

Only You

Snow crunched beneath her tires and flakes pelted her windshield. She could barely see two feet in front of her, but Emily was determined to get to her parents' house tonight. Unfortunately, they weren't expecting her, so if something happened on this road, no one would know to come look for her.

Her wipers scraped across the glass. The headlights mixed with streaks of snow made for a blinding light that was quickly swallowed into the pitch black of night. Her stomach twisted. She prayed she would make it the last twenty miles. If she didn't, it would be the perfect end to her horrible day.

Her mind drifted. She left her hometown six years ago ready to tackle what life had to offer. Now, she had seen and felt the blows life had given her and she was ready to come home. What she wouldn't give to go back and relive her teenage years, especially the time with Ethan. Ethan, her first love. Her only love. Oh, she had tried to move on and love again during college, but that's how she ended up in this mess. Her fiancé, Gary, knew all the right things to say at first, but it didn't take long for his true self to show.

Tears welled in her eyes. How could she have been so stupid? Through the blur of her tears, a brown object darted in front of her car. A dog. What was a dog doing out in this mess? She swerved just in time to miss the poor thing, but her tires caught a patch of ice and her car started to fishtail. She tried everything she knew to gain control, but nothing worked. The crunch of metal and the explosion of the air bag were the last things she heard before darkness pulled her under.

“Ma’am? Ma’am?” A voice teetered on the edge of her consciousness. Deep, warm, and vaguely familiar. She struggled to open her eyes, but they wouldn’t cooperate.

Hands roamed her face, then down her neck and arms. “I don’t feel any major damage, but you do have a goose egg on your head.”

She flinched as fingers touched the tender spot on her forehead.

“Ma’am, I’m going to get you out of here before we both freeze to death.”

Strong arms scooped her up and lifted her out of the car. With her head on this man’s shoulder, she inhaled his masculine woodsy scent.

Emily’s dreamy voice flitted in the air. “Ethan.” He smelled just like Ethan had all those years ago.

The strong arms tensed under her. “Yes?”

She furrowed her brow, then cringed at the pain from her head. What had he said? She shivered as she floated through the air in the arms of this stranger. After all that had happened, she should be afraid, but the arms around her lulled her into darkness once again.

The scent of coffee wafted through the air. Something heavy lay over her, and a crackle broke the silence around her. The fuzziness started to clear. Emily’s eyes fluttered open to find crimson and orange flames dancing in the stone fireplace. The snaps and pops from green wood sounded like Snap-its from the Fourth of July. Her gaze darted around the room. She took in the tan walls adorned with country landscape paintings, and a black leather easy chair. A stranger’s house. Emily jerked up at the realization and winced as the room began to spin and her ribs made her suck in a breath from the pain. She had no choice but to lay back down.

“Relax, Emily. You’re safe.”

How did this stranger know her name?

As the world settled around her, the familiar voice started to register. Someone she knew. Someone that knew her. *Come on brain. Think.* The voice, the woodsy cologne, the strong arms. Her eyes shot open. Ethan.

“Ethan?” Her heart skipped a beat. Could it really be him?

Ethan knelt down beside her and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s me, Em.” His dark eyes searched hers.

She couldn’t help but be drawn in by the intensity of his gaze. Her limbs turned to Jell-O just like they had six years ago. This crazy reaction needed to stop. It must be from the bump on her head. He was probably happily married, and there was no way she would ruin that for him, or let her heart get broken for the second time in her life. No. Make that the third time. The day she had left him nearly took her to her knees. But she had a dream and his plans didn’t fit with hers. Two lovesick teens on different paths.

“Can I get you anything? Coffee? An ice pack?”

His husky voice brought her focus back to him. She needed to leave before she did something she would regret.

“I’m fine. I appreciate you saving me from freezing to death, but I should go.” She tried to sit up. A moan escaped her as she grabbed her ribs. Gary. How could she have forgotten?

