



LOOK
AT
ME

a short story

WILLOWY WHISPER

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The Letter

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SHE KNEW WITHOUT LOOKING. She felt. It was familiar, the chill that spread through her, the immediate sweat on her brow. *He's here again.*

Slowly, she turned. She placed her palms on the smooth counter.

The diner was always quiet on Tuesdays, especially around two. Only a few customers sat in the red, cushioned booths. A blonde-haired woman sat at the end of the counter on a stool, reading the funny signs and vintage tin posters scattered around the walls. Every once in a while she'd chuckled to herself, amused by them, then take another bite of her burger. The other customers were regulars, periodically asking for refills on their coffee, mostly talking quietly with each other, as they did everyday. Her eyes roamed past them—through the window, out into the parking lot.

Her gut clenched.

The old black car sat just where she'd expected. The driver was still in the seat.

Emma turned quickly. She groped for the salt and pepper shakers and unscrewed the lids. But her hands still shook, and when she tried to pour in the salt, it missed the shaker.

“Emma.” Valerie swept in from the kitchen. She took one look at the salt and frowned. “What are you trying to do, make more work for yourself?”

The little bell rang. The door slammed shut. His steady footsteps.

Emma gulped in air. Frantic, she glanced at Valerie and whispered, “Take this order for me?”

“I think I'll help you with this instead.” Valerie grabbed the salt and scooted closer. “And loosen up, girl. You look tense.”

Tense. Emma felt the word vibrate through her, rattling her to the core. *I'm not tense—I'm afraid.* She turned and grabbed her tray.

He was seated in the corner, donning a denim shirt that was rolled to his elbows. He crossed his hands in front of him.

She slipped past the counter and approached his table.

He pretended he didn't see her. Pretended that he didn't notice she was there, or nearing him—only she knew better, because he always knew where she was. That was his game.

“My name is Emma. I'll be your server today.” She paused and choked out the words, “What can I get for you?”

“Chocolate.” He glanced up. Deep, liquid brown eyes. They grabbed her, they always did—and the stifling fear wrenched through her. He smiled a little. “Hot chocolate, please.”

“With marshmallows?” Her voice barely squeaked the words.

He nodded. “Yes, thank you.” So polite. Always. He turned his eyes away.

She hurried back to her haven—behind the counter. She closed her eyes. Her breath was uneven. Her chest throbbed.

“Emma?” Valerie touched her arm.

She jolted. “Huh?”

“Are you going to tell me what he wanted so I can go make it, or not?”

“Just hot chocolate.” Emma reached for a mug. “I can make it.”

“That guy.” Valerie tossed her pony-tail off her shoulder. “I’ve seen him in here before.” She paused and a wild grin soared up her cheek. “He’s kinda cute.”

Emma caught a sob before it erupted. *He’s horrible*. No. That wasn’t rational. Maybe the man was handsome...yes, he was. Very handsome. Tall, young, dark. How could Valerie know? How could anyone know?

Valerie studied her. “I think he likes you. I’ve seen him staring at you.”

Emma slid the cup into the microwave. Maybe once, she would have been flattered. Another guy, another time. But not him. The unease prickled through her, until it became fear so hard and real that it strangled her. She couldn’t escape it. Everywhere she was, everywhere she went. Places he could reach; places he couldn’t reach. Like her dreams. He wouldn’t stay out of her dreams. His face loomed in her vision, haunting her nights—and when daylight finally came, the moment she went out of the house, she would see him again. He never said much, never did much. Just looked at her and usually smiled, but there was something about him, some horrid depth in those somber, brown eyes...

“Uh, you there.” Valerie nudged her. “It’s done.”

Emma stopped the microwave. The dread knotted through her once more. With pleading eyes, she looked at Valerie. “Will you take it to him?”

“Why? Feeling nervous?” Valerie chuckled. “No, girl. It’s good for you. If he asks for your number, just smile. That’s all you got to do.”

“It’s not that.”

But Valerie wouldn’t listen. She was already moving toward the kitchen, abandoning her.

Emma slid the mug on the tray, balanced it on her arm, and circled around the counter. It was the longest walk in her life.

He didn’t smile when she lowered the cup to the table. Instead, he looked up at her again. He just

looked. Didn't speak. Didn't explain. Just looked.

Emma's eyes burned. She dropped the tray. "What do you want?" It came out breathy, a small little whisper.

Still, he stared.

"Please." Emma's shoulders sagged. She took a step away from him, but wouldn't look away. She was trapped again. He always trapped her. He trapped her with his eyes, and wouldn't let go...

"I think you know." His voice was very soft, very low. "I think you've known all along."

"I don't."

He rose to his feet—

Emma ran. She flew towards the door and burst outside. Faintly, she heard the bell going wild—once, then twice—but she kept running. She darted past the old black car, around the diner. She didn't know if he followed her, or if she only imagined the footsteps. She reeled to a stop at the dumpster and tried to open the gate. If she could hide until he left—

A hand grabbed her face and hurled her backwards.

She screamed, but the sound was stifled.

He fumbled with the gate and yanked it open, then closed. They were inside the gate. Together. Alone.

She shook so hard that the air trapped in her lungs.

He lowered his hand, but grabbed both of her arms. He jerked her to him. He forced his face close—and there he held her eyes, so deeply that the panic turned into pain. Subtle pain, horrid pain...she started to sob.

"Look at me, Emma." Soft, panted words. "Look at me."

She shook her head.

He jerked her. Hard. He gritted out the words again, "Look at me!"

She obeyed. "Leave me alone—"

"Is this really what you want?" His fingers pressed into her skin. "Do you think pretending I never existed will ever make it go away?"

