

Mistakes

James inhaled the crisp October air. Changing leaves and cool weather spoke of the end of one season and the beginning of the next. The perfect symbol of his life.

He gazed at his palm. The five-year sobriety chip glimmered in the dimming sunlight. He made it. Not an easy road, but one well worth it. If he'd found this path sooner, maybe his marriage would still be intact. He didn't blame Donna. Even though he never hit her, he was a mean drunk. Where had his life gone wrong?

The saying, *to thine own self be true*, stood out like a beacon on the chip. After five long years, he learned to be honest about his mistakes, and what he needed next in life. He was ready to move on and start living again. What better place than a small Midwest town far from where he grew up?

He smiled as he scanned the harvest festival. Several young children jumped over bales of hay. Others sat at tables by a small pond scooping out gooey pumpkin guts to carve jack-o-lanterns. A couple of men chucked bales of hay on a trailer for the evening hayrack rides. He inhaled the sweet scent of apple cider mixed with the dusty straw. Maybe someday he'd have the family he always wanted. A dream sabotaged by his drinking problem. Then again, who would want his baggage? Who would trust him to stay sober?

A shimmer of auburn brown hair caught his attention. He tilted his head considering the woman attached to it. She turned. His heart leapt from his chest. Stephanie? Impossible, but there she stood. The pretty girl he'd had a crush on in high school stood before him, now a beautiful woman.

Taking a deep breath, he strode over to her. "Stephanie? Is that really you?"

She pivoted. Her eyes popped wide and a smile beamed across her face. “James? Yes. It’s me. How are you?”

“I’m good. You look great. Life good?”

“It’s okay.”

His eyes narrowed. *Just okay?* “Is your family here?”

Sadness flickered and disappeared. “My parents passed away a couple years ago.”

“I’m sorry. What about your husband? Kids?”

She shook her head. “Never married, so no kids.”

“Really? I always expected you and David would get married.”

A laugh filled the air. “David’s a self-absorbed jerk. I’d never marry him.”

“Wow. I thought you two were a thing.”

“No. I only went out with him because the guy I wanted to go out with never asked.”

James’ brow crinkled. “You’re kidding. Who did you want to go out with? Cause he was stupid for not asking.”

Stephanie bit her lip. “Umm. You.”

His jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious.”

She dipped her head and nodded.

“I was so scrawny and shy. Yeah, we were friends, but why on earth did you want to date *me?*”

“You weren’t like the others. You were interested in getting to know the real me. They just wanted what they thought they could get. You know the type, all hands, and no brains.”

“Aw, Stephanie. I apologize for the male population. You deserve so much more than that.”

She raised on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Heat crept up his neck. His stomach fluttered like a teenager with his first crush. "Would you like some cider? My treat."

"Sure. Lead the way." She tucked her arm in his.

Enjoy the time you get, James. Cause once she knows your secret she'll run far and fast.

If only he could escape his mistakes.

He placed a cup in front of her. "Here ya go. Careful, it's hot."

She sipped the orange liquid. "Mmm. This is good." Stephanie propped her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm. "So. Tell me about you."

Oh boy. Here goes nothing. "Well, I married young and divorced two years later."

"Your wife obviously didn't know what she was throwing away."

His heart sank to his toes. "Thanks, but she knew exactly what she gave up." He gripped the cup and moved it in a circle. Staring at the swirling cider, he closed his eyes.

Stephanie's hand covered his. "James? What happened?"

He peered into her bright blue eyes. *You knew it was coming dude. If you want a future with any woman, you'll have to admit you failings.* "I started drinking after we married. It became a problem." He sucked in a breath. "I'm an alcoholic, Stephanie."

Unfazed, she cocked her head. "Do you still drink?"

"No." He stuffed his hand in his pocket and pulled out his sobriety chip. "Five years sober as of today."

She smiled. "Good for you."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's all you have to say? Not gonna tell me I deserved what I got, and go running and screaming?"

Chuckling she shook her head. “James. You made a mistake. You’ve learned from it and moving forward. Why should I run away?”

“Because I’m broken. I’ve made it five years, but I can’t promise I’ll make it five more.”

“Do you want to make it five more?”

“More than anything. I hate what I’d become. I don’t ever want to go back to the awful man I was.”

“Then why should I worry.”

Her smile warmed him. She hadn’t changed from the girl of his youth. “You amaze me.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Honestly though. I would love to ask you out, but you need someone who doesn’t have a past like mine.”

She giggled.

What was so funny?

“Jimmy. Do you remember my dad?”

“Sure. He was as great guy. Honorable and trustworthy.”

Her lips pinched in a smile. “Yes he was. But he was an alcoholic.”

“What? I never saw anything. He never—”

“By the time I was born he was sober. He never let his past define him.” She held out her hand.

James squeezed it and closed his eyes. He could do this. *Please let her be willing.*

“Stephanie. Would you do me the honor of being my date on the hayrack ride tonight?”

“Are you asking me out?”

He smirked. “Well, I’m trying.”

“It’s about time.” She winked.

Warmth inched through his body. Maybe a future did await him. He helped her from her chair and escorted her to the barn.

Moments later, bouncing down the country road, they snuggled in the hay looking up at the stars. He peeked over at her. “So you wanted to date me in high school huh?”

“Yes. Why can’t you believe that?”

“You were so out of my league, that’s why.”

She elbowed him in the ribs. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

He pulled her closer. “I always wanted to ask you out, but there was something else I wanted more.”

“What was that?”

He leaned in. His heart thumped in his chest as his lips brushed against hers.

Her arms circled his neck tugging him closer. Their kiss deepened, sending zings of electricity through his veins.

Did he dare to hope for the future of his dreams?

He laid his forehead against hers and matched her smile. Yes, maybe he could. The glimmer in her eyes told him she believed he could be the man he always wanted to be.

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. Isaiah 43:18 (NIV)

“For I know the plans I have for you.” declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)