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Prologue

Gracie's night overflowed with promise. Uncharacteristic Georgia snow glistened in the front yard, and a cozy fire warmed her living room. She hummed "Silent Night," even though the memory of Christmas grew to the week-old mark. Cider sloshed in her hands as she dodged two-year-old Joshua to find her corner of the couch.

"Mommy, me like da fire truck." Joshua circled the coffee table, making siren noises, as Jake, their golden retriever, beat a quick retreat to his new bed in the corner.

"Come here, little man." Mark flopped down on the floor and tickled the toy away from Joshua.

Gracie smiled at the scene near her feet and caught Mark looking her over. He winked. They'd soon enjoy a private celebration of their seventh anniversary, complete with chocolate, a bubble bath, and massages—after the kiddos were tucked in bed at their grandparents' house a short drive away.

Christmas tree lights twinkled, and candles filled the air with the aromas of vanilla and peppermint. Gracie listened for the oven's beep, indicating her famous chocolate pound cake was finished, but heard nothing except Jake's tail thumping against his pallet.

Elizabeth snuggled up with a book and her pink blanket in the rocking chair across the room. Gracie smiled. "You going to join us, sweetie?"

Her blond curls bounced as she hurried past her daddy's extended hand. Elizabeth preferred books to tickles any day. "I readin' the book you gaved me." She hopped into Gracie's lap. "See the princess? I wanna be like her when I growed up."

“You already are a princess.” Mark rose to his knees and pretended to bow. Elizabeth rewarded him with little giggles before she disappeared into the book again.

Gracie set her empty mug down and poked at Mark’s long, muscular legs with her toes. Tonight couldn’t come soon enough.

“Penny for your thoughts, beautiful.” He slipped up on the couch and drew her close.

“It’ll cost you more than that.”

“How ’bout a kiss or two?”

Mark’s kisses would buy him anything he wanted. It was a wonder they didn’t have more than two children. “I’ll tell you, and then we’ve got to run. Kisses come later.” Heat filled her cheeks at the memory of their almost seven years. Guess God knew two little ones were about all she could manage and retain some semblance of sanity. “I don’t want to keep my parents waiting, but we can hurry home after.”

“No kisses first?” Mark stuck out his bottom lip. His blond, blue-eyed, six-foot frame shrank into the back of the couch with arms folded over his chest. He looked adorable with a pout.

“Don’t start, mister. I’ll collect my payment later.”

His little-boy expression slid into a lazy grin. He planted a kiss on her forehead. “We’d better hustle then.”

“You gonna bing da chock-it, Mommy?” Joshua zoomed his fire truck across the table again.

The cake.

She hightailed it into the kitchen. The oven remained cold and dark. No aroma of baking cake. “I don’t believe it. I forgot to turn on the oven.”

“No chocolate?” Elizabeth hugged her leg. “It’ll be okay.”

“Elizabeth’s right.” Mark picked up their pint-sized princess and tickled her tummy. “We’ll survive this one New Year’s Eve without the cake.”

“Hode me too, Daddy.” Joshua’s lobster claw hands snapping open and shut, begging to be picked up, made Gracie smile.

She checked the creamy brown batter and turned on the oven. “I really don’t want to waste all this good chocolate. Besides, it’s tradition. So why don’t you all head out, and I’ll bring the cake in time for dessert.” She rubbed Jake’s neck as he nudged closer to what he must have hoped would be dinner.

“I’d rather go without the cake than have you miss dinner.”

Elizabeth and Joshua nodded.

“I’ll just straighten up around here a little and come over as soon as the oven beeps.” Gracie tickled Elizabeth’s side. “It won’t be too long.”

Mark hoisted their two kiddos higher on his hips. “Can we survive without Mommy for a few short minutes, my little man and little princess?”

They giggled.

“I’ll make sure everything is ready for when we get home.” Gracie wiggled her eyebrows.

That made Mark haul the kids out of the kitchen and toward the front door. He wrapped two squirming, laughing children into coats and hats as Jake danced around them, barking.

She adjusted the greenery on the banister. “I’ll see you soon.”

Mark hustled Elizabeth and Joshua through the kitchen again and out the door to the garage. He turned back toward her. “I’m thinking about a long night in front of the fire.”

She walked into his arms and adjusted his scarf. “You are the most wonderful husband in all the world, Mark Lang. I love you—to infinity and beyond.”

“Buzz Lightyear you are not, and I’m glad.” He wrapped his strong hands around hers and drew her close. When he placed a kiss on each one, she couldn’t stop the shiver that trailed up her spine.

