

The Prayer

New York, 1996

Flawless, white snowflakes laced her windows as she reluctantly flipped her office calendar to the month of February. She sighed. Another Valentine's Day she would have to spend alone.

Allison's lips formed a sad smile as she recalled her first love; Danny, class of '89. Their relationship had seemed perfect in every way, that is, until he walked out of her life and into someone else's, trampling her heart in the wake. At first, she threw herself into her job to mask the pain she felt and the memories of having a warm hand to hold. But the Lord was quick to change her bitter attitude into a forgiving one. Still---she bit her lip---the past stung.

She took a deep breath. *It's so hard living in remembrance of earlier times. Why can't I just let it go and move on?* In a few short days, to her dismay, she would be watching happy couples stroll through the city streets from the confines of the break room.

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Tomorrow. All she had to do was make it through tomorrow. Relaxing on the couch with COPS playing in the background, Allison prayed she would get through another lonely holiday. Focusing on the television, her mouth began to water. Suddenly craving her favorite coffee, she pulled on her boots, grabbed a winter coat from the hall closet, and made her way to Buckies, already tasting the first sip of a delicious caramel macchiato on her frozen tongue.

She let her lungs take their fill of fresh, crisp air. Maybe after her refreshment, she would take the long way home. A cool breeze stirred her hair and she knew her cheeks were already flushed, but a feeling of warmth enclosed her chilled body as she stepped across the coffee shop entrance. "Finally." Shedding her coat, she placed her order and patiently waited at the counter until the moment her hands curved around the steaming cup.

Closing her eyes in delight, Allison turned to find a seat. A tiny gasp sounded, causing her gaze to land on the scalding hot coffee dripping down the FDNY jacket that filled her vision. She covered her hand over her mouth, realizing she was the one who had made the sound. But now, she found herself at a loss for words as she lowered her eyes to stare at her victim's work boots, caked with melting ice and snow.

"Are you alright miss?" Shawn grinned into the woman's apologetic face, hoping to ease her fear.

"Am I alright?" Allison uttered a nervous laugh and stumbled over her words. "Are...are *you* alright?"

"It's just coffee." Shawn shrugged at the blond-haired green-eyed beauty. Then, he leaned forward to whisper so only she could hear. "*Hot* coffee." When she sighed audibly with

relief and sent him a wry smile, satisfaction lined his features. His teasing had done the trick. Absently taking notice of her unclaimed ring finger, his satisfaction only deepened.

Allison felt all but lost in the presence of the handsome firefighter who towered over her. His dark brown hair and big blue eyes captivated her. She could stare into those pools of crystal ocean forever...

"I was just about to place an order, and my guess is, you will want to place one too." He winked. "Care to join me? I hate sitting alone."

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Allison awoke to the ringing of her Motorola cell phone. *Shawn*. Knowing he was calling to remind her yet again of their date, she smiled to herself. How could she forget? The man had been her every thought for the past year and she thanked God for bringing him into her life. Lately, their favorite thing to do together was pray. They even had a special verse they attributed to their relationship; one that bound them to the glory of their King. *"Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things..."*

The day went by in a blur, and before he could process the miracle the Lord had blessed him with, Shawn had led Allison to the top floor of the building in which she worked and lowered himself to one knee. He would forever cherish the moment he asked her to be his wife.

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On the eve of her second wedding anniversary, Allison gazed out of her office window, a feeling of joy bubbling inside of her, along with a gnawing pain. In a few minutes, she would be on her way to greet Shawn at the coffee shop where they had first met. She massaged her temples, willing away the headache that had worsened throughout the day. With the telling chime of her clock, she reached for her purse. Suddenly, she felt a wave of nausea rise. Unable to tamper the feeling, she ran for the bathroom, but the space around her grew blurry. Someone was calling her name, but it was faint and distant, as if she was caught in a snowstorm. A cry sounded. Closing her eyes, Allison couldn't remember how or when she had ended up on the floor.

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Shawn remembered the first time Allison had held their son. Her face had glowed with pure pleasure. *"Oh, Shawn!"* A single tear had slid down her cheek. *"He's beautiful."* His throat tightened. Would she ever get that memory back? *A brain aneurism. A coma.* Oh God, it was too much! After weeks, she had finally woken up, but that didn't change the original diagnosis. He leaned forward and placed his head in his hands, feeling helpless as a husband, and as a father. The doctor had done his best to explain the situation, but Shawn still felt like he was trying to

piece together a puzzle that was never intended to form a picture. What would happen to them now? He withheld a choked sob. *Help me believe Lord, help us bear this new burden. Help us endure this new trial.*

“Sir?”

Shawn looked up.

“The doctor is ready for you to come in now and introduce yourself.”

The words felt like a knife in his gut. *Introduce himself? To his wife?* He slid the hospital room door open and stepped inside, bracing himself for the worst. But the second his eyes met hers, he knew he couldn’t keep the promise he had previously made to the doctor. He couldn’t proceed slowly. Instead, he rushed to her side in hopeful expectation.

