



# THE NIGHT BEFORE

A CHRISTMAS EVE THRILLER

short story by



**Mark L. Benson**

# The Night Before

by

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Stone Panda Publishing

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First Edition

Stone Panda Publishing

206 Angela Circle

Oswego, IL.

60543

815-570-3993

To The Wife, The Girl and The Boy.

Your belief in me fuels every page I write. You are, and always will be, my whole world.

To Maria Stambone

Thank you for your openness, and for revealing how stories can touch readers in ways an author might never anticipate.

## The Passengers

I despise Christmas. Not just the fake, Hallmark version we're force fed for three-plus months. I mean the whole goddamn season.

It's a con job. Corporations figured out decades ago they could wrap greed in red and green, slap a bow on it, and call it joy. Every year the decorations go up earlier, the commercials get louder, and the brain-dead masses line up to drown themselves in debt buying crap nobody wants for people who won't appreciate it anyway.

It's not the only reason for my cynicism of the holiday. Not the biggest, either. But it's all I am comfortable admitting to myself today. It's how I'll get through another Christmas Eve in Chicago.

The GoRide app pinged. I glanced at the pickup address; some bar in Lincoln Park; and suppressed a cough that felt like it was dragging sandpaper through my lungs. Three days of fighting this cold, and it had finally won. Fever, chills, a headache that pulsed behind my eyes with every heartbeat. I should've stayed in tonight. But I needed the money. I always needed the money. And I needed to keep moving. Sitting still, especially tonight, let the memories creep in.

I popped two more DayQuil, swallowing them with the last of the water from the bottle in my cup holder. Through the Prius's salt-streaked windshield, I could already see them: three twenty-somethings in ugly Christmas sweaters, blinking light-up necklaces, matching Santa and

elf hats. Their off-key rendition of "Deck the Halls" carried over the crunch of plowed snow under my tires as I pulled to the curb.

You can add fake-holiday revelers to that list of reasons I hate this season. Hell, they should probably sit right at the top.

I closed my eyes. Took a breath that rattled in my lungs. My hand hovered over the app. I could still cancel, take the hit to my acceptance rate, go home and sleep this off. But rent was due on the first.

"GoRide for Stacey?" I asked as I dropped the passenger window down a few inches.

The back door flew open before I could unlock it. I've been meaning to get that broken actuator fixed for months. Two of them piled in, dragging the smell of peppermint schnapps and body spray with them.

"Merry Christmas!" the one in the elf hat shouted, too loud, too close to my ear.

I didn't answer as I pulled my tan Carhartt jacket from the passenger seat, the same one I'd worn on stakeouts a decade ago, back when it was new, and moved it aside as the last one slid in next to me.

"Dude, did you hear me? I said Merry Christmas!"

"I heard you." My voice came out rougher than intended, throat raw.

"Wow, okay, Scrooge." She laughed, elbowing her friend. "Guess somebody didn't get what they wanted from Santa."

*You have no idea*, I thought, as I confirmed the pickup in the app.

The one in front, Stacey, according to the app, squinted at her phone, then at me, then back at her screen. "You're Al, right? Al Klop... Klep..."

"Klippech," I said, then coughed into my elbow. "Yeah."

She looked me over, her suspicion barely fading. I knew what she saw: unshaven, pale and sweating despite the cold, flannel with dog-eared cuffs hanging open over a coffee-stained Blackhawks tee, Bears stocking cap pulled low. Not exactly festive Christmas Eve attire. More like a man who should be in bed.

"You should really update your profile pic," she said. "It looks nothing like you."

I shifted into drive without answering.

They launched into "Jingle Bells," loud and out of tune. My hand drifted toward the radio knob, then stopped. Too obvious now. I should've had it playing when they got in. The pounding in my head kept rhythm with their off-key chorus. Through the rearview mirror, I watched them sway and laugh, oblivious, wrapped up in their perfect little Christmas bubble.

Five years ago, I would've been annoyed but fine. I would've made small talk, maybe even cracked a smile.

But that was before. Before Michael. Before everything that mattered turned to ash on a Christmas Eve.

Now I just drove, knuckles white on the wheel, counting the blocks until I could dump them at whatever party they were headed to and be alone again.

The one in the elf hat leaned forward between the seats. "Why didn't you get us an Uber?" she said to Stacey, making no effort to lower her voice. "This car smells like stale hamburgers and sweat."

*More like DayQuil and desperation*, I thought, but kept my mouth shut.

"GoRide's cheapest," Stacey muttered, pushing her friend back. "We're almost there anyway."

I hit the gas a little harder than necessary. The sooner I got rid of them, the better.

They started back up with another verse of Jingle Bells as I weaved my way through the River North neighborhood. I turned right and pulled up to a high-rise on Kinzie. Through the lobby windows I could see more ugly sweaters and blinking lights.

“Let’s go girls,” Stacey commanded as she flung open the creaky passenger door. “We don’t want to miss the gift exchange.” The girl behind me shot out just as quickly, but elf-hat fumbled with the door handle.