Gracie stepped back. “But you’d better go before I decide not to let you out of my sight.”

“Come with us then. Turn off the oven and forget the cake.”

“Daddy, help peese!” Joshua’s voice came through the open door.

Gracie tilted her head to the side and put her hands on her hips.

Mark held up his palms in surrender. “I know. I know. I’m going and I’ll be careful. Don’t be too long, okay? I love you.”

She tipped her chin up and closed her eyes. His lips met hers and deepened the kiss while his arms lifted her off the ground.

With a playful nudge, she pulled back. “Soon.”

He set her down, slow and steady. His lingering smile sent a silent promise that warmed her from the inside out.

She couldn’t help but giggle when he turned up his jacket collar and winked.

She tossed him the keys and then flipped on the outside light as he buckled two little ones into their old blue minivan and closed the door. “Nice view,” she whispered.

Mark backed out of their driveway and into the white-dusted road.

One last wave and he was gone.



Gracie put books and all manner of toys back under the tree. They’d clean up later. Tonight was for fun. And romance. Then she noticed a little pink teddy bear blanket flopping over the edge of Elizabeth’s tiny rocking chair. Elizabeth wouldn’t sleep without it.

The grandfather clock in the foyer showed that only three minutes had passed.

“If I know my girl, she’s probably asking for it now.” Gracie smiled. If she hurried, she’d catch up to Mark’s careful un-

Atlanta-like driving. Cake or not, she'd rather be with her family.

Then it hit her. She could have her cake and her family too. She turned off the oven, loaded the still-cold cake into a carrier, and left Jake settled down for a long winter's nap. She hustled into Mark's restored Mustang—pink bear blanket and yummy chocolate in tow.

Within ten minutes, she spotted their van not too far off Highway 316. A few more turns and she'd have to slow down. The country landscape in the dark with snow falling wasn't a good place to make up time.

Suddenly a fast-moving black truck flashed its brights.

Then everything blurred. Screeching tires. Crunching metal. The truck plowed into the front of their minivan and sent it spinning off the road.

A scream filled the Mustang.

She slammed the brakes and swerved as the black monster barreled toward her. Look! Her mind willed her head to turn away from where the van had disappeared. She caught sight of a young man's wild eyes as the truck sped past.

She pulled over to the shoulder and kicked open the door. As she ran to the edge of the road, her pulse hammered against her temples. The van's engine made the solitary noise at the bottom of a long, steep hill.

"Mark! My babies!"

Police. Ambulance. Phone.

She ran back to the car and fumbled through her purse.

Phone shaking in her frozen hands, she called for help.

"Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?"

"Car accident. My family is trapped at the bottom of a hill. Off Highway 316. Past Harbins Road. I need to go help them."

"Ma'am, if you could stay on the line—"

She dropped the phone and ran back to the tire-streaked pavement where the van had disappeared. "Oh, Lord, please let them get here fast."

Still no noise. She fell to the ground and started to slide down into the ravine. Cold seeped into her coat as she pushed heavy branches out of her path, slowing the descent.

Minutes later, sirens split her desperate prayers. The once-quiet scene filled with red and blue lights, voices yelling. Police cars and fire trucks. Men in uniform pulling her back up to the road. Back to Mark's car. Away from her family. "Ma'am."

Gracie spun around at the slight touch to her elbow.

"Did you see the accident?" An older police officer stood with his notepad and pen motioning toward the hill where firefighters swarmed.

"Yes, they're my..."

"Can you describe in as much detail as possible what you saw?"

Gracie blinked and turned back to the hill. "My husband and two kids are down there. Are they going to be okay? Please tell me they're going to be okay."

"That's your family?" The officer's pen froze. He surveyed the scene and shrugged his black coat closer to his neck.

"They're doing all they can, ma'am. We'll hear something soon."

"I was following them. A black truck hit our van and sent it down the hill." Bright white lights and screeching metal filled her mind. Air burned her lungs. Short gulps didn't satisfy, and forcing more words out felt impossible. Within seconds a female officer placed a scratchy blanket around her shoulders.

"Did you see the driver?"

"He was young, had a chubby face. A college student, maybe? I...I'm not sure."

Firefighters started hauling stretchers up the hill. Two of them. The female officer stepped into her view.

Beyond the officer, a heavyside medic clambered up the hill toward a group of uniformed men. "They're gonna be DOA, man. No need to break your neck getting down there."

Her knees buckled. "Oh no. Please. No."

The older officer took her arm and steadied her. “Ma’am, is there anyone we can call to be with you? To bring you to the hospital?”

