

## *An Excerpt of "The Gift – A Journey of Acceptance"*

### *Chapter 3*

#### *A Cry in the Night*

The Summer of '69'

Norfolk, VA

Years had passed, and at times, the faint smell of orange blossoms filled the air. This sweet smelling scent would surround me like an invisible cloud of vapors that immediately brought a smile to my face and jubilation to my heart. As if this particular perfume was my dear grandmother's calling card, and she was near. I would immediately recall how years earlier, when I was just a child, every summer on her annual trip north, Grammy had brought me a vial of this perfume that could only be found in Florida. If anyone has experienced a similar experience, you know exactly what I mean. Taking in a deep breath, I would find myself stopping whatever I was doing and yearn to see her sweet face again. Just to hold her hand, or hear her sweet voice would be music to my ears.

Life for me had changed dramatically since her passing. I was now married, expecting my first child and living in Norfolk, Virginia. My husband was in the Navy, temporarily stationed in Maryland while his ship was in dry-docking for repairs. Just as Grammy had once predicted, he was five years my senior. Married life proved to be wonderful when he was home, but terribly lonely when he was away. The majority of my time was spent reading, writing to my husband daily, or watching television, if not lying on the beach. And although living on the beach was magnificent, our furnished apartment located on Oceanview Drive directly on the

Atlantic Ocean was delightful, and I lived for his ninety-six-hour furlongs every other weekend.

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On a particular warm evening, unable to sleep, I faintly heard a baby crying. As the hours passed, the crying increased. After tossing and turning most of the evening, I got up and began to wonder whose baby was crying--not recalling seeing any of my neighbors with a child.

The large castle-shaped building had been converted to furnished apartments, primarily occupied by Navy personnel and their families. The ceilings were tall and the sounds of the child echoed throughout the building. Pregnant myself and hearing a baby cry throughout the night was most alarming. As the hours passed, and the sound of the crying baby continued, its voice seemed different even to my untrained ears. It was clear that the baby was hoarse. Well after midnight, unable to sleep, I resigned there would be no sleep that evening and ventured out into the dark hallway in my robe and slippers. Listening intently, I determined that the sounds from the whimpering child originated from behind the door of the apartment down and across the hall from ours. Uncertain as to what I should do next, not wanting to appear nosey, I turned and went back into my apartment.

Shortly afterwards the baby quieted down and thankfully I drifted off to sleep, only to be awakened a few hours later hearing the cries from the child once again. Determined to see if there was something wrong with that poor child, I showered and quickly dressed. After gathering enough courage, I walked across the hall and gently tapped on the door that I was certain the disturbing cries came from. Much to my surprise and horror, the door squeaked opened.

Startled, I waited for someone to answer, but no one came, so I pushed on the door peeking my head in...all the while calling out, "Hello! Is anyone here?"

Sadly, the sick muffled sob of the baby intensified upon hearing my voice. Hesitating, I walked slowly into the strange apartment, very apprehensive at being alone and uncertain to what I would

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encounter. Following the sounds of the distressed child, I soon discovered the reasons for the child's weeping.

Pushing at the half-opened door, the putrid smell from the room made me gag. Holding my nose and breathing from my mouth, I walked further into the room. There I found the child trapped inside a wooden playpen like a wounded animal with soiled linens wrapped tightly around the poor little baby's leg. Horrified, I leaned over the rails and began to release the child from its bondage. The baby was dressed in a yellow terry cloth sleeper with its face pressed against the thin plastic mattress. As I unwrapped the baby's leg, the poor child continued to suck on the nipple of an empty bottle, covered in waste.

There are no words to describe just how dreadful it was to see such a pitiful sight. I felt my stomach turn, and I began to gag from the dreadful stench. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to just leave that poor helpless baby. Instinctively I bent down and swooped the frail baby in my arms.

Having the baby freed and protected in my arms, I began to try and sooth the child by whispering softly, "Shh... there, there now. Please, baby, don't cry, I've got you now."

Turning, I then searched for an adult, by quickly opening the door across the hall from the baby's room. I discovered a woman in her early twenties or late teens sprawled across the bed face down. Tiptoeing closer, I could hear her harsh raspy breathing. The woman did not stir, even after the baby began to whine in my arms, or when I gently shook her arm. Not knowing what to do next, and with the baby beginning to cry again in my arms, I turned and immediately went into the woman's kitchen. I had hoped to find milk and food for the baby. However, what I discovered was a practically empty refrigerator and cupboards. The only food I found was an opened bottle of mustard, along with other half-filled jars of condiments. I was stunned. Then I went back to the baby's room to try to find clean clothes and diapers. Again, this proved to be fruitless. I honestly did not know what to do next, and the putrid smell of the apartment was making me nauseous. My first concern was for the soaking wet child in my arms who obviously was starved.

