

**FRIENDS**

*"When are we going to get together?"*

I looked up suddenly, and saw the lean figure of Chris Hanson just inside my office doorway. For a brief second my heart beat out of rhythm; his stance and something about the way he had spoken jolted me back to a day exactly one year before, to another man asking the same simple question, although with an entirely different meaning. A man who had filled my nights and days with his presence, sometimes real, often imagined, always vibrant. Hal had begun our eight-month long relationship with the same query as my co-worker had just posed.

"Come in. I've got some time now," I roused myself from the past and spoke warmly.

Chris turned and grasped the doorknob, pulling the door closed behind him. For some reason I felt locked in a tomb, but hid the fear of closeness by leaning back and gesturing toward the leather armchair across from my desk. "Have a seat, Hanson. What can I do for you?"

The tall, dark-haired man smiled and folded himself comfortably into the chair, tossing a report on my desk with a casual flick of his wrist. "You're looking well today, Ellen Starr. Nice to see you with some color in your cheeks for a change," he ribbed me with a sparkle in his green eyes that nearly made me catch my breath. So like Hal's, I heard myself thinking in that traitorously accurate inner voice. I covered my momentary discomfort with a chuckle, soft and controlled.

Chris narrowed his eyes and regarded me solemnly --too solemnly. He seemed about to speak when I touched the folder in front of me and asked, "You want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Yes. It's our final report on Medfield, all ready for you to send upriver. You might want to read over it one more time, but it's all there as we discussed it. I was hoping you'd have time to go over it with me before you, um, leave."

I nodded, satisfied. "I trust you. Frankly, I don't want to look at the thing ever again. I could probably quote parts of this project in my sleep." I looked up at him, smiling.

Chris laughed, a merry sound of deep baritone warmth rumbling straight from his chest. He sat there, eyes alight, but a tenseness had appeared about his lips. It was difficult to reconcile the merriment of his eyes with the stony structure of his jawline, which was locked together with tight

musculature that belied his elf-like green eyes. It was as if those eyes peered out at me from the depths of a dark forest, nobly sparkling and partly obscured in the patterns made by the leaves, lit by the silvery reflection of the moon striking the branches, shadowed in the hidden depths of a summer night. I suddenly had the queerest impulse to ask him what he was hiding from me.

Chris had now crossed his arms --in my body language dictionary that meant he's defensive. Over-controlled. Why does he feel threatened --or angered? Was he upset that I was leaving the firm, and had taken a position with a different company? That made no sense whatsoever. My leaving had earned him a promotion and hefty salary hike and a new assistant, as the boss had taken the opportunity to re-arrange the company management web. I, too, was going back to a field I'd left to take this position, one with less stress, better outlets for my creativity, and yet, was located only across the courtyard, in the same office complex. I wouldn't even have to do without seeing my old friends. So it would be a good thing for all of us.

Still, I got the distinct signal that something was not quite right with Chris this morning. Silently I chided myself that this was totally ludicrous. Chris and I were friends. He just sits that way, I reasoned --arms akimbo was perhaps the way he relaxed, supported his upper body, maybe more stiffly than many, but who was I to judge? I was reading too much into it. I concentrated on his face; it was like staring into a fire. Patterns of expression played across his handsome features easily, yet he radiated a calm warmth and assurance. His was a face you could rely on, the countenance of a friend. Like the fire, as long as you kept a respectful distance, it would comfort and delight you.

*Hal's face had been like that.* His eyes were blue, but his lips were as full and firmly cut, his skin as tanned and healthy-looking. When I had looked into those intense orbs I saw all my dreams looking back at me, the answers to all my questions there waiting to be discovered. I was so sure he would be good for me, he was so patient, so kind, so gentle. When he held me close in his arms I felt my knees actually grow weak, my strong, aerobicized body felt like warm rubber between his palms. All my clever assertions and hard-driving ambitions crumbled to dust under his loving caresses, the way he spoke words like honey in my ear, and I still quivered at the memory of his lips in the hollow of my neck.

Even as my cheeks burned at the knowledge of his betrayal, I still clung to my idea of him as a wonderful man with the potential to go far, who was simply misunderstood, and who failed to believe in himself. And so could not believe in, or trust, me.

