

He's After Me

By K. E. Ward

At eleven o'clock on a Friday morning, Molly Peterson was just closing up shop at Charlie's Drug Store. She was of average height, had auburn hair with bright green eyes and fair skin. She wore coral lipstick, (which was her favorite color), dangly earrings, bracelets, and a banana clip. Molly loved to accessorize. There was never a day when she wouldn't wear fashion jewelry and at least something to hold back her hair, and makeup to brighten up her face. Like her mother always told her, she wasn't beautiful enough to go without a little something to make herself look better. Thinking about this, Molly searched through her hefty keychain (which had at least fifteen different keys on it) and squinted through the half-masked moonlight until she found the right one. It was a cold night in November and a light mist of freezing rain was drifting slowly towards the pavement. She put down her bag and then hoisted the door shut, holding the knob in place as she turned the key and locked it. The wind blew against her face, putting more color to her cheeks. Once she had put the keys into her pocket, she lifted up her bag again and slung it over her shoulder. It was another one of those nights. She sighed to herself that she could not go out and have a little fun on a Friday night in Chicago.

No, it was going to be another boring evening with her cat, Snickers, her television and a frozen dinner. Chip hadn't been coming around too much since his ex-girlfriend Vaughna had come back into town. She had liked him well enough—he had taken her out plenty of times and they used to hang out in his apartment watching movies and sipping on wine coolers. But he kept talking about her weight, if she would ever go on a diet, and why couldn't she look like one of those models in a swimsuit magazine?

Not the kind of magazine she would always pick up at the drugstore. Since Chip left, she may as well have a college degree with all the reading that she had been doing. She read English textbooks on her time off—none of her friends realized that she had an exceptional reading ability and a fascination with English literature. She dreamed about someday going to college and getting one of those fancy degrees—then she could say that she had accomplished *something*. Then she would be *somebody*, not just a drugstore attendant and a twenty-six year-old with no life and barely any friends.

Molly wasn't expecting anything exceptional to happen tonight. She trudged along the dirty sidewalks mumbling to herself about how dull her life had become. A few bars were open and there was a little bit of traffic both by car and by foot.

Molly just wanted to get home after a busy ten-hour shift and a grumpy boss.

"Good evening, Miss," she heard a low voice say. She could barely see his face, but she could recognize the pungent scent of sweet cigar smoke, which curled from his mouth as she uneasily looked into traffic, wondering if anyone could see her from the road.

"Good evening, sir," she said, and hugged her coat closer to her body, fully intending to walk away. It was strange that someone would say hello at night, especially in this city. But the man continued talking.

"You ought not to walk alone so late at night," he said, completing her thoughts. "Anyone could pick you up... you never know what could happen in this part of town." Molly tried to brush him off. She mumbled something to excuse herself, but the man only continued talking. "Just the other day a man was walking by here and a couple of muggers stabbed him in the stomach. All they wanted was his wallet. One needs to be very wise about things..."

Molly tried to escape him again, but the man seemed not to notice. "What is your name?" She smiled uneasily, turning her

head away. "Pretty little thing. You don't have to answer. Hurry home."

The man moved into the light and she could see the pock marks on his face. He was holding a couple of dice... she had no clue why. He puffed on the cigar some more, smiling as white smoke escaped from his mouth. Must have been a gambling man, trying to cheat the game. Molly hugged her purse close to her body and hurried away.

The street lights glowed dimly against the pavement as steam rose from the grates. Her two-inch heels clicked against the sidewalk as she rushed past empty store fronts and messy alley-ways. The man was strange. She was sure that that was not the only thing that was going to happen to her that night. Bad things always happen in three's. She hurried forwards, darting her head this way and that, jumping at the slightest noise.

It was so cold. Molly cursed that she had such a long way to walk home from work every night. It had never seemed so long before, but that night it seemed to be endless, a maze of streets and traffic lights and blind corners and shadows. She did not expect it to happen so soon. She turned the corner and looked up, shielding her eyes against the light. As soon as she saw them, she turned to run away, but the two tall men blocked her way. She did not have time to react; one of them made a move

for her and then the next thing she knew he had his arm locked around her throat, his free hand covering her mouth. She screamed against his hand, kicking and punching his arm. The man punched her back, kicking her legs and sending a blow directly to her right cheek and cheek bone.

And the other one joined in, dragging back into an open cellar intending to throw her in. They took her purse, keys, and then shoved her into the cellar.

Molly's eye hurt. She opened her eyes to darkness and realized that she could not lift her body. She was sore all over. Without keys, purse, or cell phone, she knew she would have to work up the strength to pull herself up and out of the cellar and then ask for help. It was still dark, and she guessed it was the early hours of the morning. With weak legs, she struggled to move her body, but it hurt too much.

She moaned and then managed a painful, gasping, "Help!" Her voice was not strong enough to scream or even yell. Her throat felt as though she had swallowed sandpaper... and then the pain hit her in full force.

"...Help!" she called again. And there was no answer. She was cold; the air felt like stabbing sheets of ice against her skin,

and her whole body quivered. Several moments passed by, and then she heard the brush of footsteps coming her way.

She could scarcely believe that someone had found her, and she let out a yelp of relief. "...Down here..." she said, and she wondered if her voice was audible. Then she heard the footsteps coming closer, so close that he could have been descending down the cellar stairs.

A man's concerned voice then said, "Miss? Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

Molly groaned. She wondered if she could find the strength to lift her voice again. "...No... I was mugged... these two men... beat me up... I need help..."

"My name is Damion," he said, lowering his hand to touch her arm. "You're okay. I'm calling an ambulance now."