"Door's stuck," she announced, like I'd personally designed it to trap her.

“Locks are screwy. Just pull hard,” I instructed.

She huffed and jerked the handle once more. “It won’t open,” she said, her accusation more direct and frustrated. Stacey had stopped and turned back. I could hear her shout, “Let’s go, Nicole!” over the rumble of a passing CTA bus.

“I can’t get out!” she yelled, panic rising in her voice. “He’s got me trapped in here.” She banged her open palms against the window glass like that would somehow jar the lock loose, freeing her from the backseat.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered as I threw the Prius into park and opened my own door. Just as I stepped out into the street, Stacey grabbed the door handle from outside and freed elf-hat from her imaginary prison. As the women scurried up onto the sidewalk, Stacey looked across the silver rooftop. “You should get that fixed,” she suggested.

“Yeah, I’ll add that to the list.”

I squeezed back behind the wheel and swiped the trip complete on my phone, then pressed my palms against my eyes. The fever was getting worse. My whole body ached like I’d been in a fight.

The app hung there, waiting for Stacey to rate me. I stared at the screen, engine idling,



watching those three dots pulse like a slow heartbeat. Thirty seconds. A minute.

Finally: "**Stacey gave you 3 stars.**"

No tip.

I coughed, deep, chest-rattling, and fumbled for the water bottle in my cup holder.

Empty.

The app chimed again immediately. "Your driver rating is now 4.2 stars. Your acceptance rate is below average. Accept more rides to maintain your account."

I locked the phone and tossed it on the passenger seat.

Ten years ago I drove a Crown Vic with a light bar and a badge. Respect. Now here I was, shivering in a beat-up Prius waiting for drunk twenty-somethings to tell me I'm worth 3 stars. But it beat the alternative—sitting alone in my apartment, letting December 24th do what it did best: destroy me.

The digital clock on the dash glowed 6:51. Just five more hours and I'd survive. I shifted into drive and made a U-turn in the middle of Kinzie. No traffic, no witnesses. Christmas Eve had that effect. Everyone with a family to go home to had already left. Five Christmases ago, I had one too. I headed east, shivering despite the heat blasting from the vents.

## The Interruption

I hadn't eaten since the bagel sandwich I'd forced down that morning—too feverish to even taste it before spilling coffee down my front. My stomach cramped, but I wasn't sure if it was hunger or the flu working its way through my system.

Snowflakes drifted through the streetlight as I turned right onto State. Just a few scouts for now, testing the air. Three powder-blue Streets and San trucks idled at the curb, plow blades raised, amber lights spinning on their roofs. The city had cleared last week's two inches down to bare asphalt. Even on Christmas Eve, the mayor wasn't taking chances. Snow removal won elections in Chicago. Screwing it up ended them.

The corn-cob towers of Marina City disappeared in the rearview mirror as I crossed the bridge over the Chicago River. The streets ahead looked emptier than I'd expected—not a promising sign for someone hoping to grab a late dinner. The Italian place on Randolph—closed. The diner on Madison—dark. Even the 24-hour gyro place had its lights off and gates down. I should've just gone home. But home meant silence. Meant memories. Meant December 24th closing in around me like a fist. So I kept driving, chasing the distraction of an open restaurant, anything to keep moving forward.

I drove farther south on State Street, past decorated storefronts and empty sidewalks, stillness deepening with every block. As I rolled up to the stoplight at Archer Avenue, a glowing

sign on the right caught my eye. Tasty Dragon Chop Suey. Open.

Just the thought of hot and sour soup and a crisp egg roll sent a wave of warmth through me. I eased up to the curb at the end of the block, sliding into the bus stop and gambling that parking enforcement had called it a night and I'd be gone before the next bus rolled by.

I killed the engine and sat there for a moment, letting the silence settle. My hands were shaking. Chills ran up my spine despite the flannel and the heat on high.

Get some hot soup into me, chase it with more DayQuil and I just might survive the rest of the night. I grabbed my wallet and Carhartt and pushed open the door into the December cold. Those first flakes earlier had invited their friends, and they swirled and danced around me like they knew I didn't own a shovel.



I'd just pried the lid off the soup container, steam hitting my face in a scalding, sour-sweet rush, when the back door flew open behind me. Cold air rushed in, killing the warmth. Those goddamn broken locks. I should've fixed them months ago.

A woman slid in, maybe mid-twenties, inadequate coat, no hat, clutching a bundled infant against her chest. Her breath came in panicked gasps, fogging in the cold air.

"Por favor," she said. "You have to help me. They're coming. Please, just drive!"

I turned in my seat, immediately regretting the sharp movement as my head spun. "Lady, you can't just... get out. Use the app like everyone else."

"There's no time! Please, I have money..." She made a show and fumbled in her pockets but clearly had nothing.

I struggled to put the lid back on my soup and shoved the container to the passenger floor. The last thing I needed was scalding liquid in my lap if this went sideways.

"I'm off duty. Get. Out." My voice cracked mid-sentence, hoarse from the cold and the coughing.

