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The Other Man

Chapter 1

June

"You won't see me again," the man said. "You'll be dead."

In front of him, an old woman lay in the rotten bed, the creaky house all around. The walls were bare and the wood floors were broken in spots. Rain poured in from the many holes in the roof, adding a chilly frost to the frigid air.

She croaked some noise, stretching out a hand.

"You're not used to it by now?" The man chuckled. "I would've expected all these years of solitude, of me feeding you, of me *caring* for you would mean something. But you're still as self-centered, self-focused, self-obsessed as ever."

A dribble of blood ran from her mouth. It had been weeks since she chewed off her tongue, and yet the blood still came as fresh as ever.

"Sorry?" The man shook his head. "It's too late for that now."

He bent down to where the ropes were tight around her wrists, holding them above her head. With one quick movement, he tightened them even farther. They gnawed into her mangled wrists, drawing blood. She grunted in pain, holding her teeth together.

"Enjoy this bed. Enjoy this room. Enjoy the sunshine you get. You're never leaving here. You'll never see your grandchildren, or the world around you, or any hope."

The man turned his back on the bed. Her feet were bound in chains, falling over the edges of the bed towards the floors. She would get cramps every couple hours from the awkward positioning. Her skin was a nasty, green color, with fungus growing over her. The sheets and blankets were rotted, like her teeth. Her hair fell back behind the bed, exposing her naked body to the harsh elements. Between her legs on the mattress was a puddle of blood, soaked into the bed and attracting flies that buzzed around her. Once, for fun, he'd set a dozen ants loose to gnaw on her helpless body until they died.

"You deserve this," he growled. "You deserve all of it. I'll never see all the pain you're in, but my imagination makes it so much better. I can sit in my comfortable living room and dream how uncomfortable you are and how the cold gnaws at you and the cramps overcome you. And I can smile."

She opened her mouth to say something but only gurgled blood which she spat out.

"Keep your nasty mouth closed."

The old woman closed her eyes, her eyebrows furrowed together and jaw clamped tightly shut.

"Look at me, woman!" he shouted.

Her eyes drifted open and she stared at him expressionlessly.

"I am the one doing this to you! I'm the one who's killing you! Understand it and hate it and I hope you hate everything you did and that you finally understand it all, because you deserve this!"

She blinked once, her eyes focusing on his.

"Goodbye, Mom."

The man took one long look, drinking in the scene, and then he turned and headed out of the house, pulling the hood up on his thick, black coat.

He stepped out of the ruined shack and towards his rusty, brown car. Sitting down with a groan, he turned his keys in the ignition. It didn't start. On the second try it worked, and he quickly backed out of the driveway. All around them were barren fields and forgotten forests, so that there was no chance of her ever being found.

His car turned onto the gravel road and drove away for the final time.

Liz

Chapter 2

June

I leaned over the toilet, vomit shooting out of my mouth. I clutched onto the stained porcelain and prayed that it would end soon. I couldn't remember how much I'd eaten tonight or how many pills it'd taken, but I knew this was a bigger load than most nights.

Finally, the spew stopped and I stood up straight. My stomach felt terrible, my pride felt worse, and I still couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror. I swear the bulge I call a stomach gets bigger everytime, like some disgusting tumour that I can't get cut off because it *is* me.

I flushed the toilet, heading to the sink.

"Jesus," I groan, washing my mouth out with the water. The taste never gets better.

It was better now that I had an apartment to myself, but at the same time it was worse. I loved the freedom, but I hated the choices I made. I would judge myself for being big, and then judge myself for trying to fix it. But at least it wasn't somebody else doing the judging.

Heading into the living room, I plopped down on the couch. The TV was still on, blaring some romantic show with gorgeous people I could never be and gorgeous places I would never go. Probably the Bachelorette.

I reached for the remote, but rubbed my hand against the bowl of M&M's beside it. They were in a neat, glass bowl, looking as pretty as ever. But they were what prompted my episode, the reason I wouldn't eat for a week afterwards, the cause of everything.

