

# Almost Over You



by Pauline Baird Jones

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***Almost Over You***

"I wish you'd reconsider signing this settlement."

Liz Templeton turned from her contemplation of the rain-washed city to face Henry. It was a pity her soon-to-be ex-husband's attorney was her friend. His face showed the strain of being caught in the cleft stick of incompatible loyalties, making him look even more austere than usual.

"You're supposed to be looking out for your client's interests, not mine," she pointed out.

Henry would have snorted, if he'd had the nose for it. "Steven's interests are well protected. But you're--"

"--not your client, Henry."

"If I were, you wouldn't be walking away with nothing from a five year marriage!"

"Nothing?" Her brows arched in feigned surprise. "I have my memories."

"You weren't always this cynical, Liz."

She gave a slight shrug. "I'm afraid it is the inevitable fallout of a messy divorce."

Her attempt at lightness lit pity in his eyes. She turned abruptly away from it. Pity was more painful than the amused derision of Steven's friends, who had predicted Holly would walk away with Steven in the end. Holly's history with Steven predated Liz's and the end had come quickly, proving the ancient saw that old habits are hard to break.

Her reflection in the plate glass lightened with real amusement. Holly would hate being an "old habit." And Liz would love to use it on her, but she was leaving the city tomorrow, going home where she belonged, where she never should have left.

"I suppose you've tried to talk to him?"

The question effectively erased amusement. "I made the mistake of trying. I didn't give up on my marriage easily, Henry. I'm an old fashioned girl. I believe--believed in the old virtues of commitment, fidelity."

"You still love him."

It wasn't a question, but she answered it, "The man I loved is gone. Maybe he didn't exist. He's always been half boy, half man," against her will his image formed in her mind, the handsome, willful face. Born with too much charm, he'd inherited too much money to learn restraint. "The boy is firmly in control. And that boy wants only what he thinks he doesn't have."

"It's the biggest mistake of his life. He'll realize it--"

"Let it go. Let me sign on the dotted line and end it. I need--to get on with my life."

"Steven owes you--"

"Nothing." Her tone was flat, brooking no argument. "I don't want or need his money."

"Liz, no one thinks you married him for his money--"

"Steven does."

"What?" Henry came as close to shouting as he could. "Nonsense. You must have misunderstood--"

"Steven has always been most articulate--in love or hate. I didn't misunderstand."

"I'm sorry, Liz, but you need to be practical. At the very least you are entitled to a small settlement, until you can get back on your feet. He can afford it."

"But I can't." She took a deep breath, holding on to her composure with an effort. Damn Henry for making this so hard. "I have to go, Henry."

He opened his mouth, but the desperation in her eyes finally penetrated his legal absorption. He silently spread out the legal documents for her signature, waiting until she'd finished task, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Actually there is one thing. I left some of my things at the penthouse. Could you arrange a time for me to pick them up when--"

"Of course. I think Steven is out this afternoon. I'll make the arrangements for you."

"Thank you." She hesitated a moment, wishing she could avoid the good-bye scene. But Henry was nothing, if not thorough. It took her another fifteen minutes before she was able to escape his kindly interference. Luckily she'd factored him into her time frame and still made her bus.

There were no seats, so she grabbed a strap and hung on, determinedly pushing back thoughts of the little car Steven had given her their first Christmas as husband and wife. She'd seen Holly driving it the other day. Most women wouldn't want the ex-wife's things, but Holly was the type to move in and possess.

There was plenty to possess.

Steven had always been generous, the boy side of him reveling in surprising her with gifts planned well in advance of the occasion. It had all come apart so suddenly, she wondered if he'd remembered to cancel their fifth anniversary gift.

Not that Holly would mind. She'd probably revel in taking Steven's last gift to Liz for her own. She'd made sure Liz knew about the party today, in honor of Steven's almost freedom to marry. Did Steven see the irony of celebrating something that would set him firmly on the path of broken relationships that his father had taken?

He'd been so determined not to follow in his father's footsteps that he'd run from Holly six years ago, straight to Liz, a woman totally outside his social circle, and the antithesis of his father's wives.

It seemed fate was not so easily cheated. With her middle class background, Liz had quickly found herself at odds with Steven's high profile lifestyle and bitchy friends, of whom Holly was the bitchiest. Her efforts to find a bridge between their worlds had turned into a free fall into the abyss instead.