When Damion was finished calling an ambulance on his cell phone, he flipped it closed and knelt beside her again. He smelled clean, like fresh, woody soap, and his breath against her face was soft. He took his arm and held it beneath her head, cradling her as though she were an infant. "Thank you," she managed.

"Well, I'm not leaving you until help comes," he said. She took comfort in that. Her eyelids feeling heavy, she drifted off to sleep.

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When she woke up she was in a hospital room with an iv in her arm and an oxygen tube running from her nose. She was in less pain and she felt like she was floating a little bit; she assumed that the nurses had pumped her up with some strong pain medicines. When the nurse returned to her room, Molly asked, "Where is that nice man who took me here?" She could barely remember anything else from that night, after she had been beaten and mugged, except for the fact that a gentle helper had come to her aid.

The nurse shook her head. "I'm glad to see that you are awake. And no, the young gentleman came here, stayed for a couple of hours, and then said that he had to leave. He did leave a message, though: "Hope you feel better."

Molly was disappointed that he had left. She could not forget how soft and caring his embrace had been, nor could she



shake the sound of his quiet comforting as she lay broken and beaten in the street-way cellar.

The nurse asked her what her name was and if she had any insurance. She then asked her if she had any family members in the area or anyone she could call to come pick her up. Molly gave her name and telephone number and then told her, "They took my wallet. They took my purse and my cell phone... have you contacted the police?"

"The police are out in the hallway, and they have been waiting to question you. Shall I let them in?"

Molly nodded and the nurse discreetly exited. The drapes in her hospital room were open and the mid-day sky was blue with only a few wisps of white clouds rolling by. She was so serene that she wondered if the nurses had not included a sedative among her list of new medications.

And who was this Damion person? Their encounter only lasted but for a few minutes, but Molly couldn't get him out of her mind. Why would someone in Chicago, this city of all others, decide to become a Good Samaritan? Surely she had never met anyone like that before. And she admitted, without anyone coming around to her apartment anymore, she got very lonely. To have

someone give her special attention felt very nice.. and she wanted it some more.

When the police came in they asked for her contact information and anything else she remembered from that night. One of them was very tall, with sandy blond hair and blue eyes which were surrounded by very dark lashes. The other one was a portly man with balding brownish-gray hair and a fatherly smile that completely reassured her.

"Can you remember what they looked like?" the portly man asked her.

Molly searched through her memory. "All I remember was that they were both very tall and average weight... their faces were obscured by the shadows and I couldn't see much... but now that I think about it, one of them was wearing a large, silver ring. I think that they were in casual clothes."

"Were they carrying anything?"

"No." Molly shook her head. "They were very strong. I tried to fight back, but they were too powerful for me."

They asked her to replay everything that had happened, where it happened, and at what time. She was almost not going to say anything about the man with the cigar who had struck up a conversation with her right before it happened, but then it came

back into her memory. "There was this strange guy. I met him just before I turned the corner and saw the men."

"Oh, really?" the man with the sandy blond hair said. The portly man's eyes glinted in humor, as though this were some piece of information that was not of high interest to the case. "You haven't mentioned anything about this before. Please. Tell us everything."

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A couple of hours later the nurses came back to give her more pain medication. The doctor had taken a look at her injuries, decided that nothing was life-threatening, and then told her that she could stay for the next several hours before they would let her go home, just to be sure. She lay back against the pillows and tried to close her eyes again. Soon it would be back to her regular life, back to her lonely existence, and back to her normal job at Charlie's Drug Store. Somehow she had to let her boss know that she wouldn't be back to work for a while. Sometimes the manager, Fred Barlow, asked her to come on the weekends, but mostly she just worked during the week.

When it was time to leave the hospital, she dressed in the clothes that they had given her, bundled up her old things, and went down to the pharmacy to pick up her new prescriptions. At the entrance to the hospital, she noticed Damion standing there with his hands in his pockets. "Glad to see that you're doing better," he said.

"You didn't have to come back," she said, as the nurse wheeled her out to the curb. It was hospital policy that each patient needed to be taken out by wheelchair. As she stood, Damion took hold of her hand to help her up.

"Yes, I did," he said. "It was the least I could do, considering what has happened to you."

An awkward silence passed between them. He kicked his sneaker against the pavement. "Listen," he said. "I could give you a ride home. I assume you don't have anyone to take you home."

"I was just going to call a cab," she said. But she was grateful that he had offered.

"No, I insist," he said. "It's upsetting that they let you out so soon. With insurance the way it is today, I'm sure it's common practice. Let me take you home. Do you have anyone you could call in order to be with you once you get home?"

Molly considered that a subtle way of asking her if she was married or had a boyfriend waiting for her to come home. "It's alright," she said. "The doctor checked me out and it's nothing serious. I'm sure it won't take me but a day or two to recover."

Damion narrowed his eyes. "Not with the awful-looking shiner you have on your eye. And, look," he said. "You can barely walk."

Molly reluctantly agreed for him to take her home. He grabbed hold of her arm while they walked out to the car. He had a shiny new red Mustang waiting in the parking lot. He helped her in, swung around to the driver's side, and started the engine.

"I know very little about you," he said, looking into the rear-view mirror. "I don't even know your name."

She gave a slight smile and looked over at him. "My name's Molly. I already know your name. Thank you for helping me last night. I don't know what I would have done if someone hadn't come by."

When he had the chance to turn his head back over to her, he smiled, too. "It wasn't very easy to notice someone lying over there in the cellar. I almost walked by you. Thank goodness I was able to hear you calling for help." He thrummed the

steering wheel. "Molly? What's your last name, Molly? You got a family?"

