

Like a favorite song, it was a memory that Ali would play over in her mind throughout her life. The cool briskness of the November afternoon, the golden leaves crunching underfoot, the peal of children laughing while tossing a ball with their collie—all soothing notes within the opening stanza of a loving ballad. She had gone out to the park during her break from her volunteer job at the nearby university hospital to enjoy the fresh air. It was a perfect afternoon.

She sat down on a park bench and began to people-watch. A couple of joggers passed a woman reading a book. The collie proved to be quite a fetcher. Then she saw Ryan sitting on the bench next to hers. He was leaning forward with hands clenched together in front of him. He stared blankly into space. She noticed the glint of a tear on his cheek.

“Are you okay?” she asked as she came over and sat beside him. It seemed strange to see a handsome man look so vulnerable.

“Oh...yeah, I’m fine.” He looked at her with slightly reddened brown eyes and gave her a weak smile. “I was just visiting a friend. He’s not doing so good.”

“Sorry to hear. I’m sure your visits must cheer him up.”

“Actually, he’s the one always cheering me up. I don’t know where he gets his strength. We’ve been roommates for a couple of years.”

“You appear to be good friends.”

“We’ve taken classes together, double-dated, even tried to rush the same fraternity.”

Ali let out a small snicker, which Ryan quickly noted.

“What?” he asked.

“I find most frat boys are arrogant rich kids.”

A shocked look raced across Ryan’s face before he looked off.

“I’m sorry,” Ali said, placing her hand sympathetically on his arm. “I shouldn’t be so flippant when you’re worried about your friend.”

He stared back into her eyes for what seemed to be an eternity. Finally, he asked, “Why are you here?”

“Because you looked like you needed someone just now.”

As sincerely as these words were stated, Ali could not deny an underlying attraction she had for those vulnerable eyes. She ventured forward.

“I’m Ali. Look, I volunteer over at the hospital. Would you like me to check in on your friend?”

A slight smile began to appear on his face, only to disappear in a veil of confusion. His eyes glanced down for a moment. It surprised Ali, and she lifted her hand from his arm. He looked back up, and the soft smile returned.

“No, that’s fine,” he answered slowly. “He’s here for weekly treatments. Uh, my name’s Ryan.”

He offered her his hand, and she took it. Time seemed to slow as they looked at each other. Finally, she pulled her hand away.

“I have to get back to work,” she said hesitantly. She rose from the bench. “Nice to meet you, Ryan.”

She started back toward the hospital, glancing back to see him looking back at her.

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She found it hard to concentrate on her job the rest of the afternoon, as the image of him looking back at her kept floating in her mind. Still, she realized that she probably would not see him again and was making peace with it as she walked out of the hospital that night. There he stood, with a single red rose in his hand, startling her.

“I want to thank you for cheering me up this afternoon,” he said, handing her the rose. “I hope you have time for me to treat you to dinner.”

She felt the quick twinge of caution, wondering what she really knew about him. “I do have classes tomorrow,” she offered guardedly.

“So do I, but I do want to buy you dinner.”

Her caution melted. She had hoped to see him again, and here he was. She smiled, twirled the rose under her nose, and nodded in agreement, and they walked off together to find a quiet restaurant.

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“Mom, I can’t find my green skirt!”

Ali twirled the rose under her nose, letting the scent finish up the sixteen-year-old memory. She slipped the rose back into the vase on the kitchen bar.

“I hung it up in your closet last night,” she yelled back. “Right next to your jackets.”

“That’s not where it’s supposed to be!”

“Just get dressed and come out to breakfast!”

Ali grabbed two plates, each with a fried egg and a slice of toast, and brought them out from the kitchen to the dining room table. She laid one in front of her eleven-year-old son, Charley, and placed the other one in front of her daughter’s usual spot. “C’mon, Sue. It’s going to get cold.”

She went back into the kitchen to get the other two plates with the same helping of fried egg and toast. Ryan walked into the dining room as she brought out the other two plates. They kissed quickly before she placed the plates in their proper spots on the table.

“It was about time that vase was filled,” she told him with a broad smile.

“I was slacking. Forgive me?” he asked.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a longer kiss. “Always,” she added.

“Aw, gee! Mom! Dad!” Sue walked in and sat down in her chair with a dismissive teen attitude. “Act your age!”

Charley smiled. “Sue’s just being a goof.”

Ryan and Ali separated and sat down to breakfast with their children. Despite Ali’s nursing job at the hospital and Ryan’s

independent law practice, the two still managed to have at least one family breakfast and one family dinner each week.

“So, Sue,” Ali said sweetly, “you and Mary Ann have plans this weekend?”

“She’s going over to her grandparents’ this weekend,” Sue responded curtly.

“I wish we had grandparents,” Charley chimed in.

Ali saw the pained look cross Ryan’s face. It was one thing they had in common, having lost their parents early, but it seemed any reminder of this always hurt Ryan more. He smiled faintly and turned to Charley.

“We wish you two did as well. All we have are our memories of them to pass on to you. Finish up. I’m dropping you off at school this morning. Mom’s taking Sue.”