Outside their building, the doorman's greeting was subdued, regretful as he held the door for her. The housekeeper was out, but Liz still had her key. Inside, she hung her wet things on the coat stand in the foyer and then hurried to her room.

It looked and felt forlorn, despite the luxury of its appointments and the obvious attentions of the housekeeper. In the middle of the satin bedspread was a large, dressmaker's box with an exclusive label.

So, he had forgotten to cancel.

She turned away, pulled a collapsible carry-all out of her bag and began to collect and stow the few things she planned to take with her. Some books, tapes, a photo album, the jewelry she'd brought to the marriage.

There was nothing to take from her life with Steven but the memories--and she would have preferred to leave them behind, too, despite her mocking words to Henry. She checked one last time, then zipped up the bag.

Only one more task remained. She set her key on the dressing table, then slid off her wedding and engagement rings and put them next to it. When she bent to pick up her bag she saw the white box again.

It was stupid to care, painful to look, but the card had her name on it. She had the right. And it was their anniversary. The divorce wouldn't go through in time to stop it.

With slow movements, she lifted the lid off, peeled back the glittering tissue paper and exposed the contents--a glittering waterfall of fabric so alive she gasped at the sight of it.

Her hands trembled as she touched the delicate folds, then lifted it clear of the box and shook out the creases. It was an evening dress, made from soft, painfully white fabric, covered with a myriad of tiny, glittering crystals. It was easily the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen.

And totally unsuited for Holly.

The best revenge would be to leave it here. She'd find it, try to wear it, and she'd look like dog meat in it. Liz smiled, her first real one in two months.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steven Templeton let himself into the penthouse, feeling the silence close around him. Since that last, terrible scene with Liz, he'd avoided being here alone. He wasn't sure why he was here now. He'd been at Holly's party when suddenly he just had to get away from her avid eyes and clinging hands. He'd made some excuse and left, walking out into gray rain exactly suited to his mood.

Now water ran unheeded down his face and clothes onto the deeply piled carpet as he paced slowly into the living room. It was time to face his ghosts, though if he were honest, there was only one.

*Liz.*

She wasn't here. Not really. So why did the silence resonate with reproach?

How he hated guilt. It made him wild. Made him want to do the exact opposite of what he should.

No matter how wrong.

Where had that come from? Ending his marriage was right, not wrong--wasn't it? Here where Liz had lived, it wasn't possible to lie to himself anymore. He'd been mad, but sanity was returning. And with the sanity, horror at what he'd done.

*Liz.*

He ran a hand through wet hair and looked wildly around, then, acting on instinct, he headed for the room they'd shared. Two strides into the room, he realized he wasn't alone.

*Liz.*

Her arms glittered with light in the dim room, a smile on her face that erased the past two months.

It would be all right. She'd turn and her face would light up when she saw him. Her arms would reach out--

"Steven!" She stared at his reflection, her face vulnerable for a moment before closing against him. "I thought you'd be out."

"What are you doing here?" Disappointment grated his voice to harsh.

"I came to get my things." She tossed the dress onto a chair, bent and picked up the bag. "I'd better go. I'll miss my bus."

"Your bus?"

"Yes. My bus."

She didn't look at him, just waited for him to move out of her way. Instead of moving, he looked at the room, the closets still filled with her clothes.

"When are you getting the rest of this stuff?"

"I'm not." She started towards him. "You can give it to Goodwill if Holly doesn't want it." She stepped around him.

"Liz--"

She stopped in the doorway. "I don't have time for another round with you, Steven. My plane leaves tonight and I have to finish packing."

"Your plane?" He wheeled to face her and felt the first wave of pain sweep through him. It was a small wave, but like the tide running in, there were bigger ones waiting for their turn to beat against his heart.

"That's right. I signed the papers today. You're almost free. You got what you wanted. Now you can be happy."

She turned, walking with controlled grace down the hall. He followed.

Happy? The second wave hit and he staggered with the force of it.

She paused at the coat stand to shrug on a dripping rain coat. He wanted to tell her she shouldn't, she'd get sick, but instead he asked, "Where are you going?"

She looked at him in surprise. "You sound almost interested."

"Damn it, Liz, just because--"

"Please," she cut him off sharply, her voice low but intense, "don't give me the 'just because I don't love you anymore, doesn't mean I don't care' line of bull. I'm not in the mood." She pulled the door open.

