

The Rest of Me

by

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“It's gonna take a little time.
Time is sure to mend your broken heart.
Don't you even worry, pretty darlin'.
I know you'll find love again

Love is all around you
Love is knockin' outside your door.
Waitin' for you is this love made just for two
Keep an open heart and you'll find love again, I know.”

“Love Song” by
Jeff Keith and Frank Hannon

Chapter 1

Los Angeles, 1990

The light in Renee's bedroom was turned on, so Luke knew she was home. He looked around before getting out of the car and stealthily ran to the back door leading to her bedroom and slid as much of the folded piece of paper as far as it could go in between the door and the door jamb. Once Luke got back to his father's old Buick, he set it in neutral and coasted halfway down the street before turning on the engine and headlights. Believing he hadn't been spotted, Luke was finally able to breathe as he turned onto Highland Avenue, in the direction of the 10 Freeway. He silently prayed that she wasn't angry at him for avoiding her these last few days and if she was, he hoped that his letter would generate a change of heart.

Luke had only been dating Renee for about six months, but there was no doubt in either of their minds that they were truly in love with each other. In the short twenty years they'd been on this earth, neither of them ever felt such a connection with another person. Luke never met a girl who made him laugh the way Renee did. She was always open to trying something new even if it meant getting her hands dirty or her hair messy, which he valued since he had a love of outdoor activities. He took her water skiing for the first time, and she laughed just as hard as he did when she fell forward and forgot to let go of the handle and the boat dragged her along the water. In turn, Renee opened up a whole new world for him as well. At one time he would have mercilessly ridiculed any of his friends if they admitted to enjoying sushi (I mean, come on, raw fish?), or reading a book from cover-to-cover. He had never heard of Jack Kerouac before meeting Renee and, while Steinbeck had been required reading in high school, somehow she managed to help him see it through completely different eyes and come to life in a way he never thought possible.

As he navigated his car onto the freeway, Jeanne refolded the piece of paper she'd found and stuck it down her pants before exiting the bathroom and walking back to Renee's bedroom where she was sitting on the bed, lackadaisically removing polish from her toenails. Renee hadn't left the house in two days, spending most of her time locked in her room, staring at the phone on her nightstand in anticipation of Luke's call.

"Let me do that." Jeanne ordered. As she hopped on the bed, she soaked a cotton ball with the nail polish remover and excitedly proclaimed, "We're going to have so much fun tonight, you'll see. Maybe you'll meet someone new."

"I don't want to meet anyone new." Renee mumbled.

"Then we'll go out just for the hell of going out. No guys involved. It'll be fun and you need to get out and forget that asshole..."

"He's not an asshole."

"Has he been blowing you off? Has he returned any of your calls?"

Renee shook her head while attempting to hold back tears.

“No, no don’t cry. I’m sorry.” Jeanne scooted next to her and wrapped her arms around Renee. “I’m only trying to help you forget about him. I hate seeing you like this.”

“Look, I don’t want to forget about him right now. Why can’t you let me...I don’t know...”

“Stay home and mope? That’s all you’ve been doing. Let’s go out for one drink. Come on, one drink only.”

“I’m not in the mood to get dressed. You know what? My parents are out for the night, so how about we see what’s in the wet bar and have ourselves a party here. I’ll see if there’s anything left over from dinner. That is if anyone made dinner.” Renee decided it might help her move on if she spent some time with her best friend and if she could do so without having to deal with random guys hitting on her or getting out of her pajamas, even better.

Jeanne agreed and jumped off the bed, excited at the prospect of a long-overdue “night out” with her girl even if they didn’t leave the house. Out of habit, Renee glanced at the phone again. She kept telling herself to let it go and that Luke will eventually call when she least expected it. The problem was that she couldn’t convince herself this was true. Renee had always heard of people crying themselves to sleep over someone, but never believed she’d find herself in that position. She never thought anyone could make her feel the way Luke made her feel. No one ever made her stomach flutter with one look. No one ever asked how her day was or walked hand-in-hand along the beach with her. That was where they first said ‘I love you’ to one another, walking along the beach in Santa Monica. She didn’t give a damn how much her parents disapproved of him. What did they know? Despite the fact that he was forbidden from coming to their house, she always managed to sneak him in through the back door that indirectly led to her room. There were times when she doubted whether or not her parents noticed if she was around, so what were the chances that they’d notice someone else’s kid?