The baby whimpered.

Then: *CRACK!* A gunshot shattered the rear window.

Glass exploded inward. Instinct took over. I dropped the Prius into drive and floored it.

Adrenaline hit my system like a shot of electricity. The fever, the aches, the exhaustion, all of it vanished. My hands were steady on the wheel now, my vision sharp.

Behind me, the woman curled over her baby, praying in Spanish: "Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia..."

I took a hard right, then a quick left, checking mirrors, doubling back through alleys. The dark SUV that had been closing in fell away behind us.

I pulled over several blocks away, killed the lights, and sat there trembling. My heart hammered against my ribs. The adrenaline was already fading, and with it, everything came flooding back: the fever, the bone-deep exhaustion, the shaking that might've been chills or might've been fear.

"Get out. Now."

The woman looked up from the baby, tears streaming. "They'll kill us. Please..."

"Call the police." I coughed into my elbow, chest heaving.

"No policía!" Her terror was genuine.

I pressed my palm to my forehead. Still burning up. "That's not my problem. There are shelters, organizations..."

"It's Christmas Eve. Everything is closed." Her voice broke. "Please. I just need to get to my parents' house. Pilsen. It's not far."

The baby started crying sharp, frightened wails that pierced through my skull.

I closed my eyes. Michael used to cry like that when he was sick. When he was scared.

"I can't help you," I said, but the words rang hollow even to me.

She gathered the baby and pushed the door open. The December wind knifed in, carrying snow that swirled through the car and mixed with the glass still scattered across the back seat.

I watched her walk away into the snowy night, hunched against the wind, baby bundled against her chest. I sat there, shivering, every part of me screaming to just go home. I was sick. Exhausted. This wasn't my problem.

It wasn't my job to protect this woman. Not anymore.

That thought came easy, comfortable. I'd spent five years perfecting it. The responsibility to protect the city, that was someone else's burden now. I'd handed in my badge, walked away from all of it. Let the next guy play hero. Let someone who still gave a damn step up.

Then I saw the diaper bag on the floor. The hand-knit blanket.

*Dammit.*

My hand moved to the gearshift as I tried to will myself to put the car in drive. To go home. To forget her. She was already half a block away, just a dark shape disappearing into the snow. In another minute she'd be gone completely, and I could tell myself I'd done what I could. I'd given her a chance to get out. Not my fault she chose to walk.

Except it was.

I'd kicked her out. Sent a woman and a baby into the freezing night knowing armed

men were hunting her. Men who'd already put a bullet through my window.

The guilt didn't stab, it crept in, quiet, cold, and certain, like it had a spare key. Not the surface kind that fades with excuses. The real kind. The kind that sinks its teeth in and stays.

The same guilt that's been eating me alive for five years, the kind that wakes me at three A.M. and won't let me close my eyes again.

Michael's face flashed in my mind. Not the pale, still one from the hospital, but the living one. Four years old, gap-toothed smile, asking me when I'd be home for dinner.

I could hear Jennifer's voice, sharp and unforgiving: *"You were never there when we needed you."*

I was down to two choices. Neither was easy, and both came with a price. I could drive away. Pretend I never saw her. Add it to the list of things I'd learned to pretend never happened. Or I could be the man I'd hoped Michael thought I was before I let him down.

I slammed my hand against the steering wheel, then immediately regretted it as pain shot through my already-aching body.

At the next intersection, I cranked the wheel hard, spinning the Prius in an illegal U-turn. Tires hissed through the thin layer of fresh snow. My vision blurred. Fever or tears, I didn't know. Didn't matter.

I rolled down the window as I pulled alongside her. "Get in. You left your bag."

She stopped, studied me through the falling snow. Whatever she saw—pale, sweating, desperate—made her hesitate.

"You're sick," she said.

"I'm fine. Get in before I change my mind."

Her eyes widened. "You will take me?"

"Just to your parents. That's it. Then you're their problem."

I wasn't doing this to be a hero. I wasn't doing it to earn redemption or make peace with my ghosts. I was doing it because if I drove away now, I'd be exactly the man Jennifer said I was. And I couldn't live with that. Not anymore.

Not tonight.



She climbed into the back, clutching the infant. "Gracias. Thank you so—"

"Save it. What's the address?"

She gave me a street in Pilsen, off 18th. I punched it into the GPS, my fever-clumsy fingers missing keys twice before it locked in.

Twelve minutes.

Twelve more minutes of this, then I could salvage what was left of my soup.

Twelve minutes and she'd be someone else's problem.

"Gracias, mister..." she stammered from behind me. "What is your name?"

"Who put a bullet through my window?"

"Answer mine first, then I will tell you."

I stared at the road. Names made it personal. I didn't do personal anymore.

"Maria," she said into the silence. "My name is Maria."

Dammit. There it was. Now she was real.

I glanced at her in the rearview. She was fussing over the baby, waiting me out.

"Al," I finally said. The fever was making me weak.