"What?" She writhed in agony, falling apart, losing control.

"Look at me."

She did. Images, nightmares, horrid things threatened to invade her. *Memories?* She caught the word and tried to make sense of it. *Or nightmares?* She couldn't distinguish them.

"Everyone has tried to help you, Emma." He blinked. "Most of all me, by staying away for as long as I did."

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“I’m the man who pulled you out.” The next words were spoken very quietly, breathed into her face with a tremble, “I’m the man that pulled both of you out.”

Emma went numb. *Driving, turning the wheel.* The images took form in her head. She tried to push them away, begged them to go away, but it came back anyways. Then she heard her sister's small voice, mumbled around the thumb in her mouth, “*Emma?*”

“*Yes, Kendra?*”

“*I want Mommy.*”

She looked in the mirror at her sister, bundled in her coat, sitting in the car seat. She smiled. “We're almost home, pretty girl.” Then the creek. It was swift, but she could get the car across. Better than trying to walk. She could see their house across the bank.

She pressed the brakes and went slow, just like she'd seen mom do. No problem. She had this.

Half way across. Going fine, then...the engine stopped.

She pounded the wheel, aggravated. Mom was going to kill her. She knew it. “Come on, pretty girl. We're going to have to walk across.” She reached back and unstrapped the car seat. “Climb up here with me. You hang onto my neck, okay?”

Kendra nodded. “I cold.”

“We're almost home, see?” Emma pointed across the creek. “Ready?”

Kendra's head bobbed up and down.

Emma pushed open the car door. Water rushed in the car floor. She hurried out, leaning against the vehicle. Swifter than she thought. Kendra was heavy. She pushed off the car and took two steps forward. The water splashed up around her legs. She stumbled. Fell.

Couldn't get a grip, couldn't stop, rushed away.

Kendra clung to her.

She went under. They both did. Couldn't breathe. Forced down, caught in the cold water...she threw up her head. She rasped in air.

Kendra was so heavy. So bulky. So limp.

Couldn't move, frozen, couldn't breathe. A branch whacked her across the face. She screamed, but the water filled her mouth and choked her.

Someone was yelling. Couldn't see, but she heard the voice over the roar.

She strained to lift Kendra, but she fell under again. Dying. No. Hands were pulling her out. Her and Kendra, they were going to be okay...everything was okay, because someone was pulling them out.

She lay gasping on the bank, wet, cold, hardly breathing. She was choking out water. She couldn't

see, but Kendra was no longer in her arms.

The man was crying. She heard the sound of his pain.

Her vision cleared. She lifted her head, choking back the horror.

Kendra was on the ground, the man over top of her, his mouth against hers—trying to give her life.

But it was too late.

Emma could tell.

Her pretty little sister was—

“Dead.” The same man was now holding her. He spoke the words again, “It wasn’t your fault, but she’s dead, Emma. You’ve blocked it out in your mind. You wouldn’t listen. You pretended it never happened, that Kendra never existed.” He paused and leaned closer. “That I never existed.”

She pressed her face into his shirt, gasping. “Why did you save me?” The horror iced its way through her heart. “Why didn’t you let me die with her?”

He didn’t answer. He merely cupped her face with his hands.

“Why are you here?” She forced out the words.

“I want you to heal.”

“I don’t want to...” Sobbing. “I can’t bear it...why can’t you leave me alone?”

“Because I didn’t save your life, just for you to drown it in lies.” His nose against her nose. “You can call me your angel, you can call me your friend, you can call me your lover.” He stroked the tears off her cheeks. “Because I’m here to help you. I’m not leaving until I do.”

“I killed her.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“It hurts so bad.”

“I know.” He held her tight, as if enclosing her in wings of comfort. “But would you believe me, if I told you there was hope?”

“Why do you care?” The last final words came out unbelievably quiet.

He drew her back, and with those deep brown eyes, sought out her soul. “I’ve stayed away for three years. I talked to the doctors and your mother before I finally came around again. We meant to be subtle. I didn’t want to shock you, only slowly bring the memory back.”

“Why?”

“For you.”

“Why?” she whispered again.

“Because, Emma.” The next words were spoken painfully, “Before the accident, we were supposed to be married.”

She closed her eyes. Something akin to panic—or peace—coursed all the way through her. *Married?* He had been waiting at her house. She remembered. He must have been on her porch when they fell. He must have seen, he must have ran. She sank into the memory one more time. *He lowered Kendra, sobbing, and crawled towards her. He pulled her against him, cradling her. “She's gone, Emma.”*

“No.” She gripped his shirt. Shuttered. Couldn't be. “No, Derek. I don't believe you...”

He found her lips. The kiss was painful...her world went black. When she opened her eyes again, the same man was in her hospital room. She'd never seen him before. She remembered her own thoughts. Who was Kendra? They showed her pictures. She shook her head. “I don't know,” she persisted. Over and over again, until finally, they all agreed with her. They stopped saying anything. They all went silent, and by the time she went home, nothing had happened at all.

Emma jerked out of his arms. She cupped her mouth with her hand.

“Don't run away from me.” He stepped forward, opened his arms to her. “Emma, I love you, baby.” He was crying. “Let me be your angel again.” A desperate whisper. “If only one more time.”

“One more time?”

“One more kiss.” He opened his arms wider, beckoning her.

She walked slowly towards him. She tipped back her head, kissing the man that had haunted her, the man who's eyes brought a rush of fear and pain.

Now, he brought only comfort. Her bleeding soul found a moment's rest. She sighed. “Not one more time, Derek.” Quietly, she spoke the words. “Forever, you can be my angel.”

He said no words.

But he kissed away all her pain.