

He's After Me

By K. E. Ward

At eleven o'clock on a Friday morning, Molly Peterson was just closing up shop at Charlie's Drug Store. She was of average height, had auburn hair with bright green eyes and fair skin. She wore coral lipstick, (which was her favorite color), dangly earrings, bracelets, and a banana clip. Molly loved to accessorize. There was never a day when she wouldn't wear fashion jewelry and at least something to hold back her hair, and makeup to brighten up her face. Like her mother always told her, she wasn't beautiful enough to go without a little something to make herself look better. Thinking about this, Molly searched through her hefty keychain (which had at least fifteen different keys on it) and squinted through the half-masked moonlight until she found the right one. It was a cold night in November and a light mist of freezing rain was drifting slowly towards the pavement. She put down her bag and then hoisted the door shut, holding the knob in place as she turned the key and locked it. The wind blew against her face, putting more color to her cheeks. Once she had put the keys into her pocket, she lifted up her bag again and slung it over her shoulder. It was another one of those nights. She sighed to herself that she could not go out and have a little fun on a Friday night in Chicago.

No, it was going to be another boring evening with her cat, Snickers, her television and a frozen dinner. Chip hadn't been coming around too much since his ex-girlfriend Vaughna had come back into town. She had liked him well enough—he had taken her out plenty of times and they used to hang out in his apartment watching movies and sipping on wine coolers. But he kept talking about her weight, if she would ever go on a diet, and why couldn't she look like one of those models in a swimsuit magazine?

Not the kind of magazine she would always pick up at the drugstore. Since Chip left, she may as well have a college degree with all the reading that she had been doing. She read English textbooks on her time off—none of her friends realized that she had an exceptional reading ability and a fascination with English literature. She dreamed about someday going to college and getting one of those fancy degrees—then she could say that she had accomplished *something*. Then she would be *somebody*, not just a drugstore attendant and a twenty-six year-old with no life and barely any friends.

Molly wasn't expecting anything exceptional to happen tonight. She trudged along the dirty sidewalks mumbling to herself about how dull her life had become. A few bars were open and there was a little bit of traffic both by car and by foot.

Molly just wanted to get home after a busy ten-hour shift and a grumpy boss.

"Good evening, Miss," she heard a low voice say. She could barely see his face, but she could recognize the pungent scent of sweet cigar smoke, which curled from his mouth as she uneasily looked into traffic, wondering if anyone could see her from the road.

"Good evening, sir," she said, and hugged her coat closer to her body, fully intending to walk away. It was strange that someone would say hello at night, especially in this city. But the man continued talking.

"You ought not to walk alone so late at night," he said, completing her thoughts. "Anyone could pick you up... you never know what could happen in this part of town." Molly tried to brush him off. She mumbled something to excuse herself, but the man only continued talking. "Just the other day a man was walking by here and a couple of muggers stabbed him in the stomach. All they wanted was his wallet. One needs to be very wise about things..."

Molly tried to escape him again, but the man seemed not to notice. "What is your name?" She smiled uneasily, turning her

head away. "Pretty little thing. You don't have to answer. Hurry home."

The man moved into the light and she could see the pock marks on his face. He was holding a couple of dice... she had no clue why. He puffed on the cigar some more, smiling as white smoke escaped from his mouth. Must have been a gambling man, trying to cheat the game. Molly hugged her purse close to her body and hurried away.

The street lights glowed dimly against the pavement as steam rose from the grates. Her two-inch heels clicked against the sidewalk as she rushed past empty store fronts and messy alley-ways. The man was strange. She was sure that that was not the only thing that was going to happen to her that night. Bad things always happen in three's. She hurried forwards, darting her head this way and that, jumping at the slightest noise.

It was so cold. Molly cursed that she had such a long way to walk home from work every night. It had never seemed so long before, but that night it seemed to be endless, a maze of streets and traffic lights and blind corners and shadows. She did not expect it to happen so soon. She turned the corner and looked up, shielding her eyes against the light. As soon as she saw them, she turned to run away, but the two tall men blocked her way. She did not have time to react; one of them made a move

for her and then the next thing she knew he had his arm locked around her throat, his free hand covering her mouth. She screamed against his hand, kicking and punching his arm. The man punched her back, kicking her legs and sending a blow directly to her right cheek and cheek bone.

And the other one joined in, dragging back into an open cellar intending to throw her in. They took her purse, keys, and then shoved her into the cellar.

Molly's eye hurt. She opened her eyes to darkness and realized that she could not lift her body. She was sore all over. Without keys, purse, or cell phone, she knew she would have to work up the strength to pull herself up and out of the cellar and then ask for help. It was still dark, and she guessed it was the early hours of the morning. With weak legs, she struggled to move her body, but it hurt too much.

She moaned and then managed a painful, gasping, "Help!" Her voice was not strong enough to scream or even yell. Her throat felt as though she had swallowed sandpaper... and then the pain hit her in full force.

