



# Can't Miss Christmas

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Here comes a charming standalone Christmas novella by Amazon bestselling author Miranda Liasson. Fans of both Mirror Lake series will recognize familiar elements and people along the way.

It's two days before Christmas and bestselling children's author Grace Alberts needs to fulfill a promise—to make it to a book signing for the kids at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, the place that did so much for her during a very rough time. But the weather's getting awful and all flights are cancelled out of Boston, where she's wrapping up her book tour. Then in walks her annoying but extremely sexy ex-husband, who (as usual) thinks he's got all the answers. Graham Walker just stopped by to get a book signed for Grace's biggest fan, his niece, and wish Grace a Merry Christmas—why not? But he soon finds himself troubleshooting her dilemma. He's got a Range Rover that can plow through a hundred-year Nor'easter. He's even headed home to Philly. Trouble is, Grace's and his past is a disaster, something he has no intention of reliving while driving through a winter storm, no matter how much he once loved her. And maybe still does. Bad weather has a way of bringing out the best and the worst in people, and when a run in with some deer antlers leads them to a forced stop in Mirror Lake, Connecticut, anything can happen, naughty or nice. Maybe a bit of enforced alone time and some Christmas magic can be just what it takes for them to face their past—and each other—once and for all.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

## CHAPTER 1

### Two Days Before Christmas

The sensible voice inside Graham Walker's head told him to keep walking past the big Barnes and Noble at the Prudential Center in downtown Boston, where Grace Alberts was, at this very moment, signing her latest book. Adaline's Christmas was about the madcap adventures of a spunky little orphan who was adopted by loving parents. Every little girl in America read Adaline. Hell, even he'd read the damn books, not because he used to be married to their author, but because his seven-year-old niece, Emmy, begged him to read them with her. The child had never lost her soft spot for Grace, even though they'd been divorced for two years.

Maybe he hadn't lost that soft spot either, but he pushed that thought down, even as he turned his collar up against the pelting snow. The weather was getting nasty. It was already pushing six p.m., and he had a five-hour drive ahead of him to get home to his folks' house in Philly for the holidays.

So should he do it? Go in there, for Emmy of course, and have Grace sign a book? Wish her Merry Christmas for old times' sake. Look the woman in the eye who stirred up more turbulent feelings than the last presidential election...but whom he'd once loved more than anyone.

Graham slowed his steps, passing shop windows rimmed with glowing lights, and shoppers walking with their heads down, clutching their bags against the driving wind. At the familiar clang of a Salvation Army Santa's bell, he stopped to toss a buck into the familiar red kettle. A roped-off lot sold Christmas trees that were

quickly getting heaped on with snow. At this late date, there were just a few misfit-looking ones left.

That made him think of Grace and their first tree, a scrawny little thing they'd decorated with a single strand of lights and some cheap drugstore ornaments. What he really remembered was what they did afterward. After they'd plugged it in and dimmed the room lights, they'd tossed a couple of blankets on the floor and welcomed in Christmas wrapped in them and each other. Best Christmas ever.

That memory punched him straight in the gut, giving him a queasy sensation that should've warned him off and brought him to his senses. Yet for some reason, it made him stop dead on the street.

Fat, wet flakes covered his eyelashes, his hair, his coat, bathing him in white. Maybe he needed to look Grace in the eye and let her know he was all right. And see for himself that she was too. You could eventually come to be friends with someone who'd ripped your heart out, right?

His feet made the final decision for him, even though his stomach was rumbling and he really needed to get going on the long drive ahead. He retraced his path, finally stepping out of the frigid cold into the crowded Huntington Arcade, riding the escalator, and finally entering the golden-lit bookstore. It was full of Christmas lights and children—droves of them, despite the ominous weather—standing in a twisty-turny line that wound clear around the inside like a toy train on a track. The manager was creating yet another bend in it so people wouldn't be forced to wait outside in the cold.

Graham let himself be herded into the crowd. He shook the snow off his coat and ran his fingers through his hair, not because he was trying to make it look better but because of nerves. He strained to see to the front of the line.

A little girl in front of him dressed in a red hat with elf ears jumped up and down, tugging on her mother's sleeve. Behind him, a fussy toddler wailed. Outside was freezing, but the store was stuffy and hot. He undid the buttons on his coat.

“Could I have your attention, please?” came a familiar voice from the middle of the store. The line silenced, as if the kids suddenly sensed the importance of the person talking. A head popped up—blonde, wavy, stylish—and suddenly, there Grace was, standing on a desk in a gray sweater and jeans, a scarf wound casually around her neck.

His breath caught; his feet planted. His heart did an uncomfortable roll. He was gobsmacked, mesmerized by her unfussy beauty, by the simple joy that had overtaken her face. By her lovely smile. How could he possibly have the same reaction as when he'd first met her at eighteen?

The whole place hushed, and the eyes of the children surrounding him grew round with awe, as if meeting her was on the same caliber as a visit with Santa.

This had been a bad idea. He wasn't ready. Maybe he'd never be ready, and he'd always feel this uncomfortable slurry of regret, loss, and yearning that even now threatened to overwhelm him.

From her high perch, Grace was using her arms, asking for quiet, gesturing emphatically as she always did when she was excited. She looked thin. Too thin.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said, “but the store manager's just informed me that you're expecting eight to ten inches of snow tonight, and the roads are getting bad.” A collective murmur went up from the crowd.

“Please don't quit signing,” a little girl said mournfully.

“No, sweetie,” Grace said, beaming her smile the child’s way. “I’m not going to stop. But for all of you who have long, treacherous trips, we’re going to come around with a piece of paper. You can write down who you want me to sign the book to, and it’ll be waiting for you in a couple of days when you come back. That way, you can all get home safely. How’s that sound?”

“We aren’t leaving,” said a mom.

“Yeah, really,” another parent said. “As long as you can stay, we can stay.”

Grace exchanged glances with a woman he assumed was the store manager, who shrugged. “All right, then,” Grace said. “But please don’t compromise your safety for a book, okay?”

She sat back down, conversing and laughing, hugging children as she carefully signed each book. She’d always loved kids. It had been the heartbreak of their marriage that they’d lost their own child.

Watching from afar, Graham felt as if there had been no tragedy, no rivers of tears. As she laughed and smiled and handed over her books, he was reminded of when he first saw her working in the children’s section of the local library near their college. He used to hang out there when he was homesick, a place off campus where he could see families and be reminded of the real world outside the university. Finally, he’d made up some excuse to talk to her. It had taken him about a minute to fall in love with her.

Never would he have predicted what had happened between them. Never would he have imagined they would not weather the devastation of a very ill premature baby, the strains of his fledgling sports apparel business, and then her sudden, exploding fame. Yet somehow they’d let each other slip away.

If he closed his eyes for a second and forgot all the other stuff, it still felt like she was his.

No. He'd moved on. So what was he doing here, mini-stalking her? He could buy Emma an unsigned copy, and she'd never know Grace had been signing books.

With that sensible thought, Graham left the line and headed toward the exit, exhaling a breath of relief. He'd almost made it past the information desk when he heard his name.

A mumbled curse left his lips before he stopped and turned, but he already knew who it was. "Monica," he said to a polished woman in a suit and heels who stood directly in front of him, hands on hips. He would've added a how nice to see you but he didn't mean it and couldn't bring himself to lie.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Monica the publicist. The one who’d booked Grace night and day for a year solid after she’d published her first book. The woman was a publicity machine, and she’d helped turn their home life into a circus.

“I...was in line to get a book. For my niece. But...I’ve got a long drive ahead of me.” There, that was the truth. He left out the part about panicking.

“Oh. Well. I can get you to the front of the line. Come on.”

There was no time to protest. She’d grabbed his arm and began hauling him over to Grace, whether he liked it or not.

Grace was talking to the store manager. Phrases drifted up like Airport closed. Ten inches on the way. Monica left him to fend for himself as she walked over to join the discussion.

“Did you hear this?” Grace asked Monica. “The weather’s becoming a serious issue.”

Monica did something on her phone. “Your flight’s canceled.”

“My flight can’t be canceled.”

“Your flight, and those of a million other people. You can’t fly to Philly tomorrow.”

“I have to,” Grace said. “I promised I’d be there for the book signing.”

Graham leaned against a wooden pillar in the middle of the store. Of course she'd promised. Every year, she took part in a Christmas Eve book signing for the kids who were stuck on the inpatient wards of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia over the holiday. She loved that hospital, the place where Joshua, their son, was born at just twenty-six weeks. He'd gotten the best care, but the odds had been stacked against him from the start.

Graham tried to shake off the memories that had flooded, unwanted, into his brain and his heart. Now was a very bad time to say hello. It was unfortunate that Monica had seen him, but, well, no harm done. Slipping away would be cowardly but still easy. He was sorry Grace wasn't going to make the signing, really he was, but what concern was it of his?

"What about the train, a bus, that kind of thing?" Grace asked.

Monica shook her head. "Everything's delayed for hours."

Grace used to get annoyed at his problem-solver nature. How many times had she told him, "I'm not looking for advice, I just want you to listen to me," but he couldn't help himself. His brain just worked that way. And it was working that way now.

Well, he would just turn that off. Her problems were no longer his business. He'd just stopped by to wish her happy holidays. Plus it would be overstepping to interfere.

Graham pushed off from the pole, eyeballing the doors longingly, but for the second time that day, his feet betrayed him. Instead of heading toward freedom, he walked the few steps up to the desk where Grace sat. She was tapping her pen against her chin, deep in contemplation. His first thought was that she looked even younger than when he'd last seen her. Less stressed, maybe, now that he wasn't around? Looked like divorce had been good for her.



“What about renting a car?” she asked Monica.

He cursed under his breath. She was a white-knuckle driver in snow. She’d grown up in Florida, and he wouldn’t trust her to drive his grandma to the corner grocery store in a blizzard.

“I’m driving to Philly,” he found himself blurting out. “I have a Range Rover. You can ride with me.”

No one was more stunned than himself. Why he’d just said that, he had no idea. His folks were waiting for him in their cozy house off the Main Line, where all his siblings and their families would gather for the holiday. It was his first holiday off in five years while his business partner manned the helm. He was looking forward to a quiet drive, some peace and relaxation. All he’d wanted was to say Merry Christmas, not offer to go on an odyssey of epic proportions across three state lines with his ex-wife.

In all fairness, she probably felt the same way.

“Graham.” Her pretty blue eyes widened. The word came out a little breathlessly, as if she was well and truly shocked.

“Hello, Grace,” he said. “Merry Christmas.”

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Grace Alberts recognized the familiar masculine baritone immediately. It rumbled clear through to her bones. She registered her ex-husband’s tall, commanding physique, his lean muscles, his broad shoulders. He’d always had a startling gaze, with an intensity that made her feel like she was the only person in the room. Make that on the planet. Her breath hitched as that same electrifying feeling coursed through

her now, turning her already frayed nerves to dust.

So he was attractive. He was also ornery, prone to giving advice, and stubborn as a mule. Worse, he'd checked out—mentally, that is—at the time she'd needed him most.

Yes, they'd truly hurt each other back in the day, when they'd been so young and hopeful and innocent. Her gut twisted, wrung out with the pain of it still.

Despite the fact that her heart had just taken off like a racehorse at the starting bell, her palms were sweating, and she felt a bit dizzy, she attributed it all to stress. It had been a long book tour, and she was exhausted. The bookstore was packed, and even the windows were fogging up from everyone breathing.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

Yes, the crowd! She had books to sign, children to meet who were waiting for her despite the treacherous weather. She had no time for pesky but handsome exes.

Philly was her last commitment before taking off for the holiday, and it was an important one. She was the headliner at a book signing and party tomorrow at the Children's Hospital. People were counting on her to show up, and she would do anything not to disappoint a child, much less an ill one. After that, she would fake her way through enjoying the holiday with her half sister and her family until she could get back to her apartment in New York.