Luke’s family were incredibly kind people, what did it matter that they didn’t live in a wealthy area with an elegant house? They were a happy family that loved having her around, and she could see that they adored Luke and he felt the same about them. Luke’s mother was one of the sweetest and warmest people she had ever met. Whenever Renee went to their home for a visit, his mother welcomed her with a huge bear hug and always made sure she was fed. She couldn’t remember the last time either of her parents hugged her. At times she wished she was a part of Luke’s family.

What happened? Did he all of a sudden stop loving her? Can that happen? Can you suddenly fall out of love with someone? What if she never saw him again? She felt the all too familiar tightening in her chest and decided that this would be as good a time as ever to get the mini-party started. She was done crying.

Chapter 2

New York, Present Day

The last of the boxes were finally unpacked. Renee looked around the small one-bedroom apartment and let out a satisfied sigh. She loved her new place. There was no denying that Renee would miss California, but this change was long overdue. The West Coast no longer held anything of value for her and within the past year, more than half her time was spent in the East Coast office of her company and as a result, she had become enamored with New York. However, as much fun as Manhattan was, Renee was in no way interested in living there full-time so after some extensive research she chose to settle in the neighborhood of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. It was only a twenty-minute express bus ride into Manhattan, had the feel of a small town, and was home to some of the best restaurants.

Last year Renee oversaw the building and design of BioTech's new flagship continuing education center in lower Manhattan. As her company offered her the position of Vice President of the Global Education Department and she was currently going through a divorce, she decided New York City might be the perfect place to start over. BioTech was the world's leading manufacturer of dental implants and for the past four years, Renee ran the Domestic Continuing Education Department in Los Angeles. The education center provided courses for dentists and surgeons to learn about new and developing areas in their field of expertise to maintain their licenses. The new East Coast training center was twice the size of the one in California and Renee would be running the entire show. Her new job started in a week and she couldn't wait.

While overseeing the building and design of the East Coast center, Renee became friendly with a few of her future coworkers, so she didn't feel completely alone. Even if she was, she didn't think she'd mind it too much. What Renee wanted more than anything right now was some alone time...indefinitely. While breaking down the empty boxes, her cell phone rang. It was Tiffany.

"So when do I get to see the new place?" Tiffany asked. Tiffany (or Tiff, as she preferred being called) was one of BioTech's top sales representatives, and she and Renee had become close within the past year. While Renee was the type of person who took a while warming up to new people, Tiffany had never met a stranger. Renee had no doubt that "Tiff's" magnetic personality was the number one attribute that helped make her one of the most successful sales rep's the company had ever known. And as outgoing and charismatic as Tiffany was, her husband Andre was equally as shy and reserved. Andre ran the IT department for a hedge fund in Midtown and was one of the nicest people Renee had ever met.

"Are you in the neighborhood?" Renee asked. "If so, come over."

"Nah. I'm uptown right now. A few of us are going to Fig & Olive for dinner you should join us. Meet a few people."

"I'm good. Maybe another time. I'm kind of worn out from unpacking."

"Are you almost done?"

"I am done."

“Damn, that was quick. You at least need a drink. Come out with us.”

“I’m too tired to make the trek out there.”

“You see, if you had moved to the city like I suggested it would be easier to come out with me so you can meet some new men. You’re not going to meet anyone worth your time in Brooklyn.”

“And as I’ve told you before, if I moved to Manhattan I would be paying three times the amount for my apartment plus it’s bad enough that I’ll have to deal with the massive crowds and noise during the work week, I have no desire to deal with any of that during my free time. As for men, I told you that I don’t feel like meeting anyone new right now. My divorce was finalized only yesterday; I want some time alone.”

“You were separated for over year, though. Don’t you miss having a man to do things with?”

“When I start to, you’ll be the first to know. Tonight I just want to enjoy my new place, order a pizza, finish off a bottle of wine and watch RuPaul’s Drag Race.”

“If you change your mind you know I’m here for you.”

“I know, and I love you for that.”

