

**THE LAST  
NIGHT**

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P R E S S



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*For Kelly*

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally...*  
— *John Donne*

THE LAST NIGHT

Pine and eucalyptus trees surrounded the Westfield Academy baseball diamond, forging a sort of haven where the only sight was dusk overhead. I felt I was somewhere far away in the mountains, in another world entirely, forgetting that just past the trees and through the winding passageways of Coldwater Canyon lay metropolitan LA.

This was a welcomed escape.

When I stepped onto the field for the first time in almost nine years, with that sharp smell of freshly cut grass still warm from the summer sun, I couldn't help but think of all the nights I'd spent here before I left for college. I felt the familiar grind of infield dirt beneath my shoes. My head hung low to watch my feet balance along the first-base line, to see my toe drag across the chalk as it created a white crescent against the earth. I saw myself back when I used to play, fielding grounders at shortstop and throwing the ball to Alex at first. Those were our simple times.

Some part of me still was that person, but the rest knew I could never be the same again. If only I could

reach out and touch my former self. I didn't know what I'd hoped to get back. Maybe I just didn't want to know what I do now.

I thought of all the players who rounded the bases on this very soil fifty years ago; how nothing else could have mattered than the crack of the bat, their teammates' cheers from the dugout, the smell of dirt woven in the seams of leather gloves. I could almost see those ballplayers, feel them, before they faded into the evening light, never to return except in memory.

No one knew I was here, especially not Shannon. What would she care anyway? I could have been driving off the edge of the Santa Monica Mountains and she wouldn't know the difference.

No.

I kicked the dirt at the idea. I kicked it again at the thought of her walking away. I'd taken the long road to return to where I'd begun when it was just me, whoever that was, when no one else told me who I was supposed to become. I'd returned to the place where I'd met her. Where I'd met Alex.

My phone rang. My heart jumped when I hoped it was him, that somehow he knew I was thinking of him just then. It wasn't. Then my chest started to burn. What the hell was I doing here? I'd disappeared when he needed me most. Alex had saved my life, and I might have failed to repay the favor.

ONE WEEK EARLIER

## CHAPTER ONE

**M**y black Mustang GT sped through traffic, as fast as one can in rush hour anyway, to arrive at Shannon's first recital since earning her master's degree. I snuck in after the show had begun and found a seat in the back just in time. She took center stage in the Ralph Lauren dress I bought her for our last anniversary. With the audience waiting in anticipation, she flipped her auburn curls over her shoulder, then readied the violin under her chin. Shannon stood perfectly poised, almost statuesque, until the hairs of her bow glided over the instrument's strings and Beethoven's "Violin Romance" radiated over the auditorium.

I couldn't think of how many times I'd heard the composition. During the weeks of honing her performance, I'd turn down the volume of the Dodger game on TV, hold still to quiet the groans of the leather armchair, and watch the home team run the bases to the music seeping through the bedroom door. Now, from the back of the recital hall, I could see the patrons were as enraptured as I had been. I may be biased, but she was the best violinist I'd ever heard. Tonight was the

first time I listened to the song with accompaniment. The orchestra made her sound even better.

After the show, I gave her a kiss to congratulate her, but her attention was focused on the surrounding people in suits and black-framed glasses. They must have been important because, each time I tried to snag her attention, she'd wave at me as if to say, *One more minute, Ed.*

One minute turned into thirty, then fifty, and then I lost count. At first glance, my suit was just as nice as these people's. Yet I didn't belong. The other musicians and guests who didn't acknowledge my presence only reinforced that fact. They were right that my musical talent might not have matched theirs, but the unspoken joke was that I knew more about their affairs than they realized or preferred. I just didn't have the patience for the snobbery that often accompanied the music business. Somehow Shannon could tolerate the games, even if she didn't play into them herself.

I signaled toward the door to let her know I'd meet her at home, but I doubt she saw me.

My post-graduate life was spent in a cubicle punching keys as resident code monkey for LA's leading consulting firm. When people asked how I enjoyed my job in IT, I said, "It pays the bills." I'd spent the last year developing a database for a start-up Internet marketplace aimed at shrinking Amazon's piece of the pie. I was convinced the client would later file for bankruptcy when it failed to compete, which would negate all the long nights

I'd sacrificed. I regularly reminded myself that the paycheck afforded my coveted, Westside apartment with the creakiest door in the building.