"His name is Gabriel," she said, her eyes never leaving the baby. "Like the angel."

"Angels aren't real."

She lifted her eyes to the mirror, held my gaze. "Neither is hope. But I still have it."

Hope. Jennifer had hope too, sitting beside Michael's hospital bed, holding his pale hand, believing right up to the last breath that he'd open his eyes.

The heater wheezed, barely cutting through the cold pouring in from the shattered rear window. Snow hissed against the windshield, thick and fast now, swirling under streetlights like ash. The wipers worked hard for nothing, smearing dry flakes across the glass and screaming about it the whole way. The Prius rattled over every patch of slush, the check-engine light staring at me like it knew something I didn't.

I sniffed and wiped my nose on my sleeve. "All right. My turn. Who the hell just shot out my window?"

Maria didn't answer right away. She held Gabriel close, blanket tucked to his chin, staring at the snow blur outside.

"Bad men," she finally said.

"Yeah, I figured." My voice came out sandpaper-rough. "Got names?"

She looked down at the baby. "Vázquez brothers. You know them?"

I shook my head. "Should I?"

"They run things. Girls, mostly." She paused. "I was one of them."

The way she said it, quiet, matter-of-fact, hit like a fist. I kept my eyes on the road. Didn't know what to say. Red lights at an intersection painted the wet pavement blood-orange, turned the falling snow into embers.

"You know how many girls they own? Houses full. I was in one on the South Side for



eight months." I caught a quiver before she paused, resolve returning to her voice when she continued. "I'm one of the lucky ones. I got out. Most never do. But when I left, they said I stole from them."

"Did you?"

Her eyes snapped up, sharp. "I only took my son."

I coughed into my fist, chest rattling. "So they want payback."

"Yes." She looked down at Gabriel, her voice dropping. "And him... he makes it worse."

"The baby makes it worse?"

She nodded, wouldn't look at me. "His father is one of them. If they find us..." She didn't finish.

Didn't need to.

Snow drifted through the broken window, settling on Gabriel's blanket before melting into nothing.

"Why tonight?" I asked.

She exhaled slowly. "Someone told them where I was. A tip. I thought I was safe."

Her fear filled the car, sharp and electric and suffocating. I turned up the defroster, partly to clear the windshield, mostly to cover my coughing.

"All right," I said finally, voice barely there. "We get you to your parents. You'll be safe there."

But even as I said it, I didn't believe it.

## The Revelation

The roads got quieter the farther west we went, with even fewer cars than downtown but more snow. The kind of night where the city folds in on itself, everything muffled and slow.

Gabriel had fallen asleep, tiny breaths fogging the edge of Maria's coat. She watched him like if she blinked, the world might snatch him away.

"Do you have children?" she asked quietly.

My hands tightened on the wheel. "Once. A son."

The words hung in the air. I could feel her waiting, but I kept my eyes on the road. I didn't owe her anything. Hadn't talked to anyone about Michael in years. Not since the divorce was finalized. Not since I stopped going to the therapist Jennifer's lawyer insisted I see.

Why would I start now? With a stranger in my backseat?

But then I glanced in the rearview. Saw her looking down at Gabriel, one hand curved protectively around his small head. The way she touched him, so careful, so present, like he was the only thing in the world that mattered.

The way Jennifer used to hold Michael.

Something cracked inside me.

"His name was Michael," I heard myself say. "He was four."

I shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't be opening this door.

"What happened to him?" Her voice was soft.

I swallowed hard. "Flu. He'd been battling a cold for a few days, but we didn't think much of it. Kids get colds, right?"

She was watching me in the mirror. No judgment, no pity, just compassion.

"Two days before Christmas, his fever spiked." I had to stop, clear my throat. "Christmas Eve morning my wife called 911. By the time they got him to the hospital, it was too late."

The wall I'd built to keep all this behind began to crack and crumble. The words welled up, catching in my throat, building pressure, before discharging as an admission.

"I wasn't there. When he passed." There was no stopping it now. "I was solving a case. Double homicide we'd been working since Thanksgiving. I hadn't seen him much the whole month. Didn't know just how bad he was."

"Your wife," Maria said carefully. "She blamed you?"

"My ex? Yeah." My jaw clenched. "Said if I'd been home instead of chasing gangbangers, if I'd been paying attention, maybe I would've noticed sooner. Maybe we could've gotten him help before it was too late."

"Do you believe that?"

I didn't answer right away. Couldn't.

"I don't know," I finally said. "Some days I think she's right. Some days I think it wouldn't have mattered. And some days..." I stopped myself.

"Some days what?"

"Some days I think I deserved to lose them both."

The words came out before I could stop them. Five years of guilt, compressed into one

sentence.

Maria was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was steady.

Understanding.

"My first night in that house, I prayed God would kill me," she said quietly. "By the second week, I was praying he'd just let me forget. But forgetting doesn't help. It just makes you empty." She looked at Gabriel. "You haven't forgotten Michael. That means you still love him. That means he still matters."

