially *in the middle of fucking nowhere*. It had been over five minutes since he had even seen another house. He lived in the Bay area where houses are so close you can fart on your neighbor's house. He sped along, past the oak trees and empty fields. This part of California was mainly just farmland and farming towns with not a whole lot in between. He was getting nervous

now, hoping there would be at least something on his dirt road. He slowed down and looked out the window.

Just a whole lot of God's country and not much else.

If he didn't find something soon, he was officially screwed. His blood was beginning to boil. A slow, simmering rage was building. He floored it and took off down the road, leaving a giant dust cloud behind him.

Wyatt Cross was in a hurry. Some idiot trucker had jackknifed a semi and spilled chemicals all over the road. Wyatt was a grower of vegetables part-time and a cultivator of marijuana full-time. California had just voted to decriminalize possession and his business was about to go through the roof. He had even hired two Mexicans to help him grow. There were so many farm trucks going in and out of this area, no one would suspect anything if he were pulled over. He kept his weed carefully hidden in his crates of vegetables. He grew Blueberry and AK 47 along with two of his own strains. He had customers as far away as San Francisco. He was on his way south from Orland where he had his farm. He had taken the farm roads to avoid the fustercluck on Rt 20. He had ten crates of hot peppers and two pounds of green to drop off in Santa Rosa. He was making great time. He was going way too fast for a dirt road with limited visibility, but he never realized it, until it was too late. Wyatt wasn't really supposed to be driving. He had lost his license over a year ago for DUI. A mere technicality as far as he was concerned. He couldn't believe CHIPS had a sobriety checkpoint out here. Just ridiculous. He didn't drive drunk often, if ever. He usually never even drove buzzed. This was farm country. Everyone drove drunk around here.

Take away a man's license to drive, you may as well take away his license to exist.

He knew the area well. He avoided the major roads and just stuck to country roads and farm roads. Most were paved, some were not. He knew the risks, but couldn't say not easy money. Tax-free, untraceable money, the best kind there is. Away from the long arm and prying reach of Uncle Sam and his goons.

Wyatt wasn't much of a driver, even when he was sober and not in a hurry. In the weed business, you damn well better keep your word to your buyers. If you say you are going to be at a certain place and a certain time:

Then by Jesus, you better be there.

He swerved his truck onto Farm Road 7 and nearly tipped it over. He knew he should slow down, at least the logical part of his brain was screaming at him to slow down, but the money-making part was only seeing dollar signs and the dollar signs almost always won out.

Mike stopped when he saw that the dirt road just stopped in front of him. A rainstorm must have washed away half the road. It dropped by more than two feet and was nothing more than soft mud. No way was he going to make it across, not without four-wheel drive. He got back in his car and tried to make a phone call, only to see that he had no service. He threw the phone down on his seat. His map showed nothing. It would take him almost half an hour to get back to the highway and he could be sitting there for hours. He looked around and saw another dirt road off

to his right that read "FARM ROAD 7". At this point, they had no other choice. The road had to connect to something. Even another Farm Road, just someplace where he could get cell service. He took off down the road, past the avocado trees, then past the Apple trees. Finally, he had entered the biggest cornfield he had ever seen. He couldn't see over the corn. If he could, he would have known that Wyatt was heading directly perpendicular to him going almost 70 mph.

Mike ol boy, you should just have stayed on the highway and waited it out. You'd probably be on your way by now, yet here you are.

Mike was going way too fast for a dirt road. Wyatt was going even faster. Had just one of them been driving at a slower speed the entire accident might have been avoided. It was a one in million type of event. The chances of two vehicles coming to the intersection at exactly the same time on these deserted farm roads were minute.....but not minute enough.