Allison blinked and looked up at the man in confusion. “I’m sorry, but, who are you?”

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New York, 2001

Allison sat alone in the World Trade Center’s South Tower building. Her fifth-floor office was beginning to feel stuffy. Drumming her fingers over her keyboard, she released a sigh. It had been a slow week. Flopping backward in her leather chair, she let her arms hang loose and used the tips of her shoes to spin around. Her circular movements knocked a pen to the floor. Bending to grasp it, her gaze landed on a half-open desk drawer. She placed the pen on top of the hard surface above her head and grasped the drawer’s cold, metal knob. Pulling it completely open, she peered at its contents. A wave of sadness, guilt, and longing swept over her as she stared at the single photograph that lay tucked away inside. Pulling it out, she sat back in her chair once again.

She rubbed a manicured finger over the dusty faces, the faces a different woman, not her, had loved. A handsome man with dark brown eyes smiled back at her, and the baby in his arms looked like a tiny angel. Hot tears threatened to surface and she quickly tampered the realization that she was a wife, a mother. No. Allison shook her head. She was neither of those things, and yet, her heart ached with loss as if she had been. *Oh Shawn, I hope you have found some way to forgive me. I just don’t remember you, and I don’t think I ever will.* She closed her eyes and was taken back to the last conversation they ever had...the only one she remembered...

“Allison!” he lunged for her hand.

“Don’t!” She pulled away from him, sobbing. “I don’t know you,” she glanced down at the baby in his arms and trembled, “and I don’t know *him*.”

“But you will! Please,” he begged as he held her son out for her to see, tears staining his pale cheeks. He looked so tired, so worn. “Give us a chance.” The words were laced with sorrow.

Allison turned her face away and wiped her wet cheeks with the sleeve of her sweater. She tried to drown out his desperate pleas, but it was no use. They continued to cry out like an echo invading her mind. This was all too much. She stared at the open door beside her, and it seemed to open even wider, beckoning her to flee. And more than anything, she wanted to take flight. This room was a cage. He asked her to give them a chance, but she could already feel herself breaking the lock. “No,” she folded her arms over her chest. “I can’t.”

Not once did Shawn take his eyes off of her, and his heart skipped a beat. “Love believes and hopes *all* things, Allison.” His voice broke. “I’ll never stop believing in our marriage, and I’ll never stop hoping that one day,” he swallowed, “you’ll come back to me.” He cradled the little baby closer to his chest, caressing the boy’s nose with his own. “To us.”

She looked up at him then, and the look in his eyes made her want to weep all over again, but she stood her ground. He reached for something in his pocket and placed it in her hands. She grasped it without so much as a curious glance. There was no turning back now. As she headed for the door, she braved one last look over her shoulder at the two people she had loved most in the world, or at least, thought she had. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, and then she was gone...

Allison opened her eyes again, feeling her chest tighten at the memory. *The photograph.* Shawn had given it to her as a goodbye, and after all these years, she couldn’t seem to let it go. Had she done the right thing by leaving? Weren’t they better off without her? She stared blankly out her office window and felt a small tug at her heart. But was *she* better off without them? Regardless of the answer, she knew no matter what the doctors had said, no matter what her friends had told her, and no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to move on.

Movement in the sky suddenly caught Allison’s attention. In an instant faster than she could have ever imagined, all the blood drained from her face and she blinked in silent horror. Jaw dropping, she prayed it was only a terrible dream. Rising from her seat, she walked closer toward her window as if in a daze. Shock coursed through her, wringing every nerve. She reached out to place a hand on the wall beside her, bracing herself beneath its solidity. Through the glass, she witnessed a scene that nearly tore her in two. It was a view engulfed with smoke, fire, and total chaos. The sound of panicked television reports being blasted in and out of other offices filled her senses until her head swam. *Plane crash...firefighters...evacuation...accident.* She brought a shaky hand to her mouth, fearing she might be sick. Minutes went by and she couldn’t bring herself to move. She wasn’t sure she was still breathing, but something inside of her registered, and she knew the exact moment she became aware of what was happening. It was a moment she knew she would never forget, because as her feet began to sway from under her, she knew it was no earthquake, it was no accident. *Second plane...*

“Lord,” Allison prayed fervently with a shuddering breath, “please don’t let me die today.” She tightly clutched the photograph between her fingers and begged her Heavenly Father for a second chance, even as she felt the walls around her begin to crumble.

Three years apart was long enough.

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“Get as many people out as you can! It’s going to collapse!”

Shawn’s face was scorched with heat. Ash and debris filled his vision, making it difficult to find those who needed his help. He reminded himself to breathe. His mask protected him from inhaling too much smoke, but soon, it wouldn’t be enough.