Snatching the bowl, I flung it across the room where it exploded against the wall. The shattering was louder than I expected, and I cringed. Hopefully the neighbors wouldn't say anything to me.

For the next little while, I layed on my couch, thinking I should be doing pushups or something similar. But that was just my imagination. Who knows if I ever could do any.

My living room was nice, but I was starting to get sick of it. I flicked off the TV, leaving myself in a dimly-lit rooms. The bulbs were burning out as I watched them, yellow spots darting in front of my eyes no matter where I turned. My stomach was gurgling and I felt another episode coming on, but I pushed it down as far as I could. I wanted to resist it for a while, avoid the inevitable.

Twenty minutes past and the urge took hold of me again. I fisted a couple handfuls of M&M's into my mouth, went to the kitchen for my pill, then headed for the toilet. At least it'd be a smaller load.

Chapter 3

September

I sat down in my usual seat on the train, propping the side of my face against the cool window. The air outside was frosty, getting colder every morning. My seat was frigid, but after half an hour it would be warm. And then I'd have to get off. For the moment, I was stuck in the train with the screaming baby a few aisles behind me and the old woman in the far back.

"This seat taken?" a lady asked brusquely, putting her purse on the seat next to me.

I glanced up at her and saw a petite woman with short, black hair and a book tucked under her arm.

"Hey, Lily." I grinned, facing forwards in my seat.

"What's up?" She dropped down into her chair. "Ready for the grand work week?"

"I'm gonna miss vacation."

Lily chuckled. "I didn't go anywhere, but I'll still miss it. Especially the cigarettes. Can't smoke at our stupid workplace. At least we don't start in August like everybody else."

"I didn't do anything except think about quitting."

She smiled at first, but glanced at me warily after a moment. "You know that..."

"I know, I know. I can't and won't go anywhere else." I slumped down in my seat. "It's just nice to imagine that I could."

"Well, maybe someday..."

"No," I interrupted. "No, it won't happen."

"You don't know that. Maybe, maybe a therapist or a counselor..."

"I've tried a lot," I said. "Can we not talk about it right now? I don't wanna start work like this."

"Yeah, okay. Sorry." She was quiet for a bit, but then livened up. "Hey, so you know who I met over vacation?"

I turned towards her and grinned. "Sure."

She spent the rest of the train ride going over some guy she met at a friend's party. They'd hooked up, broke up, made up, and everything else there was to do. And they did it all within a few weeks. That's what excited her most, I guess.

We got off the train half an hour later, worked our way through the bustling train station. She bought a bagel, and then we headed into the main city. A couple blocks down was our office. Three years ago, I thought it was the most amazing place on earth. Now I wasn't so sure.

They'd accepted me despite all my problems, and they gave me lots of breaks throughout the day whenever I felt an episode coming on. Lily was there, my accountability partner and best friend. But so were the men.

The men never took their eyes off me. You'd think that would make me feel more secure, but instead it made me hate myself more. Some of them mocked me. Some of them didn't. But all of them touched me. All of them hunted me.

Chapter 4

"I swear if another guy tries to grab my butt at the office I'm gonna kill 'em." I growled, throwing my bags at the luggage compartment. When I sat down in my seat, Lily lowered herself in the chair next to me.

We sat in silence for a couple minutes until the train jerked to a rolling start. She glanced at me from the corner of her eye, then sighed deeply and sank back into her chair.

"I don't know, Liz." She ran a hand through her hair, pulling it back from her face. "I don't know anywhere else that will take you, but I don't want you to have to deal with this harassment either."

"Yeah." I kept my eyes forward on the seat in front of me.

"Maybe if you said you got a boyfriend they would quit?"

I shook my head. "I wish it was that easy."

"What about smoking? You could smoke with me, and your breath—"

I glared at her. "What did I tell you about that?"

"Pish-posh," she said. "So, about work..."

"I think it's hopeless, Lily."

"And you've talked to the director? The high-ups? Surely, *somebody* would listen to you! I mean... this is like illegal stuff, right? Harassment?"

