

ONE MORE DAY

With You

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C H A P T E R O N E

A calloused hand pressed against my back. The touch jolted me awake, but I forbid myself to look – even though I ached for a glimpse.

I understood the consequences of illusions, and their occupation of space inside my head was no longer welcome. Yet, I struggled to suppress the temptation to glance, like an itch that begged relief. Sound reasoning suggested I leave it alone, but melancholic feelings plagued my desires. Thus, I caved to the details of the moment and entertained the hypothetical.

The hand was the size of Texas and every bit as rough as the cowboys who ranched the land. I suspected the person was him by the way his fingers tapped a three-beat tune against my spine, a trio of notes that distinguished his touch from any other. But then again, the soloist could not be him. He was no longer with us.

I battled the urge to peek and sought a distraction. My eyes shifted back and forth before settling upon a yellowed blind over a window beside the bed. Shards of sunlight bent around the edges, and light fractured across the opposite wall. The projection of splinters illustrated how my heart shattered the day he left.

It was impossible to know the time of day, but my nose indicated morning. The savory aroma of fried bacon permeated the room where I had slept. My mind sampled the crunch and flavor, but my mind detoured to a matter of urgency. I feared an impersonator might have awakened me. And I needed to know why.

But I acted late. When I rolled over, I caught a trailing voice.

“Come eat – before it gets cold.”

It was him.

His tone was as familiar to me as crickets who sang on summer nights. Words articulated as if released from the depths of a well - every inflection, bold and resounding.

With his voice, I glimpsed his backside slide past my view into the hallway. The figure disappeared like a ghost. But as he flashed out of sight, I recognized the easy way he carried his shoulders. A man who required fractional energy to generate motion. The result, a fluid, effortless gait.

My eyes squinted as I pinched the bridge of my nose. Good and bad ideas battled for territory inside my head. A fire of hope burned on the right side, while a firehouse sprayed at the blaze from the left. Neither faction seemed to cede any ground. Perhaps, my mind reduced itself to believing irrational charades. Whereas in the past, before the hurt, I would have extinguished the flames without a second thought.

I grasped the edge of the bed and wondered how long I had slept. I remembered a pressure-cooker-of-a-headache that stressed my skull as if a bomb existed beneath the bone, configured to detonate, designed to blast brain matter from my head. My wife, Julia, saw my attempt to diffuse the pain with four capsules. When the medicine failed, she insisted I take a nap. Lying down in this room and closing my eyes were the last acts I remembered before the hand pressed against my back.

The room spun as I staggered to stand. Up too fast, I thought. My feet felt uneven, and I steadied myself with a hand against the wall. I called for my wife and turned an ear for her response. When she didn't answer, I decided to investigate.

The hallway led from the bedroom to the front room. I stood at one end and peered toward the light emanating from the other. From here to there were no more than ten even strides, but at my pace, it would take twice as long to cover the distance.

Halfway into the hallway, a portrait from my senior year in high school hung crooked on the wall. A rectangular mirror faced it from the opposite side. I crept forward with my eyes on the photo. I cringed at the thought of being imprisoned in perpetuity, sentenced to stare at one's face for eternity, examining every flaw, debating every horrible decision, and questioning the value of one's very existence. I avoided these types of retrospective self-examinations.

My head swiveled toward the mirror. I paused and sighed at the reflection of a defeated man, wounded by eventualities. An army of gray had infiltrated the periphery of my temples. Fault lines sprawled across my forehead, crow's feet sprouted at the corners of rheumy eyes, and the stubble around my mouth showed flecks of white.

I pivoted back to the picture on the wall and studied a kid who feared nothing and invited the world to change him. And despite the cocksure grin sported for the camera, he was foolhardy of his future. I envied that boy's naivety. Though, it never served him well.

Crossroads tested me at every turn. Signs often indicated the best route. But all too often, I ignored the righteous path and descended upon wrong. Burdened by guilt, I bargained with excuses to prove a choice worthy – an audacious way to conduct affairs.