Wyatt only caught a brief glimpse of Mike's SUV as it ran right into the side of his truck, flipping it over, landing it on its side. The steel from the old farm truck had saved his life, but it wouldn't keep him from getting some pretty serious injuries. The door had buckled so badly, it had shattered his left leg and twisted his leg. The force of the impact had knocked him around so violently, he had sustained a pretty serious concussion. Still, in the few seconds, after the crash had occurred, he had come to his senses and was trying to climb out of the truck, which was now laying on its side. He got out of the truck and tried to stand up, only to collapse on the ground. The pain in his left leg was too much. If he hadn't been wearing his seatbelt, it could have been much worse. Wyatt could barely stand up. Once he did, he knew he was in trouble.....*big trouble.*

The airbag had deployed correctly. Mike was amazed he was still alive. The force from the airbag had broken his nose. His laptop had become jammed in the impact and had crushed one of his ribs. It took him a moment to regain his composure. He reached into the glove box and pulled out several napkins he had accumulated from the fast-food restaurants he frequented. He managed to stop the bleeding. He looked at himself in the mirror. Even with a smashed nose and bruised face. He was grateful to still be alive. He managed to get the car door open. He could still walk, although his left knee hurt like a son of a bitch. He held the napkins over his nose and stumbled over to the truck, praying the driver was still alive. He was amazed that his little SUV had done that amount of damage to a giant box truck. He put his hand on the door to try and open it, when he saw Wyatt emerge from the rear of the truck, hobbling on his right leg.

"My God, are you alright?" asked Mike

"Do I look alright?"

"Is anyone else in the truck?" asked Mike with blood all over his face.

"No.....just me," said Wyatt.

"God, I'm sorry. I never saw you."

"How the hell did this happen? I've driven these roads for years. Most of the time I never see another car on the road. What are the odds?" said Wyatt

"Knowing my luck? Probably pretty good. How badly are you hurt?" asked Mike

"My leg is toast. I'm having a hard time seeing, but I'll live. You look pretty bad."

"Just a broken nose. Wouldn't be the first time. I think I cracked one of my ribs. Look, my phone is gone. Do you have one?"

"No, I don't use those things. I don't like anyone to be able to track me," said Wyatt resting uncomfortably on the side of his truck.

"How are we going to get help?"

"I guess we're going to have to walk to the nearest farmhouse or ranch."

"Are you serious? We're in no condition to go anywhere."

"We could stay here. Course it might be hours or even days before anyone comes by. You want to take that chance?"

"Somebody must have heard the crash," said Mike

"Take a look around. There's nobody around here for miles. Some of these farms are thousands of acres. Our only chance is to try and make it to a phone."

"You can't even walk. Why don't I go and you stay here? You're in worse shape than I am. I'll try to climb a tree and look around. Maybe I can see a house or something."

"What if you get lost? It's easy to do around here," said Wyatt.

"I'll just stay on this road until I find something."

"Mister, this road doesn't go anywhere. I think there's a ranch house or something about five miles back that way," said Wyatt pointing to the road he was on.

"Okay, so I'll stay on that road then."

"Look, I'm coming with you. You get lost, we're both dead. We may have to cut through some fields. I know this area, you don't." said Wyatt hobbling over to him.

"I won't get lost, all I have to do is stay on the road."

"Dude, I'm on these roads all the time. It's like a hundred degrees out here. You won't make it a mile before heat stroke set in."

"Well, we got to do something, I don't think just sitting here waiting for someone to come by is a good idea. We don't know how badly we're hurt," said Mike.

"I got a pretty good idea. I can barely stand up."

"So, let me go. If you're that bad let me do the walking."

Wyatt managed to make a walking stick from the debris and a bandage from his shirt. Ten minutes after the crash, they were both walking down the road together, in pain.

Mike was dumbfounded by this guy. Every step he took, Wyatt seemed to wince in pain. He could have a broken leg or ankle. They didn't even know how far it was to the nearest house. It could be miles. No way was this guy going to make it this far.

"I'm sorry, my name is Mike, Mike Stanton," he said and stuck out his hand.

Wyatt shook it and stopped.