Renee was grateful to have someone looking out for her during this enormous life change, but she did wish that Tiffany didn’t put so much stock into having her meet someone. The truth was that Renee knew she had been making poor choices when it came to men for many years and she finally decided to do something about it. Divorcing Kevin was one of the most painful decisions Renee ever had to make and she never wanted to experience that again. Having waited until she was almost forty to get married, one would think she would have possessed the maturity level to pick up on the red flags that had been popping up everywhere she turned, yet that wasn’t the case.

Renee met Kevin six years prior through some mutual friends who lived next door to him. The two hit it off at a house party their friends held, and within six months they moved in together. Kevin was a good-looking guy with blond hair and soft brown eyes who, like Renee, never married. While a lot of people judge a person who is pushing forty and still single, Renee wasn’t one to do this as she was in the same boat. Both simply hadn’t met the right person yet; that is until they met each other. Kevin managed a chain of supermarkets throughout Los Angeles and owned his own home, so he was a very stable guy. After a year of living together, they tied the knot in front of a handful of close friends and family and honeymooned in Aruba for two weeks. Before long, it was evident to Renee they had made a mistake and barely three years later, separated. Kevin’s multiple attempts at winning her back failed miserably and only served to make things worse between them. He wasn’t a bad guy, but it was very obvious to most people – including Renee – that they were incompatible in many ways. Not only did they discover how little they had in common, but less than a year after marrying, their sex life proved to be nonexistent. Sex soon became a routine task that no longer interested either of them. At times Renee wondered if she married him solely to be married. It never ceased to amaze her how much it bothered people to see a woman in her late thirties who was still single. Why did they care? How did one’s marital status affect another person’s life? People mistakenly think it’s a compliment when they ask questions such as “you’re so beautiful, how come you’re not married yet?” With most, Renee politely responded that she simply hadn’t met the right man, but honestly, she wanted to either tell them to mind their damned business or

ask them if they were from the fifties. How was it that in this day and age single women were still looked upon that way?

For the last couple of weeks, Renee researched therapists in the area, though she had yet to schedule an appointment with any of them. In the meantime, she thought it best for her well-being to steer clear of the dating scene. Renee couldn't deny that she missed having a man around, but she was also self-aware enough to realize that it was time to take a break and tend to whatever was broken within her. Until then, she knew it would be nearly impossible to enjoy a healthy relationship.

Walking into her bedroom while taking her long blonde hair out of its ponytail, she realized that not all the boxes were unpacked. After announcing her move to New York, Renee's mother, whom she rarely spoke to anymore, sent her a box of personal items that she left behind after moving out of the family home many years prior. Renee had no clue as to why her mother waited this long to send it to her. She very rarely saw her family and preferred it that way. Grabbing an Xacto knife, Renee tore it open with the feeling that she'll simply end up tossing whatever the box contained. Inside were some old books, t-shirts, a denim skirt that she wore once while in her teens, and an array of other items that could only be categorized as trash. The only possible explanation as to why her mother would have sent her any of these articles was if she'd been doing some major spring cleaning while mixing Xanax with Chardonnay, which was not at all unusual. From what she could tell, there was absolutely nothing of value in that box until she emptied it out and discovered an old photo album at the bottom. With a smile, she tossed the other items to the side and excitedly pulled out the album she hadn't seen since living at home. At one time the cover was hot pink, but had since faded throughout the years. She flipped through it, glancing at the photos of familiar faces she had sworn eternal friendship with at one time, but hadn't seen nor spoken to in over two decades. She stopped at one page full of pictures of herself and her one-time best friend, Jeanne. Renee briefly wondered whatever became of Jeanne. Last they spoke was at Jeanne's wedding at least fifteen years ago. As is the case with a lot of friendships, the two began drifting apart toward the end of their college years. Over time, they would meet for dinner or drinks here and there to catch up on each other's lives, but once Jeanne met her now-husband (for the life of her, Renee could not remember his name), the two women began seeing less and less of each other until the day of Jeanne's wedding. The last words the two spoke to each other were how they promised to stay in touch and meet for drinks when Jeanne returned from her honeymoon.