"Graham." Dammit, she hadn't meant to sound like that, breathy and surprised and even a little relieved, as if she'd been waiting for him—which she absolutely hadn't been, even though she knew he often did business in Boston, and she'd wondered deep in her mind if maybe he'd show...

But that was ridiculous. She'd gotten over any sense of comfort his presence used to bring. She'd succeeded all on her own these past two years. There were just so many leftover feelings. It would just take time. The holidays are always hard, she reminded herself. She would get through this one just like she had all the others, even though her family, unlike his, left a lot to be desired.

"I'm sure I can rent a car," she told him. "Thanks anyway." She could not drive with him. That would be catastrophic. Not to mention uncomfortable. She'd pass on the ride, thanks very much.

"I'll call for a rental, if that's what you want," Monica said, eyeballing Graham, like nearly every woman on the planet. With thick, wavy hair, strong, handsome features,

and dressed in work clothes and a wool coat that fit him like a glove, he was a gorgeous man. Grace didn't blame Monica for looking. But that didn't stop her from feeling like the most popular girl in school was attempting to take her prom date home.

"Sure, that would be great," Grace said, then flicked her gaze in what she hoped was a casual, friendly manner back to Graham. "Thanks for the offer. It was kind of you."

Kind. He didn't look kind, he looked feral. She perused his thick hair, cut in a businesslike style but which sat just on the edge of unruly, and his thick brows that were, at the moment, so deeply knit they cast an air of danger over his face. The steely set of his jaw was offset by a dimple that only showed when he smiled, which wasn't often, thank God. His deep brown eyes were boring through her, like they had in the old days, filled with so much unspoken emotion, it took her breath away.

Intense dislike, that was what it was. She'd been despondent after they'd lost their son. It had taken a while to figure out she'd been suffering from postpartum depression. But by then, Graham had started working more and more. Grief had torn them apart, and they hadn't been able to find their way back to one another.

"You look—you look well," she said. Oh God. That might've been the stupidest thing she'd ever said.

"You too," he said, never taking his eyes off her.

Truth was, he looked like sin. Like every fantasy she'd ever had. He looked amazing. After all they'd been through, how could she still feel the tug of him so strongly?

"Well, I'll be going, then. Great to see you, Grace." He cast her one last glance she felt clear through to her toes before he turned to go. Everything they'd left unsaid felt as heavy as a winter wool blanket.

“Graham, wait. Let me sign a book—for Emmy.” She loved his little niece and knew she was a big fan because Emmy wrote her letters and told her so. In them, she also expressed her disappointment in their divorce. Grace couldn’t fix that for her, but she could keep her stocked in books as best she could.

He was already walking away and didn’t seem to hear. Disappointment rifled through her. Outside the windows, snow was coming down in furious swirls and driving flurries, as chaotic as her thoughts. She took a big breath, trying to channel calmness.

Monica was back, looking at her phone and frowning. “No rental cars available. Only compact models.”

“Amtrak? Greyhound? Private driver?” Grace asked.

“Excuse me,” a familiar voice said. Grace looked up, startled, to find Graham back at her side. The light touch of his hand on her elbow seared clear through to her skin. “Just come with me,” he said to Grace in his usual firm, confident way, not letting go. “Despite everything that’s happened between us, you can still trust me to keep my word. I’ll get you to Philly on time.”

“Grace, you’re welcome to ride out the storm with my family,” Monica said, darting a contrary glance at Graham. “My folks would love having you. You can travel to Philly right after Christmas, when the weather calms down.”

Grace looked past Monica to Graham, who wore his usual stoic expression. At one time, she’d trusted him with everything—her hopes and dreams, her greatest fears, her deepest sorrows. But all that had been eroded, and they rarely even spoke to each other now except when they had to.

Maybe going with him now could enable them to mend some of the hurt between them. Maybe fate was giving them an opportunity to smooth over some of the sharp

edges of their relationship.

Lest she get too mushy, surely after they spent a few hours together, reality would set in. She'd remember all the reasons they'd divorced, instead of everything getting muddled and blurred by the intense bodily reaction he still stirred in her.

Either way, she could survive anything for five hours, and she'd get to Philly on time. The extra bonus was that he was a confident and experienced driver in bad weather. "It's okay," she said to Monica. "I'll ride with Graham."

Something flashed in his eyes. Maybe he felt a little triumphant, or perhaps just glad of the rare opportunity to torture her for five hours straight. Or maybe he felt the same nagging pull she did, to make amends and to heal old wounds. After all, that was what Christmas was for.

### CHAPTER 2

The traffic started out at a creep but thinned out once Graham drove out of the city, as if all smart people had the good sense to get the hell off the road in anticipation of Storm Armageddon. Unfortunately, Graham couldn't count himself as one of them. In the pitch-dark night, the snow blanketed windshields and cars and the road in a slippery, bluish-white blanket.

The traffic was nothing compared to what was going on inside the car. Conversation was as painful as tooth extraction, overly polite and superficial, skirting around anything meaningful or potentially awkward. Grace's career was meteoric; his business was finally turning a profit, and they were expanding to other states. They hadn't made much progress beyond that.

"Where are you spending the holiday?" he asked. Please don't say with Maxim. Maxwell. Maximillian. Whatever his name was. The guy with the horn-rimmed glasses and the I'm really successful haircut who was currently number three on the New York Times list for his latest cheesy thriller. Not that Graham had looked or anything.

"My sister's," she said. Oh, her horrible half sister, who was a privileged, entitled pain in the ass and hadn't even visited after their baby had died. Graham must've unconsciously made a face, because she said, "What? Blakely and I are closer now. I can't wait to see her."

Which he pretty much knew was a fib, but he let it go. Grace's father had left when she was eight, and her mother had remarried a well-to-do real estate developer and

had Blakely, who couldn't be more different from Grace. Despite losing the family-of-the-year lottery, Grace had turned out pretty well, though sometimes Graham wondered if her tendency to put up a tough front was a reaction to the scars of her past. Neither of her parents seemed to really care enough to actually be parents to her: her mother lived overseas somewhere, and her father cropped up every couple of years, usually when he needed money.

“So, you like living on the Upper East Side?” he asked. When they were married, they'd lived in a simple walk-up in Brooklyn.

“Yes, very much,” she said.

“You living with Maxim?” Oh hell. What was he doing? He'd meant to drop some subtle hints until the answer came out naturally in the conversation. So much for that.

She rolled her eyes. “Maxwell.” She paused. “And no, I don't live with him.”

“Oh, sorry. Maxwell.” He wasn't sorry. And for some reason, he was unreasonably happy she didn't live with him. He, unlike Maxwell, didn't skydive over the Burj Khalifa, swim with sharks in South Africa, or bungee jump off some high-assed building somewhere in China. He liked his life calm, orderly, and in control. Those qualities had enabled him to survive his divorce as well as build his business into what it was today.

Except Grace had disliked his craving for order. Felt he was too emotionally buttoned up, and accused him of seeing things in black-and-white terms.

“How about you?” she asked. “You dating anybody?”

He shrugged. Up until last month, he'd been seeing a nice woman who was punctual, neat, and didn't challenge his every move—basically the opposite of Grace. On



paper, Niki was perfect. She wanted a relationship, and a future with marriage and children, as he did. She was intelligent, fun, and a great cook (unlike Grace, who nearly set herself and him on fire trying to caramelize crème brûlée with a chef's torch for his birthday one year). Niki was also a fanatical exerciser, whereas a workout for Grace was pushing the trash can to the curb on the Thursday nights he worked late. If you'd asked him if there was anything wrong with Niki, he wouldn't've been able to think of a single thing.

Maybe that was the problem. There was no friction, no conflict—no challenge. The silences he and Grace used to have had always been filled somehow with a kind of underlying understanding...but with Niki, they were awkward.

Were “awkward silences” a good enough reason to break off a relationship? She'd taken it well, but sometimes she still called him, hoping they'd get back together.

“Oh no,” Grace said. “That's a long pause. I'm afraid to ask why.”

“I'm not seeing anyone,” he said.

“Oh. Well, I'm not either. I broke it off with Maxwell.”

“Because he only hit number three on the New York Times list?”

She crossed her arms. “That was snarky, Graham.”

He paused. “You're right. I'm sorry. Why did you break up with him?”

“It feels weird discussing this with you.”

He shrugged. Damn weird. “We were best friends for a lot of years. I don't know why it should be.” He just really wanted to know.

“He was in love with who he wanted me to be, not who I was. He kept pushing me to be more adventurous, travel more, eat more exotic food... I’m just not like that.”

“I always liked you just the way you were.” Yeah, yeah, he should shut up already. But it was true. She was perfect just the way she was. Except for being stubborn. And difficult. And too proud to ever ask for help.

She turned to him then. “I hate to admit this, but you’re right. You never tried to change me. You never complained when I was overweight or—”

“You were never overweight. Right now, you look like you could use a couple of cheeseburgers.”

“I’m a vegan. I’ve purged my body of all impurities.”

Including him, he supposed.

## Page 5

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“I’m messing with you.” She grinned widely for the first time, and wow, it hit him like a sucker punch to his gut. “I took up jogging.”

Well, who said people never changed? They drove in silence for a while, and Graham tried in vain to quash the edginess that had his nerves standing on end. And he hadn’t even had any coffee since the morning.

As soon he could, Graham exited the highway and stopped at a convenience mart for gas. It was a relief having something to do. If he didn’t stop reacting to her—his whole body on alert, his pulse pounding, his imagination racing to places it had no business going—well, it was going to be a very long trip.

“White Christmas” blared from a speaker as Graham filled the tank. He turned up the collar on his coat, wishing he had on more comfortable clothes for the long drive.

He wished everything was more comfortable on this crazy drive. When he walked into the store, Grace was buying pretzels and a coffee. He got a coffee too, and paid for her things before she could protest. At the last second, he asked for a couple of lottery tickets, an instant scratch-off game and one of the daily numbers tickets.

“You still buy those?” she asked from her spot in front of him in line.

He used to buy them all the time. He hadn’t, though, since those days when they were broke and poor and winning would mean a ticket to a new life.

But today was...different. He’d bought it on impulse, maybe as a talisman for luck. To survive the drive intact. Or more than that. Something deep down inside made him

buy it because it reminded him of the old days.

When they were broke. When all they had was a mattress on the floor and an old steel shelf from his dad's garage where they kept their underwear and socks. When dreaming of winning the lottery brought visions of a less dumpy apartment, furniture, a car.

Those had been the happiest times of his life. They'd been so in love. They'd had everything and never even knew it. But of course he couldn't say any of that.

"You sure you're not hungry?" he asked. "It's a five-hour drive in good weather."

She looked hungry. He knew her well enough he could tell. She was a little pale, a trace of dark circles under her eyes. Or maybe she was like him, too nervous and keyed up to think about food. "We can stop and get something after we're on the road for a while. Does that sound good?" he asked.

"I thought you hated to make stops," she said, her mouth pulling up in a smile. "When we were married, I used to have to barter for pee breaks."

"Maybe I've learned to be a little less..."

"Anal?"

"Ha ha. In all fairness, I recall several road trips where we made plenty of stops at rest areas but never got out of the car."

That made her blush.

"We were young," she said, clearing her throat. Their eyes met, and he could swear he saw a piece of the same heartbreak that was currently wreaking havoc with his

entire body.

“We’re still young,” he said, his frustration coming through a little. It was just that they were acting like a pair of eighty-year-olds reminiscing over times that were gone forever.

They could still create good times.

Oh hell. There he went again. It had taken him so long to get over her. Longer yet to even look at another woman. And here he was, two years later, after just thirty minutes in her presence, fantasizing about everything he’d worked so hard to leave behind. Old habits died hard.

When the clerk handed him the lottery tickets, he pocketed the daily number one for later and handed the scratch-off one to Grace. Another old habit.

She looked at him and then the ticket and frowned. “You want me to scratch off the numbers?”