"Lil, they'd just say that they've already given me a lot of free space and that I have nothing to complain about. And they'd get fired if they try to help me."

"Even the director?" she asked.

"The director's one of the worst ones. He... he's just bad. I'll figure something out, okay? I don't want you to have to deal with it."

"But—"

"I don't want you getting involved," I said. "I'll figure something out."

She crossed her arms. "Fine. Can I have the window seat? You got it on the way in. I might be able to sneak a cig."

I roll my eyes and grin. "Fine, fine."

A couple minutes later, when we had switched seats and I was now next to the aisle, a man came stumbling back through the rows of chairs. He was thin, almost sickly, with long strands of blonde hair that were almost to his shoulders. The man walked awkwardly, catching himself on every other aisle.

As he was nearing my row, someone from the chair in front of me stuck out their foot into the aisle. The blonde-haired man fell and bounced off my arm onto the floor.

"Oh my god!" I leapt up and offered him my hand. "Are you okay?"

He took my hand and got hurriedly to his feet, glancing around the cabin nervously at the other people. "Yeah, yeah, just tripped."

"No you didn't!" I exclaimed, rounding on the man in the seat in front of mine. He was a jock, with hair spiked up and his lips curved in a sneer. "What's your problem? This dude didn't—"

"Leave it alone," the blonde-haired man whispered to me.

"I will not! This... this guy needs to say sorry. Yeah, sorry. That's right." I crossed my arms and stood over him. "Now do it."

The jock, sitting alone in the aisle, began to laugh loudly which only made me angrier. "Okay, *Mom*." Doubled over, he glanced at up the blonde-haired man and said, "Sorry you're a clumsy—"

I turned around to face the man who had fallen, but he was walking off down the aisle. I chased after him, catching him near the back.

"What's wrong?" I asked, grabbing onto his arm. "Wait!"

He spun around to face me, his eyes brimming with tears. "What do you want? Do you know how embarrassing that was for me? Even without you doing that! I don't... I don't need anyone to protect me, okay?"

I stood there shocked for a moment, trying to think of a proper response. "What do you want me to do then? I couldn't just... watch."

He crossed his arms and turned his head so he wouldn't look me in the eyes. "It's fine."

"Are you getting off at the next stop? Can I... buy you a drink or something? To make up?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine. Just going to the bathroom. Bye."

The man walked away from me, heading into the single-person restroom. I slunked away back to my seat.

"What happened with him?" Lily asked as I sat down.

"I don't know, really. Try to be nice and the guy just..."

"Well, maybe Karma will pay you back," she said cheerfully.

"I don't believe in that."

She shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I don't either."

Chapter 5

I didn't see the blonde-haired man on the train for about a week after that. It wasn't until two Mondays later, when I was miserable about heading into work, that I bumped into him.

That day was especially bad, since Lily wasn't coming in. She had a bad hangover from the previous night, she said, and so I was forced to face that workday alone.

I was walking back through the aisle to my seat when a hand reached out and stopped me. I instinctively jumped backwards, heart racing. He didn't seem to notice.

"Hey," the blonde-haired man said, "you're the girl from a week ago?"

"Two weeks ago," I snapped. "And I haven't forgot."

"Look, I'm... really sorry about everything. I was being stupid. Can we... could we try to start again? Talk some? Maybe, if you want, I could get you a drink to thank you."

"I'm heading into work," I said, "but I'll sit with you if you want. My partner's not coming in today."

He scooted over to the window seat, but frowned. "Oh. I didn't... know you two were together."

I shoved my luggage into the carrier overhead and took a seat beside him. It was much closer to the front of the train than I'd ever sat.

"Um, if this is awkward you don't have to..."

I grinned and shook my head quickly. "Not like that. Just a friend. We're not lesbian. At least, I'm not. She might be when she's drunk."

He nodded, fidgeting in his seat. "So... you said you were heading into work?"

"Yeah, I ride this train in everyday and out everyday. I've never seen you though?"

He shrugged. "Most people don't. I never got your name, though."