Tears stung her eyes. She searched the ground for her phone until the female officer placed it in her hand. “My parents...were expecting us.” She covered her mouth and tried to get a breath. “Thompson. My daddy.” She handed the phone back. “In the contacts.”

The last stretcher came up the hill, and Gracie thought she saw a bloody foot move. She fought against the female officer who held her near Mark’s Mustang while the firefighters loaded the stretcher into a second ambulance.

“It’s best that you stay here, ma’am.”

“My husband and babies...”

Minutes passed in a haze as other police officers arrived and left. Then her parents pulled into the chaos. Her father took her in his arms and nodded to the remaining officers.

“Daddy, you have to hurry. I saw Elizabeth move. I need to get to them.”

All the way to Gwinnett Medical, no one spoke a word.

They’re okay. They have to be okay. Over and over the words raced through Gracie’s head. Another part of her mind heard DOA.

She jumped from the car as soon as her dad pulled up to the ER doors. She rushed straight to the reception desk. “Please, my family. They were brought here. A car accident. I have to see them. My name is Gracie Lang.”

The woman forced a smile. “Just a moment.”

Police officers milled around just beyond the desk. One of them stepped away from the others. The older officer from the side of the road. “Mrs. Lang?”

“Yes.”

Her mother’s arms tightened around her waist.

The officer motioned for her to follow him as he walked through the ER doors. “They’re in trauma room one.”

“Is my family okay? Please tell me they are...”

He stopped just outside the door. His stiff posture softened, and he shifted from one foot to the other. "I'm really sorry, ma'am. The EMTs did everything they could."

"No! This has to be a mistake. I saw my daughter move. They have to be alive." She pushed her mother's arms away. "I need to see them."

The officer stepped away from the door.

"Gracie, I'll go." Her dad's strong hands held her rooted in place. "You stay here with your mother."

"No. I have to see for myself." She forced her legs to walk through the cold metal door. All around, the ER buzzed with voices, clanging metal, and electronic rhythms. An acrid smell assaulted her senses, and she focused on the center of the room.

Three white sheets.

I can't do this.

Every thought of how to survive this moment froze like the December ice outside. Useless muscles refused to move. Warring emotions unraveled the last thread of peace holding her heart together.

Nothing remained.

Gracie fixed her eyes on the lifeless covered bodies.

A mistake. This was all a mistake. A different van. Not her family.

The nurse stood next to a large form covered in sterile white. She waited patiently, eyes filled with compassion.

A traitor to her inner scream to flee, she moved forward. The nurse began folding the sheet down. Gracie closed her eyes.

Maybe it won't be Mark. This is all a mix-up.

She drew in a few shallow breaths and opened her eyes. The blond hair and defined jawline belonged to her husband. No mistake.

An icy hand wrapped around her heart and it exploded.

Oh, Father, why can't this be a mistake?

She reached out quivering fingers and then recoiled at the chill of Mark's cheek. Beneath the bruises and lacerations was

the face she had kissed good morning for the past seven years.

The nurse stepped away, but Gracie knew she waited with the police officer, just beyond her view. If she could get through the officer's questions. Beyond her parents' heart-wrenching sobs. Past her front door at home. She would turn the lock and...

Gracie looked at the ceiling. "Please, God. Please let this be a dream."

When she looked back down, nothing had changed.

The nurse had removed the sheet to reveal Mark's face, but Gracie needed to see his hands. She moved the white cotton material away from his side. The sheet felt as cold as his rigid limbs. She'd give anything for one more touch of his gentle hands as they caressed her. Held her together. Lent her courage.

Gracie forced her fingers to move. Her knees quivered as if she'd run a marathon, and she could barely see for the flood of tears that splattered as drops of gray all over the bloodied sheet. She turned away to keep from falling, only to face a sight no mother could bear.

My babies.

Leaden hands muffled the scream that fought its way through her lips. Gracie shut her eyes against the two small covered forms in front of her.

Her burning eyes held no more tears. She didn't want to move. Didn't want to breathe. Didn't want to remember anything from this day. The only life she wanted existed before this room.

The joy of Mark's proposal.

The first time she saw Elizabeth and Joshua, red and squalling.

The sweet scent of her newborn babies, or the brush of a kiss on her cheek.

A young nurse pressed two items into Gracie's hands. The pungent odor of blood and hospital antiseptic stung her eyes

and nose. The woman whispered something about them being ready to take home.

Home. Gracie stared at the things in her arms. Joshua's fire truck and Goodnight Moon, Elizabeth's favorite book, felt like shadows in her arms. They were all she had left.

Gracie turned for one final look before she stepped out to the bustling world whirling without her.

Three white sheets.