"...Help!" she called again. And there was no answer. She was cold; the air felt like stabbing sheets of ice against her skin,

and her whole body quivered. Several moments passed by, and then she heard the brush of footsteps coming her way.

She could scarcely believe that someone had found her, and she let out a yelp of relief. "...Down here..." she said, and she wondered if her voice was audible. Then she heard the footsteps coming closer, so close that he could have been descending down the cellar stairs.

A man's concerned voice then said, "Miss? Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

Molly groaned. She wondered if she could find the strength to lift her voice again. "...No... I was mugged... these two men... beat me up... I need help..."

"My name is Damion," he said, lowering his hand to touch her arm. "You're okay. I'm calling an ambulance now."

When Damion was finished calling an ambulance on his cell phone, he flipped it closed and knelt beside her again. He smelled clean, like fresh, woody soap, and his breath against her face was soft. He took his arm and held it beneath her head, cradling her as though she were an infant. "Thank you," she managed.

"Well, I'm not leaving you until help comes," he said. She took comfort in that. Her eyelids feeling heavy, she drifted off to sleep.

When she woke up she was in a hospital room with an iv in her arm and an oxygen tube running from her nose. She was in less pain and she felt like she was floating a little bit; she assumed that the nurses had pumped her up with some strong pain medicines. When the nurse returned to her room, Molly asked, "Where is that nice man who took me here?" She could barely remember anything else from that night, after she had been beaten and mugged, except for the fact that a gentle helper had come to her aid.

The nurse shook her head. "I'm glad to see that you are awake. And no, the young gentleman came here, stayed for a couple of hours, and then said that he had to leave. He did leave a message, though: "Hope you feel better."

Molly was disappointed that he had left. She could not forget how soft and caring his embrace had been, nor could she

shake the sound of his quiet comforting as she lay broken and beaten in the street-way cellar.

The nurse asked her what her name was and if she had any insurance. She then asked her if she had any family members in the area or anyone she could call to come pick her up. Molly gave her name and telephone number and then told her, "They took my wallet. They took my purse and my cell phone... have you contacted the police?"

"The police are out in the hallway, and they have been waiting to question you. Shall I let them in?"

Molly nodded and the nurse discreetly exited. The drapes in her hospital room were open and the mid-day sky was blue with only a few wisps of white clouds rolling by. She was so serene that she wondered if the nurses had not included a sedative among her list of new medications.

And who was this Damion person? Their encounter only lasted but for a few minutes, but Molly couldn't get him out of her mind. Why would someone in Chicago, this city of all others, decide to become a Good Samaritan? Surely she had never met anyone like that before. And she admitted, without anyone coming around to her apartment anymore, she got very lonely. To have

someone give her special attention felt very nice.. and she wanted it some more.

When the police came in they asked for her contact information and anything else she remembered from that night. One of them was very tall, with sandy blond hair and blue eyes which were surrounded by very dark lashes. The other one was a portly man with balding brownish-gray hair and a fatherly smile that completely reassured her.

"Can you remember what they looked like?" the portly man asked her.

Molly searched through her memory. "All I remember was that they were both very tall and average weight... their faces were obscured by the shadows and I couldn't see much... but now that I think about it, one of them was wearing a large, silver ring. I think that they were in casual clothes."

"Were they carrying anything?"

"No." Molly shook her head. "They were very strong. I tried to fight back, but they were too powerful for me."

They asked her to replay everything that had happened, where it happened, and at what time. She was almost not going to say anything about the man with the cigar who had struck up a conversation with her right before it happened, but then it came

back into her memory. "There was this strange guy. I met him just before I turned the corner and saw the men."

"Oh, really?" the man with the sandy blond hair said. The portly man's eyes glinted in humor, as though this were some piece of information that was not of high interest to the case. "You haven't mentioned anything about this before. Please. Tell us everything."

A couple of hours later the nurses came back to give her more pain medication. The doctor had taken a look at her injuries, decided that nothing was life-threatening, and then told her that she could stay for the next several hours before they would let her go home, just to be sure. She lay back against the pillows and tried to close her eyes again. Soon it would be back to her regular life, back to her lonely existence, and back to her normal job at Charlie's Drug Store. Somehow she had to let her boss know that she wouldn't be back to work for a while. Sometimes the manager, Fred Barlow, asked her to come on the weekends, but mostly she just worked during the week.

When it was time to leave the hospital, she dressed in the clothes that they had given her, bundled up her old things, and went down to the pharmacy to pick up her new prescriptions. At the entrance to the hospital, she noticed Damion standing there with his hands in his pockets. "Glad to see that you're doing better," he said.

"You didn't have to come back," she said, as the nurse wheeled her out to the curb. It was hospital policy that each patient needed to be taken out by wheelchair. As she stood, Damion took hold of her hand to help her up.

"Yes, I did," he said. "It was the least I could do, considering what has happened to you."

An awkward silence passed between them. He kicked his sneaker against the pavement. "Listen," he said. "I could give you a ride home. I assume you don't have anyone to take you home."

