

AWAKENING

JOSH WASN'T REALLY sure why he was there. Or rather, it seemed he was there because of the girl. He just didn't remember coming there. He was waiting in the dark for the restaurant to close and for her to walk to her car. It was snowing, a light, dream-falling snow—and wasn't it strange? He did not feel cold. He did not feel much of anything at all.

Then he saw her. She was pretty in an unaffected way, with bags and paraphernalia dangling from her arms. He smiled; it was like she was always planning for a party. She walked toward her Subaru beyond the aura of the parking lot lights, reached into her pocket, pulled out her keys—and promptly dropped them in the fluffy snow.

The keys fell into four inches of windswept powder and disappeared from view. She was flustered; he could tell she did not know where they were as she bent over in the shadows and felt around clumsily, her arms full of stuff. They had disappeared into the snow and it was dark.

Suddenly he was by her side. He wasn't sure how, exactly, but this was the way things had been for him lately. He plucked them from the snow and handed them to her. He handed her the keys and his hand touched hers—she was not wearing gloves and neither was he—but he did not feel a thing. He thought he might feel something—a spark—love—was that why he was there?—but he felt nothing.

She was clearly surprised. He looked at her and she looked at him and they stood there for a few moments looking at each other, frozen in time. Would she turn on him, a stranger in a deserted country parking lot at night? For a moment he thought she would—but she didn't. Something in her did not want to turn. She was trusting by nature. She wanted to trust him.

He saw this in her and felt a rush of—love? He did not know exactly what it was. At this point Josh was going on feelings and emotions and nothing more. The filters were completely off and what was left was something like a bare wire. He saw her as a fellow traveler and he saw an open heart. It was almost as if he could read her mind. Strange, he had never been interested in reading people before.

He realized she was not like him or the people he normally associated with. She was not “city.” That was why she was not afraid of dark parking lots or strange men. She did not reach for the pepper spray, if she had any, which he doubted. She wanted to trust people. She wanted him to be a nice man who helped her in a moment of need and picked her keys out of the snow.

The thing was—was he a nice man? He wanted to be. He did not know what he was.

Her trust was all the more surprising because he knew he was not conventional. In fact he was a bit of a fright. While he was waiting for her he had caught a glimpse of himself in the shiny windows of a Land Rover and was startled by his appearance. He saw a gaunt young man gazing back at him with pale skin and large eyes. For a moment he didn’t recognize himself.

Josh was a good-looking fellow with wavy black hair and one very distinctive trait—but more about that later. His coat was open in spite of the cold and he looked, well, febrile; although he also did not look that way because his lips were blue from the December cold. He seemed deserted in his own self. He did not look like someone a country girl would want to know.

How could he not recognize himself? It was just like everything else lately—his memories were jumbled and vague. He honestly did not know how he came to be standing in a parking lot in a snowstorm waiting for this girl. And yet he was very clearly waiting for her. Somehow he knew she would be coming out of the restaurant. It was the whole reason he was standing there in the cold.

But why couldn't he remember anything more? What was it? Amnesia? Josh laughed at himself. He remembered the article from *The Lancet*—apparently there was no such thing as amnesia. There were no known medical reports of someone receiving a blow to the head and walking around for weeks or months with no idea of who he was until something happened to jar his memory. It only seemed to happen in the movies.

He came crashing back into the moment and realized he had just laughed out loud. She looked a little surprised but still did not seem frightened. Once again he experienced this warm feeling for her, whatever it was. It made him a little dizzy.

"Thanks!" she said, looking puzzled. "Where did you come from? I didn't see you."

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "It just looked like you could use some help."

"I feel like such an idiot. A little snow always sends me into a spiral. I know, it's Vermont. But I'm dreading it."

"You don't like the snow?"

"I love it—when I'm in my cozy log cabin. But I hate driving in it. Had an accident, completely lost control of the car and spun around several times. Ever since then I've been terrified."

Accident! Josh stood there riveted to the snowy pavement for a moment at the sound of that horrible word. There was a jolt. He saw himself in a car and he was sliding and he hit something and then he was in a hospital. He remembered thinking this is what it feels like to be on the other side.

She was looking at him, puzzled, because he had not replied. He wasn't being rude, not intentionally anyway. He was struggling to bring himself back to the moment from this terrible memory.

"Perfectly understandable," he blurted at last. "I was in a rather bad one myself. I think."

“You think?” she said with a merry laugh. “You don’t know?”

“Seems like there are a lot of things I don’t know lately. But listen, why don’t you let me follow you home?”

“No—that’s way too much to ask. You don’t even know me.”

“I don’t know. I sort of feel like I do.”

She looked puzzled again. “Well, anyway, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

He had gone too far, been too forward. Only it was not forwardness at all. The only thing he wanted was for her to get home safely in her little car. He knew it seemed strange for a complete stranger to make such an offer; he could not remember having done anything so gauche in the past. But a lot of things were different now. He had never cared about anything the way he cared about this girl and her safety in the cold but beautiful snow.

And yet why did he care about her? He had absolutely no idea. He could not remember meeting her. He did not know anything about her. All he knew was that he was connected to her in some way. Was he a stalker? He sensed this was not the first time he had stood in that parking lot at night waiting for her to come out of the restaurant. The truth was he did not know what he was.

“I’m sure you will,” he replied. “You have a good, sturdy car there. If I had a wife or a daughter, this is just the kind of car I would want them to have.”

She did a sort of double take, and it occurred to him how strange such warm words must seem coming from a stranger. They were the overflow of a tenderness that sneaked up on him and surprised him.

“Anyway, thanks again,” she said as she slid into the car. “And button up that coat. You look cold.”

He closed the door for her. Gallantry was not necessarily his thing, but he wanted to do it. Then he began wiping the snow off the windshield with his bare hands. She rolled down her window.

“Thanks, but you don’t have to do that.”

“You can’t see where you’re going.”

“I have wipers. Anyway, thanks again.”

She rolled up her window and drove off towards the road.

He was left standing there alone, very much alone in the Vermont mountains without a car in the lot and none on the road. A thought occurred to him—why not follow her anyway? He wanted to follow her, but he could not find his car. He stumbled around the empty lot in the snow. It should have been easy to find. What was he driving?