Molly struggled to find an answer. She waved her hand. "Oh, you know. People come and go in your life. If you have someone, you never know how long you're going to hold onto them. I suppose that's how it's been in my life... one person comes along and leaves, and the next person comes along and does the same. I've never been married and I've never had children. I've had roommates before but they haven't been the most supportive. What can I say? Everyone has left me. My only friend is my boss, and I work for him."

Damion asked her which direction he should be headed.

"Where do you work?"

She sighed. "I work at the drugstore, five days a week, sometimes seven. It's not the best living but it pays the bills."

"How long have you been working there?"

"Five years," she said, grimacing.

"You don't like it?" he asked, reading her expression.

She wondered if he disrespected her for her job. "I always wanted to go to school and get one of those fancy doctorates and

become a college professor..." she said, trailing off. "All there is to do at the drugstore is pricing, stocking, sitting behind the cash register and bumming around with my boss. It's an okay job, but... there has to be something more."

"I understand what you're saying," he said. "It's good that you have ambitions and that you're never satisfied staying in one place."

"Now, if only I could afford to go to college," she said. "I dream big, but I never have the chance to follow through."

"Don't think that way."

"You think I could? You think I could possibly drag myself out of a dead-end job? Even if I could save up and eventually afford tuition, I don't know if I have the drive and determination in order to make it there. I would certainly fall behind more quickly than you can count to ten. It's been a long time since I've graduated from high school."

"Don't sell yourself short," he said. "I know plenty of people who didn't go to college right away. They worked for a while, saved up, and eventually earned college degrees. There's nothing that says it's too late in the game."

"Let's not talk about this," she said, with a wave of her hand. They approached her apartment building and she directed

him there. "Thank you for everything. This is where I live. You've been so kind to help me last night and to drive me home today. I don't know how I'll ever thank you."

Damion reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He pulled out three twenty dollar bills and handed them to her. "This should be enough to replace what those four men took from your wallet." She held up her hand to refuse but he insisted. "Just take it," he said, and she would have refused again if she didn't really need the money. Then he lifted out a business card and held it out to her in one swift motion that had her heart fluttering in her chest. "Call my anytime," he said. "I know how lonely it can be in a city like this.. a person's got to have someone to reach out to."

She did not want to say no, considering what he had just given her. She took it from his fingers and exited the car, saying, "Thanks again for helping me, and for the cash. You've been wonderful." She closed the door and waved to him as he left. After a few moments she walked up the flight of stairs to her level.

The police had already been there and had given her a set of keys at the hospital. Once she was in her apartment she rested her head against the door and sighed. She had never in her life been treated with such kindness by any stranger. She



wondered whether or not to take him up on his offer to call him, but dismissed it as pure craziness. *He didn't really mean that,* she told herself. *I'll just leave him alone.*

When she called her boss to explain what had happened over the weekend, he told her she could take a couple days off to sort everything out. But Molly insisted on coming back to work on Monday morning, just as usual. It was not as though she had much of a life other than work. Going to Charlie's Drug Store was what kept her busy enough not to have to think about sleeping alone at night, not having anyone to call when she had a problem, and not having anyone to rely upon when times were rough. Sunday afternoon she decided to buy a new outfit—nothing too expensive given her tight budget. She was able to find an item or two at the drugstore, but today she shopped at a lesser-priced consignment shop.

Wearing a few bangles and some poppy-colored lipstick, she marched into the shop intending to find something to replace the clothes that had been ripped by her apparent mugging on Friday night. Her left eye hurt; she had been surprised at how powerfully that man had dealt her a blow. She looked into the store mirror and saw that her eye had turned a nasty color of black, blue, and green. She didn't want to think about this. She

absorbed herself in finding a nice blouse and maybe a pair of pants.

When she asked the store attendant for her opinion about a certain ruffled top and some pleated slacks, the woman looked up from her newspaper and said, "I don't give opinions here, lady. All I do is ring up the orders and make sure the customers don't stiff me. You think it looks good, it looks good."

Molly was appalled that the woman had been so rude. When she worked at the store she made it a point to greet all customers with a cheerful "hello" and to ask them how their day had been going while she passed the items through the check stand. Nevertheless, she shook off the comments and decided to purchase a different pair of slacks, one that would match her green eyes.

That day was a little depressing. There was a slight drizzle in the air and the sky was darkened by swiftly-moving gray clouds. She got home, placed her bags on the coffee table, and sat down on the couch. She noticed Damion's card lying next to the remote.

*He'd never wanted me to call him, she assured herself. Better not get my hopes up just to be let down.*

She sank into the couch. After a few moments she began to change her mind. The man had been so nice to her, even going the extra mile to help her out when everything in her wallet had been taken, too. She knew she would have to contact the DMV and the bank as soon as the week started in order to replace her driver's license and her credit cards... but it was still the weekend, and there was very little she could do today in order to put her life back into place.

*Damion*, she thought. *What a nice name... and what a gentleman, as well.* She picked up the card and dialed the number with her wireless telephone.

The phone rang a couple of times and then he answered with a low, "Foster."

Molly debated whether to hang up the phone right then and there. But when he repeated himself, she gave a shy, "Hello."

He took a moment to answer. "...yes?"

Molly breathed deep. "This is Molly Peterson, the one you helped out Friday night... I hope this isn't a bad time," she said. "I do remember how you said that I could call you whenever."

"Molly? I'm surprised."

"Surprised that I called you?" she said, with a waver in her voice.

"Yes," he cleared his throat, "and surprised that you would call so soon. I got the impression that you didn't ever want to talk to me again. But I'm glad," he said. "I'm glad that you decided to call." That was all he needed to say. A glimmer of happiness brightened up her eyes as relief melted through her.