"Wyatt Cross, owner and proprietor of Cross Farms," he said and pulled a business card out of his pocket and gave it to Wyatt.

"Wyatt, I do wish we were meeting under better circumstances."

"Yeah, me too. Mike, I've got a bit of a problem here."

"I can see that."

"No, not my leg. I had my license revoked last year for DUI."

"Mike stopped dead in his tracks."

"Wyatt, so help me God, if you were drinking, I'm going to break your other leg."

"No, I'm completely sober. I just don't know what I'm going to tell the cops. I wasn't even supposed to be driving that truck. You see the problem I have here?"

"That's your problem, not mine."

Wyatt stopped and grabbed his shoulder.

"Please Mike. I'm really fucked here. Let me just call one of my workers. We can say they were driving the truck. You have insurance and so do I, everybody comes out of this okay. Think about it."

"I'm not going to lie for you, Wyatt. Any insurance investigator worth a shit would smell a rat here. You could wind up in a bigger mess. The truth hurts, but it hurts a whole lot less than lying."

The two said nothing for the next few minutes. Mike was in pain, but he was able to still walk. He had managed to stop the bleeding and the swelling had subsided somewhat in his nose. His eyes were still watery, but he was able to function. He was worried about Wyatt. He was limping and seemed to be fine, but wondered if he had internal injuries. It was a miracle they were both alive after what had just happened.

"God is it hot out here. I'm used to Cisco weather. This is brutal."

"It's only a hundred. Pretty mild for this time of the year," said Wyatt.

They both stopped in their tracks when they saw a car approaching them a few hundred feet ahead.

"Oh, thank you, Jesus," said Wyatt.

The car slowed down and stopped next to them. It was a 57 Chevy Bel Air. The car looked incredible as if just left the showroom floor. The man driving wore a cowboy hat and was smoking a cigarette. Mike had no idea how anyone could ever smoke, let alone when it was this hot outside.

"Hiya Boss. We've been in a pretty bad wreck. Can you call the police or something? Neither of us has phones." said Wyatt.

"Well, I ain't got one either. Come on, hop in. I got one back at the ranch you can use." he said

"Great," said Mike as he put his hand on the door handle and opened the door. As he did, he looked up and saw that the driver of the car had turned into something else. Something horrible. He looked like a demon or boogeyman. Mike immediately backed away from the car. He looked over at Wyatt, who must have seen the same thing. His face was expressionless. The three of them said nothing. Mike looked over at Wyatt who looked scared shitless.

"Well, come on, get in." said the cowboy.

Mike and Wyatt looked at one another. Neither of them said anything, but they were both thinking more or less the same thing.....*no way Jose am I getting in that car with you. Not now, not ever!*

"Ah, sir. I think we're going to stay by our vehicles at the wreck up the road. Could you just call the police and report the crash for us, please?"

The cowboy seemed upset. He lit up another cigarette and turned over to them. He looked perfectly normal.

"Guys.....you look like shit. Get in the car and I'll take you back to my house. Get you something cold to drink. My wife was a nurse. She can help."

"Well, we appreciate it, but all the same, we really should stay with our vehicles. Please call someone when you get home," said Mike

The cowboy looked a little more than upset. He reached over again, as if he was going to say something, but decided against it. He looked back at them."

"I oughta just leave you two out here to die. Is that what you want? Wyatt, is that what you want? You want me to just leave you out here to let the birds pick at your corpse?"

"How did you know my name?" asked Wyatt.

"You told me, you idiot." said the cowboy

"No, I didn't."

"Wyatt. You've got a concussion so bad, you're pupils are dilated. You're hurt, now get in the car and let me help you."

"Wyatt, why does he want us to get in the car so bad?" asked Mike

Wyatt looked at Mike and started hobbling back to the wreck.

"Please call someone for us. We'll be just up ahead," said Mike and started following Wyatt.

