

Chapter Three

Zak came to long before he let on.
What was the point?

He could tell from the whispered voices who was there. His best friend and Kay's brother, Mick, and his wife, Dreama. Pastor Dave, of course. They'd want to comfort him with platitudes that would offer no comfort.

All trying to make sense of the nonsensical.

"Zak? Are you with us, Zak?"

That was Dave. How long would they keep trying to rouse him? Could he wait them out? Would they just wander away if he pretended long enough?

"I don't think he can hear you, Pastor. He's still out."

Mick's voice sounded rough, gravelly, probably from crying. At least he had Dreama to lean on.

"Well, the orderly said he banged his head a good one when he hit the floor," Dreama chimed in.

The shock of Kay's death hung over the room like the brain fog of a too-early morning wake-up from a sound sleep. Only no

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one was asleep. As predicted in junior high, he was officially King of the Dead.

He thought of his two nicknames. Zee came from Kay, of course. She always said it was cute that both their nicknames were the first letters of their names. But King of the Dead he wore deeper—and unwillingly.

Zak chanced a slight opening of one eye, just as Mick reached for the arm of the bedside chair to lower himself into it.

“We’re all stunned,” Mick said.

Time passed in silence. What was there to say? “I’m sorry” wouldn’t cut it. If he heard “She’s in a better place,” it would drive him mad. And if anyone piped up with “Well, God must’ve needed another angel,” Zak would come out of his feigned unconsciousness and thrash them within an inch of their lives.

Right now, he did not care what God wanted. God took away his life and that would have to be answered for.

“You give and take away,” that chorus from church that he used to love, rattled into his brain. How could he have liked something so annoyingly repetitive?

“I thought it best to ask Barry Sasser to stand watch outside the door,” Dave said. “As word gets around on the prayer chain, folks will want to come down, and Zak would not want that right now, I’m sure.”

Zak let out a too-audible sigh and wished he could take it back. His time to hide was ending.

“I think he’s starting to come around, PD,” Dreama said. “He might be trying to speak, I’m not sure. I can’t make it out.”

Zak stirred in his best imitation of someone coming out of unconsciousness.

Dave leaned closer. “Zak? Zak? Are you okay? Are you with us?”

He stirred again. Blinked his eyes open. A performance that deserved an Oscar.

Mick snapped his fingers in front of Zak's face.

When Dreama slapped Mick's hand, Zak almost laughed. But any humor died in his throat as she then kissed the backs of his fingers. "Zak?" She spoke softly. "Come back to us, Zak."

They didn't understand. He didn't want to come back. Not to a life without Kay. He wanted more than anything to be gone too. She was dead. His life was also over.

He no longer had a home. He lived in a house, but it would never be home again—never had been really. Kay had been his true home.

Why couldn't everyone go away and leave him alone? That's what he wanted. But they wouldn't leave. Not unless he made them. So, he opened his eyes.

"Go home." The words burned his throat and came out low.

Mick laid his hand on Zak's arm. "You want to go home?"

The question made sense but wasn't what Zak meant.

"Doc Rawlings wants you to hang out here for a while because of the concussion and all."

He turned his head toward Mick, but only saw Kay. He tried again.

"I want you to go home. All of you. Just go." Then he closed his eyes again.

Pastor Dave cleared his throat. "We want to be with you. You need us and we need you. We're all trying to deal with Kay's loss together. It just seems best to—"

"I know what's best for me, PD. I can't do this right now. I can't face this today." He opened his eyes. "I need to be alone with God right now. Talk to Him, probably yell a little—inside."

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Dreama gazed at him, lips pursed. She wasn't making the purchase.

He scrambled. "Dreama, honey, I can't right now. But you'll all be with me in prayer. Besides, you need to be home with the kids. They need you too."

Bingo. He'd knocked that one out of the park. Her Mommy gene was going crazy, and she wanted to get home to hold Satchel and Jazz close.

Dreama got into his face. "Your BS isn't working. I want you to know that." Her voice was low, but full of compassion. Yet the struggle in her eyes told him he was right.

"Go, Dreama." He inclined his head toward the door. "They need you. You know I'm right."

She held his gaze a moment before taking Mick's hand and walking toward the exit.

"We'll be back tomorrow." The statement was more like a warning than a promise. "This is going to be hard for us all, Zak. Don't shut us out. We need each other."

Pastor Dave nodded his head to indicate he'd be following her in just a moment. As the door closed, he eyed Zak. "She's right, but you know that."