He nodded.

“You’re crazy,” she said.

“For old times’ sake,” he said. “Well, why not? We may as well start this journey off on the right foot.”

She rolled her eyes, but for a heartbeat, something flickered in them. He wasn’t sure, but maybe she’d been touched a little by the corny gesture.

“Oh, all right,” she said, using her nail to scratch off the numbers.

“We didn’t win,” he said, looking over her shoulder. Of course they hadn’t. They’d both lost, badly, a long time ago. Except that had nothing to do with a lottery ticket.

“Where you folks headed?” the cashier, an elderly man who appeared to be in his seventies, asked.

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“To Philadelphia,” Graham answered.

“Well, be safe. I’ve seen a lot of pileups when the weather gets like this because they don’t salt like they should.”

“Thanks. You get home safe too.” Worrying about the weather temporarily took his mind off Grace. He was glad to get back to the car, crank up the defrost, and flick on the wipers, the smell of heat and really bad coffee filling the air.

Grace held her coffee wrapped in her hands, close to her face.

“Don’t you have gloves?” he asked. She looked cold.

“I forgot them somewhere.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re thinking I haven’t changed at all. Still forgetful. I know you’re always prepared for every situation, but I’ve done just fine without you, gloves or no gloves.”

“I know you have,” he said quietly. Yes, she had done just fine without him. “I wasn’t being critical. I was just wondering if you should buy a cheap pair before we leave.”

“Oh.” She looked chagrined. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. You were worrying about me.”

“Just being a friend. That’s acceptable, isn’t it?”

“I’ll always consider you a friend. Even if we don’t have to deal with each other the

rest of our lives. Like Janine and Ted.”

He frowned, not because he especially cared about the couple who’d lived a few doors down in their apartment building in Brooklyn, but because it sounded like she’d accepted that Graham wasn’t going to be part of her life much longer. “What about Janine and Ted?”

“Didn’t you know they divorced? About a year ago.”

“No surprise there. They both had wandering eyeballs.”

“My point is, they can’t stand each other, but they’ll always be bound by their children. I mean we—we don’t have anything like that binding us forever.”

“First of all,” he said, “I don’t dislike you. I never felt like I couldn’t stand you.”

He paused, debating whether or not he should speak what was on his mind. “And second, we are bound by a child.” Judging by the stony silence that followed, the words had dropped hard. But he didn’t regret them. They’d had a child. He had a name. They would always be united by that experience, from the joy and anticipation of pregnancy to their son’s early birth and the heartbreaking roller-coaster ride afterward.

“We are bound by our son,” he said quietly. “To not acknowledge that is to say he never existed.”

She turned to him. The defrost fan suddenly sounded jarring, so he dialed it down. It was dark, but under the intermittent lights on the highway, her eyes looked a little shiny. Finally, after all the small talk, he’d said something meaningful. Something that had cut through some of the layers of bullshit that were cemented like a wall between them.



“No one ever talks about it,” Grace said, looking into the distance. “None of my friends, not even my sister. Sometimes I wish someone would acknowledge what happened instead of always pretending it didn’t.”

“Same here,” he said. Their baby was a subject that never came up among his brothers. Even his sisters and his parents didn’t bring it up. It was too sad, too crushing. Their baby was a premie who’d fought hard, but there were just too many complications—pneumonia and then a blood infection had overwhelmed his tiny body. Graham drove on in silence, lost in thought. Remembering Joshua just now with Grace reminded him of all he’d lost—and not just his son.

Just then, the snow went from pelting to total whiteout. Graham cranked up the wipers, which snapped obediently back and forth.

“Maybe we should stop,” Grace said.

“At a rest area?” he said. “Just kidding.” He caught her smiling.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. Maybe it was. But he wasn’t necessarily thinking about the weather.

\* \* \*

“Graham, it’s horrible out here.” Two hours later, somewhere in southern Connecticut, Grace noticed him leaning forward, a vise grip on the wheel. “I’m sorry I was so insistent about doing this.”

She almost expected Graham to say, No surprise there. They’d often butted heads over which of them was most stubborn. Instead, he said, “You’re the big headliner tomorrow. All those kids are waiting for you.” He wiped a foggy spot on the

windshield with the back of his hand. “Besides, I need to get home too. Evan deploys to Afghanistan the day after Christmas.”

“He must be all grown up now.” The last Grace had seen Graham’s youngest brother, he’d been seventeen, and she’d heard from one of Graham’s sisters that he’d joined the military. She missed Graham’s close-knit siblings, and his parents, who’d been married thirty-five years. They’d given her a sense of family she’d never had.

“I still can’t believe it happened to us,” he said out of the blue.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

She knew immediately he was talking about the divorce. She often thought the same thing herself. Her driving companion had a list of faults a mile long. He was bossy, obsessively prepared, and a little bit of a know-it-all. But he was also kind and upstanding, and he'd rip his heart out of his chest and give it to you on a platter for the asking.

And he was still the most attractive man she'd ever seen. That fact hadn't dimmed in the least. Grace reminded herself sternly there was no point in thinking any of this. Divorce was final. There had been reasons for it. Attraction would linger, maybe forever, but so would the problems that caused them to separate in the first place.

They drove in uncomfortable silence, the snick snick of the wipers like a heartbeat between them. Unwillingly, another memory crept into her consciousness. After the first time she'd slept with Max, she'd run into the bathroom and cried. It was as if she'd belonged to Graham and only Graham, and it had nearly killed her to be with someone else. But she'd done it, and Max was a good man. He simply wasn't the right man.

Even after these years apart, Graham's stamp on her seemed permanent, like a tattoo. Indelible. Undeniable. Oh, she'd fought it. Still fought it, telling herself it would fade with time. But a large part of her wondered if it ever would.

"Grace," he said, his tone dead serious. "I have to tell you something."

"What is it?" Her heart dropped down to her ankles, like that High Striker game at an amusement park. He'd met someone? He had cancer? His parents were sick? Instinctively, she clutched the dashboard for support.

What happened next seemed to happen in slow motion. One minute, they were staring ahead, into the swirling whiteness. The next moment, something big and brown was visible ahead of them, a shadowed mass in the road that loomed large and suddenly struck. Graham slammed on the brakes, but it was too late.

The car made contact with the enormous mass—an animal. Windshield glass shattered, air bags swelled and detonated. Grace's head snapped backward and her arms flew up to shelter her face. White was everywhere, a massive cloud of airborne powder that made her cough and choke.

Then suddenly, all was still. She could hear the quiet shuffling sound of the snow as it landed on the windshield, obliterating it in seconds. A hissing sound emanated from the engine. Grace patted her chest, her arms, her face. All intact. The air bags had done their job.

As soon as she gathered her senses, she looked over at Graham. He was slumped over the wheel. Oh God, slumped! It took Grace a second to realize his airbag never completely deployed—and then she saw why. There was a massive antler sticking through the windshield. It must have pierced Graham's bag at exactly the right time so it could not inflate.

Graham was unconscious—oh dear God, please, not dead. Not dead.

Panic paralyzed her. She was awful in emergencies. That was why she was an author! Yet she had to think and act. She unbelted herself, grasped Graham's strong, broad shoulders, now dead weight, and shook them a little, calling out his name. No response.

Should she move him? You weren't supposed to do that, were you?

Where the hell was her cell phone? Her purse had flown forward, and she could feel

the contents crunching under her boots. In the icy blackness, she couldn't see a thing.

Graham was as limp as a wrung-out rag. She laid him as flat as she could, reclining his seat, and rested him back against it.

"Graham," she called, saying his name again and again. Tears blurred her sight, but she blinked them back. She somehow had to keep her shit together so she could think. Because they could not end like this. Not with so much unsaid.

All the emotion she'd been fighting, that she'd kept dammed up inside her, rushed out. She still missed him; she still thought about him. Spending this time together made her realize the ache in her heart for him had simply not healed. The sense of unfinished business between them was so strong, it made her tremble.

She'd been afraid of the truth. She should've been afraid of never getting the chance to tell it.

Back in high school, Grace had taken CPR when she worked at a summer camp, and she'd always had good intentions to take it again but...what was it she remembered? ABC...let's see. Airway, Breathing...yes! That seemed a good place to start. She climbed over Graham, trying to ignore the sharp antlers sticking through the windshield. The wide-open eye of the dead deer seemed to stare at her like some kind of macabre Rudolph, adding to her sense of panic.

She opened his coat and leaned near his face, trying to hear or feel his breaths. Pressing a finger next to his windpipe, she felt for a pulse, but she was so panicked, nothing registered except her own erratic heartbeat.

She took a couple of deep breaths to calm down. Puffs of white air came out when she exhaled. As if she didn't already know that being in this car was a ticking bomb, and time was quickly running out.

Despite the seeping cold, she unbuttoned a few buttons of his shirt. He wore a white undershirt, just like he used to so long ago, and for some reason, that made more tears spring up. Resolutely, she pressed her ear against his chest. It was hard, all curved, chiseled muscle. As she nestled her ear against his pec, she heard it. The strong, definite strum of his heart. Underneath her cheek, his chest rose and fell in a steady, strong rhythm.

Oh, praise Baby Jesus, he was breathing and pumping blood. The relief let loose a veritable waterfall, rolling down her cheeks, dotting his white dress shirt. She touched his face, felt the familiar sweet roughness, brushed back a lock of hair that fell close to the bloody gash on his forehead.

Blood trickled in a dark stream down his temple. She unwound the scarf from her neck and pressed it against his wound. While she waited for it to stop bleeding, she tried to figure out what to do next.

Unconscious, Graham looked like a different man. His square jaw didn't seem quite so stubborn. The scowl of displeasure he often wore when he looked at her was gone, and in its place was a vulnerability, the childish innocence of a man asleep.

She whispered a quiet oath that she would take care of him. Better than she had the first time around.

There was not a soul on the road, no one to flag down. She flicked on the hazard lights and groped around on the floor for her cell, which she found scattered among her wallet, hairspray, and loose change. No bars. No fucking bars. She leaned her forehead against the side of his chest and sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Graham," she whispered. "So, so sorry. For everything."

It was going to end like this. On a misplaced mission to be somewhere for Christmas

Eve, somewhere she'd insisted on going, regardless of how foolish a trip it was. Yes, she loved the hospital and the kids, but how much of her insistence was because she was dreading the holiday, that she wanted to feel needed and loved in a way she simply wasn't by her own family? And now Graham was going to die and they were both going to freeze to death without being able to tell each other anything of real importance.

Suddenly, something grazed her back, faint and warm—Graham's hand. She bolted upright, in time to see his eyes flutter open. The man who'd caused her so much heartache and pain, but who'd also given her so much joy and happiness, was alive and awake, an unspeakable gift.

She fumbled for his hands and clutched them tightly. They were a little cold, and a little shaky, but he squeezed back, his big hand encompassing hers. The reaffirming feel of his hand reminded her for some reason of walking out of the church after their wedding ceremony. They'd clutched each other's hands tightly, full of promises and anticipation and nerves.

"Don't cry, Grace," he said, his voice low and barely audible. "I'm really sorry Rudolph didn't make it." His mouth turned up in the tiniest quirk of a smile.

It was horrible about the poor deer. But the fact that Graham was back to being Graham—and trying to make her stop crying—made her inexplicably happy.

### CHAPTER 3

Grace unabashedly kissed Graham's cheeks. His forehead. She was beyond thrilled that he was all right, talking and moving. Her lips hovered over his, and she caught herself at the last moment—what was she doing? Whoa! She'd almost really kissed him! Smooched him right on those beautiful, full lips. When she drew back, he was staring at her.

Not just staring. His gaze held more than a you are crazy, woman expression. It held a look she knew all too well. His gypsy-brown eyes darkened and threw heat that shot straight through to her abdomen and radiated everywhere despite the penetrating cold. A gaze that told her in no uncertain terms that he wanted to cover her lips with his and kiss her until she was boneless and panting.

