

# All Because of Me

I nearly jumped off the couch when the door of our apartment snapped open like a sprung trap, leaving a doorknob-shaped dent in the wall. I flinched again a moment later as it slammed loudly shut after Danny had burst into the room. He immediately began pacing and raving. “He’s dead! They’re all dead!”

“Danny?” I squeaked in alarm.

“I left to find you. And once we were together, I was so enamored all I could think of was getting you to safety and assumed they’d be OK. The sideshow wasn’t that bad when I left. But they must have stayed behind to save the tents and wagons and then... they... oh shit.”

“Danny, slow down. What are you talking about?” I pleaded with him. My own heart was beginning to race, surely synching up with the tumult pulsing in Danny’s chest. “Who’s dead?”

“All of them! Ed, Frida, Charlie, Tip Top, Muscles; all of them! They’re all dead and it’s my fault!” Danny was nearly screaming, one of his hands scrubbing at his forehead, the other absently fumbling for his pocket, retreating from it, then seeking it again. “I should be dead, too. I should have died with them. Or gotten them out of there. Or at least tried to help them. Oh God!” He collapsed onto the floor, both hands now pulling at his hair. “I killed them! God help me, I killed them!”

“Danny! Stop saying that! You didn’t kill anyone. They could have gotten out of there just like you did. They chose to stay behind. Besides, we don’t know exactly what happened. Who told you they’re dead?” I asked, trying my best to pump the brakes on the situation. Seeing Danny like that frightened me, but I was at a loss for how to calm him down.

“I heard it from the cops,” Danny said, his voice winding down a bit. “Police and paramedics were still all over the place cleaning up the mess and checking for other survivors. I explained I was from the sideshow and they told me there were no survivors found in that part of the fair. But they gave me the names of the bodies they had identified, and it accounted for all of them. All of them but me.” His sobbing welled back up again at this.

It was a while before he said anything else. He wiped at his face with his shirtsleeve constantly. He still wasn't used to being clean shaven, and the tears must have felt strange and ticklish rolling down his bare skin. Words having failed me, I sat down next to Danny on the floor and embraced him.

"Danny, honey," I cooed after some new words had finally ripened. "I don't want you to blame yourself for this. You can't. It's terrible. I know it is. But it isn't your fault. It's those asshole kids that knocked over the lemonade cart. And the fricken lemonade stand guy, too, for that matter. Why didn't he just stand the damn thing back up instead of running off screaming while it flooded the whole place? But Danny, you can't beat yourself up over this. It won't help anything, and it isn't right."

"I dunno," Danny mumbled as the sobs ebbed out again. "Maybe you're right. But it doesn't make me feel any less awful or guilty."

"I know. I can't imagine how hard this is for you," I said. "On the bright side, I guess now it doesn't matter that you shaved. Maybe in some horrible, twisted way, this had to happen. Maybe it was meant to happen."

"Don't say that. Not yet," Danny warned, though he sounded more tired than angry now.

"Alright, Danny. I'm sorry," I said, flushing with regret.

Danny looked up at me with his red eyes. "Can I just be alone for a while?"

"Sure. Of course," I said, clambering to my feet again, pins and needles glittering under the skin of my legs as I rose. I stepped out of the room, pulling the door gently closed behind me. He stayed in there for hours—mournful, heartbreaking howls occasionally punctuated the soft whimpers that burbled out from under the door.

Eventually Danny emerged, pink and puffy, looking at me dolefully, yet with a renewed air of confidence. He strode across the room and hugged me—a strong-yet-desperate hug, a mixture of grief, confusion, and affection. "You're right," he said softly, his mouth brushing my ear as we held each other. "Maybe it had to be this way. After all, I have you. I made my choice. I saved you, and now we're together."

"That's right," I soothed. "However much I wish it could have happened differently, I'm still happy we're together now."

"Me, too," he said firmly. "And now I know that if I'd had to make the choice, I'd have killed them all myself, with my own bare hands and teeth, if that's what it took to have you."

"OK," I said without letting go. "Let's maybe not go there."

“Too soon?” Danny asked.

“Too soon. Too far. Too much. Let’s just be OK with you not feeling responsible for their deaths for now, alright?” I suggested.

“Alright,” Danny agreed grimly, his embrace tightening slightly.

Soft footsteps, barely audible from the outer hall, passed by, and Danny nuzzled deeper into my neck. A quiet but threatening growl rumbled deep in this throat, instinctively warding off the trespasser.

Oh boy, do I love him.



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