Feeling nostalgic, Renee examined some pictures of the two of them at the Santa Monica Pier. They loved spending time at the pier. Renee remembered the night one of the pictures was taken as if it were only last week. Renee was laughing while holding a chocolate covered frozen banana and Jeanne was posing in such a way to look as if she was provocatively putting it in her mouth. Nothing ever embarrassed Jeanne, and that was one of the many aspects of her personality that Renee always loved. Moments like this made Renee feel she should give in and join the whole social media movement to look up old friends and see how their lives turned out. Renee simply wasn't able to muster up enough interest in that scene, not to mention she'd heard so many complaints about how people on Facebook always argue and carry on bitter debates about politics and religion and she had no patience for that. All her friends knew that she was only a text or phone call away if they wanted to communicate with her.

Renee froze when she saw the pictures on the next page. She hadn't thought about Luke in many years. Inspecting one of the photos more carefully, she noticed that it was from that same night on the Santa Monica Pier. Renee and Luke were on the famed Ferris Wheel, arms around each other. In another picture, they were kissing. The following pages held more memories. She was simultaneously surprised and happy that she hadn't torn those pictures up after he inexplicably disappeared from her life. She smiled as she noticed one picture where he was giving her a piggyback ride, and she held her arms wide

open as if attempting to fly. She peered closer at the animated image of herself. She was wearing the smile of a young girl who was truly in love. A young girl with the whole world ahead of her. She then studied Luke's face. He looked genuinely happy as well. For a brief second she wondered where he was now: if he was married, had children, if he was still living in California. What happened?

She closed the photo album and stuck it in her small bookcase knowing she would most likely never open it again.

Arizona, Present Day

Luke had never been more proud of his beautiful daughter, Katie. Today was her high school graduation, and in a few short months she would be heading to New York to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). Little did Katie know that she wasn't moving there by herself. He was sure Katie would have some strong opinions about that – as she did with everything – and he would hear them soon enough. While Katie's mom planned on taking her out for a nice dinner that night, Luke took Katie to lunch at her favorite Mexican restaurant after the ceremony. As the two chatted away about her big plans, Luke sprung the news.

“Dad, are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“Where are you going to live?” There was panic in Katie's eyes and, to tease her, Luke wanted so much to say that he planned on spending a few nights with her in the dorms but was afraid she might make a scene.

“Don't worry, sweetie. I already have a place lined up in Brooklyn.”

“This is crazy! What about your practice?”

“Dr. Greenberg bought out my half of it. I have an incredible opportunity out in New York that I can't pass up.”

“Does Mom know about this?”

“She does, but please don't get mad at her for not telling you. I wanted to tell you myself.”

“You're doing this to keep an eye on me, aren't you? Admit it.”

“I'm not going to lie. I'm a little worried about my only child moving three-thousand miles away. And New York City is an entirely different world. It's about as far from Scottsdale as you can get in every way. Now, I'm fully aware that at eighteen you're an adult, so I have no intentions of butting into your life or spying on you, ok? But don't you think it might be a good idea to have someone nearby that you

can count on in case you need anything? I know you're excited, but you can't tell me you're not a little hesitant about such a significant change. Am I right?"

Katie reluctantly nodded in agreement, then asked, "What's the big opportunity you were offered?"

"An oral surgeon I met at a dental conference years ago opened a very successful practice in the Upper East Side. It's called Park Avenue Dental. They provide all types of services. Their periodontist retired, and I was looking to make a change so the timing couldn't have been more perfect. Now I'll be making more money, living near you and, let's face it, being a part of such a successful practice in the Upper East Side can only do wonders for my career.

"Why were you looking to make a change?"

He thought for a moment before answering. "Well, aside from you moving out there, I've always liked New York. Great museums and restaurants. Can't beat the theater district. You know what I'm talking about, you've been there with me before."

"Is this oral surgeon a woman?" She asked with an impish grin.

"No, he is not. There's no woman involved. I just thought it would be a nice change all around and the bonus is that you'll be there as well.

They both ate in silence for a few minutes before Katie asked, "Are you ever planning to get remarried?"

"Where did that come from?" Luke asked after almost spitting out his margarita. Katie had never asked him about his dating life, or lack thereof.

"You and Mom have been divorced for almost ten years and she married Ken only a couple of years later. Sometimes I wonder if you ever want to get married again. Do you even date at all?"

"It's been a while, but I have."

"How come I've never met anyone you dated?"