I attempted a step forward but stalled with a spasm banging inside my head, like a drummer pounding a beat with my pulse. I winced and considered a retreat to bed. Yet, I continued a few steps before halting when I heard an exchange of familiar voices beyond the hallway.

“Did he wake?” she asked.

“He stirred a bit,” he said.

“It’s a big day. Maybe we should let him sleep a bit longer.”

“And risk not having enough time?”

My thoughts trudged through a swamp of susceptibilities. None of this could be true. And even though I yearned for one more day, I couldn’t allow myself to entertain the absurdity of the idea. I knew better than this. When I tried to shake away the thoughts, the throbbing sensation in my head intensified. I wanted to wake or run away, but the voices drew me in.

He said, “Better let Jerrad know his eggs are ready.”

“So, you’ve decided he needs to get up,” she said.

“You know the constraints we’re dealing with,” he replied.

She called from the kitchen, “Jerrad, breakfast is ready.”

I took a false start back, reset, and then drifted forward to an invisible boundary that defined the edge of the front room. A wall obstructed my line of sight into the kitchen. I attempted to see more, but couldn’t from my position. My mouth flattened, and my spine lengthened as I contemplated options.

My mind brewed upon the decision to move forward when Grandma glided from the kitchen into the dining room. She held a plate of breakfast food in her hands, danced four steps toward the table, and set the plate down. She seemed oblivious to my presence in the room.

I observed her actions as she patted at the shape of her short, gray hair — a tight bonnet of ringlets constrained by practice and hairspray. The curls shimmered in the light as she feathered locks into place. Her hairstyle was every bit as grandmotherly as the ankle-length gown she wore. The white fabric blended from brushed cotton invited comfort. I wanted to wrap her in a hug, but instead, I stood still and watched.

I traced her movements with my eyes like an intruder peeking through a hole in a clapboard. She exhibited grace in her smile and a bounce in her step. There was a luminous quality to her being, and her presence warmed my spirit.

But when her head swiveled my direction, and her expression changed, I felt instant shame, like a man caught in the act of thievery. However, she showed no will to prosecute. Instead, her eyes widened, and a smile stretched to expose every tooth. Electricity flowed through her words as she greeted me.

“Good morning, Angel!”

I managed an awkward smile. Then, I muttered a response with a fat tongue and stretched my neck for an angle to view beyond the thin wall for a peek into the kitchen.

“What is it, Angel?” she asked.

“Who’s cooking breakfast?”

She trapped the tip of her tongue between her uppers and lowers but couldn’t corral a burgeoning smile. She pirouetted toward the kitchen and motioned to someone with her head.

For a moment, everything stopped. Sights, sounds, smells, and even time existed in a vacuum. My core caught fire, while my skin grew frigid. Beads of cold sweat melted onto my forehead.

I rubbed a hand across my face and squinted through passing fingers. And that’s when it happened.

He stepped into view from the kitchen, and donned an unsettling grin.

My arms fell slack to each side as my eyes absorbed the impossible. The sight of him left me stupefied, numb, and befuddled.

But the man was him – that much was undeniable. His appearance detailed in every way, right down to how he dressed.

He preferred this blue patterned shirt to any other in his closet. He wore it rolled to the elbows, exposing an inked forearm, commemorating his time in the Navy. The snap-down tucked into a pair of neat blue jeans. A cracked strap of leather with worn holes made sure neither piece strayed. The clothes fit him well – paradoxical to when clothes sagged from his bones like a wet tent.

His grin changed to a confident smile, and he removed a foam trucker hat from his head.

My stomach boiled an acidic stew – a dash of astonishment, a pinch of disquietude. I wondered if I might faint from shock.

But before I did, he took a healthy stride toward me and engulfed my body with a pair of long arms.

I didn't reciprocate, as my mind swirled with hope and fear.

Grandpa was alive, and I needed to know how that could be possible.