He slammed his hand into the wood, shutting it in her face. "I have a right--"

She flinched, but held her ground. "You have no rights in my life. You gave them up when you got engaged to Holly. Now let me out."

"We're still married, remember?"

She looked at him, smiled alarmingly. "I'm afraid I don't know my lines in this little comedy, Steven. What is it you want now? Absolution? Forgiveness? Sorry, I'm fresh out."

He clenched his hands, stepped close, forcing her to lift her chin to look at him. "I just want to know where you're going."

She glared at him for a long moment before saying stiffly, "I'm going home."

"Home?" He frowned. "You mean--New Orleans?"

"That's right. Can I go now?"

"But--what will you do?"

"Get on with my life. Rejected wives don't die of broken hearts anymore, they just leave."

"But--"

"It's not your business. Now if you'll excuse me--"

His hand dropped from the door. Not his business? How had he let this happen? It was all wrong. "Liz--"

"Did you know my dad gave me a quarter when we got married? So I could call him when you broke my heart. I could have saved him a quarter if I'd just remembered he's usually right. Now get out of my way."

Dazed, he stepped back and watched her walk out of his life without a backward glance.

Obeying a compulsion he didn't understand, he turned into the tide of pain, heading back to her room. A small lamp on her dressing table cast a pool of light over the glittering dress where it had slid to the floor. On the dressing table he saw her key, her rings.

He picked them up. They gleamed gold in his palm, reminding him he'd chosen the dross. In the mirror he saw not his face, but his father's and the abyss gaped opened at his feet.

"What have I done?" he whispered, "oh, God, Liz. I didn't mean to--"

The tidal wave swept him over the edge.

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Liz arrived at the airport, dazed, exhausted, and running late. The push to wrap up her life, combined with the scene with Steven, had taken its toll. She stepped from the cab into a dark tunnel that she took hoping it would eventually lead her to light. Every action was as hard as climbing Everest. To her relief, someone picked up her luggage. She followed, only widening her view when a door closed her in an office instead of depositing her at a check-in desk. She looked up.

"Steven?" She sank into a chair and stared at him, too dazed to feel anything but surprise.

"Hello, Liz." His voice was quiet, strangely calm. His face looked different, too. Older somehow.

"Why are you here?"

"I've come to ask you to come home."

She shook her head, rubbed her face. This couldn't be happening. "I'm--going home."

"Not to New Orleans. Home with me."

She stared at him for a long moment. Anger began a slow boil, giving her a desperately needed energy source to tap. "You're crazy--"



"I tore up the settlement papers this afternoon."

"You tore up--" She stood as her voice rose.

"I don't want the divorce. I love you. I want you to come home."

Words crowded against rage in her throat, almost strangling her, then pouring out in a torrent.

"You practically throw me out, accuse me of being a gold digger, tell me you're going to marry your former lover, wreck our home, our life together, then decide it was all--what--a mistake? You've changed your mind?" She glared at him, shaking with the need to smash his face, hurt him like he'd hurt her. "You're insane!"

When admiration sparked his eyes, her hands curled into fists.

He waited two heartbeats, then said, "That's about it."

She took a couple of panting breaths. "You bastard. Get out of my way."

"When I've had my say, you're free to go."

"You had your say two months ago. And I have a plane to catch."

"I know you hate me, Liz. I hate myself right now for what I've done." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his tailored slacks and gave her a wry smile. "I know it's unfair of me, but I'm counting on your generosity. You've always been a finer person than I am, and I'm hoping you'll listen."

"I'll miss my plane." She could feel herself soften and fought it. She wouldn't be charmed into heartache a second time.

"I booked you on a later one."

"You had no right."

"When has that ever stopped me?" He smiled. She had to look away from the lure of a love she didn't want to feel, but hadn't had time to root out of her heart.

"Fine." She sat down with her arms crossed, her head turned away from him. "Have your say. Why shouldn't you be a selfish son of a bitch right to the bitter end?"

There was a tense silence. It gave her pleasure to hear the pain in his voice when he spoke.

"I guess I deserve that. I've been a bastard and anything else you want to call me. I don't know how to convince you it won't happen again. Or how to ask you to give me another chance."

He pulled another chair close to her and sat down. She slid her chair pointedly back. Steven had to know he couldn't smile his rich boy's smile and make the last two months go away. Surely he wasn't that arrogant?