I rationalized it all out, made myself analyze every aspect of that relationship because of the toll it took on my own sense of well-being. I was amazed that I had bent over backwards to please a man who turned out to be such a completely selfish person. I had somehow expected him to respond to my sacrifices with grateful amazement and adoration, and when he didn't, had made excuses for him, true or not, to the tune of "he's afraid of commitment, he's afraid of losing himself." Poor guy, how was it that I had missed the fact that he was already lost?

Whether or not Hal ever found himself was not to be my concern. After I had given him so much of myself, and I had listened and empathized with his problems wholly and tried to help him to see a way out, he let me down. Still, it was hard. I knew him, I knew him so completely it was

like looking into a mirror of myself. All my insecurities, all my mistakes, all my fears were the same ones he had had. Some he had still, and I because I thought I had grown past them I could surely help him do the same. When I let go of him it tore a huge chunk out of my very soul, I felt like I had killed a part of myself by not hanging on for him. But I knew that if we were to ever have the relationship I felt we needed, a true give-and-take sort of affair, he would have to come to me. He would have to give me what I had given him. I could not hold out any longer and still keep my self-respect, and now it amazes me that I went even that far. I must have been desperate indeed. Looking back, it seems almost silly --because in actuality I was running from love as fast as he.

Simply put, he did not come. First I raged, then I cried, and then finally I felt so sorry for him, I pitied him because of what he would miss in life. I knew that all the beautiful, strong, trusting women he would try to possess would not fill the void in his heart that he so desperately needed to fill, only he could do that. I had told him so once, and he looked at me solemnly with those dark lashes framing his eyes and asked, "Do you think I'm a womanizer?"

I should have realized then that he was trying to tell me something. But no, instead I assured him that I did not, I was merely trying to impress upon him that quantity would never make up for quality. But in the end, he rejected that pat answer. It was too easy to continue as he was, and too hard to believe in the happiness that I offered.

And I thought my eyes were open. Perhaps it was he who was being realistic, for once.

My friends Pam and Gina talked themselves blue in the face trying to make me see the futility of my situation.

"Think, Ellen," Pam raged at me. "Do you really want a man who would cheat on his wife?"

I was momentarily taken aback by her cold analysis of the bare facts. The words came tumbling out as I rushed to his defense. "But you don't understand, he isn't a jerk. Really. He just needs time to see that I won't pen him in the way she does. I don't need him to cater to my needs, I don't cling to him at all. I want him to be happy, that is my main concern. And I have all the time in the world."

"OK," reasoned Gina. "But you can't make the world perfect for Hal. Why are you denying your own needs to make room for his? What happens when you need a shoulder to cry on, someone to make you feel special? Do you think for a minute that he would do the same thing for you, were the situation reversed?"

I sighed. "He does listen to me, he makes me feel wonderful and he cherishes me --of course he would--" I stopped. I knew that he would not, no one would make the sacrifices I was making for this man, and so no one would understand why I was doing it.

"You really love him, don't you?" Gina said slowly, her disbelief and begrudging admiration for my loyalty showing in her eyes. I nodded my head. I really thought I did.

"I would do anything in the world for him," I told them.

Pamela hung her head. "I feel for you," she murmured, and looked away from me.

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Hal was a few months away from getting his law degree. He and his wife, Cinda, lived a few doors away from mine in the same apartment complex. From the moment he walked through my door to borrow some laundry detergent the day after they moved in I knew he would be trouble. The physical attraction between us was overwhelming. I had never even considered getting involved with a married man, never condoned it when I heard anyone else was. I considered it taboo --until I met Hal. From then on I lived a double life, keeping up the facade of goal-oriented career woman for the rest of the world, but when alone with Hal, feeling like another person. All the soft romantic scenes I had theretofore scorned in soap operas and paperback novels suddenly were being played out in my living room. From the moment I realized how deeply he saw through my tough woman-of-the-world exterior to the vulnerable core of me I hid nothing from him. I felt his love for me seeping into my pores, giving me renewed strength as he told me how he admired my accomplishments, sang praises to the softness of my hair and the brilliance of my eyes, and finally, making love to me with both raw energy and tender passion. I wept for the jewel I had found. I begged him to send Cinda away, so we could gather what we had together and make each other happy always. I loved him so completely, I couldn't bear to think of anyone else touching him, wanting him, needing him. No one could give him the things that I could.