"I've been thinking about everything that you told me in the car. It was very meaningful to have someone listen to me and all of my problems, for once. Yes, I could consider saving up my money and going to school someday. I realized that I worth so much more than what I do now—that I have been selling myself short and that I need to stretch myself and realize my potential as a human being. I've had so many disappointments in my life but I can't let that stop me. I have decided that that is what I want to do—go to school—and you have helped me to understand that about myself. So thank you. Thank you for providing me the motivation. I know that we have only known each other since early Saturday morning, but I already feel that I owe you so much."

She could feel him smiling into the telephone. "I'm glad, Molly. I'm glad that you took what I said to heart. I already know that you're a wonderful woman. But there's another thing—"

Molly hesitated. Damion's voice was warm and comforting, and she decided not to say what she was thinking. *I wish I could see you again.*

"I dropped you off and it was apparent that no one was there to help you out of the car. I assume that there are not very many people in your life... at least no one who is very supportive. You need to start meeting people. There's no use staying in by yourself all the time. I assume that there is no one else..?"

He had finally asked if she was attached. Molly nodded until she realized that Damion could not hear her. "True," she said. "But that's alright with me. I like spending time with myself. I like the quietness of my home and my cat. Snickers is enough for me. Sometimes I get tired of socializing with people when all they do is let you down. I hadn't wanted that to ever happen to me again, I—" She realized she was babbling, so she held her tongue.

"Let me take you out," he said. "At least you can start your new social life with me."

"Oh no, that's alright," she said, even though there was a new brightness to her eyes.

"You'll enjoy yourself," he said. "I'll take you to a nice restaurant and you won't have to worry about a thing.."

They set a date for Friday night. She had mixed emotions about the whole thing, wondered if she would screw this one up like she had the others.

On Thursday night she changed her clothes in the store bathroom just as she usually did before locking up to go home. She switched off the light, waved to Debbie, a fellow store clerk, a good-bye, and locked up.

Being very cautious this time, knowing what had happened to her the other day, she decided to carry a flashlight with her and some pepper spray that she had bought during the week. She looked left and right as she was crossing the road and as she was turning corners. The streets were nearly empty again, and a light whisper of a breeze blew through the chilly air.

The strange man that she had seen had not been there all week and was not there today. As she came upon the same spot, the bad memories flooded back to her. She heard the same footsteps that she had heard just as she was leaving the store, only now it came to the forefront of her mind. Leaves tumbled onto the sidewalk pavement, twirling around with the wind and

then falling again. She heard a jangle of keys but saw no one. Her breath quickening, she rushed forward the same as she had the previous Friday. She crossed the street and thought she saw someone shifting behind the buildings. She went into a dead run, not stopping until she reached her apartment, when she turned the key and then bolted it.

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Friday morning she made a frantic call to Damion. "The same thing happened again."

Damion sounded incredulous. "You were *mugged* again?!"

"No," she said, her breath quick. "But I swear it was the same people. Someone was following me and then I ran home. I think it was going to happen again, Damion. I'm sure of it."

Damion told her to calm down. "Just tell me everything that happened."

Molly ran through everything that she saw, everything she heard, and what her intuition was telling her. Damion was very supportive and listened to her even when she said, "I think someone's after me."

But he had to disagree about something. "You can't know that for sure. Even if there was someone, it could be that someone who might have witnessed the mugging was trying to watch out for you... have you ever thought about that?"

But Molly shook her head vehemently. "That's not the truth. I know that someone was following me. And that someone was trying to hurt me. I'm never walking home alone again. From now on I'm taking a cab. I just wish I knew who was doing this. I wish that the police had caught them in the first place."

By the note in his voice, Damion was still skeptical. "Well, let me pick you up tonight after you get off work, and we can relax for a bit. It sure sounds like you need that much, at least."

Molly mumbled her agreement and then hung up the phone, shaken.

She went through the motions of her work day and helped customers as usual. Several people asked what happened to her. She had expected that, given how obvious her bruises and scrapes were. But like she told her boss before, she didn't want to miss work. She had her bills to pay and besides, it wasn't as though she had any other life. But he had at least insisted that she



get off work early. That worked for her, because Damion had wanted to take her out and she terribly wanted to see him. She wanted to discuss what had happened to her the previous Friday and how that might have had a connection with what happened just last night.

"How are you doing, Molly?" he asked as she entered the car.

She breathed deep, trying not to show him how anxious she was. Damion was basically the only person whom she could talk to about all of this. She could have talked to her boss or her co-workers, but she didn't necessarily feel like spilling her guts to Mr. Barlow or to any of the bubble-headed people that she worked with. She thought about last night, about how frightened she had been in thinking that someone was out to hurt her again. "I don't feel safe, Damion. And I don't know what to do about it."

They were speeding along and Molly didn't know where he was taking her. "Just try to relax," he said. "Can you remember anything else about last night? Did you actually see someone following you?"

She nodded her head. "I saw the figure of a man shifting from building to building. He was coming closer and moving as

though he didn't want me to see him. When I heard his footsteps behind me, I bolted. I swear that someone was there. And there was no one else out there on the streets, not even a car rolling by."

They neared a 24-hour breakfast joint and then Damion slowed to a stop in the parking area. Before he got out he said, "Well, it's a given that someone was there, then. But it may not be what you think. Think about all the alternatives before you jump to a conclusion. Statistically speaking, the same people won't be after you more than once. What I believe is that it was just a one-time mugging, and that's all."

Molly was silent as they walked into the restaurant. She mulled over in her head what had been happening and what it could possibly mean.

