

COMING HOME

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THE MOON WAS a mere sliver of white in the inky midnight sky as I drove home. I followed an old Volvo down the otherwise deserted country road, singing along to Keith Urban on the stereo. My voice cracked and I laughed. 'I'll never be able to give up my day job,' I told the stereo, 'but at least I get to see Keithy-babe in concert this year. Woo-hoo!' I pumped my fist into the air. 'Looking forward to that.' Returning my hand to the wheel I began to sing again, tapping my fingers in a rhythm completely out of time to the beat of the music.

I glanced in the rear-view mirror and noted a large truck approaching in the distance, lit up like a Christmas tree. I looked back to the front windscreen just in time to see the Volvo braking hard and swerving to the right. *Oh crap. What on earth?* I stabbed at the brakes, my foot hitting the floor trying to stop the momentum of the car. I felt the steering wheel wrench out of my hands, my little Toyota swerving to the right. With all of my strength, I grabbed the wheel again and yanked it the other way, trying to turn the car away from the Volvo. My heart pounded against my ribcage in a frantic rhythm. I stopped just short of the right bumper of the old car in front of me. We were blocking both sides of the road.

A flash of movement caught my eye and I saw a stray dog, thin and mangy and with its tail tucked between its legs, scamper into the trees alongside the road. Thankfully it had survived its suicidal dash. I put a hand to my heart, relieved that the dog was okay—but adrenaline still pumped through my body.

The whole incident had taken only a moment, but both the Volvo driver and I had narrowly escaped a nasty accident; one caused all because a dog ran across the road at the wrong time. I heard my Dad's voice, 'Don't ever swerve for an animal, you'll end up getting yourself killed.' I was glad that the driver in front of me hadn't learnt that piece of advice. From what I'd seen of it, the poor dog looked like it was famished. Seeing its ribs through its coat broke my heart. I wondered if I could coax it out with the remnants of my lunch and at least take it to a vet or an animal shelter to get checked out.

I jumped as a horn blared behind me. The unexpected sound broke through my contemplation and I realised I was still sitting with my car in the middle of the road. I looked in my rear-view mirror and brilliant white light blinded me. *Oh God. Oh no.* I'd forgotten the truck and it was barrelling towards me. I looked back down to see the Volvo stopped in front of me. It was still blocking the road—and me—and not moving. Why wasn't it moving? Didn't they realise the danger we were in? I tooted my horn several times. I could see the silhouette of the driver in the beam of my headlights. Why didn't they move? My heart began to race again, fear a metallic taste on my tongue. I had nowhere to go.

The truck's horn blared, louder, more urgent. He wasn't stopping. Why wasn't he stopping? Why wasn't the Volvo driver moving? *What the hell?* I was trapped. My thoughts raced. I had to move. I had to get myself out of the way first, then try and move the other car. I slammed my Toyota into reverse, thinking if I could just get onto the shoulder of the road then the truck would at least have a chance to drive between us and no one would get hurt. My hand, slick with sweat, slipped on the gear stick as I tried to put it into drive. I looked in the mirror. In the few seconds since my first glance, the truck was so much closer. I needed to move.

Time slowed to a crawl and my thoughts turned to Daniel, my Daniel, waiting for me to come home. My last words to him rang through my mind. 'I love you. Yes, I always drive carefully. I love you, see you soon.' Tears swelled in my eyes. I had driven carefully, but for only a moment—just a split second in time—I didn't. A split second when I paused to think about a stray dog and how to save it and now . . . now I had to try and save myself.

My foot slammed on the accelerator but, in my panic, the edge of my shoe caught the brake and the car stopped dead with the engine roaring. I swore and my stomach dropped to my toes. I looked in the mirror and was again blinded by light. He was too close. I closed my eyes and braced myself for impact.

I thought again of Daniel, and how hard this would be for him. And my parents—*oh no*. They were still away on holidays. My poor sister would have the burden of calling and telling them. Tears began to trickle down my face.

I could smell rubber burning, the stench invading my nostrils. I panted through my mouth, my breath coming hard and fast. The smell was unbearable. The driver sounded his horn and I could hear his brakes screaming as he got closer, ever closer.

The moment I hit my brakes until now had gone by almost quicker than I could blink, but I could have sworn two hours had passed. All the thoughts, relevant, irrelevant, past, present and future racing through my mind—surely it was longer than a few seconds?

I wished I told my family that I loved them more often; that I'd given them hugs more; that I had no doubts they knew how I felt about them. Daniel knew how I felt—better than I did sometimes. God, I loved that man. He was so special, an amazing man, and he loved me back. I was so lucky.

After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, I carefully cracked open one eye, then the other. Everything seemed the same. I looked around. It was eerily quiet now. The horn had stopped blaring, the brakes no longer screamed, just a stillness, a peacefulness, in the aftermath of such freakishness. It was a miracle. The truck driver had managed to stop. My heart rate began to slow.

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After pulling into our driveway, I switched off the engine. I sat for a moment or two, staring at my hands in my lap, shaking like leaves in a storm. The aftermath of the accident and my drive home were a complete blur. All I could recall was the need to get home to Daniel. To feel his arms around me once more. I couldn't believe I survived not one, but two close calls in such a short space of time. It was incredible. I ran my hand over my face, feeling sick and happy and scared and elated all rolled into one big stomach-churning ball. I looked at our front door and smiled to myself, knowing that I was the luckiest woman on earth because I got to spend the rest of my life with the man waiting so patiently for me on the other side. I opened the car door and steadied myself on the armrest as I climbed out, my knees imitating jelly and not yet inclined to hold me up.

Two policemen barrelled past me and knocked on the front door. Shocked by their rudeness, I called out, 'Hey, what about an "excuse me"? Or at least a "can we pass?"' They ignored me and waited for the door to open, their expressions serious. Daniel came to the door and I saw him hesitate at their presence.

'Sir, are you Mr Daniel Smythe?'

I watched as Daniel nodded.

'We are very sorry to inform you there has been a double fatality on Grieg's Road tonight. Your wife and another driver were killed instantly when a truck failed to stop.'

Denial ripped a scream from Daniel as he sank to the floor.