Grace's breath caught. His gaze slid down to her lips, and her insides turned into a warm, melty puddle. The car suddenly felt stifling, claustrophobic. She sat up, struggling to get some space between them. A big wave of strong, heady emotion always seemed to cloud her reason and her judgment when she was around him. One thing about Graham Walker was certain—he did not elicit halfway feelings, good or bad.

"Are you all right?" she asked, trying to keep her focus. Now that he was conscious and talking, they had other things to worry about. The car was freezing, getting buried under snow, and no one was around for miles. Plus, the engine wouldn't start when she tried the key, and her toes were already starting to feel like tiny little ice blocks.



“I have a whopping headache.” He brought his hand up to his forehead, but she caught it before he could touch his wound, which had mostly stopped bleeding but still looked nasty.

“You have a gash. It looks like it needs a couple of stitches.”

She had to get them some help. But how? “I’m going to start walking. I’ll flag down the first person I see.” She opened the door and saw for the first time the massive body on their hood, which was dented like an accordion, the engine still hissing loudly. The hazard lights reflected off a sign, half covered with snow. “Welcome to Mirror Lake...Population 1000.” Wherever that was.

Grace got back in and shut the door.

“I don’t want you to leave the car.” Graham struggled to get up.

“Don’t move until help comes.” She paused. “Please don’t move,” she rephrased. “Maybe you hurt your neck or back.”

“I’m fine, Grace,” he said through gritted teeth. He sighed. “What I mean is, I’m not helpless. It’s going to take both of us to get us out of here.”

She put a hand on the center of his chest. “I’m just so damn happy you’re alive. Please don’t ruin it by going back to your obstinate self. And it’s not safe to move. You need an ambulance.”

He raised a brow. “You’re happy I’m alive?” For once, he didn’t sound sarcastic.

“Yes, I’m thrilled, okay? You scared the bejesus out of me!”

He grinned, full on, and wouldn’t you know it, out popped that damn dimple.

The intense flashlight beam that suddenly shone inside the car prevented Grace from thinking too much about that.

Grace looked up to see a cop on the driver's side, knocking on the window.

Oh, thank God. Aliveandsaved, all in the same day.

"Officer!" she said.

A tall, dark-haired man assessed the situation with a calm and steady gaze. "I'm Chief Tom Rushford of the Mirror Lake Police Department," he said. "I suppose you two didn't get the memo that there's a blizzard out here." He had kind eyes. That alone was enough for relief to cascade through her.

They would live to tell this tale. More importantly, something between them had shifted, something that could finally throw open the possibility of understanding each other. And that was suddenly massively important to her.

Tom took in the windshield, the punctured air bag, and the gash on Graham's head. "I see you seemed to do a little better than the deer. How are you feeling?"

"Great, Officer," Graham said.

Typical male. "He hit his head on the steering wheel, and he was out for about five minutes." Grace felt a little like she was back in the third grade, tattling without hesitation. Graham tossed her a dirty look, but she shot him one right back.

In the distance, red lights flashed. The officer squinted into the driving snow. "We've got an ambulance coming."

"I don't need an ambulance," Graham said, trying to sit up, but Grace pushed against

his chest again.

“Just sit tight,” Officer Tom said. “We’re going to take you to our community hospital. They’re going to have to backboard you until your neck checks out.” He looked at Grace. “You keep him still, okay?” He turned to Graham and patted his shoulder. “Listen to your wife. She obviously loves you.”

“She’s not...” He started to explain, but the officer was already gone, trudging through the snow to greet the ambulance crew. His gaze met Grace’s.

“Are you all right?” he asked when they were alone.

## Page 9

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“Me?” she said. “My airbag went off, remember?” She took a breath. This time, she was going to be honest. “The worst part was being afraid you—I was afraid something happened to you.” She couldn’t bring herself to say died.

Strong fingers wrapped around hers, squeezing firmly. A burst of warmth torched through her despite the bitter cold.

“Thank you, Grace. For worrying about me.”

She nodded, pretending to straighten her coat, anything to look somewhere else besides into his warm, sincere eyes that were making her feel very strange inside.

He spoke again, sounding a little resolved, a little amused. “Guess we’re going to be spending some time in—what’s this place called again? Mirror Lake?”

She had no idea what Mirror Lake, Population 1000, was like. But she had a feeling they were probably going to find out. Graham was in no condition to go anywhere, plus the entire front end of the car looked like it had been run through a giant trash compactor.

She flicked her gaze back at him and smiled. “All right, then. Mirror Lake it is.”

\* \* \*

It was after midnight when Graham and Grace walked into the lobby of the Grand Victorian hotel. Graham could hardly believe the final twist of events of this weird day that had led them straight from the CT scan at the Community Hospital to a room

at Mirror Lake's best (and only) hotel.

Of course the ER doctor, Ben Rushford, who was around their age, was the cop's brother. "Your head scan is normal," the very tall, bearded doc had said. "You're good to go. Actually, my wife and I are happy to put you up at our place for the next night or two. We've got plenty of room. Five bedrooms, and with the kids, we only use four of them. Except I hope you don't mind dogs, because I can't promise one of them won't accidentally wander in."

Grace had been quick to thank him for his kindness, but she'd already gotten them a room at the hotel down the street.

Graham didn't protest, because such small-town hospitality, while genuinely kind, made him a little uncomfortable. He also hoped a room was actually two, and that Grace was just playing along about the couple thing because it was easier.

So now they were standing inside a beautiful high-ceilinged lobby flanked on one side by a giant Christmas tree covered with the big old-fashioned kind of colored lights. He made out the festive scents of pine and maybe vanilla and cinnamon—except the tree and the pine smell were real.

Grace insisted on dragging her rolling suitcase and his duffel bag through the lobby, because the doctor said he shouldn't lift things due to his concussion. Nevertheless, he attempted to take the duffel from her. "Please," he said. "You're emasculating me."

She rolled her eyes and tugged it back. "You heard what the doctor said."

Yeah. "Dr. Ben" had also said no reading, driving, TV, or sex for the next few days. Which meant they had to find some other way besides a car to get Grace to Philly. And as far as the no-sex rule...well, that was a good thing. Just in case he happened

to be tempted. Which he had been—in the car, the hospital, and, come to think of it, right now, despite the throbbing in his head, twelve stitches, and the fact that he was exhausted.

He looked around at the looped garlands and the massive wreath hung over a big carved fireplace with a burning, crackling fire. “Nice place,” he said.

Grace turned to him and smiled. “Are you angry I did this? I know it’s a little high-end, but I felt a little uncomfortable accepting the invitation to the doctor’s house.”

“Yeah, I did too. And I don’t care how much the rooms cost.”

“One room. I have to wake you up for neuro checks every two hours, remember?”

“Grace, that’s really not nec—”

“The last I knew, you weren’t an MD, so since we survived our near-death experience, I’d rather just play by the rules, okay?”

He knew by the familiar set of her chin and the way she narrowed her eyes that she was digging in for the long haul. Fine. He was too tired to fight her on this one.

At the desk, a man in an immaculate suit with a close-cut beard introduced himself as the manager, Hector, and gave the usual spiel. “Caroling’s tomorrow evening, if you’re feeling up to it. Everyone meets at the Irish pub around the corner at six. Folks start out at the senior center, hit the hospital, circle around to downtown, and end up at the square.”

“Sounds lovely,” Grace said. “Nice to meet you, Hector.”

They’d be gone long before caroling, which ordinarily would give Graham a sense of

relief, since he couldn't carry a tune if his life were on the line. But the fact that their time together would be coming to a fast end threw him a little. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and they both had places to be.

As soon as they walked through the doorway of their room, Grace released a big breath and pulled off her boots. Graham placed the key on a tray on the antique chest near the door and shrugged off his coat.

His eyes were drawn instantly to the big bed. A four-poster with spiral carvings up and down the heavy, dark wood posts and a velvet canopy overhead.

"You take the bed," Grace said. "I'll take the couch."

"The bed is huge. Surely we can be civilized and each take a side. May as well sleep in a comfortable bed if you insist on waking me up every two hours."

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While she considered that, he walked up to her and held her by the shoulders. “It’s been a long day,” he said. “I’m sorry for this.”

Up close, she smelled good. She was soft in his arms, and her lips were pink and full, and suddenly, he didn’t care about his head or his exhaustion or the wrecked car. He wanted to kiss her until they forgot about everything and all that remained was the feel of her mouth on his. He wanted to use his mouth and his hands to roam all over her, remembering all her curves and the special places he’d once known better than his own.

Graham dropped his hands before he did something foolish. His brain might have taken a hit, but his dick was functioning just fine, and that was, of course, a problem. Suddenly, the relief he’d felt moments before about finally resting did not feel like relief. At all.

Grace smiled, but he still saw the fatigue in her eyes, the dark circles. “Hey, you took the antler hit,” she said. “Nothing to be sorry about.”

“I haven’t given up on finding an alternative for you to get to Philly. If we get you on an early bus or train—”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. I talked to the hospital publicist in Philly. She canceled the event because they’re expecting eight to ten more inches. So whenever I get there, I’ll go visit all the kids who are stuck on the wards over Christmas and pass out books. It’s not quite the same, but it works.”

He still felt bad about detaining her, but he nodded and moved to unzip his duffel. A



wave of dizziness nearly bowled him over, causing him to lean on the bed. He didn't want to appear weak, so he quickly righted himself and attempted to get his toothbrush again. Suddenly, she was at his side, slipping off his shoes, pulling the covers down. Then she finished opening his bag. He gave in to the room's swaying and his pounding head and lay down on the bed, which felt like heaven.

"Amid all this precision packing," she said, rifling through his neatly rolled shirts and underwear, "I'm not seeing any jammies."

From the pillow, he raised a single brow. The corner of his mouth quirked up a little.

"Oh God. You still don't wear any, do you?"

"No, but there's a pair of black sweats in there. And a T-shirt."

She handed him his clothes and his toothbrush and helped him sit up. After he used the bathroom and collapsed back into bed, she was next to him, holding out her hand, which held two red pills.

He looked up at her. "What are those?"

"Midol."

"I'm not taking—"

"The ER instructions say take ibuprofen, but this is all I've got."

She stared him down, palm outstretched. Finally, he caved. "Fine." Anything to take the anvil out of his head. He swallowed the pills and handed her back the water glass, but didn't release his grip right away. "Thank you," he said, looking straight at her. "I mean it. For everything."

Her smile warmed him like a shot of Crown Royal, smooth and shooting straight through his gut.

“Well, I’m going to use the bathroom,” she said, averting her gaze and busily unzipping her suitcase, pulling out clothes and cosmetic cases and even a pair of fur-lined slippers. The suitcase, which was stuffed to the brim, looked like a bomb had gone off inside. Graham couldn’t help chuckling to himself. He couldn’t believe it, but somehow, he missed the chaos.

She, of course, took twenty minutes in the bathroom, even if it was one in the morning, and came out wearing her glasses and a flannel nightgown with red and green fuzzy socks. Her hair was loose and wavy, and seeing her like that brought back a thousand memories. Of that hair wild and flowing around his face as she kissed him. Of him trawling his hands through that luxurious mass of silk.

He’d taken for granted all those regular, run-of-the-mill nights where they’d gone to bed chatting and talking, just their regular bedtime routine. He missed their conversation. And the way he always curved his body around hers and kissed her on the neck before they both drifted off to sleep.

How had he let it all go? How had he lethergo?

She set her phone alarm and crawled under the covers, being careful to keep a good distance between them.

“Grace,” he said, turning off the light.

“What is it?” came from the other side of the bed.

“I’m sorry I never took you to a place like this when we were married.”

“We couldn’t afford a place like this when we were married.”

“I know, but I was always worried about money. Too much. I wish we would’ve had a little more fun.”

