

Rocky Road at Midnight

(From Luke's Point of View)

If she'd not had such a hard time in life, I would have said no. I would have told her I was busy, that I couldn't come. But, Susan has had a hard time. And even though our connection is Kelsey, even without Kelsey, Susan my friend. So, I took her call and agreed to meet her at the little grocery store around the corner from their apartment.

I wasn't that far away from them when she called. I'd just been stomping around the block, glaring at passersby, trying to let off a little steam before driving home. I arrive in front of the store, sit on an aluminum bench near the entry/exit door, and wait.

After five minutes, Susan wheels out of the market with an insulated grocery bag in her lap. She must have already been in the store when she called me. She sees me and looks like she wants to wrap me into one of her mother-hen hugs. Clearly Kelsey explained she'd said no to my proposal. And now Susan feels sorry for me. I try to ignore my hurt pride. Susan knows more about unwanted pity than anyone, so she certainly won't dish any out. Still, it stings the way she looks at me. It is another reminder that Kelsey doesn't want me, when I want her more than anything.

Susan wheels over to the bench, stopping less than a foot from me. "She really loves you."

Gee, she doesn't waste anytime with small talk, does she? But what she's saying isn't true. I shake my head. "Funny way of showing she loves me."

Susan nods. "I know. That's why I came to talk to you. I don't want this to create an irreparable rift between you two."

That is Susan — fixer of things broken, the creator of things new. She will make a wonderful architect one day. Only, she can't architect Kelsey's and my relationship. "You can't fix this, Susan. She doesn't love me the way I love her."

Now, she shakes her head and sighs. "Uggh," she says, exasperated, shaking a hand in the air. "If you could literally knock sense into people, I'd go get a stick and beat the both of you," she says.

I laugh, imagining her in a rage, fiery red hair waving in the wind as she whacks me and Kelsey.

"It's not funny," she says.

"Yes, you trying to beat me with a stick — very funny," I say. "The fact that she doesn't want me — not funny."

"You're not listening," she retorts, still annoyed.

"I am listening, Susan," I tell her, standing up. "I'm listening to the person who matters: Kelsey. And she's not saying what you're saying." I turn and walk away. I quicken my pace when I hear her wheeling behind me. I know this is wrong, running away from a woman in a wheelchair. But my hope is that she'll stop following. I don't want to talk about this with her. Not now, not when it's so raw.

"Wait," she calls as I move further down the empty sidewalk. "She told me that if she hadn't been marked, and you had asked her, she would have said yes."

I stop. I can't have heard right. I turn around, evaluate her face. She seems serious. "What did you say?"

"She would say yes if she wasn't marked."

She is completely serious. Her green eyes look at me unflinchingly, daring me to find untruth. There is none. Part of me is glad, but the other part of me is angry that she would let this come between us.

Susan takes a long breath, then speaks. “I know it doesn’t make any sense to you. But, she’s being honest about this, Luke. It’s not you or anything about you or not loving you. Being marked is freaking her out.”

I can’t say anything. I just stand there staring at her. Staring at what Kelsey sees every day: someone who is in a wheelchair because she did what society asked. And she didn’t get anything back in return. No one has helped Susan. There is no medicine to save her, even though Susan offered up her own well-being for a stranger. I turn away from her. I don’t want to give her the look she hates. But, I am beginning to pity Susan.

I can hear the wheelchair gears turn as Susan wheels herself closer. A hand gently touches my lower back. I turn to Susan.

“Look,” she says. “I want you to be patient with Kelsey.”

I nod. Yeah, be patient. It’s hard to be marked. I kneel, so Susan won’t have to look up at me. “Listen, I love Kelsey, and what’s going on between us is…” I pause, looking for the right word, one I can’t find.

“Stupid,” she suggests, with a slight smirk.

I suppress the urge to smile at her wisecrack. “I don’t know if I’d call it that. But it’s not permanent. I appreciate you coming to talk to me. OK?”

Her face is serious again. “OK,” she says. “Listen. This is my fault. I know Kelsey is scared that what happened to me can happen to her. And I feel awful about that. I have to be a daily reminder of how things can go wrong. So, I’m sorry about that.”

She may be right about Kelsey's feelings, but she shouldn't blame herself. "No, Susan. If anything, you're a daily reminder that Kelsey has a really great friend. Nothing else."

She scoffs. "I don't buy that, but it's nice of you to say. Anyway. I just want you to know she loves you. She's just a little mixed up right now. I'm going to work on her. Just, don't let this answer she gave you push you away."

I can't help but wonder if Kelsey wants to push me away, if saying no is her way to do that. But, Susan is here telling me that's not what Kelsey is trying to do. I need more time to digest what Kelsey said, what Susan is saying. But, I can't let Susan spend the night worrying I'll abandon Kelsey. "I won't let it push me away. I'll be there for Kelsey," I tell her.

She nods, pats the bag in her lap. "I have Rocky Road," she says. "Have a bite with me before you go home." She holds out two spoons and gives me a pleading look.

I'm pretty sure my face betrays my dubiousness to this plan. "It's midnight," I tell her. "Isn't that kind of late for ice cream?"

"Rocky Road at Midnight is the best," she says, handing me a spoon. She looks so hopeful that I can't help agree to have at least a couple of spoonfuls with her.