The car sped off down the road, kicking up dust as the engine roared to life. When the dust settled, the car was gone, as if it had never existed.

"Where the hell did he go?" asked Wyatt.

"Wyatt, why did we just refuse a ride from a guy who could have saved our lives?"

"You saw it too. Tell me you saw it. Tell me I'm not hallucinating. I know I'm hurt, but I also know what I saw."

"I don't know what I saw," said Mike

"But we both saw the same thing? How could we both hallucinate about the same thing at the same time? No, it had to be real." he said

"He looked like a monster."

"Wyatt, how many fingers am I holding up?" asked Mike who was holding up two fingers

"Too many....wait....two fingers. Yeah, two fingers."

"You know when that car took off, I never actually saw it go by us. I mean I heard it, I saw the dust from the road, but I never actually saw the car itself. Isn't that weird?"

"This whole goddamn thing is weird. Besides, I can't leave the truck," said Wyatt.

"Why not?"

"Cause I got enough weed on that truck to put me away for a long time."

Mike just shook his head in disbelief.

"Any more surprises I should know about?"

"No, that's just about everything."

"Isn't weed legal in the state now?" asked Mike

"Yeah, but I got a lot of weed Mike. I've been growing and selling for a long time. I've never been busted. I don't intend to break my streak."

"But they decriminalized it?"

"Yeah, for small amounts. That doesn't mean it won't stop some asshole cop from arresting me for it and ruining my life. You got to have a permit to grow over ten plants and I don't have one. Besides, I was smoking it when you hit me. That's probably the only reason I'm walking right now."

Wyatt missed a step and collapsed onto the ground. Mike raced over to help him. Wyatt turned and coughed. He spit up blood into his hands. He stopped when he saw the blood.

"Look Wyatt, I'm no doctor, but you're hurt bad. When we get to the wreck. You stay with the truck. I'm going for help."

Wyatt nodded and hobbled along back to his truck. He sat down on the ground and lit up a joint from his pocket. He offered one to Mike who declined.

"Mike. I may be high, but I'm going to ask you something," said Wyatt in between puffs.

"Ok, what is it?"

"Mike, what if we didn't actually survive the crash. What if we're both dead and we don't know it?"

"I doubt we would be this hot and miserable if we were both dead."

"Maybe we're just caught in some kind of weird in-between world, like *Twilight Zone*."

"Wyatt, we're just in a bad spot here ok. We'll be fine as long as we don't panic. You might want to lay off that stuff. I'm sure they're going to test us for drugs and alcohol once we get to the hospital."

"Mike, I don't think we're ever going to see the inside of a hospital. No, we're in some kind of in-between world I think. Not alive, but not dead."

Mike realized he was dealing with a whacko in Wyatt. If they were going to survive this thing, it would rest on his shoulders alone. Wyatt was too strung out to be much use.

"Wyatt. You stay here. I'm going to go for help." said Mike as he walked back over to his car in the hopes of finding his phone. Much to his amazement, he found a bottle of orange juice on the ground next to the car. He picked it up. It was still cold. He walked back over to Wyatt and gave him the bottle.

"I'll be back soon....just hang in there," said Mike.

"I don't want to get in that car, Mike. Please, don't leave me, I don't want him to take me," said Wyatt.

"So, then don't get in the car."

"I don't know man, did you see that guy's face? It wasn't the concussion. You saw it too, I know you did."

"I didn't see anything Wyatt. It was hot and I could barely see through all that smoke."

"Then why didn't you get in?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm not thinking clearly. I've lost quite a bit of blood. Wyatt, I have to leave you. I'm sorry about your situation, I know it sucks, but it's better than being dead. Just stay here and try to keep out of this sun." said Mike.

He continued walking down the road. He never looked back at Wyatt. The sun was beating down on him, frying him as if all of the sun's rays were being focused on him. It was only May, it wasn't supposed to be this hot.