He felt her hand squeeze his arm. “Go to sleep, Graham. Everything’s good, you know? So the Christmas program is canceled and you have a concussion. We’re alive and safe and out of the storm. And it’s Christmastime in a pretty little town. Life could be a lot worse, you know.”

“I’m glad I’m stuck here with you.”

## Page 11

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She laughed. “You’re not going to be saying that in two hours when I blast a light into your eyes.”

He smiled. Despite everything that had happened, he felt a strange sense of...well, he hated to say it but...contentment. And that was the last thing he remembered before he fell into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

It was very dark when the light drilled Graham in the eyes, startling him from a sound sleep. Instinctively, he lifted his arm to shield himself, but Grace leaned over, pulling his arm away and blinding him with the flashlight app on her iPhone.

“What time is it?” Graham asked, squinting against the torture.

“Three a.m. I’m seeing if this works to check your pupils.”

“It does. It fries my retinas quite nicely.”

“Okay, you’re fine. You can roll over and go back to sleep.”

“Who can go back to sleep once they’ve been blinded?”

“As I recall, you have the ability to sleep just about anywhere at any time.”

“Not when it feels like someone’s about to stick a pencil in your eye.”

“You’re so ungrateful,” she said, her tone teasing.

“Besides, I think you might enjoy waking me up.” He found himself trying to come up with something silly to continue their banter. Concussion or no, he wanted to reach out and tug her to him until she was in his arms, soft and wonderful. He fisted his hands and crossed them over his chest and tried to count sheep. Do inventory on the Christmas polar fleece quarter-zip orders, which was the item currently selling like hotcakes. Anything to distract himself from the fact that she was a mere foot away.

They fell into silence again. There was a faint ticking—it might have been her watch—counting out each endless second.

“Graham,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I’d really appreciate it if you’d be okay the rest of the night.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine. Why don’t we skip the rest of the neuro checks?”

“The hospital said it was important to do it every two hours. I’m just not really sure what I’m supposed to be doing. I mean, if your pupils are unequal or unreactive, doesn’t that usually mean you’re dead?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Saying that doesn’t make me stop worrying.”

He chuckled a little. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Because I’m worried?”

“No, it’s just that you—care. You haven’t got an apathetic bone in your body.” He’d always loved and admired that about her. She cared more than anyone he ever knew. About everything and everyone. She answered every fan letter personally, thanked each kid for every piece of artwork and every drawing they sent. Mailed books to kids who couldn’t afford to buy them. She was even kind to Blakely, who didn’t seem to have a clue how to be decent back.

“Why, Graham, did you just pay me a compliment?”

“Yes. And considering that I’m blind, that’s a big deal.”

She chuckled softly, and for a moment, he felt like he had long ago, when they used to laugh and joke, and conversation came as easily and simply as sunshine on a warm spring day.

They stopped talking, but it took forever to fall asleep again. Graham didn’t really remember the five a.m. check. Come to think of it, he might have mumbled something like Get that effing light out of my eyes, Grace.

But the seven o’clock check was different. Maybe he’d heard her rustling around, turning off her phone alarm before it went off. Maybe he felt the warmth of her breath as she leaned over him, and felt the mattress dent as her weight shifted closer.

“Graham,” she whispered. “Are you all right? Do you need anything?”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

“My head feels better.” The bowling-ball feeling had lifted, and for the first time since the accident, he felt pretty normal.

“I have to turn the light on again.”

“As you wish.”

She did, and burned a hole through his retinas again, after which he politely thanked her. But then something weird happened.

She started to laugh. Not a ladylike chuckle, or a little giggle, but a loud, snorty laugh. She always laughed like that when she was a little out of control, when she didn't care who heard her or what she sounded like.

“What is it?” he asked, wondering if he was missing the joke. Or worse, that he was the joke. Booger in his nose? He ran a hand through his hair to try to assess how badly it was sticking up. Between the stitches and rolling around trying to sleep between torture sessions, he guessed pretty badly.

She touched his arm. Her fingers were ice cold.

“It's just, if I had to describe this situation to someone, I'm not sure I could. The reindeer antlers, the concussion, the iPhone neuro checks. It's a little...ridiculous.”

He raised a brow. “A little?”

“Oh well.” She left the bed and put a thick, dark gray cowl neck wool sweater over

her nightgown. “I’m freezing.”

“Turn up the heat.”

“It’s already on seventy-five, but it feels like sixty in here.”

“It’s the high ceilings and the big windows that you love so much.”

“I’d take character over heat efficiency any day.” Of course she would. She crawled back into bed, tossing her coat on top of the bedspread. “Since it’s technically morning, I’m not waking you up anymore. You’ve officially made it through the night. Now I’m going to get some sleep.”

It would be so easy to make her warm. Plus, there was no way he was going to be able to fall back to sleep. His head felt way better, and that was letting all kinds of other thoughts flood through. About how she’d blinded him, all right. With her phone light and her smile. She made him laugh, just like the old days.

All it would take was one of them reaching out to the other, to tear down the barriers between them. Everything that had happened to them since he’d walked into the bookstore yesterday—maybe it had all happened for a reason. Graham was not a romantic, but he realized he wanted to believe that was so.

His heart was thudding so loud, he could hear it in his ears. “Grace,” he whispered.

But all he heard in return was the soft, deep sound of her breathing.



### CHAPTER 4

#### Christmas Eve

Grace awakened to a crack of light peeking through strange curtains and the sensation of finally being warm in a cozy, wonderful way. As consciousness dawned, she stretched, bumping into a leg—a leg!—that was definitely not her own. Another tentative stretch told her the situation was far worse. An entire male body appeared to be wrapped around her. His deep, regular breathing assured her he was asleep.

Her every muscle froze in place. The large, masculine arm draped casually over her told her Graham had survived the night. And the very male part pressing into her back let her know he was definitely neurologically intact. A big bicep half covered by a gray T-shirt sleeve encased her solidly. Her gaze trailed from his arm down to his big, beautiful hand, his long, slender fingers resting on the comforter in front of her. Oh dear God, he was wrapped around her like a hot pretzel. For just a moment, she lay still, encased in his strength, breathing in his familiar scent.

Waking up wrapped around each other like this used to be habit. He still stirred her, now and always, in ways no other man ever would. Being near him was to be on fire, and that hadn't changed at all. Underneath the flames, she recognized something even more disturbing—a sense that everything was right in her world, although the only thing that had changed was him suddenly being in it.

The big muscles flexed. The arm pulled away, and the masculine weight shifted. Grace quickly shut her eyes and pretended to sleep.

The bed lightened as Graham rose to use the bathroom. She heard the muffled sounds of running water, a soft voice talking on the phone. What would today bring? They were stuck in a small town without a car after a major winter storm. It was Christmas Eve.

She didn't want this bubble to end. Being with him was like being covered by a soft blanket, or wearing a comfy pair of jeans—unlike anything she'd felt before, except with him.

She was rummaging through her suitcase when the bathroom door opened and Graham walked out, hair damp, smelling like heaven. He wore jeans and nothing else, which made her stomach plunge down to the floor and her cheeks blaze. She tried to avert her eyes, look anywhere but at the hills and valleys of muscle, the light coating of dark hair, the way his jeans hung low on his lean hips.

Somehow, she managed to pass him and get in the bathroom, where she used the time to try to calm the hell down. If she didn't come up with an excuse to leave this room, something combustible was going to happen between them. She had to get out while she still had all her wits about her.

When she'd finally got her breathing under control, she left the bathroom, walked toward her suitcase, and stubbed her toe on the bed.

She let out a curse and hopped around a little, imagining what she must look like with her bedhead hair, red plaid flannel, and Christmas socks. Very sexy. Unlike the delicious, muscular god walking toward her.

She tried to use the pain to distract herself from how her mouth had suddenly gone dry and her knees felt as wobbly as a one-year-old's, but it wasn't really working. Worse, Graham stepped a little closer.

She splayed out her arms, warning him back. All that lean muscle, all that raw, masculine heat—it couldn't come near her. She would throw herself at him, smooth her hands over all that hard, bountiful muscle, and beg for things. Her body could not be trusted. "I'm fine. Really. Just stubbed my toe."

"Want me to take a look?"

His gaze was torching her, like paper in a fire that turns immediately to ash and blows away.

The fact that he was now inches away with his lips quirked into the slightest smile told her he didn't heed her warning, or give a damn about it. And oh, she did not want him to. He was so close now, she could smell the soap from his shower, see the little beads of water on his shoulders. His fingers gripped her elbow, and she swore it tingled from his touch. Other parts of her were sort of on fire too. So not good. "Let's see it," he said, the smile morphing into a wicked grin.

"Graham, I'm fine." She tried to shrug away. He dropped his hand, but still she felt pinned in place, unable to move or even breathe. Electricity buzzed and snapped between them. She didn't want him to see how much he affected her, yet she was helpless with him so near.

His gaze homed in on her lips. He was going to...yes, he was. Kiss her. Her heartbeat thrummed in her throat, and every muscle froze in anticipation.

She wanted it. Wanted him. So, so badly.

Graham lowered his mouth. The dip of his head was so familiar, yet it made every nerve stand on end. At last, their lips met. His were soft and pliant, and they brushed against hers, carefully and slowly. Her hand was trembling as she wrapped it around his neck and pulled him toward her until their bodies were flush, fitting together like

they were always meant to.

That simple move blew careful and slow right out of the water. His mouth crushed hers, devouring her with deep, sensual kisses. His tongue slid inside her mouth, and she met it with equal vigor, desire roaring and crashing between them, unleashed like a storm surge, uncontrollable and insatiable.

Suddenly, Graham pulled back, out of breath. He cradled her face in his hands and looked at her tenderly. "I missed you," he said. "I missed this."

His words terrified as well as kindled hope inside her. In her life, people didn't stay. And when they left, they sure as hell never came back.

"I think about you all the time," he said. "I came to your book signing because I had to see you. I tried to tell myself it was for Emmy, but it wasn't. It was forme."

Grace reached up and circled his wrists with her hands. "When you were slumped over that wheel, all I could think of is how we wasted our chance together."

"It doesn't have to be too late for us," he said. Oh, how she wanted to believe those sweet words. When he kissed her again, deep and hungry, her knees buckled, and they both fell back onto the bed. Thoughts about divorce and mistakes and tragedies fled, and she got lost in the feel of his lips and hands as they roved all over her body.

He rolled them both over until he was on top of her, pulling up her flannel in handfuls, stroking the skin of her sides and back. He helped her drag her nightgown over her head, kissing her lips, her neck, the sensitive skin of her collarbone. She reveled in the way he held her, whispered soft words to her, nipped and licked and kissed her while she lay there clinging to him, unable to get enough.

Grace threaded her fingers through the coarse silk of his hair, ran her hands along the

ridges of his back and the smooth, lean muscle of his chest. Every touch was precious. She took nothing for granted. His touch was the same, familiar, expected, and yet different—more hungry, more desperate, making her tremble as if it was their first time together.

“I missed you too,” she whispered as he kissed her breast, flicked her nipple with his tongue, and took it into his mouth. Before she could even let out a coherent sound, he traced the band of her panties with his fingers, back and forth, teasing, until her body felt like a guitar string, taut and quivering. She was close to tears, overwhelmed with the joy of being in his arms. A joy she never thought she’d experience again.

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She ran her hand along his fine ass, then wrapped it around his shaft and stroked him. He let out a strangled groan. His gaze, bright, intense, and vulnerable, told her he was just as affected by their lovemaking as she was.

She was very wet, and he was stroking her, playing, tormenting. She felt feverish, quaking, turning her head restlessly until he kissed her, murmuring soothing words to calm her while he slipped his fingers inside her and continued his sensuous torment.

“I need you inside me,” she said, begging him, but he shook his head. Brought her hands together above her head and held them there as he rained kiss after kiss upon her lips. Her back arched, every muscle tightened and tensed. She opened her body to him, and her heart. He kissed away her cries as she came, releasing in a heady rush as she fell over the edge, exploding in a frenzy of feelings that overtook her completely.