I glanced at her in the mirror. She was what, twenty-five? Probably younger.

I looked back at the road. Some things you learned from textbooks, some from experience. And some you learned from a woman holding a baby in your backseat, teaching you what strength actually looked like.

## The Confrontation

I checked the rearview out of habit. Two headlights glowed back, small and distant. Could've been anyone, except they didn't fade when I turned. Or the turn after that.

I eased off the gas. The lights stayed put. Not close enough to read a plate, not far enough to ignore.

Maria must've noticed the tension in my posture, my focus more on the mirror than the road ahead. "What is it?"

"Probably nothing." Which meant it was definitely something. I floored it, blowing through the next intersection as the light flipped to yellow.

The headlights followed.

"Maria. The SUV behind us. You recognize it?"

She twisted around, looked, then back at me. Her face went white. "No. Why?"

"Because that's the same one from Archer. When they shot my window."

Her breath caught. "You're certain?"

"Yeah." I eased off the gas. The SUV slowed too. "They found you," I said.

Her breath hitched. She pulled Gabriel closer, whispering something in Spanish, fast and quiet like a prayer.

"We're not going to your parents." I kept my eyes on the mirror. "Not with them on us."

The SUV's engine roared behind us, gaining. I cranked right under the Dan Ryan Expressway. Water dripped from the concrete overhead, old sodium lights painting everything rust-orange and dim.

The Prius creaked as we came out from under the viaduct. Snow whipped through the shattered rear window, swirling through the cabin like white ghosts. I it melted down my neck, cold and cruel.

The SUV closed in.

"What do we do?" Maria's voice trembled.

"See if they can keep up." I pressed the gas. The Prius groaned in protest, the little four-cylinder straining. "I used to be better at this," I muttered, half to myself. "Guess we'll find out if the old girl's still got some fight left."

Maria's hand gripped the back of my seat. Behind us, the headlights dropped back some, but still trailed.

My collar was soaked, my chest burned. My nose wouldn't stop running. But old instincts flickered to life. Cop instincts buried under five years of grief and DayQuil. The kind you don't forget.

I scanned the street ahead, calculating angles, looking for advantages.

There.

An intersection with a concrete light pole. A narrow street, parked cars lining both sides.

I had a plan. A stupid, desperate plan. But it might work.

"Maria." My voice cut through her prayer. "Listen carefully. Get down on the floor. Cover Gabriel completely with your body."

"What? Why—"

"DO IT NOW!"

The command voice, the cop voice I hadn't used in five years, snapped her into action. She didn't hesitate. Rolled to her knees, placed Gabriel on the floor between the seats, used her body to create a cage around him. Her arms braced against the seats, back curved to absorb impact.

If anything came through, it would hit her first.

I cranked the wheel right and deliberately clipped a parked sedan at low speed. The Prius jolted, fishtailed, then came to rest at a slight angle half a block down, giving me a clear view from the driver's side in the direction the SUV would come from.

"What's happening?!" Maria's voice was muffled from the floor.

"Stay down." My voice came out eerily calm now. Focused. "Don't lift your head no matter what you hear. Protect Gabriel."

I gripped the wheel with my left hand. My right hand moved to the ignition.

I turned the key.

The engine died. Dashboard lights went dark. In the sudden silence, I could hear my own heartbeat. Maria's whispered prayers. The distant rumble of the SUV's engine.

Through gritted teeth, I mumbled, "Come on... come on..."

Headlights swept around the corner.

The black SUV screeched to a stop forty feet behind me, blocking the street, engine idling. High beams flooded my mirrors, turning everything white.

Two men got out. Brothers. I could tell from the way they moved, the same heavy-shouldered build, the same predatory confidence.

The driver was older, bigger. Six-two, expensive leather jacket, gold chain visible at his throat. Gun tucked in his waistband. A nine millimeter, positioned for a quick draw. His hair was slicked back, graying at the temples. Everything about him screamed *in charge*.

The other one was younger, maybe late twenties. Leaner, wiry. Cheaper jacket, track pants, white sneakers that almost glowed under the streetlights. He moved faster, twitchy, kept his right hand near his jacket pocket. The enforcer. The one who pulled triggers.

They split up to flank the Prius. Gold Chain moved toward my driver's door. Sneakers circled around toward the passenger side. Men who'd hunted before. Men who always caught what they were hunting.

Twenty feet away, Gold Chain stopped and shouted, "End of the line. Where is she?"

I didn't answer. Just kept my hands visible on the wheel. Foot hovering over the gas pedal, hidden from view. Through the rearview mirror, I tracked their positions.

They kept coming, slow, confident.

Fifteen feet.

Maria whimpered from the floor. Gabriel made a small noise. She was keeping him quiet somehow.

Ten feet.

*Just a few more seconds*, I thought.

The brothers were almost on me now, one at each door. I could hear their footsteps crunching through the slush.

Five feet.

Gold Chain reached for my door handle.

I cranked the ignition.



The engine roared to life.

"What the..." Gold Chain jerked back.

