

“No.”

Lauren stared at the white paper she'd dropped to the dirt of the narrow shoulder. It looked like nothing there, a harmless white rectangle shaking slightly in the breeze, just a few inches from the toes of her stain-spattered Keds. A piece of litter that might blow away and eventually disintegrate into nothing after a few good rainstorms.

It had to go away. It had to be nothing.

Hoping if she watched long enough the words would disappear and cease to exist, Lauren waited. The printing remained.

A little birdie told me you're back. Welcome home, Lauren. Lets' reconnect.

Not explicitly threatening. Not dangerous at all, really. Until the next paragraph wormed its way through eyes and nerve bundles to the brain cells beyond. We have something to discuss, and you really won't want to involve the authorities in this, I promise. Text me. We'll talk. A phone number was listed in bold digits, and after it, the letter was signed simply BEK.

Bobby Edward Kepnick.

“Shit,” she whispered, nudging the letter a little with her shoe. It didn't wriggle and spring to life. It couldn't hurt her.

But of course it could. There was no address on the envelope. No stamp. No postmark. This letter had been left in her mailbox by a person, stuffed in by some cruel hand. A hand that could deliver more than a letter, surely.

An accomplice? Or just a random person paid to deliver a note?

She tried to hold as still as she could, a prey animal making herself small, but a car zoomed past and scared the hell out of her. Lauren yelped, and the car drove on. But was it possible someone was watching her?

She turned in a circle, checking for spies. When she saw none, she snatched the letter from the dirt and jogged back up the hill toward home, her neck on fire with prickling awareness. Who had left this? Was it a cruel prank or something more sinister?

When Lauren reached the front yard, she sprinted up the porch stairs and locked the door behind her. She'd been lulled into a false sense of security by the peace of this place, leaving the door ajar whenever she went out to work in the yard or get the mail. She held her panting breath for a moment, straining her ears to listen.

Nothing crept or creaked except the ticking of the clock and the soft hum of a fan she'd set up in the dining room window. The

final coat of satin varnish was dry. It looked beautiful. And now it was all ruined.

When Lauren inhaled, her head filled with the sharp ache of the drying varnish, and that calmed her. This was her home. Kepnick was in prison. This was some kind of awful prank played by a resentful neighbor or a bored teenage kid.

There was no threat here. No crime. The cheap white paper wasn't scrawled with mad, slanted rantings or threats. It wasn't even filled with a single-spaced monologue of inkjet perversions.

Let's reconnect.

Anxiety prickled over her skin like spider's legs.

What did that mean? He had no right to say such a thing.

They'd never been connected. Never.

But that wasn't quite right, was it?

She bit her lip hard, hoping the pain would distract from the memory. The memory of the letter she'd written at fifteen.

Blood rushed to her face as the old shame glowed through her. She'd been a confused young girl, wrestling with the weirdness of her life. She hadn't thought much about Kepnick in the first years after he'd confessed, but at fifteen she'd seen a news special about another serial killer, and her interest in Bobby Kepnick had been sparked.

She'd gone to the library over and over again, looking up information on Kepnick and what he'd done. Lauren had seen a couple of scowling, scary images of him in the news during her father's exoneration, but her teenage research had turned up kinder pictures. At the time of his first trial for three of the murders, he'd been a thirty-three-year-old man with bright-green eyes and a charming smile. Not movie-star handsome but not ugly. Not at all.

As an elementary school student, she'd had a bad habit of developing secret, childish crushes on male teachers, and he'd looked like that kind of harmless man. Accessible and almost fatherly. Kepnick was a monster, but he'd also been the man who'd saved her father's life, in a way, and for that he'd been a warped kind of hero in Lauren's teenage mind.

She could feel only hot shame now because that was why she'd written to him at fifteen. To *thank* him. To string some faint connection between her bright future and her strange past.

Lauren blinked and realized she'd slid down the wall and was sitting on the newly finished floor of the entry, the paper now a crumpled mess in her hand.

Let's reconnect.

Lauren scrambled up from the floor, hands nearly sliding out from under her as she twisted herself up too quickly. She hurried over to the table.

“Come on, come on,” she urged as her laptop slowly blinked from sleep.

She typed in Kepnick’s name and hit the NEWS tab. The screen filled with articles immediately, but a quick scan made it clear they were all years old.

When she followed a link to Wikipedia, she found even more reassurance waiting. There hadn’t been any parole or pardon. He was serving five life sentences in maximum security.

It could be a prankster. There were thousands around here who must remember her father’s trial and conviction and then ultimate release. Her grandmother had once implied that her neighbors had been thrilled to witness a true scandal. *A fall from grace is very exciting for the onlookers*, she’d muttered. Still, none of those people could know that Kepnick had any personal connection with Lauren.

Had Grandma known?

She’d been staying with her grandmother for five weeks that summer while her dad did some traveling up and down the state in hopes of raising his sales and earning a promotion. It had worked. They’d moved out of their apartment and into a gorgeous townhouse the next year.

But without cable Lauren had been left with too much time on her hands in those hot summer weeks, and her teenage imagination had scrambled frantically into strange corners to fill her days. Puzzling over Bobby Edward Kepnick had been one misbegotten hobby. She’d also developed a brief habit of using binoculars to spy on the men who worked horses at a boarding facility a half mile away.

Puberty was a strange beast.

At the end of her stay, she’d suffered a sudden fear that Kepnick might write back to her after she’d gone, and she’d felt sick that her grandmother would find out what she’d done.

And Lauren had so wanted her grandmother to love her and forgive her and never regret that they’d taken her in. Her stomach had been sour for two full weeks after her stay, but then her mind had turned to anxiety about the coming start of her first year of high school.

Lauren had always assumed there’d never been a return letter, but was that true? What if he’d written back and then written

again and again, a terrible stream of letters that had terrified her grandma with his continued presence?

No. Elizabeth Abrams spoke her mind unreservedly even if the truth hurt feelings. If he'd written, Lauren would have heard about it and been thoroughly scolded at the least.

"There was never a connection," she said aloud, and the sound of her own words gave her a little bravery.

She wasn't fifteen anymore. Kepnick had given her father back to her, yes, but he'd taken him first. He'd stolen her childhood, and he'd killed that woman and murdered at least eight others. He wasn't a monster hero; he was just a monster. And he was toying with her now. If he knew anyone on the outside, he could've sent that note with a twenty-dollar bill and requested a special delivery. It wasn't that scary.

Was it?

Excerpted from *The Last One Home* by Victoria Helen Stone with permission from the publisher, Lake Union. Copyright © 2021 by Victoria Helen Stone. All rights reserved.