"Elizabeth," I answered. "Maybe if I like you enough, you can call me Liz. But not yet."

"Alright," he said with a grin. "Sounds good. I like that name."

"What's yours?"

"My what?"

I smiled. "Well, you're gonna tell me your name too, right?"

"Oh, right. It's um Eli."

"Short for Elijah?"

"Nope." He sighed. "My parents were hippies, I'm pretty sure. Our last name is Smalls. Long nights, short names. Eli Smalls."

"That's your impression of hippies?" I asked skeptically.

"Well, maybe not exactly. Anyway, anyway, where do you work? What's your pet's names? Where did you grow up? Let me know about you!"

"These sound like security questions." I winked playfully. What the heck is getting into me. "And security questions are very secure. So, when I decide you call me Liz I'll tell you about Elizabeth."

He nodded. "Alright, alright. Makes sense."

"Just to give you a tease, my first pet was a squirrel."

Eli slapped his knee as he laughed. "A squirrel? Your first pet was a squirrel? That's so great. Did you not have a life?"

I punched him in the shoulder gently. "Don't laugh at me. What was your first pet? A turtle?"

"That's better than a squirrel."

The train pulled into the station much too soon. We both stood up, grabbed our belongings, and headed for the front. As we went our separate ways in the city, we stood together for one last moment.

“I loved talking to you,” he said.

“Me too, Eli.”

“Take care, okay? Maybe when I see you later you can tell me about your job.”

I shook my head. “Probably not.”

“You sure, Liz?”

“Watch yourself, boy.”

Chapter 6

October

I didn't know who was behind me, but I knew I had to go quicker. They were dangerous.

My breathing picked up as I raced ahead, towards the train station. Earlier that week, I'd planned this night with Eli and it seemed perfect. Now I was alone and terrified. Someone was coming.

I glanced over my shoulder at random times, afraid of what I'd see. But I had to get away. They were closer. I knew it. I could hear things moving in the darkness, but I didn't know how many there were.

"Leave me alone!" I cried out, turning around at last.

There was nobody there and no answer, of course. But I knew they could see me. The city was entirely dark around me, it seemed, and I knew I shouldn't have gone to dinner with him. I always needed to get back to my apartment, "as soon as possibly possible" I used to say. And now I'd let Eli keep me out, and some terrible man or woman was chasing me.

"Go away!" I screamed. "I just wanna go home!"

Inside my head, I counted to three, and then I turned around and sprinted away. The train station was up ahead, and before long I was finally safe. There was nobody behind me now, and I could see everything. The lights were on, and the final stragglers from the city were leaving. A few other people came in on the trains, but the only thought in my head was peace.

I waited anxiously as the train sat there and the people filtered off of it. I bounced on my toes, rocked on my heels, and did anything I could to calm my nerves. All the people around stared at me, but that wasn't really a concern. I just wanted to go home. It felt nice to be somewhere bright.

We were finally allowed to get on the train, and I rushed on board. I sat down in a window seat, not the one I usually did. This wasn't even the same train, and I didn't expect it to be, but still there was an air of awkwardness for me. I wanted a familiar face. Eli, or Lily, or even the old woman who always sat at the back of my usual train. At least on this one there was no crying baby.

I leaned my face against the cool window when I was in my seat, closing my eyes. Now I was safe. As long as I never stayed in the city past dark, I'd be fine.

But what if the person followed me on the train? And followed me home? And knew where I lived?

I opened my eyes to watch the station, to make sure, and there he was right in front of me. He was in all black, the hood pulled over his face, his shoulders tight and high. It looked like he was staring at the ground, but his head moved an inch and I knew he could see me too. There was no other movement. He stood in front of my window, his head bowed and covered.

And then the train started rolling, and we left the city. I knew he hadn't followed me, and yet I felt worse about everything. There would be no, "It's just my imagination" hopes. He was there. I knew it. I could see the other passengers give him odd looks, but they weren't scared. I was scared, terrified.

He didn't know where I lived, but he knew I rode the train. And I knew he would be watching.

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