I tossed my keys on the foyer table and strolled toward the far wall of windows. I surveyed the darkened basin below, where the city lights were laid out like stars under the charcoal haze of a sky. I exhaled, weaving my fingers behind my head, relishing my slice of the twentysomething American Dream.

Shannon returned home near midnight. She walked in sporting jeans and her black blazer, the Ralph Lauren draped over her arm in a garment bag. I played solitaire on the kitchen countertop. She strode past me to lay her dress and violin on the couch as I flipped over three more cards, none of which I needed.

"I really enjoyed that."

She spun around as her hand shot to her chest.

"You scared me," she said. "I thought you'd be asleep."

I uncovered the ace of spades and moved it up top to start a new foundation. She slid into the barstool next to mine.

"I fumbled the bridge a little," she said.

"No, you were perfect."

She tried not to grin, then moved the two of spades onto the ace. I didn't know how she saw that simple move and I missed it. She continued, "Why did you leave so quickly?"

"You were busy talking. I didn't want to interrupt."

"Do you know who those people were?"

I shook my head, keeping my eyes on the cards.

"Friends of my advisor," she said. "One was from the LA Phil, another from Baltimore. The Baltimore

woman remembered my audition from last month.”

“Why don’t you sound excited?”

“Because I’m wondering why you aren’t.”

I stopped flipping cards and collected them back into the box. “I’m just tired. Too tired to even finish this game. Really, I’m proud of you.” I kissed her forehead and returned the deck to the coffee table drawer.

“This could mean big things for us,” she said. “Have you thought about my question?”

I studied the city lights through the windows. There were fewer than earlier. I hoped that if I concentrated hard enough they would spell out an answer for me. Aside from a line of blinking red bulbs atop a skyscraper, the rest remained still.

“It’s just not part of my plan right now,” I said. “I want to be sure I have a good job before I start a family.”

“I’m not talking children here.” She stood to join me, lacing her fingers between mine. “I’m talking us.”

We’d been through this discussion a few times. I didn’t hate the topic. I hated the uncertainty of having broken up before and what that meant for the future. For us.

Back in college, the last time we were apart, I’d shown up at one of her recitals, very much like tonight. She exited the performance wearing that same black blazer, again with one hand carrying her violin case while the other held a garment bag. When she saw me, some brand of sad pleasure crossed her face—at least I hoped it was pleasure. She decided to approach anyway. Her auburn curls bounced over her apple cheeks and gently tapped her shoulders. They were the same curls I’d once run my hands through—the way she liked it—before I’d smell my fingertips, allowing

traces of her honeysuckle conditioner to wander through my nostrils—the way I liked it. The moment was as intimate as it was foreign because it had been banished to another life.

As we walked to her car she said, “I saw you after the show, you know. Standing in the back.”

“I said I would come.”

“That was before…”

She stopped herself. Before she could begin again, I jumped right in and said, “I want to give us another shot.”

I’d never spoken so plainly before. I liked it. I could see her attempting to sort the unsolicited information, but she didn’t smile as I’d hoped.

“Ed. I’m seeing someone.”

“That Richie guy?”

She gave me a stern look for being cute with her. “His name’s Rich. He’s nice.”

“He sounds wonderful. Does he love you?”

She tried to balance the dress and violin while fumbling through her purse.

“You want me to hold something?”

“I got it. Besides, it’s too soon. We’ve only been seeing each other for a month.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Best to let him go before he gets too attached.”

“You can’t come here and tell me you want to get back together.”

“You just left. I don’t know what to do with that.”

“You’re right. It wasn’t all your fault.”

I slowed to delay reaching her car since each step was another grain down the hourglass. My effort was useless, though. Her Toyota was now two spaces away,



and the keys rattled in her hand.

“So let’s talk,” I said. “If you’re hesitating for even a moment, let’s figure this out.”

Now she huffed and looked away. “I can’t do this tonight.”

That much was true. The next morning was something different all together. After I flipped on the news and threw a slice of wheat bread in the toaster oven, I heard the front door shake. Someone tried the knob, but finding it locked, they rang the bell. I figured my roommate had forgotten his key again.

When I opened the door, however, Shannon turned to face me. I stopped breathing. She breathed heavily, not daring to blink her hazel eyes. I took half a step toward her. She came the rest of the way and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. After a moment, I pulled her to my chest.

Her hair smelled of honeysuckle.

Back in the kitchen, she sat at the counter while I fried eggs and potatoes. We ate with the TV on mute and with her knee pressed against mine.

