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**BY JUDE MCLAUGHLIN**

**EPISODE #81**

I WANT TO BELIEVE

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## I WANT TO BELIEVE

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me," Suzanne said, determined to keep her poise no matter how much she wanted to grovel. She'd worn her favorite suit, the one that made her feel best, a navy blue number with slacks that actually looked good on her and the mandarin-collared jacket that fit perfectly over her chest. It made her feel a decade younger. She needed that right now.

Simon had a fresh clipper cut and had clearly neatened his Van Dyke, plus he was wearing a sportscoat and dress shirt over black jeans, so Suzanne guessed he was feeling as unhappy about this meeting as she was. He unfolded the napkin into his lap and said, "I... no problem."

Suzanne fiddled with the silverware. She'd asked him to meet her at a restaurant she found written down in last year's daily planner as one they wanted to try together. Now they were there, all she could think was, *What was I thinking? He's young enough to be my son!*

The server arrived to distribute water into their glasses and ask if they had any questions about the menu. This prompted them both to actually pick up their menus and study them.

The next awkward moment was when they both had put their menus back down and were waiting for the server to return for their order. Suzanne was just thinking, *This was a terrible mistake*, when Simon said, straightening his tinted glasses on his nose, "I'm sorry, I really don't know what to say right now."

Suzanne twisted the corner of her napkin. "Neither do I. I mean, I thought of a lot of things I could say." She took a deep breath and looked at him. "The most important one is: I'm sorry."

He smiled at her, sadly and sweetly, and her stomach fluttered at a happy rushing memory that bypassed whatever blocks were inside her head. He said, "Women keep apologizing to me these days. I don't know what that says about me."

She laughed a little. "More than just me? The aliens must've really had it in for you."

He shrugged. "I don't know what I ever did to them. I understand their encounter suits look like old upright Hoovers, though. Maybe it was because I always hated vacuuming."

When Suzanne smiled at that, he smiled back, and that smile warmed her in ways she didn't think she could be warm. That gave her a little courage to say, by way of explanation, "I have to tell you that my memory is really... spotty. It's like someone tried to scratch you out of my head."

"That sounds painful," Simon said.

"It is sometimes," she said. "Like right now."

He looked away and was about to say something when the damned server came back for their orders. Suzanne ordered something and immediately failed to remember what she'd ordered. At least dinner would be a surprise. Nothing else about how awkward and horrible this was becoming was a surprise.

When the server was gone, Simon said, looking down at his hands, "I have to tell *you* that... I'm still really angry. I understand that it wasn't your fault. I know it wasn't your fault. I don't know why I can forgive one of my closest friends for forgetting I was human, but I can't stop being angry at you for forgetting I existed at all."

Suzanne wanted to ask about the friend and what happened there, but she knew the rest of it was the important bit, no matter how hard it was to hear. "I'm sorry."

He grimaced. "It's my issue, really, honestly. I have to figure out how to work through it. Because I do... I think... still love you."

That made her want to cry, reached right back into her lizard brain and dragged tears stinging into her eyes. She looked away, blinking hard, trying to get the stinging to stop. "I think I still love you, too, but other parts of me feel like I hardly know you."

"I know," he said sadly, and he reached across the table for her hand.

They sat like that for a while, his warm hand enclosing hers.

"Ira said," she began when she thought she had mastered the tears that were trying to choke her, "that he'd never seen me happier than when I was with you."

Simon nearly beamed. "I'm glad he felt that way. I... I was really happy with you too. I was... I'd started to think about maybe asking you to marry me."

She couldn't stop the tears this time, and they just spilled over, fast and big, dripping off her chin onto the dark skin of his hand. With her free hand, she caught up her napkin and covered her face. He didn't let go of her hand, but gripped her even tighter.

He had to let go when their dinners arrived, and she had managed to pull herself together by then, though she suspected her nose was bright red. Dinner was a perfectly workmanlike General Tso's Chicken, though the vegetables were markedly tasty. There was a bottle of white wine with dinner that was probably Simon's idea. She wasn't sure she should be drinking—one of the teetotaller ideas that had been packed into her head alongside the horrible anti-sex stuff—but maybe it would make things easier.

Eventually, she said, as casually as she could, "Maybe we could... start this over? Try to get to know each other again? Because I... I expect I've changed from... how you remember me."

There was a long terrifying silence as he ate and drank thoughtfully. Finally, he said, "We can try, but I, um... I kind of have someone now. She was the person who was there for me when everyone else got mindfucked. She was the one who took care of me when the mindfucking was getting to me. I love her and I'm not going to dump her because things *might* work out again with you."

Suzanne's stomach crashed into the ground, destroying her appetite entirely. That was not something she'd expected him to say. *Of course he wasn't waiting around for an old lady like you!* she thought.

He reached over and took her hand again, despite the plates and other impediments. He took his glasses off with his other hand and looked at her with his compelling yellow eyes. "This doesn't mean I don't want to try. I'm not involved in an exclusive relationship with her. She's had another lover for the last several months. What I'm saying is that if you can accept that we're not monogamous, I'm willing to try again with you."

Suzanne stared at him, distracted by his gaze, by barely surfacing memories of looking into his eyes in more intimate moments than this, and didn't understand what he'd said for a few minutes. Then she realized what he'd just said.

"I... I don't know whether I can do that," she said. "I guess I don't understand how that would work."

He squeezed her hand and released her, both with his gaze and his grip, returning to finishing his dinner. "Once upon a time, a long time ago," he said, "there was a lady who wasn't sure she could deal with her boyfriend telling her he was trans." He looked up, and this time, he was the one with tears in his eyes. "But she went away and did research and came back and apologized and wanted to try. And it worked. I really want to try again with you, Suzanne. But I need you to want to try."

She stared at him for a long moment and said, "I want to try too, Simon."