Graham sheathed himself. As she guided him inside her body, he began a slow, steady rhythm, one that rocked her to her soul, filling her to the limit, and yet somehow wasn't enough. She wrapped herself around him, took all of him inside her. His gaze locked on her, direct and honest and raw. She was powerless under it, and yet she'd never felt so free, with this complicated, difficult, amazing man whom she simply could not live without.

They rode the wave of release together, until at last they collapsed, still entwined in each other's arms. Graham smoothed back her hair, kissing her neck, her forehead, and for a few minutes, they simply lay there, surrounded by silence in the dim room. His arm covered her possessively, held her lightly at the waist, and she stroked it, the sense of peace and contentment of being with him settling in like the thick blanket of snow outside.

She wished they could stay in this special bubble forever where there were no problems, no pain, no outside world.

With that thought, the room phone rang. Graham reached over to answer it. The conversation was about the state of his car, so Grace climbed out of bed to head to the bathroom. Or rather she tried. Graham tugged her back and playfully bit her arm to get her to stay. Then gave her a lively swat on her butt to send her on her way.

She managed to pull on some jeans and a sweater. When she came out, Graham was dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed, scrolling through his cell. He gestured for her to come sit next to him.

“That was Hector from the front desk. My car’s in the shop, and it’s going to take at least a week. The shop people brought over all your books from the trunk, and they’re bringing them up now. And there’s a bus going to Philly that passes through town at four o’clock, but there’s only one seat. I told him we’re not interested.”

Her heart leapt at his last statement. It meant he wanted them to stay together. She wanted that too. But then she remembered his family, and the fact that tomorrow was Christmas. “Your family’s expecting you. You should take the seat and get home to see your brother.”

“I don’t want us to split up,” he said. “I don’t want to leave without you. I’m sure there’s another bus in the morning.”

She thought about everything that had happened since the time she’d stepped into the Barnes and Noble yesterday, which now seemed like a million years ago. Despite the storm and the accident—or maybe because of them—they’d found each other again, and it felt so right.

Graham kissed her and rubbed her arm. “I should go talk to the guy at the shop.”

“I was thinking I’d take my books to the hospital and give them out. The kids would enjoy them, and I really don’t want to travel with all these boxes on a bus anyway.” She wasn’t quite sure what she expected him to say. But it wasn’t what he said next.

“I want to come with you.”

His words struck her to the core. Startled and pleased her.

“I could help you,” he said. “Carry your books. Be your PR person. Anything you need. What do you say?”

At one time, she’d believed he didn’t support her career, when things had happened so fast and their life had gotten overtaken by her sudden success. That he wanted to take part now thrilled her. “I’d love for you to join me.”

She felt just like she had in the early days of their marriage. Giddy and in love.

Maybe this dizzy, heady feeling had something to do with the fact that it was Christmastime and they’d been thrown together, and of course things had happened. Nature had simply taken its course, and they’d acted on the explosive attraction between them.

Or maybe it had everything to do with the fact that she was still in love with him—that she’d never stopped loving him. And that was terrifying.

\* \* \*

Graham had to show his ID and practically give a blood sample to get permission to enter the pediatric ward. For a small hospital, there was still a lot of commotion about Grace signing books. Hospital security sent up two officers, and once again, as in the book store, a drove of thrilled children and their parents gathered around Grace.



She'd created a whole world that everyone was clamoring to be a part of.

He understood the feeling. He wanted to be part of her world too, and for the first time, he felt like it was possible to leave their past behind and start again. If he could just convince her to believe it.

A feeling of pride came over him as he watched Grace as she sat in an open play area surrounded by colorfully painted murals, talking with kids and signing books.

Yet, if he were honest with himself, he hadn't always felt like that. Her career had been a bone of contention between them. She'd gotten published and then suddenly famous—really famous. It had felt to him at that time that the fictitious Adaline and her escapades were way more important to her than their marriage was—than he was. Her work had become another barrier that kept them from comforting each other after their son's death.

Now, watching the children and parents interact with Grace, he saw by the looks on their faces how much the books meant to them. Despite or perhaps partly because of their son's death, Grace had created something truly special that had touched a lot of people. In his book, that was amazing.

"I have two questions for you," a nurse who introduced herself as Helen said to Grace as she finished up with the crowd. "One, can you sign a book for my granddaughter, and two, when you're done here, would you come down the hall to the nursery and visit us too? The nurses all have kids who read your books, and the new parents would love it too, if you have some left."

"Of course," Grace said, but Graham noticed her smile was a little tight. He immediately got why, because he felt the same way. Seeing a bunch of plump, happy babies and their parents would be difficult under the best circumstances. Yet it was Grace's nature to agree, regardless of the emotional cost.

Graham approached her as she shook the last parent's hand and hugged the last child. "You know, you don't have to go to the nursery. You can just sign a pile of books and—"

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“I’ll go,” she insisted, then gave his hand a quick squeeze. “But thanks for worrying about me.”

Frankly, he was worried about himself too. Just being in the hospital had brought a bunch of memories tumbling into the present. Above the colorful artwork and the cheery Christmas decorations, the bright fluorescent lights glowed a bit harshly. An antiseptic smell permeated the place. And the beeps of monitors and IV pumps couldn’t disguise the fact that life-and-death business was part of the fabric of life here.

Graham followed Grace down a long hallway, Helen chatting endlessly about how wonderful Mirror Lake was, how a retired nurse spent most of the fall knitting Santa hats for all the new babies, and offering them goodies from the myriad cookie and candy trays that seemed to be stacked on every free countertop in the nursing station. She didn’t notice how Grace stiffened. To Grace’s credit, she made small talk with the staff, signed books, and walked with one of the nurses into some of the rooms to meet parents and their babies.

“So, what’s it like being married to a celebrity author?” Helen asked him as he waited in the nursing station.

“Terrific,” he said. “I couldn’t be more proud.” He shouldn’t pretend, but the thought of explaining seemed too complicated. He ate a homemade Christmas cookie instead, which was delicious but didn’t dispel his antsiness. Grace had been gone a while, and he wanted to make sure she wasn’t overtaxing herself. Suddenly, he looked up and saw her standing in the hallway in front of the large nursery viewing window, arms crossed tightly.

He walked up behind her and didn't say anything, just put his arms around her. For a minute, they looked at the chubby-cheeked babies, some bald, some with thick shocks of dark hair, some with heads a little conical from their tough journey into the world. A few were sucking their fists, others were wailing lusty cries, red-faced, their mouths in big wide O's.

They stood there, together, in silence. He knew exactly what she was thinking, because he was thinking the same thing, about their baby, who never got a chance to be fat cheeked and chunky, with a loud, healthy cry.

Graham could literally feel Grace's pain seeping through his sweater. He tightened his arms around her, trying to say with his presence what he couldn't say out loud. He thought of the times he could not comfort her, when they were married and it had been his business to do that for her. When he'd been at a loss, and nothing he'd been able to do or say had helped.

Now that time had passed, he understood so much better that they'd lived through a tragic situation that no one could ever really comprehend, that neither of them could really be comforted except with the passage of time. He wanted somehow to make up for it, to do better, to tell her he was so, so sorry for not being the husband she'd needed.

"Cute little buggers, aren't they?" Helen asked, coming up behind them. "You two have any yet?"

"No, not yet," Graham said, releasing Grace. Then he quickly changed the subject. "Grace, you ready to take off?" Beneath her friendly smile, she sent him a grateful nod.

"On behalf of all my staff, thank you so much for all you've done," Helen said. "It was a real treat."

As Grace hugged and laughed with the staff and took their compliments—how their daughters loved her books, and how they were all holding their breath for the next one—Graham understood that now, more than ever before, he and Grace had issues to resolve. Things to talk about that would affect whether or not they could truly start over again.

The question was if he could somehow surmount the invisible boundary between them, the one that had prevented them from fully grieving the loss of their son and had torn their marriage apart.

\* \* \*

“I think I’m going to take a little walk,” Grace said, hugging her arms tightly around herself as they reentered the hotel room midafternoon. Graham didn’t know it yet, but she was going to insist he get on the four o’clock bus.

Seeing those babies had been a huge reality check. It brought all the pain she’d worked so hard to push away cascading back. And it brought a fresh array of doubts. How could she trust Graham again when things had gone so far awry the first time around? How could she trust herself, when at this very moment she felt herself putting up walls between them once again to shut out all the pain?

She’d placed her coat on the bed, but now she picked it up, shrugged it on, and headed to the door. Graham stepped directly in her path. “No,” he said.

She whirled toward him, her expression startled. “What do you mean?”

He let out a breath. There was no turning back now. “I saw how upset you were. If we could just talk—”

“It’s all in the past. Done. It was a horrible time, and—”

He held her by the shoulders and shook her a little. “It’s not done. Both of us still hurt from it. It’s time we both talk about it.”

She did not want to go there. Frankly, it scared her to death, and she was freaking out. Stepping out of his reach, she looked at him warily. They’d gotten caught up in each other, in the attraction they’d always felt, but this—revisiting their unresolvable issues that were so closely tied to the death of their son—could crush her.

“I didn’t respond well to your depression,” he said. “I didn’t understand it. I thought you were pushing me away on purpose.”

“Stop blaming our divorce on my depression. It was a lot more than that.”

“Okay,” he said warily, sitting down on the bed, waiting for her to continue.

“You never really came back, Graham. Even after I started to feel a little more normal.”

“That’s not the way I remember it.” He crossed his arms as he continued. “After your first book sold, every weekend was booked, and when you weren’t doing events, you were home writing like crazy to meet your deadlines. I tried to understand how badly you were hurting, and I understood your need to work to forget your pain. But you didn’t appreciate my pain, Grace. You were in your own little world, where all that mattered were your books.”

She shut her eyes tightly to protect against the sting of his words, which struck their target too well. “I would trade every success I had to have our sweet son back. You know that.”

“I do know that,” he said softly. “I tried to understand. But then you announced you were going on tour. Announced it, Grace. Didn’t discuss it, just told me that’s what

you were doing.”

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“I didn’t think you cared. You were spending more and more time with your business. It seemed to me like just when I finally started working again, you were trying to keep my career down.”

“I’ve always been proud of what you accomplished. But I felt you used your work to push me away. I was hurting too, Grace. It wasn’t just you.”

She shook her head. Graham knew her too well, flaws and raw edges. He was right when he said she’d gotten swept away by her work. It had saved her from despair. Trouble was, she’d lost herself in it. She hadn’t comforted him—she’d been hurting so badly herself. “We made horrible mistakes.”

“We didn’t understand how to comfort each other. But we can learn.”

“We both moved on with other people.”

“No, Grace. I still love you. I’ll always love you. I started to say that before the deer hit.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. Of course he loved her. She felt that down to her marrow. She missed him, she missed what they had together. But was that enough to protect them from hurting each other again? It hadn’t been the first time. Now he was standing there, his eyes filled with emotion. Silently pleading with her to take the leap. All she had to do was put her trust in him. But how could she, when she’d nearly been destroyed the first time around? “I love you too, Graham,” she said softly, but shook her head.



His face fell. The hope in his eyes shattered, and she winced. “What is it?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I survived the pain of our baby dying, and the pain of losing you. But I can’t put myself in a position to make the same mistakes again.” It had nearly destroyed her. She’d survived by being tough, by distracting herself with her work. Now that she was finally living her life again, how could she risk going there again?

“Don’t, Grace.” He grabbed her again by the shoulders. “Don’t be afraid to fall. I’d catch you, you know. This time I would.”

She reached over and kissed him. A firm, quick press on the lips. “Your family is waiting for you.” Her voice cracked. Oh God. He needed to get on that bus and leave before she completely lost it.

“Don’t do this,” he said. “Come with me. What we have is worth another chance.”

But she turned and looked out the window at the peaceful winter scene below. The world continued, people with shopping bags strolling past quaint shops, cars rolling along toward home as the work day ended.

