

A Man Alone

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VII

One

I drove fast. Really fast. I passed people in no-passing zones. I ran yellow lights and even a red. I half-stopped at octagonal signs. I didn't even slow at triangular ones. I was a nut. I'm sure my eyes were wide open and my hands were gripping the steering wheel like a vise.

It didn't hit me until I got there. I swear, not until I turned off my engine did I truly grasp where I was. I peeled my hands off my steering wheel and they began shaking. My heart pounded in my throat making me feel a little sick.

I stepped out and paced back and forth next to my car several times. The cool air made me feel a little better. I sucked it in deep. I still couldn't calm down.

But I had to go. I walked slowly to the door. I began shaking worse halfway there. I leaned on the door jamb doing my best to reign in my fear.

I pushed the door bell and held my breath.

Inside there were footfalls that came closer. I saw a figure behind lace curtains. The door swung inward and I exhaled. Heat flashed on me.

We stood there for a minute, silent. I wanted to run away, run inside, fall over. I wanted...something.

More time passed. It was the strangest thing I have ever experienced. I had to do something, so I cracked a smile even though I felt like cowering.

"Scott," she finally whispered. She stepped outside and wrapped her arms around me. I was ready for her embrace, and I hugged back. It felt right. So unlike the way it was when Kelly hung on me.

"God, Stephanie." I didn't want to squeeze too tightly or too flaccidly. I didn't want to let go, but I made myself, somehow.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I've been doing some searching."

"You look a little sick."

"I'm feeling better. Better now than I have in a week."

"Do you want to come inside?" She held the door for me and I crossed the threshold. We entered the living room and I looked around for anyone else. Nobody. Good, it made it easier.

Steph closed the door, locked it, threw the deadbolt. When she turned, I was there. I loved how she wasn't scared, how she trusted me the way I trusted her. My hands were on her hips and I leaned in, pressing my lips to hers. Soft, gentle, kind, exhilarating. She kissed back slightly, maybe from instinct.

It lasted a second and I pulled back, dropping my hands from her body. I backed up a couple steps to let her breathe. She seemed to be in shock, staring at nothing. I thought it funny how my kiss sent her from the world of the living.

I made my voice as calm and deep as I could, "I'm sorry about that."

Now she looked at me. I missed her face and her voice and her presence. "You've never kissed me before."

"I apologize." I felt my skin getting hot. A little sweat formed on my upper lip. "I don't know. I've been sick—"

"Don't tell me you kissed me because you're delusional," she said smiling.

"No. No, nothing like that. But I've been full of angst recently, you know? All my friends were pissing me off—except you. You've always been wonderful. But I got sick, and it allowed me some space. I was in bed for two days and I was walking around dead for the rest of the week. I found out that my sister doesn't like me."

She pulled me to the couch and sat down with me. "That's not true."

"No, it is. She told me so, and she's right not to. I've been a prick to Helen all my life and Kristy has no reason to like me. I'm her brother, but that in itself isn't enough. I don't do anything for her.

"But as I laid in my bed, I thought about two people. I thought about Kristy and how since I graduated from high school, I've paid next to no attention to her. I have to think before I say what grade she's in. I have no idea what clubs she's involved in or what friends she has. I forgot her birthday because I was getting tossed as I celebrated my mom's."

Steph put her hand on my wrist and squeezed. She wore this pale blue fingernail polish that I thought looked rather cute. Normally I don't like any fingernail polish at all, but things change. People change, too.

"It's okay. She cried on me earlier." I pointed to a couple damp spots still discoloring my shirt. I realized that I left my flannel at my dad's. But that was fine; I wanted Kristy to have it. "We came to an understanding; I'm going to try harder to be a real brother and son."

"But I also thought about you. I would lay there in a fetal position wishing for you. Your face came into my mind and that alone made me feel better. I pictured you perfectly and that's amazing to me because usually I can't see anyone like that in my head. Then I realized that it had been some time since you and I had spoken, let alone seen each other. I got scared. I thought that you were drifting away from me, and I can't have that."

"You know, I'm wary about saying what I really feel because I'm afraid that people won't like what I have to contribute. I feel that if I tell my friends what I really think about situations—and especially themselves—that they'll be offended and not want to see me anymore. But right now, I find myself shaking, dreading to tell you what I'm thinking. And it's not anything negative at all. I'm just scared that it's not going to turn out the way I need it to. I'm afraid that you're not going to want to see me anymore."

Steph averted her eyes downward and before I could even speculate at what that meant, she gasped and snapped her eyes to mine. "What happened to your hands?" she accused me more than asked me.

"I hit a wall and some people." I don't like lying.

Her fingers traced over my knuckles, lingering on the middle finger's first knuckle on my right hand. She flexed my hand for me as I hid the pain I felt. "I think you broke this knuckle."

"I thought I might have."

"Don't you think you should get it looked at by a doctor?"

"Yes. But first maybe I should finish what I've been trying to say."

"Maybe you should go to the hospital."

I looked at her for a long time. She couldn't even look at me. I understood. "Maybe you're right, after all." I stood and walked to the door. She raced ahead of me and opened it being a good hostess. Y'all come 'gain, nah, ya heah?

"Bye, Scott. Call me soon." She closed the door and waved from behind the living room window.

I waved back with the less injured hand and got in my car. Fuck it. I turned the radio on to the hardest music I had and I turned it as loud as it would go.

Maybe it wasn't the right time. She could change her mind, after all. Things change. People change, too. Before I was lost in the cacophony and my own screams, words Zach once spoke to me came accompanied by a stabbing headache: "Sometimes you get dry humped."