Thinking back on it now, what I did next was incredibly stupid, but at the time, it made perfect sense for me to take the baby back to my apartment. So that is precisely what I did. After bending down and taking the soiled bottle along with me and without considering the consequences, I took the child across the hall to my apartment. Immediately I began to disrobe the poor little whimpering child. Laying a bath towel over my bed, I placed the squirming wet and cold child on it. Then I discarded the soiled bunting and discovered that the baby was a little girl.

My heart ached. As long as I live, I will never forget how tiny she was. So thin, that her ribcage protruded out. Then wrapping the little blonde-hair girl in the bath-towel from the bed, I immediately took the poor little thing into the kitchen to cleanse her. Responding to the warmth of the water, within a few minutes, the child's skin began to turn from the sick blue hue to one more natural. With the baby able to sit up on her own, I immediately began to wash the disgusting, soiled bottle in the other side of the sink, making certain to scrub the nipple and cap thoroughly.

Then, sterilizing her bottle and nipple in a boiling pot on the stove, I struggled to diaper the child. With no clean diapers available, I lay her on the counter using the diaper pin through a clean dishtowel I took from a drawer. Never using diaper pins before this was awkward, especially with a squirming baby through the bulky towel. Being exceptionally careful not to prick her tender skin, I somehow managed to get the makeshift diaper securely around the poor thing. Then running to my bedroom, I immediately dressed the baby in one of my husband's T-shirts.

Upon returning to the kitchen, feeding the little one was next on my agenda. Somehow, I managed to quickly fill the clean bottle with milk and place it in a saucepan of water on the stove, to heat with her in my arms. This was not as easy as it sounds especially when the little girl recognized her bottle. Immediately she began to squirm in my arms, trying to grab for her bottle.

As I recall, I felt so sorry for the poor thing that I didn't wait until the milk was fully heated. As soon as she had the bottle in her skinny little hands, she began sucking frantically. Then carrying her

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into the front room, still in my arms she downed her meal in record time. Now that her hunger had been satisfied, the child's eyes grew heavy as I rocked her. Within moments, the baby was fast asleep. Continuing to rock her for a few moments, anger grew in my heart, wondering how anyone could mistreat someone as innocent and beautiful as this little baby girl. I then took her into my bed, and covered her up securely. Surrounding pillows around her, I walked across the hall, to see about the woman--presumably the child's mother.

After successfully getting the baby's mother into my apartment, my anger turned to pity as I saw the condition of the woman. She was barely able to breathe from such congestion, and I was startled to feel how hot her skin was. After I convinced her that she and her baby were better off staying with me for the time being, she showered and changed into one of my warm nightgowns. She took some over-the-counter medication I had in reserve from my medicine cabinet and then crawled into my bed next to her daughter Jodecia, at my insistence. I soon discovered that her husband was also in the Navy and had stopped her allotment checks, leaving her virtually with no money for her and their child to live on.

Listening to her story broke my heart. *What a monster, her husband was*, I thought. *How could a man do this to his wife and child? Basically, leaving them to starve.* As she continued to tell her story, she slowly ate something that I had fixed. What the meal was, I do not recall now. All I remember is that the woman had used up her money earlier in the week by making the trip to Portsmouth to receive care for her and the child but had been turned away from treatment since her husband had denied them both as dependents. Stunned once again, that any man could be so cruel, I left her in my room as she slept soundly next to her resting baby.

As she slept, I took the few dollars I had left from my allotment check and walked to the corner store hoping I could care for them myself by buying more medicine and food. On my return, carrying the few meager provisions with the little money I had, with paper bags in hand, I suddenly began to panic. What had I been thinking? How could I possibly care for two obviously sick people? Realizing

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that I too would soon be without food and money, since I had spent my last dime on cold remedies and baby food, and I was not expecting another allotment for another week, my heart sank.

Upon returning to my apartment and putting away the groceries, I stared at the four white walls of the apartment feeling small and frightened. Not knowing what else to do, or who to turn to, I did the only thing I could think of and that was to pray. Repeating the "Lord's Prayer" over and over again in my mind, I don't know how long I actually sat there praying, but before long, a knock at my screen door startled me.

Leaning to the side of the couch, I glanced out through the wire mesh of the old wooden screen door, my heart began to race as I saw an officer in dress whites, knock again. A paralyzing thought entered my mind. Was my husband all right? As the wife of a soldier, it was understood that officers came personally to your door, only if your loved ones were killed in action.

Somehow, my legs carried me to the door and I asked timidly, "Can I help you?" I didn't recognize my own fear-ridden voice.

"No, I think I'm here to help you! Are you Linnie-bimp?"

Even as frightened as I was, it was clear to me that there was uncertainty in his voice as he looked at me through the screen door.