A pity he couldn't believe in me. Moreover, I couldn't see what was staring me in the face.

I don't even want to describe the depression into which I sank as I slowly watched him drift away from me. Thread by silken thread he unraveled the invisible ties that connected us, all the while deluding both himself and me that he would be back. He couldn't leave Cinda yet, he said. She was his home base, he could count on her, she was everything a man could want in a wife. She was the smiling face he came home to, the maid in the kitchen, who cooked his breakfast and served it to him naked every morning before he left for work.

I couldn't envision that, the actual picture sounded revoltingly funny to me. Cinda was a plump, very plain, selfish, unfeeling woman as far as I could see, constantly complaining about his neglect and accusing me in public of trying to steal her husband, when as far as she knew, we were only casual acquaintances. She had no solid basis for that --I had never come on to him, only returned his smiles and joked around with him the way any friend would.

"You're a little --too feminine," she replied to my request for proof, her cat-like eyes narrowing in distaste. "You're tiny, and petite, you wear dresses, and makeup, and your hair is always perfect. You're everything he looks for in women."

I was shaking, staring around the circle of friends who had gathered to play cards that afternoon. They stared back, much as the Romans must have who watched bloody conflicts between man and beast in open arenas so long ago, offering no help, no support, only watching to see what would happen, who would win, and who would lose. And suddenly I felt angry; straightening, I shot back, "Well, he isn't my type at all. I consider him a friend, but that's as far as it goes. I dress and look the way I do because I want to look good for me."

That last sentence, of course, was the only truth I spoke to Cinda. I was furious at her for being so blind. Why the hell don't you do something about the way you look, I thought fiercely. If you feel threatened by me you should take a good look at yourself.

Hal called me on the phone that evening. He demanded to know my version of everything that had been said between his wife and me. I told him, and he seemed a little put out that I had said he wasn't my type. I wondered why it mattered. Had he wanted his wife to guess what was between us? Had he inwardly hoped I would break down and give away the secret?

Had he thought that I would be the reason for the breakup of their marriage, so that he could get out and be able to blame the whole thing on someone else --namely me? I may have been a fool, but I wasn't fool enough to think that he would appreciate me and continue to love me if I were that selfish. I wouldn't have been able to look at myself in the mirror if I had allowed Cinda to discover what was going on right under her nose. No, I vowed to myself, if Hal and Cinda divorced it would not be because of my needs, it would be because Hal realized that he needed me, and not her. I didn't think what I would do if it never happened, I was so sure that he would appreciate what I gave him, and grow weary of her carping and careless appearance. Subconsciously it might have occurred to me that he might need the struggle, the guilt, the constant bitching, the feeling of martyrdom to assuage the guilt, more than his own happiness.

At Hal's insistence, I moved out. I found an apartment on the other side of town. As I put all my possessions in boxes and watched them being loaded onto the truck, I fought the tears stinging my eyelids with the conviction that I was doing the best thing for Hal. The pressure of hiding what he was doing from Cinda was getting under his skin, he couldn't look at me without wanting me, he couldn't speak to me without a tremor in his voice. I wondered at his weakness, but didn't try to judge. He was under a terrible strain at school, at work, at home, and I didn't want to add to that. He would appreciate my giving him his space, I was certain. He could come and see me when he felt better, and he assured me that he would.

So I moved from my comfortable home and set up housekeeping in a smaller, more expensive place, burying myself in projects at work and travel on the weekends to keep my mind off of him. He will come, I assured myself. My ego wouldn't let me accept the fact that I wasn't the better choice. I had offered him understanding, comfort, and I thought most importantly, the freedom to be himself, and to be free from constant guilt and strain. But I kept recalling a conversation I had with him when I was still trying to convince him to leave her.

"How can I look my parents in the eye if I leave the woman I vowed to stay with forever with no means of support? And I can't let her find out, if I do she will leave me and I will be all

alone . . . I won't be able to get my law degree if I have to do everything at home as well as work and study --please try to understand."

"I am not asking you to give that up," I replied soothingly. He was so distraught. "I can help you --I want to help you. Please let me."

His blue eyes were downcast, and I longed to bring back that cheery smile I had first been attracted to. "I love you," I said. He looked up, and I was shocked at the fear stamped plainly on his face.