"Let's just not think about this and have a little fun," he said. She reluctantly agreed and let him hold the door open for her.

Once inside, she could smell the aromas of fresh waffles, frying eggs, and hot coffee. Despite her unease, she thought to herself what a perfect place for him to take her. She couldn't wait to order scrambled eggs, hash browns, and toast. Her stomach rumbled in anticipation of the meal. The hostess was

wearing bright red lipstick and she was pleasant enough. She led them to a booth with a little wink as she said, "Someone will be with you shortly."

The lights were not too dim and not too bright. Damion smiled eagerly at her. "You look nice tonight."

Molly shivered and laughed. "Oh, with this shiner? You've got to be kidding me. I look like a peacock with a bloody nose."

Damion glanced at his menu. "Everything looks good. Have you ever been here before?" He was making light conversation, and she figured she should go along with it if she didn't want to be rude. She bantered with him back and forth as the waitress took their orders and went back into the kitchen.

"I meant what I said," he told her. "I don't think you have anything to worry about. But I agree with you about taking a cab home at night. I thought you would do that sooner, actually." He touched the bottom of her chin. "Such a sweet girl," he said, in a lower voice.

She smiled at him shyly, a rosy color coming to her cheeks.

"Don't tell me you're going to go all silent on me now. The evening's just getting started. It's a clear night, and the kitchen smells great."

Their food came and they ate while talking about themselves a little more. She found out that Damion was a businessman, but that he had taken a couple of weeks off to handle some personal affairs. He lived alone in a house he'd had for six years, and he regularly visited his sister in the suburbs. He flew to other cities quite often because of work, but he was getting a little tired of not being able to stay in one place for very long.

After about forty minutes of being deep in conversation, Molly realized that she was having a great time. After they finished eating and Damion paid the bill, he offered to walk her around the park just so that she wouldn't have to be alone for the entire night. She was surprised that this date was turning out so well. As they walked together by the lake, she looked over at him and said, "I'm glad that I met you the way that I did."

"Oh, really?" he said, with his eyebrows raising.

"Oh, not glad that I was beaten up and mugged, and not glad that someone could be following me now. I'm just glad that circumstances allowed for you to find me and that we've been getting along so well and... and..." she trailed off.

"You don't have to say anything more," he said. He sighed. "I don't want to doubt you anymore. I don't want to tell you

that you have nothing to worry about. But I'm concerned for you. I don't want anything to happen to you. That's what matters to me most. That you're safe and that I know you won't be hurt again."

He brushed her fingers with his. "I already care for you deeply."

They walked silently together for the rest of the way until they both grew tired, and then Damion suggested that they start walking towards the car. He unlocked the passenger's door and Molly got in, feeling lightheaded and happy. When they got to her building, he put the emergency brake on and he got out. "The night was wonderful," she said. The night air was cold, but Molly could see a nearly full moon and a brush of bright, serene stars which seemed to add a sense of magic to the evening. Damion reached down and touched her lips with his. He remained there for several moments and then retreated, releasing his hold on her. Molly recaptured her breath.

"Let's do this again."

Molly edged backwards towards the main door and gave him a last wave. They didn't say anything more to each other as she turned the key and entered the building. From the first-floor window, she saw him get into his car and speed away.

*What a magical night, she thought, as she slipped into bed.*

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Monday morning she awoke to find an envelope sticking out from underneath her door. She frowned. Could it be a note from her landlord? She always paid the rent on time, kept her apartment neat and clean, and thought she never really bothered anyone. She made an effort to say hello to all of her neighbors and even fed Mr. Ottoway's cats when she was away on vacation.

Still in her terry-cloth robe, she bent down and picked it up. It was not addressed, and there was no writing on the front to indicate whom it might have been from. She did not even have to tear it open because it had been folded closed, and she opened it curious to see what this was all about.

*IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU YOU'LL STAY OUT.*

Molly let the leaf of paper fall from her fingers. The note had been typed on plain white paper in plain black ink. With trembling fingers she examined it, turned it around and around again, and found nothing.

She dialed Damion's number immediately. "Something happened," she said in a rush. "I told you that someone was there, following me the other night. Now there's proof that someone is after me... what did I tell you? This is exactly what I was afraid of."

"Whoa, whoa, slow down," he said, as Molly tried to breathe deep.

"I can't," she said. "I need you to come over. I don't feel safe anymore. Now he's leaving something at my door. What will he do next?"

"Wait," he said. "Before you told me that there were *two* men. Now you're telling me that there is just *one* of them?"

Molly took a moment to process her thoughts. "I'm sure of it," she said. "There may have been two people the night of my mugging, but I believe that there is just one of them who's behind this. After all, there was only one person following me the other night. And then there's the coincidence of that man with the cigar standing on the corner right before I was attacked. I don't know who that was, but I want to find out."

Damion came over and examined everything in her apartment. "Is anything missing?" he asked. "Could he have come inside

your apartment, too? Do you remember hearing any strange sounds last night?"

"No, not that I know of," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know what I might have ever done or something that I'm doing now that someone would want me to not do. I don't have any kind of a life. No friends, no enemies. I've never been threatened like this before."

Damion's eye darkened. "You're not involved in anything dangerous, are you?" But by the look on his face she could tell that he didn't want to suspect her. This obvious question should have come up sooner, she thought, but Damion obviously wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Once, several months ago, when she was breaking up with her ex-boyfriend, she had caught someone stealing from the drugstore cash register. But these kinds of things happened all the time, and Molly didn't think it had any bearing on the case currently in progress. "I think they might have the wrong person," she whispered.