I slammed the transmission into reverse and stomped the accelerator.

The Prius launched backward, tires smoking, rear end fishtailing as I fought to keep it straight. Forty feet of open street between me and the SUV. The brothers realized what was happening. Gold Chain dove left, Sneakers dove right. Too slow.

I watched through the rearview mirror as the SUV grew larger, filling the frame.

*CRUNCH.*

The collision was catastrophic.

My rear bumper drove straight into the SUV's grille, punching through plastic and metal and collapsing the radiator like tin foil. The impact whipped me backward. The headrest caught my skull, neck snapping back, jaw clenching involuntarily. I felt my teeth slam together. Tasted copper. Blood. I'd bitten my tongue.

The Prius shuddered, bucked forward from the rebound, then stopped.

Everything went quiet for half a second. Muffled. Like being underwater.

Then Maria screamed. Gabriel wailed. And steam—God, so much steam—erupted through the shot-out back window, hissing and billowing up into the sodium light.

I blinked away the white spots in my vision. Turned my throbbing head to check the mirror.

The SUV's front end was obliterated. Grille punched inward, hood buckled vertical, radiator split wide. Green coolant gushed out, steaming where it hit cold pavement. Both headlights dark. The engine block might be cracked.

It wasn't going anywhere.

The sharp odor of vinegar and chili cut through the stench of antifreeze, comfort and chaos in the same breath. My dinner had exploded across the floorboards on impact, hot and sour soup seeping into the mat. I let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a cough. Figures. Just another mess I wasn't cleaning up tonight.

My Prius shuddered violently. The engine sputtered, coughed, rattled, then cut out completely. The dashboard lights flickered and went dark.

*Shit.*

I twisted the key. Nothing. Twisted again.

The starter ground, caught, died. One more time—

The engine roared to life, rough and grinding, but alive.

Movement in the street caught my eye.

Sneakers had dove out of the way when I rocketed backward, rolled clear but slammed into a parked sedan on the landing. Now he was on the ground, palms flat on the asphalt, trying to push himself up. Slow, but moving.

I shifted into drive and cranked the wheel hard left.

Gold Chain was reaching for his gun.

I floored it.

Aimed directly at them.

*CRACK.*

The gunshot was deafening inside the car. The windshield exploded inward, spiderwebbing as the bullet punched through, missing my head by inches. I felt the heat of it kiss my cheek.

Maria's scream tore through the car.

Gold Chain rolled left, fast, came up in a crouch with the gun still raised.

But Sneakers—

Sneakers tried to dodge. Still off-balance. Still dazed from hitting the sedan.

Not fast enough.

My passenger-side fender caught him at the hip. The sickening THUD reverberated through the frame. His body slammed across the hood, momentum carrying him up and into the already-cracked windshield. More glass shattered. Then he tumbled off the side, hit the pavement hard.

*Don't look back. Don't look back.*

I didn't look back.

Kept the accelerator pinned. Made it to the end of the block and fishtailed into the cross street. The Prius's tires screamed. My hands were locked on the wheel, knuckles bone-white.

"Is it over?" Maria sobbed from the floor. "Are they gone?"

"Not yet. Stay down!"

I glanced back through the passenger window.

Gold Chain was kneeling beside his brother in the middle of the street. Sneakers lay motionless, one leg bent at an unnatural angle that made my stomach turn. Maybe unconscious.

Maybe worse.

Gold Chain's head snapped up. Our eyes met across half a block of snowy pavement.

Even from here, I could see the rage. The hatred. The promise.

But he was trapped. His brother needed help. And behind him, their SUV sat dead, radiator fluid pooling beneath it like black blood in the streetlight.

I accelerated.

Tires squealing, engine howling in protest.

Three blocks. Four. Five.

No headlights behind us.

My heart hammered against my ribs, sweat soaking through my shirt despite the cold.

Blood trickled from the corner of my mouth. My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

## The Aftermath

Finally, I eased off the gas and pulled into the empty, well-lit parking lot of a closed Jewel-Osco. Killed the engine.

Sat there. Breathing. Trying to remember how to breathe normally.

"Okay." My voice came out hoarse. "You can get up now."

Maria uncurled slowly, frantically checking Gabriel. Hands running over his arms, his legs, his head. "Is he hurt? Did I hurt him?"

Gabriel was crying high, frightened wails, but there was no blood, no visible injuries.

She'd protected him completely.

She looked up at me, eyes wide. "You... you hit him. With the car."

My jaw clenched. "He'll live. Broken leg, maybe. Maybe worse." The words came out hollow. "I don't know."

The reality was settling in now, cutting through the adrenaline fog. I'd just run a man down. Deliberately. With a vehicle.

"You saved us," Maria said.

"I destroyed my car." My voice cracked. "I probably seriously injured someone. I..."

Her hand reached forward, squeezed my shoulder through the seat. "You saved us. That's what matters."

I closed my eyes and gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles ached.