He never lost that fear. He never came, though I waited so patiently and only called him twice to see if he was all right. After two months, I had to admit defeat.

I was folding laundry when it hit me, right between the eyes. It was the little-known family secret, told me by my aunt the night after Dad's funeral in a furtive attempt to explain a few odd circumstances that had occurred over the years. My father had left an unhappy marriage for the woman he loved, who became my mother. So history does attempt to repeat itself, or we are irrepressibly drawn to the same cycles of existence as those from which we sprung. I sat straight down on the hard, cold floor, where wintriness seeped thru the small cotton rug in front of the dryer and chilled my very bones, and resolved that here it would stop, right now, this minute. I counted my blessings. I had my job, which I love. I had a renewed sense of being true to myself, and knew that I would never get involved with a married man again; I will avoid them like the plague --and if, God forbid, I do fall in love and it is so important that we be together, I will wait for him to get a divorce before I let go of anything, before I give up one ounce of self-respect, one square inch of what I have put together for myself in this life. While it might have been good for me to humble myself to a certain extent, I learned the limits of what one should reasonably expect, and that is, don't expect miracles.

And I had my friends. Friends are important to me. I missed Hal's friendship, but as time goes on, I realize that he was destined to ruin it, simply because it was a good thing to have, it made him feel good. Some people cannot let well enough alone, they have to beat it to death before it overpowers them and they find themselves depending on it too much.

I heard that he was chasing someone else later. I had already known that Hal had been unfaithful to Cinda before me, but that hurt, it underscored his betrayal of me. It made me feel sick and dirty. Knowing he chose to be a loser made my sacrifice even more bitter medicine to swallow, for I had compromised myself, given up my home, given him his "freedom" and let myself look like an idiot to my friends for nothing. It was a hard lesson, it made it harder to trust anyone for a long time after that. But in my analysis of both Hal's behavior and my motivation for trying to make such a dead-end relationship work, I realized several things about myself that I wouldn't have otherwise. I can't sincerely regret it. I grew up quite a bit as a result.

Conversely, I thought of the time, some many months before, in fact, when I'd been in my old place, when Chris Hanson and I had spent an evening going over paperwork from the office, sharing pizza and Cokes while we bent our heads together over folders and memos scattered over my living room carpet. It grew late, we were tired, and our eyes became fuzzy. I set aside the last

of the reports and looked at him, smiling at his dark hair which stood on end in places from where he had raked his large hands through it distractedly. His chin was dark with the stubble of his beard, his green eyes wore smoky shadows of fatigue. "Let's get some sleep," I suggested, "I've had enough."

He nodded, and stood, stretching his long legs and cramped muscles. "Me too," he replied, yawning into his fist. "Excuse me! I guess I'd better wake up a bit before I try to drive home. Do you have any coffee?"

I cocked my head and looked up at him. It was Friday, so he didn't need to worry about going to work in the morning. "Why don't you just sleep on the couch? It folds out and is pretty comfortable. I have plenty of blankets, and that way I won't worry about you falling asleep and trying to uproot any trees on your way home."

He considered a moment. He started to shake his head in negation of the idea, then caught himself yawning again. "I guess I'd better take you up on that," he said sheepishly. "Do you mind? I am totally worn out --don't ever let me --work that long --again," he punctuated the sentence with another stifled yawn. I giggled, and went to fetch blankets and an extra pillow.

We pulled out the couch, and made up his bed. I turned out the light, leaving the small lamp on, and moved toward my own room, suddenly stingingly aware of a man's presence in my apartment. Through the walls I could hear him moving around in the other room as I removed my makeup and got into my nightgown, which was modest yet somewhat frilly, cut like one of those turn-of-the-century dressing gowns with elbow-length sleeves and a ribbon-tied yoke. I thought of something else Chris might need, so I tip-toed back into the hallway. He was sitting on the edge of the bed in his underwear, his discarded button-down shirt and trousers hanging over my flowered armchair.

He looked up at my startled gasp, and grinned disarmingly. "I'm sorry," I stammered, "I just thought --if you need some towels in the morning --they're in the --never mind, I'll get them," I whirled around and flew to the linen closet, yanking out a couple of large blue ones. His laughter followed me, further fueling my embarrassment.