Mike stopped by the side of the road when he saw a spigot sticking out of the ground. He turned on the faucet and was delighted to see a stream of cold water spurt out. He drank for what seemed like an eternity until his stomach started to hurt. As he stood up he nearly buckled over from the pain in his ribs. The pain almost took his breath away. He looked back down the road and couldn't see Wyatt. He felt bad about leaving him, but there really was no other way. He just hoped Wyatt would still be alive when help arrived. He walked down the road, cursing his luck. Wyatt was right, what the hell was the odds of two vehicles colliding on a deserted road like this one? Had to be a million to one. The road wasn't even paved, let alone marked. He wasn't even sure he could direct the paramedics to the crash scene. He would have given his only functioning kidney for a drink. This day was a disaster. Not only would he miss the appointment at the lawyer's office. He was involved in a head-on collision. He also began to wonder if Mr. Wyatt was telling him the whole story. Just didn't add up. Maybe he just wasn't thinking clearly, or maybe he was.

The car flew by him and nearly clipped him. It was the same 57 Chevy they had seen earlier. Mike watched the car as it drove by. He could see Wyatt sitting in the back seat with a look of terror on his face. The cowboy drove by him and didn't even slow down, let alone stop. Mike couldn't believe it. What the hell were they doing? Why was Wyatt looking like he had just seen the devil? Maybe the cowboy was taking him straight to the hospital. Mike watched the Chevy disappear down the dirt road. He saw power lines at the intersection with another dirt road and decided to follow them. He kept walking and walking. He looked at his watch and noticed that it had stopped working. Buy a knock-off Rolex, you get knock-off reliability. His watch had stopped the moment he hit Wyatt. Just his luck. He couldn't even pick a decent watch.

Couldn't pick a decent wife either.

He walked and walked, then noticed he passed by the same hay bales. Somehow he was going in a circle. Mike looked around. He could see nothing but fields and corn. How on Earth did he go in a circle? He walked past a grove of almond trees and date trees. Where the hell did the cowboy and Wyatt go? He kept walking and found himself back at the same intersection he had crossed a few hours ago. He recognized the stop signs and this time took another road. He wasn't more than a mile down the road and he could see the road abruptly come to an end at a pile of Salt Cedar trees. He stopped walking and turned around. He hadn't gone more than a hundred feet when he saw the 57 Chevy suddenly appear from out of nowhere. The car slowed down and came to a stop in front of him. Mike could see the cowboy sitting in the driver's seat with a toothpick in his mouth. Mike walked over to him. The man turned and looked at Mike.

"Offer's still good if you're interested." said the cowboy.

"Where's Wyatt?" asked Mike

"You mean that other fella? I took him back to the house. My wife looked over at him. He was hanging on by a thread. His femoral artery was bleeding. Wife called an ambulance for him. Took him to Chico."

"Huh? I didn't see any lights or hear any sirens."

"They had lights, but no sirens."

"So you told them what, exactly? Not to worry about me?" asked Mike, more than a little upset.

"Your buddy was in bad shape. You got a few bruises, but you'll live. Hell, you must have walked five miles. You can't be hurt that bad." said the cowboy

"Yes, well I'd like a doctor to make that call, not you."

"Well, hop in.....I'm not going to offer again," he said

"You didn't bother to tell the police or paramedics about me? How did you know there wasn't anyone else in the vehicles?"

"Wyatt told me it was just you and him. Now are you getting in or ain't ya?" said the cowboy.

Mike began to get more than just a little worried. He was more than just worried, he was scared. He hadn't been this scared since he was a kid and watched a scary movie when he was home alone. Something about this guy just wasn't right. He wasn't a cowboy, it was as if he was something else, just wearing a human cowboy costume. He put his hand on the doorknob. He watched the cowboy's face light up like a Christmas tree. It was as if his entire life depended upon Mike getting into his car. In an instant, Mike had this thought race across his mind. It didn't just quietly appear as most thoughts do no, this one was more like a lightning bolt.