"Ah... I'm Linda..." I stammered. My mind began to race, searching for the right words to say. "How do you know...only my Grandmother called me that?"

Seemingly ignoring my confusion, he pressed on.

"Well then, it must be you that I'm here to help. Are you alright?"

Looking up at the taller man through the screen door, my eyes were drawn to the gold scrolling on the shiny black brim of his hat. Still bewildered by him being there, and asking me such bazaar questions, I politely said, "I'm fine..." Then adding almost as an afterthought, I pointed over to my bedroom, "but there are two very sick people sleeping in my bed."

"Ah...who are they?"

"I...I don't know for sure. Can you help them?" I asked timidly.

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"I'll try. Can I come in?" His voice never wavered, sensing how unsure I was.

Hesitating momentarily, I unlatched the eye-and-hook that kept the door locked from the officer in front of me. Grateful for some help, I slowly opened the door and extended my arm to guide him into the room. "They are both in there." I quickly added, stepping aside so that he could pass.

Walking into the bedroom alone, I could hear the soft muffled voices of the woman and the officer. A few minutes had passed when the officer returned to find me pacing back and forth in the front room.

"Where is your phone?" he asked urgently.

Pointing toward the front entrance, I said, "Um... we use the payphone in the hallway."

Without uttering a reply, he went out the door, my voice trailing behind... "The ambulance won't come...her benefits have been canceled by her husband."

"They'll come for me," he called out to me his voice powerful with great conviction as he dropped nickels into the payphone. I nodded my reply, standing inside the door waiting for his return.

Within a matter of minutes, he promptly returned and proclaimed, "The ambulance will be here shortly!" Then taking great strides, leading back to my bedroom, he paused briefly to look back at me. "Don't worry, Linda. Portsmouth is an excellent Naval Hospital. They will be well cared for there."

Only able to nod my reply, I waited again in the front room as the sounds of muffled voices filled the tiny apartment. As grateful as I was that the officer had come to rescue the sick woman and her child, I couldn't help but feel inferior for not being able to help them more. Never had it occurred to me, that not only had the entire apartment complex, which obviously had heard the baby cry all night as I had, chose to ignore them, but also the apartment's landlord did nothing as well. Within minutes, the sound of sirens filled the air, announcing that the ambulance was on its way just as the naval officer had promised.

Attendants came to my door and I pointed the way. Never had my tiny apartment been filled with so many people, as more medical personnel swarmed inside. I watched silently in awe from the entrance of the kitchen as each of them, swiftly saluted the officer as they approached him, answering with a prompt, “Yes Sir, or, No Sir,” to his every direction.

As fast as they came in, they were gone, taking with them Jodecia and her mom to Portsmouth Naval Hospital. Closing the door behind them, the deafening sounds of silence filled the room. I sat numbly on the couch, uncertain as to what had happened or how I would ever explain it to my husband when he returned.

The events seemed so extraordinary, that in truth, I could hardly believe them myself. So involved with all the earlier commotion, and worried for the safety of the child and her mother, I didn’t have a chance to think clearly, let alone ask any questions. Then suddenly my heart began to race, as I wondered, *How did that officer know my special nickname? Who told him that I was in need of his help? No one knew that Jodecia and her mom were here with me.*

Almost as an answer to my questions, a gentle tap at the door took me by surprise. Immediately I went to the door and was pleased to see that the officer had returned. Not even hesitating this time, I warmly smiled at him and opened the door freely.

“I’m so glad you came back. I have so many questions...”

Before I knew it, I was rambling on, asking one question after the other. “Can I get you something to drink? I have a fresh batch of iced tea. Won’t you join me in the kitchen?”

Not waiting for his reply, I walked into my kitchen and began firing more questions at him, while reaching for a glass from the cupboard. Turning to retrieve the tea from the fridge, I watched him remove his hat then carefully place it on the kitchen table as he took his seat. My eyes were drawn to the insignia on the brim.

“What’s your rank? My husband’s hat is cloth...not nearly as nice as yours is.”

“Admiral,” he smiled, looking for my reaction.

I chuckled, unfamiliar with the ranking of the military. “Wow is that higher than a Captain?”

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“Yes,” he said smiling at me, seemingly not the slightest bit annoyed that his rank meant nothing to me. And as easy as that, we freely conversed. I soon discovered that he was the Admiral of the ship that just happened to be docked next to my husband's ship--the U.S.S. North Hampton while it was in port. After casually discussing my husband, his rank, and where we both hailed from, I still couldn't get over the coincidence that the Admiral's ship was docked directly next to my husband's when in port. The admiral only smiled and then tried to explain that he didn't think this was a coincidence. I still can recall how he stated that with all the ships in the harbor, what would the odds be that he was chosen to help me, being the ship directly docked next to my husband's? Or that he would have left late that particular morning, only shortly following my return from the store?