A memory surfaced. It was my lieutenant, years ago, standing in the parking lot after an officer-involved shooting: *"Sometimes doing the right thing means living with the consequences, Klippech. You did what you had to do. Now you live with it."*

I pulled out my phone with trembling hands. Dialed 911.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Shots fired." My voice was steady now. Cop voice. "Two armed suspects, black SUV, corner of..." I gave the cross streets. "One suspect is injured, needs medical attention. They're armed and involved in human trafficking. Suspects are the Vázquez brothers."

"Sir, can you stay on the line?"

I hung up.

Maria stared at me. "Won't they trace that call to you?"

I looked at the Prius. Its hood dented, windshield shattered with a bullet hole dead center, steam still wisping from under the crumpled front end. The cabin reeked of hot and sour soup. Vinegar and chili mingled with a metallic tang of something broken deep under the hood, like the aftermath of a takeout joint explosion. It competed with the interior's normal scent of old coffee, faux pine tree and fever sweat, cut through by the ghost of baby powder drifting up from Gabriel's blanket.

"Yeah. Probably. But right now," I said, "let's get you home."

I turned the key. The engine almost didn't catch. It complained, rough and grinding, but it was running. Now a family of warning lights glowed on the dashboard like an accusation.

"Your car..." Maria's voice was small.

"It's just metal and glass." I shifted into drive. The transmission groaned in protest. "You

and Gabriel aren't."

"You protected us tonight," she said "No hesitation. No questions. You didn't know us. You were sick, you could have been killed." She met my eyes in the rearview. "My father is like that. He would give everything to protect the people he loved. Even strangers, if they needed him."

My throat tightened.

"You would have been a great father to Michael," she said quietly. "I think you still are. Even now. Even after everything."

"I wasn't there when it mattered." The words scraped out.

"You're here now." Her voice was firm, certain. "For us. That matters too."

I had to look away. Had to focus on the road before she saw my eyes watering. I blamed it on the fever. On the exhaustion.

But deep down, I knew better.

The snow was falling heavier now, thick and relentless. I pulled out of the parking lot, heading west toward Pilsen.

The Prius groaned beneath us, every bolt rattling, but it kept moving forward.

One more mile. That's all I needed.

One more mile, and she'd be safe.

Behind us, sirens began to wail in the distance.

We drove in silence for a while.

But something had shifted. The weight I'd been carrying alone for five years felt... lighter.

Not gone. Never gone.

Just shared. For the first time in a long time, that felt like enough.

## The Reunion

I found a spot in front of the modest house on 18th Street and the engine shuddered twice, then died.

I tried to restart it. Nothing. Not even a click.

"It's okay," Maria said softly. "We're here."

I sat there for a moment, too exhausted to move. My whole body felt like lead.

Maria's hands were shaking as she reached for the door handle. "What if they're angry? I disappeared for two years..."

"They're your parents," I said, certain. "They'll just be glad you're alive."

I forced myself out of the car, every muscle screaming protest. Grabbed Gabriel from Maria because she couldn't bring herself to move. The baby felt surprisingly heavy in my arms, or maybe I was just that weak.

We walked to the door together. Maria knocked.

The door opened. A middle-aged woman stopped mid-breath.

*"Mija?"*

Maria broke down. "Mamá..."

They embraced, sobbing. The father appeared, stunned, then joined them. The mother noticed Gabriel in my arms.



"Un bebé?"

Maria took Gabriel, introducing him through tears. I stood on the porch, swaying slightly, watching them cry and touch each other like they couldn't believe it was real.

Something cracked inside my chest. Not pain—something else. Something that had been frozen for five years starting to thaw.

My vision blurred. I told myself it was the fever. But I knew better.

I turned to leave, but my legs almost gave out. I caught myself on the porch railing.

"Señor!" The mother noticed me for the first time, really noticed. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Estás enfermo. You are very sick!"

"I'm fine. I should..."

A coughing fit cut me off, deep and rattling.

The father stepped forward, took my arm to steady me. "You brought our daughter home. You must come inside."

"No, really, I..."

"Por favor." The mother was already pulling me toward the door. "You cannot drive like this. Come. We have soup, medicine. You rest."

I tried to protest, but another chill wracked through me. Maria appeared at my other side.

"Please," she said quietly. "You gave me the greatest gift. Let us give you something in return."

"I really shouldn't..."

The mother was already leading me inside, scolding in rapid Spanglish about foolish men who drive around sick on Christmas Eve.

The warmth of the house hit me like a wave. Smells of cooking, cinnamon, pine. Christmas decorations everywhere. The kind that came from love, not obligation or a marketing campaign.

They sat me at the table. Someone put a bowl of soup in front of me. Someone else brought a blanket. Medicine appeared. Real medicine, not the dregs of a DayQuil bottle.

The family gathered around, talking, crying, laughing. Maria held Gabriel, introducing him to his grandparents properly now. They passed the baby around with reverent hands, speaking to him in Spanish, kissing his forehead.

I sat there, soup warming my hands, blanket around my shoulders, and watched.

This. This was what I'd wanted for Michael. To see him grow up. To share moments like this.