What if Wyatt was right?what the hell do I do then?

"Look, I'm sorry, this just doesn't add up. I just can't understand why you wouldn't have called the police. There should be cops everywhere trying to find me. I didn't see or hear a single one. I don't know what you did with

Wyatt, but I don't think he was taken away by an ambulance." said Mike

"You calling me a liar?" asked the cowboy without looking at him.

"I guess I am." said Mike.

"You really want to stay here in this heat? You could be slowly dying of internal bleeding and not even know it. Everything's fine one minute, then the next minute, you're dead. You ready to die, boy? Huh? Ready to go meet Jesus or Allah or Buddha or whoever it is you pray to."

"Is anyone ever ready?"

"No, I guess not. It's all over so quickly. One minute you come out of your momma's pussy, the next minute you're on death's doorstep. It's the blink of an eye. Kinda makes you wonder why everyone clings to it and fights for it. All they have to do is just get in the car.....so to speak and it's over. No more pain, no more suffering, no more alimony payments or unplanned pregnancies. Nope, just pure, sweet bliss.....forever."

"You make it all sound so easy. Like it's not worth fighting for. But it's my life and you bet your ass I'm going to fight for it."

The cowboy just chuckled and lit up a cigarette.

"Well, don't say I didn't offer." said the cowboy.

"Yeah, thanks but no thanks," said Mike

"Too bad, I would really like to have given you a ride. Maybe some other time then. I'll see you someday, Mike." said the cowboy as he took a drag off his cigarette. The car sped off down the road and disappeared into the fruit and nut trees.

Mike was still standing there, trying to process what had just happened. He was shaking. He couldn't remember the last time he had been this scared. Maybe the man really did want to give him a ride. Maybe he was some old-timer who didn't connect with people, just animals. Either way, he hoped he never saw that car or that cowboy again. He walked over to some almond and date trees, sitting down in the shade. He closed his eyes and thought of the time he and his brother got lost in an orchard near San Diego playing hide and seek. They spent the night in the orchard. It was as terrifying as it was exciting. That was until their parents and the police started searching for them. Mom and Dad were not laughing when they came home. Before he drifted off into bliss he thought about calling his brother when he got home. He needed to talk to his big brother. He always made everything better.

He remembered why he chose to live only a few miles from the ocean. California can be brutally hot in the summer months.

Hot enough to peel the paint off a car like a cowboy has.

He knew he was screwed, but somehow, he also felt a little relieved, as if he had passed some kind of a test without knowing it. That cowboy was weird.....just plain, good old-fashioned, *weird*.

Mike woke up in the hospital. He had tubes stuck in him and machines monitoring his vitals. He wasn't conscious for more than a few seconds when the pain hit him like an electric shock. He recognized his brother and his wife.

"Where am I?" he whispered

"Oh, Jesus he's awake," she said and rushed over to him.

"Hey, buddy.....stay with us." said his brother.

Mike could see his leg raised over the bed. His right arm was in a cast. His whole body was on fire.

"Jesus, this hurts. What the hell happened to me?" he asked

"Mikey...you were in an accident out on a farm.....Jesus Christ Mikey, I thought I lost you," he said with tears in his eyes. He grabbed Mike's hand and squeezed it.

"How long have I been out?"

"Eight days Mike. The accident happened eight days ago."

"I've been in here all this time. What happened to Wyatt?" he asked

"Who the hell is Wyatt?" asked his brother

"The other guy. I hit his farm truck. He was hurt pretty bad."

"How did you know his name?"

"Well, we got out of the wreck and walked for a bit. He grew peppers sold weed. Kind of an idiot. How's he doing?"

His brother and his wife looked at one another totally confused.

"Mikey, he was pronounced dead at the scene. There's no way you could have talked to him.

"Of course I talked to him. Wyatt Cross, owner and proprietor of Cross Farms."

His brother and his sister-in-law seemed totally lost. They decided to ignore it for right now. They were just grateful he was still alive.