“What will you do alone here?” His voice, tight and controlled, as if he’d forced it through gritted teeth, came to her from the open doorway.

“I’ll go to that place—the Irish pub. Where the locals go. I’ll be fine.” She had no intention of doing that, but it had been the first thing to pop into her head. At this point, she’d say anything to get him to go.

He was silent for a long time. Panic seized up inside her. She was terrified to move. If she turned around, he would see everything on her face—her doubt, her confusion, her anguish.

Maybe she could explain. She turned around—just in time to see the door shut. The soft click resonated in the big ceilinged room. He was gone.

### CHAPTER 5

Grace stood at the window in the silent, darkening room, watching the strings of Christmas lights come on one by one in the little shops along the main street of Mirror Lake. If she put her cheek to the window and looked way off to the left, she could see the Christmas tree in the town square glowing like a Christmas card picture. The snow hadn't started falling again yet, but clouds hung low in the sky.

The lights only distracted her for a moment from the heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach. It felt like she'd swallowed a boulder. Actually, it felt like there was one in her head too. She was achy all over, light-headed and nauseous. Maybe she was coming down with the flu.

Heartsick, that's what she was. She loved him. And she always would.

She remembered how, early on, he'd begged her—to start fresh, to try again for another baby, to let him in.

Even after the depression, she hadn't been capable. Her parents' marriage and the way they'd simply gone off to lead separate lives afterward had made her insulate herself against pain and wonder about her own capacity to love.

The absolute ache she felt told her she was capable now. And she was sorry—sorry she hadn't ever told him how much he'd meant to her. Sorry she'd pushed him away in their marriage. Sorry she'd expected him to somehow understand her without being able to tell him how much she needed him—how much she'd always needed him.

The tough-as-nails attitude that had enabled her to survive these past few years had acted like a suit of armor. It had enabled her survival. But it had also kept everyone out.

Neither of them could have prevented the death of their child. But they could have controlled what happened afterward.

She could control what happened now.

Grace left the window and bolted across the room. She took time to slide a key from the dresser into her back jeans pocket, and ran out the door.

The lobby was aglow with lights—from the big, beautiful tree in front of the two-story wall of windows, to the lighted garlands around all the doors, to the roaring fire in the giant carved fireplace. The lobby door opened briefly with the influx of guests and a gust of fresh, crisp air brought the promise of more snow.

Frantically, she looked around at the people gathered in all the sofas and chairs, the seats at the lobby bar. No sign of Graham. She'd given too little too late, just like the first time. She couldn't live with that.

She ran to the front desk. "Excuse me, Hector," she asked the manager. "Have you seen...have you seen the man I was with yesterday?"

"Oh, yes, miss. He was running late for the bus, and Chief Rushford gave him a ride in his cruiser."

"Thank you," she said. "Where does the bus leave from?"

"Across from the bridal shop. Three blocks that way." He pointed with his pen in the general direction of the town.

Grace took off. No coat, no cell, and Ugg ripoff slippers to boot. She ran through the slush and snow, oblivious to everything—her aching lungs, the bitter cold, her wet feet—except her need to find Graham. She finally reached The Bridal Aisle, only to find the tiny bus shelter near the road deserted.

Tears burned behind her lids, despite the fact that the rest of her was freezing. Graham was gone. There would be no fairy tale second chance in this beautiful fairy tale town.

Fearing the worst but needing to be absolutely sure, she threw open the door to the bridal shop, which was still open at four p.m. on Christmas Eve.

“Did—the—bus—leave?” she asked between gasps. Two women were dressing a mannequin in the middle of the store. The younger woman, who wore her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, took her gently by the arm and led her to a cushioned chair.

“My name’s Meg, one of the owners. I’m afraid you just missed the bus.”

Of course she had. Because she’d hesitated. Because she’d been afraid.

“You walked from the hotel without a coat or shoes? Oh my Lord,” said a very polished woman in a beige suit, who came out from the back room and introduced herself as Alex.

Her astute gaze swept quickly over Grace’s state of dishevelment. “Meg, honey, you still have that Crown Royal from the mayor’s daughter’s wedding in the back?” Then she left to fetch it.

The women sat down with Grace. They made her take off her wet socks and slippers and gave her tea, shortbread cookies, and a throw for her lap. And they listened to her story. Turned out Meg was the ER doctor’s wife, and Alex was the cop’s. Small

world. Or at least, small town.

“You may have a bus to catch tomorrow morning,” Alex said, “but you’re not staying alone until then. Happy hour at MacNamara’s starts at five, then we’re all going caroling. Come with us.”

Their genuine kindness touched her, but there was no way she was going to hang around people tonight, even really nice ones. “Thank you both for helping me. But I’m afraid I wouldn’t be good company.”

“Of course you won’t be,” Meg said. “That’s why you should be around other people. Besides, you have to eat dinner.”

It probably beat crying alone in her hotel room. The room where she’d made love with Graham just a few hours ago.

## Page 18

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Tomorrow was Christmas, and she was alone. She'd survive, as she always did. But in the past thirty-six hours, everything had changed. Every part of her wanted to be with Graham.

\* \* \*

Graham hoisted himself up into the bus and settled into a seat by the window. Not that he cared about staring out at the perfect snowy universe, but it was the only one left. A woman with black hair and glasses with faux jewels embedded in the frames was rummaging through a big satchel on her lap in the seat next to him.

The woman pulled out a big hardcover library book with a plastic book jacket—a romance novel. “Hello,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m Alethea.” Graham shook it and uttered a quick pleasantry. He got the distinct impression this woman was a talker, and that was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

Things had happened so fast. Too bad he couldn't blame it all on his concussion. Hitting his head, making love with his ex-wife. Okay, the circumstances were crazy and the quarters were close. Temptation was understandable, and maybe even excusable. That didn't mean they were meant to be together.

Except he didn't believe that. Grace, however, did, and she'd told him, in no uncertain terms. Practically escorted him onto the bus. So he should let it all go and be glad he was headed back home.

He remembered one of his mom's favorite sayings. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice...

He'd done everything he knew how to do. He'd told her he loved her, for God's sake. But love hadn't been enough for her. She hadn't trusted him—that he could change, that they could do things better this time around. What else was he supposed to do?

“Did you just ask me if you've done the right thing?” the woman next to him asked.

“Oh, sorry,” he said. He was so discombobulated, he was talking to himself. He needed rest. His family. Somewhere where he could calm down and get his head straight. “I—I'm a little...overheated.” Graham pulled at his coat collar. The bus heater was cranked up full blast and blowing loudly, the wipers click-clicking back and forth. The driver checked his watch. They must be waiting on someone.

Why couldn't the damn bus get going already?

“Forgive me if I'm intruding,” the buttinsky woman said, “but you look a little upset. Can I help? I haven't got any kids of my own, but three strapping young men consider me their adoptive mother. And they're all around your age. I'm very intuitive. I can practically guess what's bothering you.”

“I'm fine, ma'am,” Graham said, uttering a silent prayer that this woman would simply stick to reading her book. Or fall asleep once the bus started moving. “Just having a crazy day.”

“I bet you had to leave your sweetheart behind. I can tell by how restless you are that you don't want to leave Mirror Lake.”

“How on earth do you know that?”

She gave a soft chuckle. “Everyone knows about the reindeer that went through your windshield. Where's your girl?”



Geez. Small towns. “She’s not—” Maybe it was his exhaustion that made him tell her the truth. “She’s my ex-wife, and she stayed behind. And it was just a regular deer.”

“Well, that’s awful. All of it. But it sounds like you’re running away, then. That’s never a solution, dear.”

“Actually, she told me to leave. She doesn’t want to take another chance on us.”

“Why not? Did you cheat on her? My ex cheated on me, and I’d never take that stinker back.”

“No, nothing like that. Our...our baby came early. Really early. We lost him. Things were never the same after that.” He’d suddenly developed diarrhea of the mouth. Maybe the concussion had altered his personality.

“What do you wish you could tell her?”

“Oh, we’ve pretty much said it all. It’s been a few years.”

“No, I mean, if you had a chance to tell her anything right now, what would you say?”

Graham looked out the window. It was nearly dark, the little square aglow from the lights hung on a giant pine, and all the old-fashioned lampposts wound with red and green lights. A perfectly tranquil holiday scene. Too bad nothing in his life was anywhere close to tranquil. “I’d say she’s the love of my life and I can’t live without her. And she shouldn’t be afraid to take another chance on me, because I’ve changed.”

“You can still make it better.”

“No, you don’t understand. We’re divorced.”

“Is she remarried? Are you?” She reached down between them and pulled up his hand. “I don’t see a ring on your finger.” This woman was touching him. Touching his hand. These Mirror Lake people!

“Okay, folks, we found our last passenger,” the bus driver said, settling in his seat and taking a sip of steaming coffee from a travel mug. “Everyone hold tight while she boards.”

A college kid stepped on board with a single book bag, wearing headphones to shut out the world. He envied her the carefree time of life.

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*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

Grace had told him to go, so he'd gone. Why did that feel so...wrong?

Now his seatmate was shaking his wrist. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Graham," he said.

"Well, Graham, sounds like you two had a rocky start, and a bad thing happened. But that you've somehow managed to reconnect."

"It was a mistake," he said. "We got...carried away."

She laughed. Laughed. "Do you still love her?" Alethea asked.

"I'll always love her," Graham said without hesitation.

"Well, when you imagine your life, is it better or worse without her?"

The loud whoosh of the hydraulic doors clattering shut punctuated her question, but before Grant could blink, the driver rolled the wheel and pulled out of the bus stop.

Grant thought about this morning, how he'd awakened tangled up with Grace, her sweet-smelling hair against his cheek, her familiar body curved into his. How perfect that had been, how peaceful. How right, and he could swear she'd felt it too.

Something kept tugging at him. When they'd been arguing and she'd been standing by the window, Grace had looked frightened.

He'd never been very good at reading between the lines. And Grace was a complicated woman. Maybe too complex for a face-value kind of guy like him.

But maybe he'd be frightened to take a chance too, if the people who were supposed to love him the most—his parents—had never showed him unconditional love. Grace's parents had moved on, built new lives, and left her behind. Why would she believe him to be any different?

He slumped down a little in his seat and shoved his hands hard into his jacket pockets. His right hand hit an edge of cardboard.

It was the lottery ticket from the gas station that he'd bought at the beginning of their trip.

Once upon a time, they hadn't been afraid to take a chance with each other. But life had gotten hard and they'd both made mistakes.

Now, on Christmas Eve, fate was dangling a second chance right in front of him. He could show Grace what unconditional love was. He understood her terror and her fright, but he believed their love could overcome that. How to make her believe it too?

Suddenly, an idea hit him. All he had to do was be a little crazy. A little out of the box. Not his usual forte for sure.

His seat partner was smiling at him. "True love always finds a way," she said solemnly, shaking a finger for emphasis. "Especially at Christmas."

Graham looked around at the passengers. Many were reading or scrolling through their phones—college-aged kids, grandmas, middle-aged men. A man had pulled a baseball cap down over his face and was snoring softly. A young woman was trying

to soothe her crying baby.

He didn't belong here, on this bus; he felt that clear through his bones. Nothing in his life was right without Grace. He just needed to summon the courage to do something about it.

Graham stood up, energized by a sudden burst of adrenaline coursing through his body, along with equal bursts of terror and bravado. "Stop the bus!" he shouted.

The passengers hushed their conversations. Even the baby stopped crying. The driver checked him out in the big mirror. "Sit down, son. You have too much to drink before you got on board?"

Graham walked forward, clutching the silver metal poles in the center aisle.

"You don't understand. Please stop. I need to get off."

"I'm not permitted to let out any passengers except at a designated stop. You're going to have to sit down, buddy."

He was officially causing trouble, which he'd never done before, and it was...exhilarating. "Please...it...it's Christmas. I have to go back."

