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RACHAEL



RACHAEL AND I HAD BEEN BEST FRIENDS AT ARVADA WEST HIGH School in Colorado, where we both grew up. We first met when we tried out for the cheerleading squad, and the connection was immediate. Everyone loved Rachael! She was stunningly beautiful. Her brown ringlet curls were perfect, her big, bright eyes lit up a room, and her smile and laugh were infectious. Rachael's personality was just as attractive as her physical beauty. She was everyone's friend. If you were around her, you felt a sense of specialness. Because of her beauty, people were drawn to her, and that allowed her to influence many. She could almost sparkle and emit positivity. I don't think I ever remember seeing her truly sad. She exuded happiness, joy, and optimism. That is not to say she did not have difficulties in her life. We all do—and she was no exception. She just seemed to choose not to give space in her mind or heart for those things.

Besides being cheerleaders together, Rach and I hung out as often as we could. She spent countless hours at my house playing games, making dinner, and hanging out with my family and me. If she was not working or busy, she was at my house. In our senior year of high school, we were selected to be co-captains of our cheer squad. It was an honor neither of us felt qualified for, and we were grateful to have each other to lean on. While I was more of a “get down to business”

and “keep everyone in line” type of leader, Rach perfectly balanced me out with her “smile, this is supposed to be fun” and “you can do it, you’re amazing” influence.

After high school, life’s understandable circumstances created distance, but our connection and friendship did not wane. Rachael went off to college and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in human services from Metropolitan State University in Denver. I attended Brigham Young University in Provo, and after my first year, I planned to marry my high school sweetheart, Patrick. Since Pat and I met in high school, Rachael had been part of all our firsts, and she was excited for me to start the next phase of my life. Pat joined the United States Marine Corps, and our excitement about getting married was postponed as he left to serve in Iraq for his first deployment. During that time, I returned home and spent my days working and spending time with Rachael—mostly planning my upcoming wedding. We had a blast designing flower arrangements and picking out jewelry. Eight months later, Pat finally returned, and we were able to get married. Rachael was one of my bridesmaids and even designed and made my wedding shoes. Rachael and I talked all the time and were still very close when it happened . . .

Patrick and I were newly married, enjoying the adventure of living away from home and starting our life together after a forced time apart. We were living in Southern California while Pat was stationed at Camp Pendleton. One day, I was standing in our tiny apartment living room; the sliding glass back door was open to let the Southern California breeze flow in. My cell phone rang, and I saw it was a Colorado number I didn’t recognize. I answered it and heard Rachael’s stepmom, Virgie, in a panic. She was trying to get in touch with Rachael’s biological mother, who lived in California, and called the first California number she found.

Rachael had been in a horrific accident.

Rachael was in the ICU and not expected to live, and that was all Virgie knew. I hung up the phone, and panic set in. I dropped to my knees and sobbed. In one phone call—in one second—everything changed. My young, sweet, happy, vibrant friend was going to die. I audibly sobbed as I begged my Heavenly Father to care for her. I called my parents and my husband, then found a flight home that evening.

As I was frantically packing, there was a soft knock at my door. I went and opened it, and on my welcome mat, I found a bar of chocolate and a card. The anonymous gift-giver had heard my sobbing plea to the heavens from my open back door and wanted me to know they would also be praying for my sweet friend. My Heavenly Father was aware of Rachael and me and was already sending angels to attend to me.

It was a very emotionally long plane ride. Anxiety and faith competed to fill the space in my mind. I remembered learning that faith and fear could not coexist, but in that moment, it did not seem possible for either to dominate. My parents picked me up from the airport, and we drove straight to Denver Health Medical Center, a top Level 1 Trauma Center, where Rachael had been transported. The ICU waiting room was full. Rachael's parents, sister, cousins, and friends were sitting on the few chairs provided, lining the floor and the walls. Virgie came over to me, and I hugged her. The tears began to flow again. The room was full of love and hope, somehow equally balanced by comparable amounts of fear and sadness.