"Thanks," he said, as I hung them over the rack in the bathroom, and I looked up to find him peering around the doorway at me, mirth dancing in his eyes. "I didn't mean to alarm you," he added. "But I usually sleep in the buff."

I shivered, averting my eyes from his powerfully muscled frame and the dark hair curling its way across his broad chest and down his tapered waist. "Fine with me," I said flippantly, and started to brush past him on the way back to my room. Something in his eyes stopped me, and I looked up at him hesitantly. "Ellen," he said softly. "Come back and talk to me."

"I'm tired," I replied, a little too quickly. He shrugged, and bid me goodnight. As I lay down in my room, I heard the snap of the living room lamp and knew that he was laying in the darkness only a few yards away from me, his maleness separated from me by one thin wall. Get a grip on yourself, I chided, you're acting like you've never seen a man before. Nevertheless, I was

still awake twenty minutes later, and from the tossing and turning in the next room I knew Chris wasn't getting any sleep either. I rose silently, and made my way down the hall.

"Chris?"

He sat up, silhouetted by the light through the curtains. He watched me come nearer, and I sat on the edge of his bed. A car passed by, and the light fell across his face and mine, and as we read each other's thoughts we collided, reaching for one another simultaneously. We held each other for a long moment, and he stroked my hair. I felt him trembling, as was I.

"Go to bed, Ellen." His voice was a hoarse whisper. "I don't want to ruin our friendship, and neither do you." He pushed me away, and I nodded. We had to work together, to see each other every day, and an emotional involvement would only get in the way of our professional relationship. I smiled at him, and returned to my room, falling asleep almost instantly. We never spoke of the incident, and continued as if it had never happened. If I was disappointed, I consoled myself with the knowledge that Chris respected me enough and valued our friendship enough not to let anything disturb the balance. I was lucky to have someone like that for a friend. It was something Hal would never have done.

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And so I was staring into Chris's face when it came to me. His green eyes returned my gaze with an inner fire which came leaping to life, sparkling and burning with an intensity to rival Hal's. His warm laughter always rippled up and down my spine as Hal's had. He was strong and powerfully built, like Hal was. He was fun to be with and as self-assured as Hal had seemed to be. His face blended into oblivion, and I kept seeing Chris/Hal and Hal/Chris swimming before me until I blinked my eyes to clear the vision. Those eyes looking at me with such profound love and devotion were green, not blue. Deep, refreshing pine green like a mountain forest. At last I had the answer --it had only been a week after my aborted late-night affair with Chris that Hal came into my life, and I had displaced all the pent-up emotion I felt for my co-worker on that lonely and misguided man. I had entered into a "safe" relationship, one that I knew subconsciously would never work out. I had never wanted it to work, I had never truly wanted Hal for himself. It was not Chris who reminded me of Hal, and therefore was not the reason I felt so uncomfortable at times when I saw the resemblance between the two. It was Hal who reminded me of Chris. Without Hal, one thing was becoming increasingly clear: I now had no one to lavish that displaced emotion upon, and how long would I be able to hide from it?

I faced the truth, a rueful smile curling its way across my lips. "You were saying," I said slowly, leaning forward slightly.

He started, and his eyes focused upon my lips with some visible difficulty. "What was I saying?" he asked, a little defensive, completely forgetting that we had been speaking about the Medfield project, because that was not what was on either of our minds at the moment.

I held his gaze steadily, no longer afraid of his reaction. There was no mistaking the naked emotion in his eyes. He had pushed me away once, but the longer I looked at him the more certain I became of the real reason why. *Oh, Hanson, I thought, we will never lose it. It is the foundation of love.*

"When you came into my office," I responded quietly, and in a vibrant whisper, I repeated his words, *"When are we going to get together?"*

I rose and walked toward him, and he stood up quickly as I neared. I laughed a little, giddy with feeling, and amused at his awkwardness when there was really nothing to be afraid of, no way to fight it. Let it come, I thought. Let it happen.

I reached up and drew his face down to mine, and he fought it only for an instant more before giving in. His lips touched mine, and then his arms closed around me and lifted me from the floor as he kissed me and held onto me like a drowning man. Into the torrent of emotion which flooded my mind crept one sentence, a telepathic message straight from his soul to mine:

*The time is now, my friend . . . my love. The time is now.*