"None of them ever got serious. They were young ladies that I went out with only a few times here and there, and since I didn't see a future with them, I felt no need for an introduction. I didn't want you to meet and become attached to someone you may never see again. It wouldn't have been fair to you."

"After so many years you never met one person you wanted to settle down with?"

Hesitantly, he responded, "Nope."

"You hesitated for a second."

“I wanted to think it through before answering, that’s all.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

Oh boy, he thought to himself. “Shoot.”

“Did you love Mom?”

“Of course I did. Why would you ask such a question?”

“One time I overheard her talking to one of her friends and she said that you never really loved her.”

“That’s not at all true. I did love your mom; we simply weren’t right for each other. Just because you love a person doesn’t necessarily mean you’re destined to be together forever. That’s why if you meet someone you should take your time getting to know them and see if you’re both compatible. Sadly, Mom and I found out we weren’t after we married and as much as we tried to make things work, it didn’t.” After a brief pause, he added, “You know you had nothing to do with the divorce, right?”

“Oh, I know. I just...I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I want you to be happy, Dad.”

“I am happy. You make me happy.”

“I know that, but I’m your daughter. It’s not the same thing. Don’t you ever get lonely?”

“I have a lot of friends and family that love me, so no. I don’t.”

This was a lie, but he wasn’t going to burden his daughter with his personal issues, especially on her graduation day. Yes, he did have some great friends and he’d always been close with his family, that part was correct. As for dating, Luke was starting to believe that he was incapable of a healthy relationship. Katie’s mom, Jessica, was the last woman he’d gotten serious with in many years and even then the only reason they married was that Jessica became pregnant with Katie. Even before the pregnancy, they weren’t completely happy, and Luke had tossed around the idea of breaking things off although he never had the chance. Once she broke the news, everything changed. The way he was raised, if your girlfriend gets pregnant, you step up and “do the right thing.” Ultimately, they both decided that Katie would be better off with two parents who lived apart but got along as friends than two parents who lived together and hated each other. The last thing Luke wanted was for Katie to have a skewed perception of how a healthy marriage looked.

More than once Katie attempted to set him up with her friends’ single moms, but there was no interest on his part. He cut ties with a few of his married friends as he grew tired of their constant matchmaking

schemes. He had to admit to himself that he was torn: part of him didn't want to spend the rest of his life as a bachelor, but at the same time he found dating tedious.

"Maybe you'll finally meet someone in New York," Katie said. "I read somewhere that there are a lot more single women out there than there are men, so your chances should be pretty good."

Luke stifled a laugh and said, "Not sure how to interpret that, but we'll see. I'm more concerned with you getting settled in."

"Stop worrying about me, Dad."

"That's never going to happen so get used to it."

Luke awoke covered in sweat early the next morning. Looking at his alarm clock, he discovered it was only 2:30 AM. After getting out of bed for a glass of water, he ended up turning on the television. Chances were, he was going to have a tough time getting back to sleep so he may as well crash on the sofa and flip through the channels. *Rain Man* was on AMC, and he suddenly remembered what he had been dreaming about before being jolted awake. He hadn't thought about her in years, but in his dream, she was right there in front of him, in flesh and blood. They watched *Rain Man* together in his bedroom while he had the family house to himself that night. Twenty minutes into the movie he and Renee made love to each other for the first time. Anytime she came to mind, he quickly pushed the thought of her out. Why did he have to dream about her tonight? Now Luke knew for sure that he'd have difficulty getting back to sleep and if he took a Tylenol PM at this hour, he'd be groggy all through the next day.

Luke met Jessica while out with some friends in Venice Beach. In some ways, she reminded him of Renee. For a short while he thought she might be the one, but when the initial passion wore off, he discovered they didn't have as much in common as he initially hoped. Throughout their years together, Luke would always wonder if the pregnancy was truly an "accident" although he would never use that word to describe his sweet Katie. In time, Jessica would prove herself to be a controlling and somewhat manipulative person. It wouldn't surprise Luke in the least if he were to learn that she had planned the pregnancy without his knowledge. As unhappy as Luke had been in his marriage, he never once strayed because, in his opinion, responsible men didn't do such a thing and he would never view his marriage as a waste of his time because if it weren't for Jessica, he would never have his beautiful daughter.

Katie was right. Maybe this move across the country will give him some new opportunities to meet someone with whom he might click.