It was there that I learned of the extent and details of the accident. Rachael was nannying two young boys, ages four and two. She had taken them to the zoo and was on her way home. Her small four-door sedan was the perfect commuter vehicle. Driving in the middle lane of westbound I-70, a gravel semi-truck changed lanes without looking. (We would later find out that the driver was uninsured, unlicensed, and under the influence.) As the driver tried to change lanes, he drove up and over Rachael's car, pinning her vehicle under the massive gravel bin. The full weight and pressure of the semi-truck crushed the entire driver's quarter of her car. The firefighters and paramedics who were called to the scene of the accident used the jaws of life to pry Rachael's body out from under the semi-truck. Somehow still conscious, Rachael was asking about the young boys who were in her care as they worked to free her from her metal prison. In the back seat, the sweet four-year-old boy told the paramedics, "That truck fell on us!"

The young boys miraculously had no injuries from the incident.

Rachael's surgeon came to update the anxious family in the waiting room. She had survived the initial trauma surgery, but the coming hours and days would determine her future. Rachael had suffered a

massive head trauma. Her medical team commented that if she had even broken her pinky finger, she would have died because her brain would have needed to expend too much valuable energy to work on other issues.

Rachael fell into a coma post-surgery. If (and it was a big *if*) she survived the next seventy-two hours, she would clear the first medical hurdle. After that, potential recovery would be up to her body. If she remained in the coma for more than three weeks, survival would be unlikely. The surgeons informed us that only two visitors were allowed at a time. To reduce stimulation, we were instructed to limit our conversations, to use only a whispering voice, and not to touch her. After her parents and sister visited her, they came and got me, inviting me to go in. They told me she would want to know I was there.

In the waiting room, my mom and dad lovingly hugged and tried to comfort Rachael's parents. They had gotten to know them over the course of Rach and my close friendship. Rachael and her family were not members of our church. However, my dad was prompted to explain priesthood blessings and then asked if they would like Rachael to receive one. Without hesitation, and in fact, with more urgency, they said they would be very grateful if he would do that. They expressed their desire for all the prayers and blessings anyone of any faith was willing to offer. My dad called my grandpa, who lived close, and also knew and loved Rachael, to come to the hospital.

I will never forget what I saw when I walked into that room. There were more tubes, wires, and lines coming from Rachael's fragile body than I could count. She lay still, covered in a cold white sheet and stiff hospital blanket. Noisy ventilators and monitors buzzed and beeped all around us, with every system being tracked and managed by pumps and equipment. Her head was shaved, her gorgeous curls gone. A tracheotomy tube protruded from her throat to force air into her lungs, which mechanically maintained her breathing.

But her face was what I noticed most of all. Surgeons removed the sides of her skull to allow her brain to swell as necessary, unrestricted. Without the confinement of her bones, her face swelled more than one would think is possible. I could see only about four inches of the pillow sticking out on either side of her now elongated oval-shaped head. The slits of her eyes each stretched several inches long. I had expected

to see cuts and scratches, but oddly, there were none. My beautiful, young, bubbly friend's face was unrecognizable as her brain swelled, and with it, her entire head seemed to expand to compensate. It was hard to comprehend what I was looking at. But she was alive.

My dad and grandpa met me in the room. Because of the spiritual nature of their visit, the medical staff adjusted the two-person limit and allowed Rachael's dad, my dad, my grandpa, and me to all be in the room. Limiting her brain activity was vital to her survival at this point, so they asked that she not be touched. To comply, my dad and grandpa hovered their hands over her head to give her the blessing. The words they spoke and the feeling in the room were palpable, even to Rachael's father. A blessing of healing was pronounced upon her and a promise that "the effects of this accident would only be known to those who have known you before." It was simultaneously powerful and hard to believe. Looking at this unrecognizable human shell of my friend, it was difficult to try to wrap my brain around the enormity of this blessing! Would no one be able to tell? Would the effects be minimal? I knew miracles were real, but how could this be possible?