

## THE GROUND THAT SHE WALKED ON

We hadn't talked much, not since that awful night four weeks ago. Her phone call came at the wrong time, as usual. I grabbed a lime green towel and slipped on slippery feet across the bathroom tile into the kitchen. I answered by the third ring.

"Hello," I said, catching my breath.

"Hello."

"Julia." I wrapped the towel tighter around my waist. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. I need to talk to you. Can you meet me for breakfast?" Her request wasn't presented as a question.

"Today? Now?" The only reason why she'd call this early would relate to our daughter.

I raised my arm to check the time. My Rolex was still in the bathroom. I looked up at the kitchen's sun-worn wall clock shaped like Buzz Lightyear. I had to be at work in an hour. I could tell my secretary I had a client meeting.

"Okay. How about Denny's? I could be there in ten minutes."

"I prefer The Breakfast Nook."

The Nook was in Encino, way down the freeway. "Oh. Okay. I'll be there when I can."

"Fine," she sighed.

I dried myself quickly, ignoring my excitement. I put on my gray suit, then changed to my blue one. I gave my grey-tinged thinning hair a fast press with my palms in a futile effort to wipe away wetness. I trimmed my beard, then splashed on a generous wallop of English Leather from my Father's Day gift pack. Julia's favorite cologne. Mine, too.

I almost wore the tie Melissa gave me for my birthday but I thought maybe Tinkerbelle wouldn't be appropriate. I chose a red power tie that Julia once remarked looked well on me. I always thought so, too.

My short cut on Roscoe would have saved me a few minutes but I didn't make a single light. Then the morning traffic on the 405 was bumper to bumper. I tried calling to say I'd probably be late and so go ahead and order what'd you like and I'll be there when I can but I only got voicemail all three times. She wasn't big on cell phones but she had agreed for me to get her one if I redesigned her side yard with Japanese silk lanterns and a koi pond.

Julia was seated in the patio, the smoking section. The March rain last night would had made the morning air smell clean and fresh but her menthol cigarette smoke gave off a odor of late night lounges. She didn't look up as I slid in my chair, muttering my apologies. Tapered fingernails tapped nonexistent ash into a monogrammed glass ashtray. Her brown eyes angled toward a chair I didn't occupy. She wore the high-necked white lace blouse that I bought her in Cancun, accented with a cream-colored brooch that I hadn't seen before. Brown hair, speckled with strands of silver, flowed over her shoulders. I told myself that she didn't look gorgeous.

I picked up a menu and pretended to study it. Overhead, sunlight pushed flecked white rays around the corners of a wispy cloud.

"So. How are you?" I cursed myself. Too much emphasis on the third syllable.

"I'm fine, Ben." Ben. Not Benjamin. That was a good sign.

The waitress came and took our orders. Poached eggs and toast for her, so I had oatmeal and a dry English muffin.

She told me little about the last four weeks, keeping information about Melissa to one or two word vague answers, to which I would just nod and say good or fine or good again. All

through this small talk, I wondered what it was that she wasn't talking about.

The breakfast ended with our polite complimentary comments to the waitress. While our coffee cups were being refilled, she took out another menthol cigarette. With an expected effort, I lit it for her. She accepted it with a thin smile. She exhaled slowly. I tried to recall important talking points from my therapy group.

"Well, Ben," she said, looking out at the street. "You're holding your weight well."

"Thank you, Julia."

She looked back at me and smiled. Not thin or forced, it seemed to me. How many lobster dinners did I buy, just to see that smile?

Encouraged, I ventured, "And how's Melissa?"

"I told you before, she's fine."

"Yes, I know, I know. But how does she like fourth grade?"

"She likes it fine." Another tap into the ash tray. "She and Lance adore each other."

I stared, then blinked. I always found myself one name behind on her love life.

I didn't ask questions about Lance, knowing the animated answers Julia would have provided. I held back asking more about Melissa. I would see her soon. My office calendar had big red "X"'s all through Easter week.

She rubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray. The water glasses trembled with her effort. My hands clenched and I put a calm expression on my face.

"Ben," she said. "I need fifteen hundred dollars."

". . . What?"

"You heard me. I need fifteen hundred dollars."

"What for?"

“What for?” Julia repeated, with a sarcastic lilt. “Why, for Melissa, of course.”