"Where did you find me. I walked for hours and never saw anyone."

"Mikey, you didn't walk anywhere. The farmer who found you was a retired paramedic. He probably saved your life. He managed to stop the bleeding and keep you alive until help arrived. You never left the scene of the accident."

"What? That damn car and that cowboy.....where are they?"

"What cowboy?"

"They guy who wanted me to get in his car. He wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Mike, we thought we lost you. You didn't even get your vitals back until last night. It's a miracle you're even alive." she said

"No. It's no miracle. Wyatt got in the car, I didn't." said Mike before he drifted off into sleep again.

Both his brother and sister seemed confused. How did Mike know the victim, if he died instantly in the crash?.....*and just who the hell was this cowboy he kept talking about?*

The next few months were brutal for Mike Stanton. The physical, as well as the mental pain of what had happened, became greater and greater with each passing day. Four months after the crash, he was able to get through the day by taking half a pound of painkillers and had limited mobility. Eight months after the crash he returned to work. One year after the crash, he had returned to his pre-crash health, minus some occasional aches and pains. Physically he was fine, but mentally, Mike was not the same man. He had killed Wyatt in the crash. The police found evidence of marijuana in Wyatt's body during the autopsy, not to mention about twenty pounds of weed at the crash site, so that pretty much rules out any charges against Mike, civil or criminal. It was a freak accident that simply should not have happened, but it did. He wanted to attend Wyatt's funeral, but most of his family members and his own attorney told him that would be a bad idea.

"Juries won't see it as you just being a nice guy, they'll see it as you feeling guilty about what happened." his attorney said

Mike didn't like it, but he had learned the hard way not to ignore his lawyer's advice. The authorities probably wouldn't charge him, but you never know. The statute of limitation was five years. Mike tried to put it behind him and move on with his life, one day at a time.

The mystery of just how Mike was able to recall Wyatt's name was solved, at least partially when his brother pointed out that Wyatt's name was stenciled on the door of the truck Mike had hit. It was very clear to read. The name of Cross Farms was stenciled underneath.

"You must have seen it, just for a second before your car hit the truck."

"I don't know, it all just seemed so real," said Mike

"That guy was dead a minute after the crash, no way you two could have spoken to each other." his brother said

"Yeah, you must be right. Was one hell of a dream," said Mike

Mike knew Wyatt had pot in his truck and what kind of injuries he had, which could not be so easily explained. Some days he would just sit on his back porch, watching the rain come down and wonder if he had just imagined all of this.....or if he hadn't. Where would he be right now if he had gotten in that car with the cowboy? Would his brother and sister be standing over his gravesite right now? Did he really step into the Twilight Zone? Hard to say. It certainly seemed real.

Mike shelved it away on the backburner in the months that followed. He had a small mountain of bills to pay and no job to pay them with. He would need a miracle at this point to avoid bankruptcy. Mike took his brother's advice and tried to move on with his life and not dwell on the past, but look forward to the future.

Cause the past doesn't matter. All that matters is the future. The future can be anything you want it to be.

16 months after the crash, Mike received a box in the mail from the hospital where he had spent so much time. He opened the package and was surprised to discover that the hospital was returning his personal belongings he had on him when he came into the hospital. He was amazed to find his old wallet as well as his smashed cell phone and the shoes he was wearing at the time of the crash. Mike instinctively wanted to just throw it all away, it brought back too many memories. He had replaced all of the cards in his old wallet but decided to check the pockets just to make sure. In the right pocket, he felt a small card. He took it out and was horrified at what he read. He tried to scream, but no sound came out. It was Wyatt's business card he had given him the day of the crash.

Cross Farms

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Mike could barely breathe. He hadn't just imagined the whole thing.....*he had lived to tell about it. Some day the cowboy would be back for him and he wouldn't have any choice. He was getting in that car one way or another.*

Death wore cowboy boots.