"I was just going to call a cab," she said. But she was grateful that he had offered.

"No, I insist," he said. "It's upsetting that they let you out so soon. With insurance the way it is today, I'm sure it's common practice. Let me take you home. Do you have anyone you could call in order to be with you once you get home?"

Molly considered that a subtle way of asking her if she was married or had a boyfriend waiting for her to come home. "It's alright," she said. "The doctor checked me out and it's nothing serious. I'm sure it won't take me but a day or two to recover."

Damion narrowed his eyes. "Not with the awful-looking shiner you have on your eye. And, look," he said. "You can barely walk."

Molly reluctantly agreed for him to take her home. He grabbed hold of her arm while they walked out to the car. He had a shiny new red Mustang waiting in the parking lot. He helped her in, swung around to the driver's side, and started the engine.

"I know very little about you," he said, looking into the rear-view mirror. "I don't even know your name."

She gave a slight smile and looked over at him. "My name's Molly. I already know your name. Thank you for helping me last night. I don't know what I would have done if someone hadn't come by."

When he had the chance to turn his head back over to her, he smiled, too. "It wasn't very easy to notice someone lying over there in the cellar. I almost walked by you. Thank goodness I was able to hear you calling for help." He thrummed the

steering wheel. "Molly? What's your last name, Molly? You got a family?"

Molly struggled to find an answer. She waved her hand. "Oh, you know. People come and go in your life. If you have someone, you never know how long you're going to hold onto them. I suppose that's how it's been in my life... one person comes along and leaves, and the next person comes along and does the same. I've never been married and I've never had children. I've had roommates before but they haven't been the most supportive. What can I say? Everyone has left me. My only friend is my boss, and I work for him."

Damion asked her which direction he should be headed.

"Where do you work?"

She sighed. "I work at the drugstore, five days a week, sometimes seven. It's not the best living but it pays the bills."

"How long have you been working there?"

"Five years," she said, grimacing.

"You don't like it?" he asked, reading her expression.

She wondered if he disrespected her for her job. "I always wanted to go to school and get one of those fancy doctorates and

become a college professor..." she said, trailing off. "All there is to do at the drugstore is pricing, stocking, sitting behind the cash register and bumming around with my boss. It's an okay job, but... there has to be something more."

"I understand what you're saying," he said. "It's good that you have ambitions and that you're never satisfied staying in one place."

"Now, if only I could afford to go to college," she said. "I dream big, but I never have the chance to follow through."

"Don't think that way."

"You think I could? You think I could possibly drag myself out of a dead-end job? Even if I could save up and eventually afford tuition, I don't know if I have the drive and determination in order to make it there. I would certainly fall behind more quickly than you can count to ten. It's been a long time since I've graduated from high school."

"Don't sell yourself short," he said. "I know plenty of people who didn't go to college right away. They worked for a while, saved up, and eventually earned college degrees. There's nothing that says it's too late in the game."

"Let's not talk about this," she said, with a wave of her hand. They approached her apartment building and she directed

him there. "Thank you for everything. This is where I live. You've been so kind to help me last night and to drive me home today. I don't know how I'll ever thank you."

Damion reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He pulled out three twenty dollar bills and handed them to her. "This should be enough to replace what those four men took from your wallet." She held up her hand to refuse but he insisted. "Just take it," he said, and she would have refused again if she didn't really need the money. Then he lifted out a business card and held it out to her in one swift motion that had her heart fluttering in her chest. "Call my anytime," he said. "I know how lonely it can be in a city like this.. a person's got to have someone to reach out to."

She did not want to say no, considering what he had just given her. She took it from his fingers and exited the car, saying, "Thanks again for helping me, and for the cash. You've been wonderful." She closed the door and waved to him as he left. After a few moments she walked up the flight of stairs to her level.

The police had already been there and had given her a set of keys at the hospital. Once she was in her apartment she rested her head against the door and sighed. She had never in her life been treated with such kindness by any stranger. She

wondered whether or not to take him up on his offer to call him, but dismissed it as pure craziness. *He didn't really mean that,* she told herself. *I'll just leave him alone.*

When she called her boss to explain what had happened over the weekend, he told her she could take a couple days off to sort everything out. But Molly insisted on coming back to work on Monday morning, just as usual. It was not as though she had much of a life other than work. Going to Charlie's Drug Store was what kept her busy enough not to have to think about sleeping alone at night, not having anyone to call when she had a problem, and not having anyone to rely upon when times were rough. Sunday afternoon she decided to buy a new outfit—nothing too expensive given her tight budget. She was able to find an item or two at the drugstore, but today she shopped at a lesser-priced consignment shop.

Wearing a few bangles and some poppy-colored lipstick, she marched into the shop intending to find something to replace the clothes that had been ripped by her apparent mugging on Friday night. Her left eye hurt; she had been surprised at how powerfully that man had dealt her a blow. She looked into the store mirror and saw that her eye had turned a nasty color of black, blue, and green. She didn't want to think about this. She

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