There was no other explanation that she could come up with. What had seemed like a random mugging had now turned out to be something much more. But she wished she knew what this was all about. It frightened her to the core that someone had taken her



purse, stolen all of her private information, and knew where she lived. But she was certain that they had the wrong person. Whoever it was, she wanted to stop him and stop him as quickly as she could.

"I think you should tell the police," Damion was saying.

"Do you really think that they would bat an eyelash over something like this? If there were continuous threats, then maybe. But this was a one-time thing, and I don't think that they would believe that the incident the other night has anything to do with this letter that I am holding right now. I may be sure of it, but I know from first-hand experience that the police are very skeptical. I just want to leave. I want to get out of my apartment and seek housing somewhere else. I want to go to a hotel tonight and not think about someone coming to the door to leave me another note, or perhaps to attack me."

Damion thought about it for a moment. "Do you really think they wouldn't listen to you? How do you know this from 'first-hand' experience, anyway?"

Molly sighed exasperatedly. "The store was held up months ago. It was nothing, we just had to report everything to the police. That's the only other time I've run into them... unfortunately, they never caught up with the guy. I suppose

that's what happens sometimes... it's a shame, really, that some bad guys can get away with something."

"Molly, I'm just worried about you," he said, with a frown. "But if you feel safer going to a hotel, then I support that. The least thing that I want to happen is for you to be up all night worried about whether someone's going to break in. Please, just promise me, that if anything else happens, then you will report it to the police."

Molly agreed and then Damion touched her cheek. "You be safe and call me when you get to the hotel. I'll be back to check on you tomorrow. I have some errands to run and then we can talk some more. We'll try to piece this thing together."

The rest of the day was rather monotonous. She dressed, got ready for work, and showed up at noon just as promised. During her lunch break, she took the time to arrange for a hotel room on the outskirts of the city. She knew she was going to run up quite a bill hiring taxicabs and hotel rooms by the time that this was over, money that she did not have. But anything to get away from the person or persons who were evidently trying to hurt her.

Her eye had healed somewhat, and one of her co-workers commented that she looked good today. "You're a little shaky, though," she said. "Something pressing on your mind?"

Molly didn't really want to tell her what was going on. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I suppose I'm still just shaky about what happened the week before last."

That night the cab took her to the Weston Hotel, a small joint with a swimming pool and vending machines. It wasn't the cleanest hotel in the city, but it was all that she could afford. She called Damion once she had set her bags down on the bed and used the bathroom to wash her face. They talked for a long time not only about her current dilemma, but also about life in general and how much she enjoyed herself when she went out with him the other night. Right before Molly hung up, he said, "Call me if anything happens, if you feel frightened about anything, or if you just want to talk. I'll be here the whole night, and I'll keep my phone on."

When she checked her messages she had received three calls. One of them was from her mother, asking why she didn't call her on her birthday. She had forgotten, and she never forgot to call her mother. The next one was from her old boyfriend, Chip, calling to say that he appreciated the fact that she had left some of her things over at his place. She had left some

pictures, a nightgown, and some of her "el-cheapo" jewelry. Molly rolled her eyes. She did not want this. She did not ever want to see him again. The third call was silent for a few seconds, and then she heard the "click" of a telephone hanging up. It could have been a wrong number, or it could have meant something. Perhaps someone was checking to see if she was home.

Molly shivered and thanked her lucky stars that she was safe here at the hotel room. She locked her door and then went to the vending machines to get some cookies and a soda pop. She brought them to her room, popped open the can, and then turned on the television. She was not used to so much quiet. One of her neighbors used to blast music at all hours of the day, and one of the other ones took kindly to moving furniture every night. The one to the right of her door belonged to a couple that liked to fight a lot. And then there were the sounds of the street, trucks rumbling and horns blaring.

Her apartment was a tiny studio without much ventilation. She had an old, tiny radiator and a cat that demanded attention. Before she came here she went and put Snickers at the kennel. She thought about taking her with her, but the hotel signs all said, "No pets." She was worried about her and hoped that she wouldn't get too lonely without her.

Damion and Molly didn't see each other for the next day. But when Molly got the bill for the hotel room, she knew she couldn't stay for even another night. She would have to go home and brave the unknown. She gathered her belongings that morning and hauled them over to her apartment in a cab. She would have to call her boss and tell him that she would be late. She wondered if Damion would call her again. She knew that he was very worried about her when he left her, but that didn't mean that he was starting to care about her. Or was he? Molly could never tell. When she got home she had her telephone number changed. She had already called the cell phone company and told them that her cell phone had been stolen, but she was waiting to get a new one. Since the person who had dropped off the note to her hadn't broken into her apartment, she didn't see the need to change the locks. Instead, she walked over to all her neighbors and told them that someone strange came by the other night and would they please keep a lookout for him?

She still had the numbers of the detectives that had helped her that first day, but she didn't really want to bother them. She took a long bath that night, nuzzled with her cat, and ate a frozen dinner. Snickers dined on tuna and milk, and it was a peaceful enough evening. She just wanted to hang out. She didn't think that she was going to call Damion again. He hadn't

contacted her since the morning he came over to her apartment to help her with the note.

Weeks went by, and nothing happened. No Damion, no attacker. She was beginning to think that nothing more would ever happen. So she stopped calling cabs to take her home, because they were really running up a bill. Instead, she decided to change her shift at the drugstore so that she wouldn't have to walk home so late at night. On the way home from work on a Thursday, the wind was blowing quite fiercely and Molly could smell the greasy odor of car exhaust and burnt rubber coming from the roads. It was just starting to get dark when she realized that it was going to rain. A big storefront sign, which she could barely read, said, "Tires for Sale. Half-Price." The stairwells were so dark that she couldn't see into them.