"I wish you'd known my father, it might help you understand--"

He ran his hands through his hair, leaving it tangled like a little boy's. His eyes were dark with a man's pain.

Half boy, half man, she'd told Henry. She'd loved both sides of Steven until the greedy boy smashed what they had. She used the pain he'd caused her to fan her anger, then directed them at Steven. It was her only defense.

"Little boys use the blame game, Steven. Your father was a bastard, so you're a bastard. For God's sake, take responsibility for yourself." She stood up. He mirrored her movement, his eyes so sad she almost cried out. She wasn't strong enough for this. "You took the best you'll ever have and trashed it and now, you're going to have to live with it. I'm not Humpty Dumpty. You can't put the pieces of this back together again."

For a moment her mouth worked as she fought back tears. She wouldn't let him see her cry. "The best you can hope for is to do better next with the next poor sap who falls for your line."

"I'd rather hope for the impossible, than settle for less than you."

It was exactly the romantic, healing thing she'd longed to hear him say--two months, one month ago, yes, even last week when she'd made her last bid to get through to him. Between now and then were the ugly things he'd said. The knowledge of what he'd done with Holly.

"What I've done is unforgivable. I know that." He reached out to her, then let his hand fall to his side when she flinched back from him. "I wish there was some way I could prove to you that I understand now. That I've changed this time. I wish--I could make you come home again." He was quiet for a moment, then he said, on a sigh, "I'm so sorry, Liz."

It took all her will to fight the need to ease his pain, but he'd thrown away the right to her comfort.

"Steven--" she shook her head, rubbed her face tiredly.

"I guess it's stupid to think you can forgive me--when I can't forgive myself."

"This is crazy. I never wanted this divorce. You made this happen! Not me!"

"I know that."

"I hated giving up, hated admitting that I couldn't make you make our marriage work--"

"I understand that now," Steven said, wryly.

She wrapped her arms around her heart, her hurt. Damn him! How dare he make her feel like the quitter? She should just walk out that door--but could she? Could she walk away without taking this last chance? Could she stay and let him hurt her again?

"Damn you, Steven."

"I'm sorry, Liz. I have no right--You go. But--think about what I've said, and if you decide--you can call me. I'll come and talk, whatever you want." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a card. "Here."

"What is it?" She looked at him suspiciously.

"My calling card. A rich guy's quarter."

She couldn't stop the spurt of laughter or catch her breath when he smiled his delight. She'd always loved his smile.

"You mean it? You're just going to wait until I call? Holly--"

"Holly is out of it. She should never have been in it. She--she's gone. I want *you*. I'll do whatever it takes to make it happen."

"I wish--I could believe you." She should walk away. How hard it was to do when she knew what it was like in his arms. The longing to give in twisted her insides. Against her will a tiny seed of hope poked up out of despair. "I suppose I could--stay in town for a few days--so we could--talk--but that's all! Just talk!"

She saw hope bloom in his eyes. It was stupid, but love did that, kept growing against the odds. She remembered one of those odds and stiffened.

"What?" He looked worried again.

"I--can't afford to stay. I've got twenty bucks and plane ticket in my pocket." She gave him a challenging look.

"Is that all? I'll pay--through the nose--if that's what it takes." Almost hesitantly he stepped close, stroked her cheek. "I won't let you down again. I swear."

She closed her eyes so he couldn't see her pleasure at his touch. "I'd like to believe you, when--if I can--maybe I'll come home. But understand this, Steven, I won't play the fool for you again. The first time, trust is a gift, after that, you earn it--the hard way. You go the distance, then you go it again and again until you get it right. You do it knowing you might not ever get what you want."

"I don't care. I deserve whatever you can dish out. I love you, Liz. I always have. I always will. I'll stay the course this time."

The tendril of hope put out a bud. She lacked the will to crush it. "I want to believe you."

She hated how much she wanted to believe him, couldn't stop herself from touching his cheek, her reward the heat that bloomed between her skin and his. He grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss in the palm.

"Why don't I take you to a hotel, get you a room, feed you? Then, if you want, we can just--talk--or I can leave--whatever you want."

"Okay." For just a moment the abyss yawned at her feet again, until his hand closed gently around hers. Together they walked outside where the rain clouds were clearing from the night sky, exposing the thin edge of the moon.

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