It always amazed and heartened Ali how well Ryan was able to recompose himself.

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Ryan’s assistant Kate walked into his office while he was trying to work on weekly billing.

“I know you are trying to keep this practice open for another week,” she started with a wry smile, handing him a business card, “but there is a lawyer from the Barnett project here to chat with you.”

“Did he make an appointment? I don’t recall seeing anything on my calendar.”

“When has a member of the opposition ever made an appointment?”

“When has a member of the opposition ever come to my office?”

“You have a point there.”

“So do you think I can charge him for the time?”

“Ha ha. Show him in?”

“Have him wait five minutes, and then let him in.”

Kate left and closed the door behind her. Ryan gathered the billing papers, slid them into a file, and placed them on a pile on the right side of his desk. He turned and skimmed through a series of files. He found the one he wanted, pulled it out, and began to scan the summary pages. A few minutes later Kate opened the door and directed a fresh-faced Sam Langston into Ryan's office.

"Mr. Prescott, thank you for seeing me," Langston said, offering his hand.

Ryan rose, shook hands with Langston, and directed him to sit down.

"Kate says you are on the Barnett Project legal team, but I don't recall your name on any of the filed documents on this project, and I have a running correspondence with several of the lawyers on the project."

"I know, and you have been quite a thorn in their side. Your little firm has become the de facto leader of all the legal action against this project. I'm an associate with Lautner, Oakes, Keyes & Inger. Charles Barnett is one of our major clients. I was sent out to see if we could find a less adversarial method to work out the issues you and the firms you have partnered with continue to raise with the suits you have filed against this project."

Ryan shook his head with a sly fox smile. "Did you spend the entire flight working on that little introduction?" he asked as he shifted forward in his chair. "Look, you and I both know that Barnett is an impatient, stubborn bull who only cares about adding to his little empire regardless of who it hurts. I am not against growth and development, as long as it is done responsibly. My clients and this community are being ramrodded into allowing this development without true concern for protection of the surrounding community and the environment. If he wants to build his little industrial park and housing community, he will have to play fair with his neighbors and forget the shortcuts with the environmental regs."

“I think you are a little biased against Mr. Barnett. He is not the hard-driving person that the tabloid media makes him out to be. I was honored to be invited to his home for a briefing before flying here. He was a very direct man, but a very caring man. He is not the villain they make him out to be.”

“What I have seen with this project are illegal attempts to use eminent domain proceedings, dummy corps to purchase select lots to drive down surrounding property values, and sloppy and purposely vague environmental reports. Does this sound like a project of a caring man?”

Langston shifted forward in his chair to meet Ryan’s stern gaze. In the corner of his eye, he noticed a couple of photo frames on the corner of the desk facing Ryan.

“Look, I was sent here to investigate where we stood with this deal. If some of the people on this team are not adhering to the high standards that Mr. Barnett demands, then we need to address their performance.” Langston noticed the slight eyebrow lift on Ryan’s face. “Okay, he is a little harsh, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t understand the struggles of the families in this community and wants to see it thrive. He suffered through his own family tragedy over sixteen years ago when he lost his only son. As a family man, I think you could understand how tough that could be.”

Langston took the nearest photo frame and waved it at Ryan as he spoke the last statement, and then he looked at the photo. It was a photo of a younger Ryan and Ali standing next to a potted plant. Ryan’s hair was fuller and darker in the photo, contrasting well with Ali’s flowing dirty blonde hair. His blazer and her dress were the only indication that the event in the photo was somewhat special.

“That’s a picture of my wedding day,” Ryan said, grinning. “The other photo is of my kids.”

Langston looked at the photo for a few more seconds with a slightly confused crease of the brow. He composed himself and looked back up at Ryan.

“The bottom line is we want to work with you to resolve these issues and make this project a positive one for the community. We want to set up some future meetings where we can explain our positions and listen to where we can do better.”

“You’re good at talking the talk. You can take that back to your managing partner. You can also tell them I personally am not going to back off. We’re playing by the book here.”

“We wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Yeah? Ask them about Peacock Ridge. That will never happen here. Not even close.”

“I am unfamiliar with Peacock Ridge.” Langston rose from his seat and offered his hand again. “Thank you for giving up your time. I will get back to you regarding dates and times for those first meetings. I think we can work this out.”

Ryan got up and shook hands. “You won’t find us unreasonable around here, but we won’t roll over either.”

“Understood. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye. Hope you enjoy your visit.”

Langston left Ryan’s office, paying his respect to Kate on the way out. As soon as he left the building, he pulled out his smart phone and made a call.

“Yes, I just left his office,” he said into the phone. “No, he is not some local country bumpkin lawyer. He will be a formidable barrier to this project’s goals. He brought up Peacock Ridge, if you have any idea what that project was.” Langston listened and then responded, “I think we need to run a background check on Prescott right from birth. Also, this may sound odd, but could you give me an in-depth briefing on the disappearance of Charles Barnett Jr. sixteen years ago?”