“Melissa? Why, what happened to her? Is she all right?”

“I *told* you, Benjamin, she’s fine.” She took a breath, not so much for oxygen but for effect. “You always think the worst. Don’t jump to conclusions. I want Melissa to stay with my mother for Easter vacation.”

“Your mother?” Melissa’s grandmother’s idea of bonding with Melissa included *My Little Pony* videos, which my daughter outgrew four years ago. “You want her to visit Estelle? In Seattle? On *Easter*? I have Melissa for that week.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Benjamin, don’t start.”

“But, now, wait, let’s back up here . . .”

“Lance has a conference in Maui during Easter week. He values my support. Melissa has a lot of homework to make up. You’d only distract her from it, taking her to Disneyland or God knows where. All that unpleasantness that *you* started disrupted her school routine.”

“That *I* started? Now, now, that whole custody issue, that was you, *you* wanted to . . .”

“Let’s not go into that *now*, Benjamin.”

“Well, I think that we should,” I stammered. “It’s, it’s *important* that you understand and appreciate *my* feelings.” I was sweating. It sounded so much easier when I talked in group.

“Don’t *start* up about *your* feelings. We’re talking about what’s best for *Melissa*.”

“We are? We were?” My words were trying desperately to catch up to my brain.

“Of course we are.”

My mouth moved and made no sound. Remembering to breathe deeply, I focused on a water stain on the white linen tablecloth.

“Why do you need fifteen hundred dollars? Is it for Maui?”

“I *need* it for Melissa. To send her to Seattle.”

“I don’t have the money.”

“You know that I just *hate* it when you lie. Your company’s quarterly earnings statement yesterday reported a net profit of over twelve percent.”

I clenched my hands, then unclenched them. Stock options and deferred payments had never really held her interest.

I had worked out several competent defenses against this familiar argument, in my group, to my bathroom mirror, on my last blind date. Now, here she was, in flesh and perfume. All the reasons why I had convinced myself I was glad she left me justified themselves once more.

I picked up my glass, cleared my throat, then put down my glass.

“Does Melissa even *want* to spend the holiday with her grandmother?”

“Of course she does. What a *stupid* question.”

Despite my awareness of her argument history, I still flinched at her comment.

“I am supposed to have her at Easter. We agreed. The courts agreed.”

“She’s unhappy. All that carrying on at the hearing upset her terribly.”

“That *you* started . . .”

“She needs a change of scenery, Benjamin. A mother knows.”

Julia had had a difficult childbirth at an awkward age. It had bestowed upon her the wisdom of Solomon in these matters.

“I have visitation rights. If I have to, I’ll take you back to court.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Her smirk hurt. The recent custody settlement had forced me to sell my Lexus. Since then, I had at least been able to tread water. Despite my company’s success.

The waitress returned to the table. Julia said she didn’t want anything else, just the check.

I looked up to make sure that she was speaking to the waitress.

*Resist her. Make a stand.* My group was always telling me that I'd feel better if I did.

I looked up. Julia stared back at me, making me feel uncomfortably like the male spouse of a black widow spider. The sunlight faded behind a telephone pole. All of our years together held their breath. The pride and self-assurance that she claimed initially attracted me to her, still served her too well. A car alarm blared suddenly, then faded. I adjusted my fork to the left.

"I could just loan you the money. And Melissa could stay with me."

"Melissa belongs with her grandmother."

The courts had proven to be on her side but justice was on mine. John, at work, had given me a business card of a buddy who would help me *pro bono*. My group's general consensus was that Julia had reached her legal limits.

"*Well?*" Winter had never known such frost.

I said nothing, a victory in itself, I told myself. The back of my neck grew hot.

I drew in a fresh breath, albeit flavored with her menthol cigarette smoke. I knew what needed to be done. I could visualize my therapist, smiling at me. Gentle applause from the group washed over me. The restaurant's overhead Muzak rendition of *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* morphed in my ear into the majestic opening chords of the "Hallelujah Chorus."

I raised my head. I squared my shoulders. I looked her straight in the eye.

My nostrils became filled with her jasmine perfume. With no wavering in my voice, as her stern stare recalled country inns, champagne suppers, and heated nights, I told her firmly, and with such clarity that she could not possibly mistake my intent.

"Shall I make the check out to cash? Or what?"