That was then. Now in the apartment we shared, she was the one asking me to come back, and I couldn’t determine what was keeping me away. Knowing what I’d done to save us before, the role reversal knotted my stomach.

“I don’t know what’s stopping me,” I said, squeezing her fingers in kind. “But it’s something. I can’t ignore that.”

She dropped my hands and strode toward the bedroom. She took off her blazer, stopped, and pointed the jacket at me like a weapon. “You need to get out of your head. You paralyze yourself.”

“Are you saying I should ignore reason and just say yes?”

My laptop chimed at the head of the dining table: a new e-mail received. I instinctively moved to read it, reacting to the bell like one of Pavlov’s dogs. Shannon’s face flushed, so I halted mid-step. We squared off on opposite ends of the wooden slab.

“All I’m saying is that every choice can’t perfectly match your list of bullet points. I need to know if you *want* to marry me.”

The computer chimed again. I knew she hated that sound after hours.

“I’m not going to beg you, Ed. You either do or you don’t. I just don’t know how much longer I’m going to wait.”

She stormed into the bedroom. I wanted to run after her but had no idea what I would say when I got there. Instead, I resigned to silence the computer. I didn’t care who sent the message and closed the program. That’s when an unexpected name caught my eye.

I reopened the mailbox. One new message, which simply read:

*last weekend of my exhibit. hope you can make it. ashley left.* — alex

Since his wedding three years ago, I hadn’t heard much more from Alex Evergreen than the fliers advertising his artwork and a couple Christmas cards. The most recent included a picture of he and Ashley hugging in front of their recently purchased California Craftsman, the words “Seasons Greetings” scripted in

red across the upper corner.

I reviewed the last two words to make certain I hadn't misread them. "Ashley left." They were clear; yet they didn't make sense. He had friends to lean on up north. Brian and Meghan were part of his new family now. Still, I would have expected at least a phone call if his marriage was on the verge of collapse.

I dialed him right away. His contact held the first slot in my phone book. I saw it often, but clicking on his name created an unfamiliar aftertaste. I waited through the longest three rings before a quiet "hello" trickled through the line.

"Alex? It's Ed. I just got your e-mail. What happened?"

He sounded like a diseased man trying to choke out his final words. "Can you come?"

I stood up. I'd always been unable to sit still during important conversations, but I fought my usual desire to pace in circles over the carpet.

"Talk to me," I said. "Tell me what's going on."

More rasping breaths.

"Can you come?"

I headed directly to the bedroom closet and plucked shirts from their hangers. Shannon, already dressed in her penguin pajamas, stepped out of the bathroom as I pulled a duffle from under the bed. She tried to say something but couldn't. Then it dawned on me how this looked.

"No," I said, "I'm not leaving you. But I have to fly to Seattle in the morning."

"Can't someone else at the office go?"

"The office isn't sending me."

She couldn't fathom what was going on. I told her about the e-mail and the phone call. Her guard dropped. I watched as her expression battled between frustration with me and concern for Alex's predicament. She stopped to compose herself.

"So you go at the drop of a hat for Alex after... what... a three-year absence, but you won't..."

I was glad she didn't finish her thought.

Before I had a chance to think, I said, "Maybe this time away from each other will be good for us." I immediately regretted it.

A look sparked in her eye. I knew it well. She was about to fire off an ironclad rebuttal I wasn't going to like. Finally, she said: "This isn't a problem for Brian and Meghan."

"Please don't compare us to them." I threw rolled pairs of socks into the duffle. "They're the high school sweethearts everyone fawns over at ten-year reunions."

"And we can't have that?"

I laid the bag on the floor and walked to her, scooping her hands into mine. I couldn't tell whether her eyes screamed that she loved me or wanted to kill me. Probably both.

I said, "Alex and Ashley split up after only three years of marriage. I want to be sure about us."

After enough time passed for those words to sink in, her hands finally touched back.

"You're not seriously going tomorrow, are you?"

"I have to."

I thumbed the tops of her lotioned hands.

"I owe him."

She swallowed her displeasure in the way I'd come

to admire. I never doubted how much she loved me. I just hoped she didn't doubt the same. I pulled a hair stuck to her lips and moved it behind her ear. Her smile was effortless. Comfortable. Home.

Then her slight pleasure hardened.

"You may owe him," she said. "But you're sleeping on the couch tonight."

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