I had to agree the chances were definitely slim, at best. I started to believe it was too perfect, to be a mishap.

I nearly dropped my iced tea on his neatly pressed white uniform when he told me that he was stopped by a woman outside my building on his way to the base. The woman running in front of his car had been screaming to him to help her Linnie-bimp. From the description of her, this woman sounded very familiar to me.

“That's my Grandma...” I stammered, “but, that's impossible...she's been dead for years.”

“I gathered as much...now that is. Then though, I thought I had hit her.”

His answer startled me and I sat back in my chair while I drank in his words about my beloved Grandmother. I was certain that it was my beloved Grammy whom he was describing to me, down to the style of her hair, and the favorite multi-colored beads she wore frequently.

His face suddenly turned solemn. “Can't you see her?” he asked. Then nodding his head, as if pointing behind me he said, “She's standing right behind you.”

Instinctively I jerked around, but saw nothing. Disappointed, I turned back at him, when suddenly the sweet familiar scent of orange blossoms filled the room.

Almost in tears, I asked the Admiral, "Can you smell that?" Inhaling another deep whiff of this familiar fragrance.

Nodding his head in agreement, he said, "Yes, I do. It smells like oranges, sweet oranges."

"That's right. It's Orange Blossom perfume," I proudly exclaimed. It was as if by him telling me the scent, it was confirmation to his earlier story. Somehow, Grandmother had traveled from the other side to secure the help I needed.

As if able to read my thoughts, I can remember still to this day how he said, "Your Grandma must love you very much!"

"Yes, and I love her too! I miss her so much...I wish... I could see her." Suddenly I had become very emotional and was fighting back tears.

After allowing me time to compose myself, we then spoke for a long while. First, he clarified to me that nothing like this had ever happened to him before. And although he had always believed in the spirit world, after today seeing one for himself, he still didn't know what to make of it. Again, he told me every detail of how my grandmother--who had been dead for several years--had ran in front of his car, screaming for help. He casually laughed, almost joking at how he had driven straight through her apparition. I was completely in awe, as I sat grasping onto his every word.

Once he had parked the car near the curb and got out of the car, there she was again at the entrance of the apartment building, waving him on to follow her and calling frantically to him, "Help my Linnie-bimp."

Every word he spoke was amazing. Never had I heard a story with such clarity to every detail in description before. Evidently, when he had knocked at my door, it was at her insistence. She was standing next to the doorframe, begging him to help. So that was why he had known my special name and where I lived.

Feeling completely shocked by the events of the day, I took comfort in knowing that my grandmother was near. Before he left, the Admiral turned and handed me a card with his name printed on it before taking his leave. Grasping it tightly in my hands, we said our good-byes. I will always remember him teasing me that in the future,

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if I required his assistance to please call, rather than sending my grandmother after him.

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A few weeks later, another knock at my door brought a brief visit from Jodecia and her mom, who dropped by to thank me before returning home to Texas to live with her parents. As she spoke about all that had happened to her in the past few weeks, and how she had found herself in such an incredibly bad situation, I couldn't help but admire her honesty. It was as if the whole event had changed her life forever. As if she needed to prove that she would never allow herself to be put in another life-threatening situation for her or her daughter, she spoke about the new life she intended to build for her and Jodecia. As I looked fondly over at them, I tried to remember them in my mind for years to come, somehow knowing this would be the last time I would ever see them again.

And although our visit was short, since they had a plane to catch, I learned that that our friend the Admiral had been extremely busy. Apparently, he wasted no time after leaving me that morning, and contacted the Chaplain aboard her husband's ship. This resulted in the woman's husband being placed in the brig for abandoning his wife and child. The young woman, only a year older than me, and in her teens, explained how she had been too ashamed to call her parents for help when her money ran out. She had been fearful they would only lecture her, and tell her "I told you so."

So, as it turned out, our friend the Admiral had contacted them also, and made all the arrangements for Jodecia and her to return to Texas to live temporarily with them until she was on her feet again.

Holding Jodecia one last time, I followed them to the front door of the complex as the cab driver loaded their few meager belongings in the trunk of his cab. As I waved goodbye to them, I thanked God that our Admiral friend had been so helpful to this young family and especially grateful that my dear Grandmother was still helping and guiding me from the other side. I knew for certain, without hesitation or doubt that my beloved Grandma would be nearby always. This singular realization has proven to be a constant comfort to me in the years that followed.

## Linda Daly

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Thank you, Grammy!



This is a picture of my beloved Grandmother, Bertl Emma Anna (BEA) and Grandfather, Carl Stoehr taken in the fifties at their only son's wedding.