He released a sharp exhale when he almost tripped over a woman lying on the ground. She was lucky to have evacuated in time, but it was clear she hadn’t emerged unscathed. Picking her up, she remained limp in his arms as he carried her to a nearby ambulance. Helping to place her on a stretcher, he brushed the matted hair from her ash-covered face and sucked in a breath. His heart lurched. *Alli!* It took everything in him not to jump in the rescue vehicle and ride with her until they reached the hospital. But right now, there were others who needed him more than she. With a groan, he watched her disappear...again. Determination crept through his features. This time, he wouldn’t let her go without a fight. He found himself praying for both her safety, and his. He bowed his head before continuing his mission. He knew that today’s tragedy would not pass without lasting heartache and suffering.

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It had been weeks since September 11, 2001, and by nothing short of God’s grace, Shawn was still in one piece. He looked down at the slender hand he was holding and grimaced. *Alli* wasn’t. Instead, she was the victim of another coma and brain trauma. A muscle in his jaw clenched. He glanced about the stark-white hospital room and old memories resurfaced. Painful memories. He focused on the steady beeping of her breathing machine when a tiny squeal interrupted his thoughts. “Benny!” The little boy ran, arms and legs flailing with pure delight, toward his father. Shawn laughed and scooped the almost four-year-old up in his arms, hugging him tight. “How was Grandma today, buddy?” Benjamin proceeded to tell him all about his eventful day, unable to suppress a giant grin. His smile only deepened when he turned to peer into *Alli*’s peaceful face from his perch on Shawn’s lap. Shawn had simply told Benjamin that this woman was a friend, and from the start, Benjamin had been captivated by her sleeping form. He jumped down and wrapped his little fingers around her other hand, anxiously peering up at his father. Shawn caught the question in his eyes.

“No, son.” He shook his head. “She hasn’t woken up yet.” He playfully reached across the bed and tousled the boy’s hair. “But you’ll be the first to know when she does, okay!” Benny enthusiastically nodded his approval.

Suddenly, one of the monitors attached to *Alli* made an alarming sound and three nurses rushed in. The younger of the two took Benjamin gently by the hand and led him out of the room so he wouldn’t be in the way. Shawn prepared his appeal to stay, but thankfully no one dismissed his presence. A long five minutes later, he was relieved to learn *Alli* was breathing on her own. A huge improvement. The nurses eventually left and he was alone with her once more. His fingers found hers and the pleasant warmth he had felt earlier swiftly returned. In the quiet room, Shawn resisted the urge to speak the prayer that had been his last words to her. But he lost the

fight. Closing his eyes, he let the words flow freely out of the place in his spirit where he had long since kept them buried.

“Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Allison’s chest rose and fell with every even breath. Then, she inhaled deeply. Her eyelids slowly fluttered open. Dark lashes landed on a man bent over her still form, the one, she figured, who had just recited the prayer. She knew that prayer. Not just heard it before, but *knew* it. Confusion swept over her features and she arched her brow, willing her strained eyes to catch a better glimpse of the blurred figure. Who was he? And *where* was she? An image flashed before her mind and she suddenly remembered that fateful day, that tragic scene she had witnessed, and endured. Everything came back like a crashing wave.

“Alli.” A hesitant voice beckoned her back to the present.

Alli? The nickname sent a fresh tingling down her spine. She hadn’t been called that in many years. In fact, no one had ever called her that except...

Shawn grasped both her hands and squeezed tighter. *Please, Lord. Please let her remember.* His face was close to hers, close enough to feel the warmth of her breath on his face. His gaze focused on her narrowed eyes and the wrinkles that creased her forehead. She was trying to discern something, and for the smallest second, he thought he saw a glimmer of recognition flash in her beautiful, emerald-green eyes. Not just recognition, but recollection. For the first time since her previous accident, hope stirred inside of him.

A small bang averted her attention from Shawn to the clear, hospital glass. His stomach twisted as he watched her take in every inch of the little boy waiting patiently on the other side. He stood there with his backpack straps across both shoulders and his untied shoelaces dragging the tiled floor. His sparkling green eyes peered out through wisps of blond hair and he wore a large, lopsided grin that spread across his entire face. One of his hands was pressed flat against the glass and he pressed his face against the pane until his cheeks were smushed.

A small sob caused Shawn’s heart to give a little flip. At first, he wondered if the sound had belonged to him, but when he looked at Alli, whose gaze hadn’t left the glass, Shawn had his answer, and he felt as if the entire ground beneath his feet had shifted.

He held his breath as a single tear slid down his wife’s cheek.

Questions:

Setting: late 90s, early 2000s, central New York. Very busy and hectic for both main characters of the story. Stressful work environments due to heavy traffics of people and work.

Genre: Drama. There is love involved, but that is what makes the story so dramatic at times. Both characters stress over the relationship they are in, which creates drama for the plot to build off of. Circumstances and unfortunate events also bring on drama within the story.

Characters: The main characters are Allison, Shawn, and their son Benjamin, who shows up midway through the story. Benjamin makes his appearance two-thirds of the way into the entire plot, which he then is used to piece together parts of the story from Allison's perspective.

Conflict: The conflict of the story is when Allison suffers a major medical accident, on top of her getting caught in the midst of 9/11. Both of these events have a negative effect on her memory, which in turn provides suspense and worry about where she might end up after everything.