The wind kicked up even more and then rain started to pour. Amazingly, she ran into the one person that she didn't think she'd even see again: Damion. He was wearing a pressed suit and black loafers, looked as good as she'd ever seen him, and his eyes fixed immediately onto hers. A big street lamp hung over their heads, illuminating his facial features. She could recognize him right away. The wind kicked up and rain pelted against her face.

"Damion, what are you doing here?"

He walked towards her. "Just walking home from a meeting. I expected that you would be taking a cab."

She smiled at him. "Well, the cabs were becoming too expensive. Instead, I switched to an earlier shift and now I get to walk home earlier."

"Anyone been bothering you?" he said, lowering his eyes against hers.

She shook her head. "No, not since the telephone call."

He began to ask her what that was all about when a car swerved onto the sidewalk, nearly taking her out. It took her by such surprise that she gave a loud yell, trying to jump forward to get out of the way. Instead, the car swerved back onto the road careening into oncoming traffic, and plummeted into a red sedan coming the opposite way. She heard the crunch before she saw the damage. The entire front of the sedan was crumpled up like an accordion, and the gray car that had almost hit her was smashed in the front and along the side. Smoke billowed out from both their radiators. The man in the red sedan jumped out and started screaming for some help.

The driver of the other car threw open the door and before she knew it, he started running off into the opposite direction, away from the car, across the street, and towards one of the

buildings. He disappeared around the back and she never saw him again.

Damion grabbed her by the shoulders. "Are you okay?" he asked, raising his voice above the shouts. Someone across the street was calling someone on his cell phone; she could only guess that he was calling 9-1-1. Shaking, eyes watering, she caught her breath.

"No, I'm not okay," she said. "But I don't think I'm hurt. The car didn't hit me."

"Did you catch a look at that guy?"

"No," she said. "It was too dark, and he was wearing dark clothing." Molly and Damion rushed off as Damion held her arm. She didn't know why she was running or why Damion wouldn't allow her to stay there. Lights of storefronts rushed by her in a blur of colors as her hair dripped with rain. She looked back to see if anyone was pursuing her, but she didn't see anything in late twilight. Out of breath, she stopped for a second until Damion urged her on. She got a whiff of car exhaust and coughed. They dodged a fire hydrant and Molly wanted to stop, but Damion wouldn't let her until they reached a secluded alleyway, where she rested against the wall and caught her breath.



"Stay here," he said, and disappeared for several minutes. "Go back to your apartment and call the police there," he said when he came back. He disappeared again, and this time she didn't see him again. Even though tired, she was able to make it back to her apartment and crumple up against the floor.

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Molly didn't go to work the next day. She was sure that whoever almost crashed into her had meant to do that, and she was pretty sure that Damion felt that way, too. After all, why would he tell her to run if he didn't believe that someone was about to take her life? Molly had called the police last night and they came to her apartment to question her. She did not bring up the fact that she believed that whoever was behind her mugging the other week was also behind what had happened to her last night. She was afraid that they wouldn't believe her and that they wouldn't check into it. That afternoon she went to the market and bought a bottle of sweet wine and some groceries. She was tired of being afraid, and tired of running away. She thought she would just stay here and face whatever it was that was out to get her.

When she got home from the market she cooked the fettuccini and drank. She was partially drunk when Damion came by.

"How are you?" he asked. "Still feeling shaky?" And then he noticed the half-empty bottle of wine on the floor.

"It's all okay now that you are here," she said, her voice slurred.

He took her in with one long, sweeping look and said, "How much have you been drinking?" Molly could still taste the sweet tang on her lips as she licked them. Damion set down his bags and then pulled her up from the floor.

"Not much," she said. "Just enough to get me feeling good. Wanna join?" and she held up the bottle to him.

"Not today," he said. "It's only four in the afternoon. And you shouldn't be drinking yourself." He took the bottle from her and swept the hair out of her face. If she were sober, she might have been thinking more clearly. But instead, all she could think about was his clean scent and how good it smelled, how good he looked and the attractive curve of his eyelashes. She leaned in towards him and began stroking his shoulders.

"I thought I'd never see you again, before yesterday," she said, and wobbled on her feet. She began kissing his cheek.

But he pushed her away and said, "At another time, in another place," he said, turning away to start cleaning the kitchen, which had become a mess of pots and pans and soiled towels. He poured her a glass of water and told her to drink it.

But Molly was sober enough to see that Damion had a concerned expression on his face. "Where'd you go after you dropped me off?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I ran to see if I could catch up with the guy who almost ran over you."

"And?"

"I made sure that he wasn't following you anymore."

So I s'pposed you didn't catch him."

"No."

But she could tell that there was more. "Is that all?"

Molly didn't want to know what else, because she could already see his expression darkening. "I asked him what his name was, and why he was trying to attack you. He didn't give me an answer, so I told him never to bother you again. The guy got away before I could even lay one punch at him."

"The police must have run a check on his license plate."

"They did, and it was registered to a Lee Browning. The guy hasn't been seen or heard of in several months. He had an apartment on the west side, but the place is abandoned. No one seems to have known him. And there doesn't seem to be a way we can track him down now. But at least we have a name, and I was able to see his face. Not a pretty guy." He drummed his fingers on the breakfast table. "But at least we have something to go on now. Hopefully the police will be smart enough to dig, now that I have told him about everything else that has happened."

She hadn't known that he would tell them about the letter and the phone call. She hadn't thought that the police would even lift a finger, given the little amount of evidence they had to correlate the two incidents—the mugging at the street corner, and the almost hit-and-run accident just yesterday. "I want to go after him," she said, and she saw the surprise on his face.