Tears streamed down my face. Not from sadness this time. Not from the fever.

From witnessing something pure. Something I thought I'd lost forever.

The mother noticed, squeezed my shoulder. "Llora, mijo. It's okay to cry."

So I did. For the first time in five years, I let myself cry. Not in anger or self-pity, but in something that felt almost like hope.

Maria came over, Gabriel in her arms. "We want you to be his padrino. His godfather."

I looked up at her, completely blindsided. For a moment, I couldn't speak. Couldn't process what she'd just said.

"You want me to be..." I couldn't even finish the sentence. "That's a big thing. I can't be his godfather. I wasn't there when my own son..."

"I know what it is," Maria said firmly. "I'm not asking because you saved us. I'm

asking because you chose to come back. Because you could have left, and you didn't." She held his gaze. "Gabriel needs a man in his life who knows how to choose right when it's hard. That's you. That's what a godfather does. He shows up."

I looked at the family around the table. At Gabriel sleeping peacefully in his mother's arms. At the decorations that actually meant something; hand-made, chosen with care, the kind of Christmas that money couldn't mass-produce.

At the warmth I hadn't felt in five years.

My head didn't pound anymore. The chills had faded. My chest rose and fell easy, no rattle, no tightness. I didn't know if it was the soup, the medicine they'd given me, or just being surrounded by people who gave a damn about each other. Who chose to love even when it was hard. Who kept fighting even when everything tried to break them.

Maybe it was all three.

"You don't have to decide tonight. Just think about it," she said gently. "For now, just stay. Have dinner with us. Don't be alone tonight."

But I felt better than I had in days. Better than I'd felt in years, if I was being honest.

"Okay," I said. "I'll stay for dinner. We can talk about the godfather thing later."

The grandmother beamed and went to get another bowl of soup. The grandfather clapped me on the shoulder, solid and warm, the kind of touch that said you're one of us now.

And for the first time since Michael died, I didn't want to pull away.

Through the window, I could see the Prius under the streetlight, snow collecting on its crumpled hood like Gabriel's blanket, white and soft, covering the damage underneath. Making it look almost peaceful.

Just like I felt. For the first time since Michael died.

Almost peaceful.

Almost home.

**THE END**

Thank you for reading “The Night Before”, my fifth short story shared with readers through my website. I hope you found this story an inspirational read for not only just the holiday season, but the entire year.

Your time and attention mean the world to me.

If you enjoyed the story, would you consider leaving a review on my website? Your insights might assist others in deciding whether to read it.

You can get to my site via this link:

[Home - Mark L Benson - Suspense Author](#)

You may also enjoy my other short stories, “The Class Ring.”, set in 1990’s Southwest Chicago, “One Lucky Fool”, which follows a Chicago firefighter, “The Value of Vengeance”, a story of two brothers and the decisions each make that ripple through their family, and “Trask Manor”, an eerie, Poe-esque story about decent into madness.

You can find those via these links:

[The Class Ring](#)

[One Lucky Fool](#)

[The Value of Vengeance](#)

[Trask Manor](#)

I’m grateful you chose to spend your time with my story, and I look forward to sharing many more adventures with you in the future.

All the best,

Mark L. Benson

## Acknowledgements

I want to offer my deepest thanks to everyone who helped bring this story to life:

To my brilliant editor and fearless beta reader, Maria Stambone—your sharp eye and uncanny gift for transforming my chaotic first drafts into something coherent continue to amaze me. Your patience is supernatural, your insight unmatched, and your grammar skills are so precise they could keep even Santa’s Naughty and Nice list perfectly organized.

To my family and friends—past, present, and wonderfully unpredictable—you are the true backbone of my storytelling. Your quirks, your chaos, your humor, and your heartfelt moments have shaped every corner of my imagination. You’ve inspired more characters and plot twists than you’ll ever know. Thank you for being the unwitting fuel behind my creativity... though you might want to brace yourselves for future appearances in upcoming tales.

Thank you all for walking with me through this wild, festive, and sometimes dark journey. Here’s to many more adventures—and misadventures—still to come.

## Biography

Raised amidst the vibrant landscape of Chicago's Southwest side throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s, Mark found joy in captivating audiences with vivid tales of his upbringing. After lassoing his soulmate, also a proud Chicagoan, he planted roots in the western suburbs to cultivate their brood. But fear not, their ties to the city remained as sturdy as deep-dish pizza crust, with summer days spent by the lakefront, holiday evenings among downtown's festive glow, and weekends indulging in the culinary delights of their favorite eateries.

By day, Mark conquered the world of packaging design, but his creative spirit refused to be boxed in. From creating hockey goalie mask designs to testing his comedic chops in stand-up, his artistic flame burned bright. Now, he embarks on a new chapter as an author, with the releases of his short stories as well as the imminent release of his debut novel, "Archer Heights." Evoking the nostalgia of his youth, the suspense novel is like a time machine to his childhood neighborhood, capturing the essence of growing up on Chicago's vibrant southwest side.