“Em? I thought your head was all you hit in the accident. Did you hurt your ribs too?”

Tears filled her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Oh how she didn’t want to admit her mistakes to Ethan. Maybe he wouldn’t press for deeper answers. Yeah right. “No. My ribs aren’t from the accident. Well, not initially anyway.”

He scowled. Cupping her face, he brushed his thumb along her cheek. A shiver went down her spine.

“Let me take a look.”

“No really, I’m okay.”

“Em.” Ethan’s voice deepened.

No one had ever called her Em except him. The sound of her nickname coming from his mouth...no she couldn’t go there. She nodded and turned her face from him.

His hands grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it up to expose the dark purple bruise that covered her right side. His movements tugged at her heart. Careful. Respectful.

“Who did this to you?” His voice low, as she turned back to him. His glare spoke of fury beneath the surface.

“I’m fine.”

“No. You. Are. Not.” He reached out and slid his calloused fingers over the bruise. “Did your husband do this to you?”

She sucked in a breath. “I’m not married.” She glanced down at her side. “And I broke off my engagement.”

“Good.”

“Ethan.”

His hands cupped her face. “What? If this is how he treats someone as precious as you, he doesn’t deserve you.”

She closed her eyes and let his words sink in.

“Em. Look at me.” She stared at him through the blur of tears. “What happened?”

“I thought he was nice. I thought he loved me.” Sobs hiccupped as she continued. “He only wanted a wife who did what she was told.” She forced a chuckle. “You know me, I’m not like that.” Boy did he know.

His smile melted her insides.

The howling wind outside made her shiver despite the warmth of the fire and the heat radiating from his touch.

“When I told him I couldn’t go to his company dinner because I had to work, he...” Emily blew out a breath. “He threw me against the edge of my kitchen counter, and turned and walked out of my apartment.”

Tears spilled from her eyes down over Ethan’s hands. She could feel his hands tense against her face, but he said nothing. Just waited.

“That was yesterday. As soon as I recovered enough, I asked my apartment manager to change the lock on my door, and I packed my bag and left today. I didn’t know where else to go, so I came home.”

“I’m so sorry, Em.”

She licked the salty tears from her lips. “I feel like such a fool.”

Ethan’s gaze drifted to her mouth. “No. He’s the fool.”

The intensity of his statement gripped her heart. Even after all these years, he still wanted to protect her.

“Em, I...”

She could see a battle rage within him.

“I just...” He licked his lips and lowered his mouth to hers.

A kiss so sweet her knees would have buckled if she had been standing. He deepened the kiss. She breathed in his scent, his thoughts, his love. *Love?* Did he really still love her?

Ethan touched his nose to hers. The corner of his eyes crinkled. He was so rugged and handsome. She ran her fingers through his hair. “Look, I didn’t come back home for this.”

His eyebrows raised. “Why not?”

“Ethan.”

“Em. Hear me out. I went outside tonight to make sure the heat lamp was on for the baby calf. As I walked back from the barn I prayed for a second chance with you. I missed you so much.”

“But...”

He put his finger tip over her lips.

“I have never stopped loving you. I’ve waited six years for you to come back into my life. And tonight you came crashing in.” One corner of Ethan’s mouth turned upward. “Literally.” He laughed.

Her shoulders relaxed. Her silly sweet Ethan wanted her back. *Her Ethan.*

“I know I may have bad timing.” Ethan glanced down at her side. “But I want another chance with you. Em, I still love you. I always have and always will. You are the only one for me.”

She couldn’t believe it. She searched his eyes for deception, but found none. Only truth. He had waited for her. He wanted her.

“Ethan, I tried so hard to move on and forget you. But I never could.” Maybe she was crazy or delirious from the hit on the head, but she didn’t care. She wanted another chance with him. “I love you too, Ethan. I always have. It has been and will always be, only you.”

Isaiah 30:18a NLT The Lord waits for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the Lord is a faithful God.