Dave bowed his head and close his eyes in a silent prayer. Then he lifted his head again. "I'm going to pray with you and then leave you alone as requested, but we *will* be back tomorrow. We aren't walking away."

The older man laid his hand on Zak's shoulder and the warmth in his touch almost made Zak cry, but he pushed the emotion down and endured. Kings didn't cry.

"Father, we do not understand anything that has happened tonight. So much suffering. So many in pain. But our brother and friend is hurting like he never has before."

"Like he has too often before." Zak stiffened and edited the prayer internally.

Dave went on, emotion choking his words. “We ask that you inhabit his mind and provide comfort—comfort and rest. We don’t ask for answers, because there aren’t any that will suffice. Right now, we only ask that you walk this road beside us and that you never leave us.”

With the prayer over, Dave opened his eyes, and the compassion in them brought tears to Zak’s.

“Barry is in the hall,” Dave said. “He’ll stay until visiting hours are over. He’s watching over you.”

Dave grabbed his coat off the chair and headed for the door. Before he reached it, he swiveled back around.

Zak bit his tongue.

“Oh, Barry also convinced Sloan to drop the charges, so there’s that.” Dave dipped his head and looked down. “You know I lost my first wife early, right?”

Zak had forgotten.

“You don’t get over it. Not really. But you can get *through* it. With help.”

Zak stared at the pastor whose preaching he’d listened to for the past ten years. He could not recall a single word from those sermons that offered him comfort now.

The pastor’s shoulders slumped and he turned back toward the door.

“Dave?”

The man turned toward him again, eyes expectant.

“Would you ask Barry to come in? On your way out, I mean.”



ZAK’S REPORTER mind never shut off. He did not want to hear Barry’s report, but he listened anyway, the reporter in him

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taking mental notes according to the time-honored journalist's fact-gathering technique he'd learned in college. The Five W's and an H.

Who? Katharine Renee Sharp Cooper.

What? Dead, D.O.A., deceased.

Where? Behind the wheel of her Honda Accord. On the crest of the hill on Templeton Highway. Beneath the wheels of a tour bus that hit a sheet of black ice and slid sideways on the road.

When? December 11, 2021, 6:34 p.m.

Why? Drunk driver. College student from Templeton University on his way from one Christmas party to the next. Because of his excessive speed, he'd lost control of his car on the icy road and slid into the bus, which slid into the Accord. Contributing factor: Deceased was on her cell phone.

She'd tried to call him because the roads were worse than she thought. He'd made her promise to call.

In the end, her death was his fault. He shouldn't have let her go.

How? Her neck snapped when the bus slammed into her Accord. She had internal injuries, as well, but the neck injury did her in.

"Her death was quick." Barry didn't lift his face from his notes.

She'd been alive—barely—when airlifted but not when she arrived at the hospital.

So far, twelve people from the bus had also lost their lives. Several others were recovering. College Boy had walked away with only a few scratches and a broken pinkie finger on his right hand.

Zak's editor mind kicked in and assessed the story's value, clicking each item that made it newsworthy. Multiple fatalities?

Check. Alcohol involved? Check. Perp still alive? Check. Tragedy near Christmas? Check. Deceased well known in the community? Check.

Yep, front page news for sure. This story would sell papers. Photo on the front. Package it. Follow the story for several weeks, maybe months, while the kid is chased through the court system. Experts—and local pundits—would debate the safety of phones in cars. Lawsuits were already being filed against the bus company. The angles were unlimited.

Zak came out of his trance, his chest heaving. Tears soaked the front of his hospital gown.

The editor was efficient. All business.

The husband was falling apart.



OVER THE FIRST couple months after Kay's death, Zak did all the right things. Accepted condolences. Allowed people to say the trivial, occasionally painful, things people say when a loved one died. Smiled weakly. Demurred when insensitive clods asked if he'd remarry one day. Pretended not to notice when divorcees and widows tested the waters. And sank deeper into his grief.

Zak's assistant editor had adequately, if begrudgingly, kept the paper functioning until Zak's return—which was too soon, but what else did he have to do? If he had to spend another day roaming his house with memories of Kay in every nook and cranny, he'd drown in his grief. The *Gazette* became his reprieve.

Coworkers tiptoed around him, not talking about their spouses or their fun family times. Finally, and happily, they moved on and assumed Zak had as well.

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He attended church but took no part in the services. He filled his spot in a pew—but not their pew. Though he stayed in the presence of God's people, by degrees, he stepped away from God. He'd abandoned Zak that December night. If God didn't need him, then he didn't need God either.