

“Hello.”

Mark hated leaving a message, but he didn't want to call back either. She'd see the missed call and...

But God, hearing her voice again after so long—even her short, “It's Liza. Leave a message”—had left him shaking. He'd missed her little southern twang—the one she insisted she didn't have. He'd missed hearing it during those long talks into the night, or when she'd argue how Larry was the most underrated Stogie, or when she'd whisper in his ear while they made love.

He ran a finger over picture he'd made of her on their last vacation. It had seen better days—the edges worn and frayed where he'd taken it in and out of his wallet countless times over the past fourteen months. Her image had been his lifeline—the areas over her cheeks faded where his fingers had traced over them while he...

He let his gaze linger on her eyes. And there it was—what he'd missed the most—the *look*—the one telling him she loved him. Damn, he'd been a fool.

“Yeah, um, so, it's me. I was afraid you wouldn't answer when you saw who the call was from.” He let out a slight chuckle. “I wouldn't have blamed you. Should I hold out hope you don't hate me completely since I'm not blocked?”

He frowned. Wait, maybe she hadn't expected to hear from him again and figured it didn't matter. What if she was still torn apart? What if she'd moved on?

Shit, and now he was blowing it. How much time did these stupid voicemails give you anyhow? He'd practiced what he'd say probably a thousand times, but that had been him talking to her face to face—sort of.

*Come on, man, just spit it out.*

“Okay, here goes. I have to say what's in my heart whether you hear this message or not.” He was afraid he'd lose his nerve, so he just blurted out, “I'm sorry.” He smiled, imagining the surprised look his words would cause. “Never thought you'd hear that, did you?” Sorry wasn't a word he had often used, and he'd never admitted when he was wrong—though he had been a lot when it came to Liza. It's a wonder she'd put up with him for as long as she had.

“I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I...” He cleared the emotion from his throat. She didn't need to hear his tears. “I'm sorry I broke your heart.”

There. He'd said it. He *had* broken her heart. But in trying not to cause her pain, he may have gone too far.

“But you need to know I've been hurting too. I've—”

*Stop it, this isn't about you right now.*

He shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. "Can you tell I'm nervous? I also still get ahead of myself. I should've asked how you were doing. I heard you made it back to Nashville." His girl never had liked the West Coast. "I'm glad. I know how important home is to you."

He paused and took a deep breath. It was now or never.

"So, believe it or not, I'm close by and was wondering if you'd like to meet? You know, catch up—maybe talk about us."

*Please let there still be an us.*

"I promise I'll explain everything." But it had to be in person. "I'll understand if you don't want to or don't call back." He let out a short laugh. "But can I tell you one more thing?" He looked back down at her picture. "I've never gotten over you. Oh, yeah, and the old saying isn't true. Time *doesn't* heal all wounds. At least not where you're concerned."

He had to be running out of the allotted time for this message, and now he was wasting it rambling.

*Good job, Mark, put another million miles between you by not knowing when to shut up.*

"Anyhow, get ready for another shocker. You were right that night. I *was* being an asshole." A major asshole. "But there was a—"

A beep sounded in his ear, ending his time.

"Okay," he murmured to himself. "At least I can say I tried." He scrubbed over his damp eyes and sniffled. "I just hope it's not too late."

He hit end on his phone and laid it down beside him on the exam room table, then relaxed against the paper-covered pillow. His oncologist had said he could take as much time as he needed after learning the results of his scans. So he had. There—in the quiet of his thoughts—he'd realized it was finally time to call her. But not like all the other times he'd been tempted to just because he'd felt sorry for himself. This time was different. This time he didn't have to worry his illness would be the only thing bringing her back to him.

It was the reason he'd left her. So she wouldn't feel obligated. So she wouldn't have to watch him die.

Funny. Who knew the fear of dying wasn't the worst thing he'd had to face? No. the worst thing was leaving the one reason he had to live behind in California.

But he wasn't dying—at least not any time soon. He'd come out on the other side. Dr. Ford had said the scans were still clear. Remission was now his favorite word.

If she called back...

Who was he kidding? She wasn't going to call. He'd torn down that bridge and burned what was left of it behind him. He'd—

The familiar notes of Billy Joel's "She's Got a Way" rang out—a ringtone he hadn't heard in almost two years. Liza was calling back. He reached out a trembling hand and picked up his phone—his eyes blurring when he saw the screen filled with her smiling face.

He swiped to answer and lifted the phone to his ear—his heart racing.

"Hello?"