"Oh, come on, Ed," Alethea said. "We're just ten minutes out. Let the guy go after his sweetheart."

The driver's eyes narrowed in the mirror. "No stops, Alethea. Not even for you. I can't go turning the bus around when I'm on a tight holiday schedule like this."

"Hey, come on," a woman from across the aisle said. "It's Christmas. You heard her, he has a sweetheart."

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

“Yeah,” said a father with a toddler on his lap. “C’mon. It’s Christmas.”

Graham rummaged through his pockets. “I can pay you a hundred bucks.”

Ralph braked, threw the bus in park, and swiveled around in his seat. “Where do you need dropped off at?”

“The bar—I forget the name. The one tourists don’t know about.”

“Take him to MacNamara’s,” Alethea said.

“I’ll do it,” the driver said, “if he’ll buy everyone a drink.”

“Fine. Anything,” Graham said, handing over all his cash. Now he was finally getting somewhere. If only Grace would have him back.

### CHAPTER 6

Grace took a sip of the apple cider ale the bartender, Scott MacNamara, slid in front of her. The wood-paneled Irish pub was packed with locals, chattering and laughing under the strings of Christmas lights that hung in loops from the ceiling. The whole bar, apparently, was going caroling soon, including a guy sitting next to her at the bar dressed as Santa. A friendly, fun place, if you lived here and knew everyone.

As it was, Grace was just going through the motions. She'd stopped by to have a drink with the kind people who'd helped her in the bridal shop, after which she planned to quickly bow out and go back to her room. However, they weren't even here yet, and all the other friendly people were keeping her busy chatting at a time when making conversation felt as painful as gallbladder surgery.

She didn't want to think of Graham. Or how she'd blown everything. Or how much she missed him already. She was so lost in thought, she didn't realize Scott was waiting for her reaction to the drink. "Local company," he said, nodding to her glass, where the apple cider ale fizzed cheerily.

"Oh, really?" she said, pretending to be more interested than she was. "How local?"

"Those three guys sitting right there," he said, pointing to three good-looking guys seated around a crowded table. "The Spikonos brothers. They make brandy, but this is their first foray into hard cider."

She, like Santa, did a double take. "The one on the end looks like Lukas Spikonos, the rock star."

“He’s from here. But everyone leaves him alone, if you know what I mean.”

Santa was still eyeballing the brothers.

“Hey, Santa, you okay over there?” Scott asked. “You want to try a hard cider?”

Santa put up a hand and mumbled no thanks, then went back to watching football on the big screen behind the bar.

“Delicious,” Grace said, giving her best smile, even though her heart was splintered in two.

Scott’s eyes narrowed. “Nice try, but you seem upset. Where’s that guy who got bucked by the reindeer?”

“He took a bus home to see his brother before he leaves for deployment.”

Graham. He’d told her he loved her. He’d offered her a second chance and she’d rejected him. She thought about calling him, but would he even take her call? On a bus surrounded by people? All she knew was she was so, so sorry, but she had no idea how she would even get him to believe her. She’d acted like she didn’t care, like she didn’t love him. Her gut told her it was too late.

As she fretted about what to do, more people entered the bar. The police chief, Tom, had his arm around Alex from the bridal shop, and Meg came in with her husband, Dr. Ben. The women recognized her immediately and walked right over to the bar.

“How are you doing, honey?” Alex asked, as if they were old friends instead of having just met an hour ago.

Grace held up her cider. “Just sampling the local flavor,” Grace said. “And thank



both of you for being so kind. I'm fine, honestly."

"Grace, I want you to meet someone," Meg said, giving her a side hug. "This is Tiffany Richards. She helps run the battered women's shelter. It's one of the places we're caroling tonight."

Grace shook hands with a woman with long wavy red hair, who wore a red coat and a red dress and heels. "It's great to meet you, Grace," she said, perching on the seat to Grace's left. "I'll just come right out and ask you—do you have any books left? The kids at the shelter would love them. And we'll be stopping there during caroling tonight."

Grace really did not want to go anywhere where she had to smile and talk to people. Or sing, for that matter. But it was Christmas Eve, and kids were involved. So she'd take the distraction and do something besides feel sorry for herself. "I'd love to give them out," she said. "Sounds like a plan."

Scott put a heaping plate of nachos in front of her. "On the house," he said. "We heard what you did at the hospital today."

"Oh...you didn't have to do that." She felt uncomfortable being thanked. Plus she felt like she had a pile of boulders filling up her stomach. There was no way she could eat.

"Please share these with me," she said to her seatmates. "Are you going caroling too?" she asked Santa, more to be friendly than anything else.

He cleared his throat. "Yep. Presents to give out at the hospital later." Grace thought he was a big guy, older, but up close, he just looked large, in a muscular way. He also looked young, maybe even younger than she was, and one of his eyebrows was falling off, but she hesitated to tell him so. And he certainly didn't seem very jolly.

But who was she to judge?

She'd visit the shelter with all the carolers as she promised and then quietly return to the hotel and call it a night. And then what? The long, lonely hours ahead did not seem appealing, and she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep. She'd booked a ticket on the morning bus tomorrow.

"You're the Santa the temp agency sent over, right?" Tiffany said. "See me after the caroling. I'll have your check." She reached over the bar in front of Grace and smoothed his fake brow back down. "There you go."

Suddenly, the redheaded woman hesitated. Looked hard into Santa's eyes and frowned. "You from here?"

The young Santa blushed under his fake beard. "You're mistaken, lady. I'm just passing through town."

The loud idle of a motor, a blast of exhaust, and the squeak of brakes sounded from outside the bar, turning everyone's attention to the door.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

Someone wiped a circle in one of the foggy windows. “There’s a Greyhound sitting out there.”

“There’s a dog in the snow?” a dark-haired woman with Italian features said, standing up. “Let’s bring him in!”

“I think they mean a Greyhoundbus, Bella,” a darkly handsome man said next to her, tugging her down.

“Those damn tourists,” Scott said, coming around the bar. “I’ll tell them to head to one of the bars on Main Street.”

Before Grace could take a gulp of her drink or Scott could reach the door, it opened. And in the doorway, taking up a good portion of it with his wide shoulders, was Graham.

\* \* \*

Graham. At the sight of his face, so familiar, so dear, Grace’s breath caught. Her heart felt as full and heavy as a basketball trapped in her chest. Graham slid into the now-empty chair next to her. “Did the bus break down?” she asked, mentally smacking herself for not saying something, anything, better than small talk. Fear seemed to freeze her tongue. Actually, she was terrified. Not to mention shaking all over.

He reached over and took a sip of her drink. “Nope. I’m back because I paid the driver a hundred bucks.” He smiled. “And promised everyone a free drink.” Sure enough, a gaggle of people were piling from the bus into the bar.

A middle-aged man passed by, playfully slapping Graham on the back on his way to the counter. “Thanks a lot, buddy.”

“No problem, Ed,” Graham said. He turned to Grace. “I’m here because of you.”

She looked up at him. “Because of me?” she whispered. Oh, one look in his warm brown eyes and she lost it. Relief and panic coursed through her. He’d come back for her? Despite the fact that she’d rejected him and hadn’t even had the courage to tell him how she really felt?

How could someone love her like that?

He placed his big hand over hers where she’d rested it on top of the mahogany bar. “Yeah,” he said. “Because I can’t live without you. Because I regret what happened to us every second of my life. Because I love you, and I believe we can begin again.”

“I ran after you, but by the time I got to the lobby, you were gone.” She stood up and ran her hand down his cheek, feeling the soft and scratchy textures of his skin. Like life, maybe. The better and the worse. Now it was time for the truth. He’d done everything for her, even stopped the bus and come back. She owed it to him to be honest.

“You’re the love of my life, Graham. I’ve never stopped needing you. I did a terrible job telling you that. I tried to steel myself against feeling things, like I was protecting myself from more hurt. And I never told you how much I loved you, but Graham, I never stopped.”

Their lips met, soft and warm and wonderful, under the festive lights. Grace slid her hands around his neck and kissed him like she’d never kissed him before. Kisses of passion and, more importantly, of promise, that they would stick together no matter what life threw at them next. He tasted like apple cider ale and forever, a pretty

amazing combination.

“Last call for Philly,” the bus driver yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Hey, buddy, you on the bus or no?”

“You can’t miss Christmas,” Grace whispered. “Your brother.”

“Christmas is wherever you are, Grace,” Graham said. “And I wouldn’t miss that for the world.” He gathered her hands in his. She felt his warmth spread all through her. “We can both get on the early bus tomorrow. Come home with me. We’ll spend Christmas together. And every day after that.”

“I’d love to go home with you,” she said. “I’ve missed your family.”

“They’ve missed you too. My mother will be thrilled. She hasn’t been the same since we split up.”

She stood on tiptoe and whispered in his ear. “Then let’s never split up again.”

“I don’t ever want to spend another night apart from you. Even if it involves neuro checks every two hours with blinding lights.” And he kissed her, long and sweet and slow.

\* \* \*

They spent the next few hours caroling and eating and drinking. Everyone was so well-intentioned and friendly that it was difficult to extricate themselves from the great company. It was near midnight when Graham gathered their coats and they finally made their way to the door.

“Are you sorry we stayed so late?” Grace asked Graham.

If it had been up to him, he would've left hours ago. "Well, I've wanted to be alone with you since the second I walked in, but it's been great to get to know everyone."

"I think we've made friends for life," she said.

"Maybe we should come back when the car's done and check this place out some more."

"You can't leave yet," Scott said.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:55 am*

Okay, these small-town people were great, but this was getting a little ridiculous. Because he wanted to get out of here and make love to his wife.

Something bumped Graham's elbow. It was Santa, who still hadn't taken off his suit or hat. The guy had to be baking under all those layers.

"We have a tradition in this bar at midnight," Scott said.

"Scotty, you are such a bullshitter," Drew Spikonos said. "He's got a tradition every night at midnight. It helps him sell drinks."

"Shut up, Spikonos," Scott said. "Everyone needs someone to kiss to bring Christmas in."

"What about you?" Drew asked.

"Are you volunteering?" Scott asked, and Drew made a face.

Graham wrapped his arm around Grace's waist. "I've got my someone," he said as she smiled and leaned closer to him. At least if they had to stay, he'd get a few kisses in.

"Okay, Santa old boy, pucker up!" Tiffany said, being a good sport about kissing the odd Santa. "But don't get gropey, you hear?"

The old-fashioned cuckoo clock above the bar struck midnight. Snow fell heavily outside the fogged windows. And everywhere, couples young and old kissed. Graham

gathered Grace in his arms and placed his lips close to her ear. “Merry Christmas,” he whispered. Then he kissed her, smooth and slow, enjoying the feel of her soft lips on his, and the way she fit perfectly in his arms. Where she belonged. He took his time because he wanted to get it right. He wanted it to be a Christmas kiss that was the most tender, wonderful, forgiving, and promising kiss she’d ever had. One for the ages.

Next to them, Santa seemed to really plant one on the young woman who ran the shelter. Afterward, she was breathing a little hard. She reached up and pulled off his once-again dangling white brow in one quick movement.

“You’re not old. You’re young.” She looked from the caterpillar-like brow in her palm to Santa’s face. “Do I—know you?”

“Looks like Santa’s looking for a happy ending too,” Graham said.

“Or at least a beginning,” Grace said.

“Merry Christmas, everybody,” Scott said as folks held up their drinks. “Good health, good cheer, and good friends to get you through.”

“Merry Christmas,” Graham called. “Hey!” he said to Grace, grinning widely. “Wonder if we won the lottery?” He held up the ticket from his pocket.

She slid it out of his hands, tore it in two, and let it fall to the floor. “We won the lottery, big guy. In every way that counts.” Then she kissed him again, and he had to agree that yes, he’d won the jackpot, all right. And he had a feeling that this was about to be the best Christmas ever.