"I didn't think that you would be so brave," he said. "But that's what I was going to do anyway." And then he pulled something out of his pocket. "There was one other thing," he said. "I found this on the street." He showed her a keychain with a miniature New York State license plate on it. "I didn't show it to the police, but one of the keys is the door to his old apartment."

"Why would he be following me?" she whispered.

"That's what we need to find out next."

The police confirmed that Lee Browning used his credit card just outside of Chicago two days later. At least she knew that he was well out of the area, and that he wouldn't be able to hurt her, at least for now. Molly had never been so frightened in all of her life. She didn't want this to disrupt her routine in any way, though. She wouldn't let this stop her from going to work, coming home, and spending time with Snickers. She saw Damion once about every day when he came by to check on her in the evening. All they talked about was the case, and whether or not she had been bothered again, and she had not. He stayed for a few minutes each time, they talked, and then he left. That was all that there was. She was glad that Damion was back in her life, at least for now, and in whatever form. Every day at lunch she spent in the park eating a sandwich she had bought from the cooler in the drugstore, and she thought about what was happening to her. She wondered if there were any more of them, if Lee Browning was the only man behind this. She hoped that he was, but she was frightened to think that someone else was still out there, following her.

And what had the note meant? Certainly she wasn't mixed up in any business that would endanger her.

She watched her shadow elongating as she walked home from work one day, she spun her keys around her finger and hoisted her bag, a faux-leather fringed black purse, higher up on her shoulder. She was absolutely sure that someone else was behind all of this. She didn't believe that the two men who had beaten her up the other day were the only ones involved, even if Lee was one of them. She figured someone had put them up to it, and she was determined to find out who it was. The police had been very little help. They were never able to track Lee down again, and it had been two weeks. The action was dying down again. But she didn't think that it was over completely, and she still looked behind her everywhere she went.

That day she decided to do a little detective work herself. She visited Lee Browning's old apartment with a big white sign with black letters that read, "MANAGER." She could not tell if anyone was there, but there was no light underneath the door. The place looked ominous. Molly had a creepy feeling inside of her, and she could not tell where it had come from.

She lifted her fist and knocked. The sound echoed on the uncarpeted hallways, but she heard no other sound except for the humming and rattling of the radiator. Many seconds passed, and then a minute, when she heard the bolt turning and the lock grinding open.

The door squealed. A rather short, hefty man with a pot belly that was falling out of his dirty undershirt answered the door. He had dark hair with stubble that was almost a beard, and he looked like he came from some foreign country, which she did not know. "Can I help you ma'am?" he asked, with a low growl to his voice. This man looked like he did not get many visitors, and when he did, he wasn't happy to see them. Molly wondered if she should turn around and go home. The place was nearly deserted, and there was not much to see here.

But instead, she gathered her nerve and said, "Sir, are you the manager? I would like to talk to you about Lee Browning, one of your tenants."

The man eyed her up and down and said, "You with the police? I already told you, I don't know anything else."

"No," she said. "But I'm the one whom he was after. Lee Browning tried to run me over and kill me. And if you won't help me," she said, exasperatedly, "I'll call the owner of the building."

He poked a thumb at his chest. "You're looking at him."

She did not think that he was going to let her in, but instead, he held open the door for her, motioning for her to come inside.

They talked for a while about what Mr. Santos, as she discovered his name was, knew about his former tenant. He was a quiet man who always paid his rent ahead of time, worked in a local factory, and received very few guests.

"And who were his guests?" she asked. "Did you ever see them? Did they come during the day or did they come at night?"

"There were just a few and I did not get a good look at them. I do remember that Mr. Browning had a little bit of a gambling problem. I don't know how he paid all his bills. He used to have a wad of cash in his wallet whenever I saw him, and then when he came back, it was all gone."

"Do you remember anything else about his visitors?" she asked, hoping that he would at least tell her something that she could go on.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Except that one of them, this nervous-looking guy, left the place in a shiny new Impala.

When Molly left she could hardly breathe. She could not comprehend how all of this could be possible. Only one person she knew drove an Impala, and that was her ex-boyfriend. Heaving for breath, she tried to piece everything together. Why would he want to hurt her, after all these many months? And why would he be telling her to butt out of something, when she never bothered



him at all? Who was the man at the corner, and why would Chip want some guys to beat her up? He already knew where she lived, so certainly he wouldn't have wanted her purse to find out how to follow her.

Molly was shaking as she left the building. It just did not make any sense. Fumbling her way through the darkness, she tried to make it back home. But as she tried to catch her breath in an alleyway, a man came up behind her and put a knife to her throat. "I thought I told you to keep your nose out of it," Chip breathed.

"Chip," she said, her voice croaked. She darted her eyes left and right, looking for a way out. "What is this all about?" she asked. "Surely there's a way that we can talk about this."

"There's nothing more to talk about," he said, jabbing the knife harder into her throat. "I told you to leave things alone, and you wouldn't listen. You knew about everything. My gambling debts were piling up. You knew how I got the money, and you and your new boyfriend were going to tell the police."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"You knew how I was embezzling money. I knew you found out the day you had looked through my mail. I saw the look on your face. You were going to turn me in."

Molly almost cried. "I never found out," she said. "You're reading too much into it. I didn't know anything about your gambling, or your crimes."

But then Chip's grip faltered. Molly grabbed the knife from his hand and as he reached to attack her, she stabbed him deep in the chest.

Running away, she quickly called Damion on her cell phone. He met up with her on the street, and hugged her. "It's all over," he said, as she relaxed into his arms. She knew that everything would work out now, and that she had nothing to be afraid of anymore.

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