



Come to Me Recklessly: The Closer to You Series

By A. L. Jackson

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Come to Me Softly*, another irresistible new adult romance in the Closer to You Series.

*His heart was turned off...
Until she turned him on....*

Christopher Moore gave up on the idea of love years ago. Now, his life is an endless string of parties and an even longer string of girls. Enjoying the physical perks with none of the emotional mess, he's convinced everyone that he's satisfied—everyone but himself.

Samantha Schultz has moved on with her life. Finishing her student teaching and living with her boyfriend, she's deluded herself into believing she's content. But there is one boy she never forgot—her first love—and she keeps the memory of him locked up tight. She will never allow any man to break her the way Christopher did.

When Christopher's sister and her family move into a new neighborhood, Christopher is completely unprepared to find Samantha living at the end of the street. Memories and unspent desires put them on collision course of sex, lies, and lust. But when guilt and fear send Samantha running, Christopher will have to fight for what has always been his.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Come to Me Recklessly was everything I've come to expect from A.L. Jackson: a truly **amazing love story** that draws you in and **pulls at your heartstrings**. This second-chance love story was absolutely beautiful.

~**The Book Nuts**

"I **absolutely love reading books by A.L. Jackson**. The impacts her intensely emotional journeys have on me are everlasting and can never be replicated. What she creates with each unique story continuously shocks me with how powerful written words can truly be. ~**Best Sellers Best Stellars**

"Oh...my...gosh. I am suffering from the **MOTHER OF ALL BOOK HANGOVERS!** Wow. Come to Me Recklessly by AL Jackson was pure perfection!!! A true work of art!" ~**HEA Bookshelf**

About the Author

A. L. Jackson spends her days writing in Southern Arizona where she lives with her husband and three beautiful children. She is the author of the Closer To You Series, including *Come to Me Softly* and *Come to Me Quietly*. She is also the author of *Lost to You*, *When We Collide*, *Take This Regret*, and *Pulled*.

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF A. L. JACKSON

Also by A. L. Jackson

To love and faith.

PROLOGUE

There are few things that hurt so much as a broken heart.

It's physical.

Intense.

Real.

It doesn't matter which way you slice it, analyze it, or add it up, you'll always come up with the exact same sum. The worst part is there is no antidote for this affliction.

They say time mends all things.

I say they are liars.

Maybe time subdues, burying the pain beneath all the new memories we make, tucking it under the burdens and joys and new experiences that life layers on over the years.

But that broken heart?

It's always right there, lying in wait. Ready to crush you when you're slammed with that errant, unexpected thought.

But nothing could have prepared me for this—what it would feel like to look up and find him standing inches from me.

From the moment we met, he always had the power to bring me to my knees. I should have known his control over me would never diminish or dim.

I should have known it would only intensify.

Maybe I should have run.

But somewhere inside, I knew he'd never let me get far.

ONE

Samantha

My phone rang with the special chime, the one reserved just for my brother Stewart. I rummaged around for it in my purse while I was browsing the aisles of Target. The grin taking over my entire face was completely uncontrollable. I just couldn't help it. Talking with him—seeing him—was always the highlight of my day.

Running my thumb across the screen, I clicked the icon where his message waited. I'd never even heard of the app until he'd convinced me I *had* to get it, teasing me that I was living in the Stone Age, which to him I was pretty sure would date all the way back to 2011. I couldn't begin to keep up with all the tech stuff he loved.

I held my finger down on the new unread Snapchat message from gamelover745.

An image popped up on the screen, his face all contorted in the goofiest expression, pencils hanging from both his nostrils as he bared his teeth. I choked over a little laugh. The joy I felt every time I saw his face was almost overwhelming as it merged with the twinge of sorrow that tugged at my chest.

Quickly I shoved the feeling off. He told me he couldn't stand for me to look at him or think of him with pity. I had to respect that. He was so much braver than me, because seeing him sick made me feel so weak.

I forced myself not to fixate on his bald head and pale skin, and instead focused on the antics of this playful boy. The little timer ran down, alerting me I had only five more seconds of the picture, so I quickly read the messy words he'd scrawled across the image.

I'm sexy and I know it.

On a muted giggle, I shook my head, and I didn't hesitate for a second to lift my phone above my head to snap my own picture. Going for my silliest expression, I crossed my eyes and stuck my tongue out to the side.

So maybe the people milling around me in the middle of the busy store thought I was crazy, or some kind of delusional narcissist, but nothing inside me cared. I'd do anything to see him smile.

I tapped the button so I could write on the picture.

Love you, goofball.

I pushed SEND.

Seconds later, my phone chimed again. I clicked to receive his message. This time he was just smiling that unending smile, sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bed, radiating all his beauty and positivity, and that sorrow hit me again, only harder.

Love you back, he'd written on the image.

Letting the timer wind down, I clutched my phone as I cherished his message for the full ten seconds before our Snap expired. The screen went blank. I bit at the inside of my lip, blinking back tears.

Don't, I warned myself, knowing how quickly I could spiral into depression, into a worry I couldn't control, one that would taint the precious time I had with him.

Sucking in a cleansing breath, I tossed my phone back into my purse and wandered over to the cosmetics section, browsing through all the shades and colors of lip gloss. I tossed a shimmery clear one into my cart, then strolled into the shampoo aisle.

Apparently I was in no hurry to get home. It was sad and pathetic, yet here I was, twenty-three years old and passing away my Friday night at Target.

Ben had texted me earlier saying he was going out to grab a beer with the guys and not to wait up for him. All kinds of warning bells went off in my head when I realized that his leaving me alone for the night only filled me with an overwhelming relief. That realization hurt my heart, because he'd always been good to me, there for me when I was broken and needed someone to pick up the pieces, making me smile when I thought I never would again.

But with Ben? There had always been something missing. Something significant.

That flame.

The spark that lights you up inside when *the one* walks into the room. You know the one, the one you can't get off your mind, whether you've known him your entire life or he just barreled into it.

Was it wrong that I craved someone like that for myself?

Maybe I'd be content with Ben if I had never felt the flame before. If I'd never known what it was like to need and desire.

But I had. It'd been the kind of fire that had raged and consumed, burning through me until there was nothing left but ashes. I'd thought that love had ruined me until Ben came in and swept me into his willing

arms.

He'd taken care of me, a fact I didn't take lightly. I honored and respected it, the way Ben honored and respected me.

So maybe I never looked the same or felt the same after *he'd* destroyed something inside me. But I'd survived, and I forced myself to find satisfaction in that, willed it to make me stronger instead of feeble and frail.

I tossed a bottle of shampoo I really didn't need into my cart, but it smelled all kinds of good, like vanilla and the sweetest flower, and today I didn't feel like questioning my motives. In fact, I tossed in a bottle of body wash for good measure. I rarely treated myself, and I figured I deserved it. The last four years had been spent working my ass off, striving toward my elementary education degree at Arizona State University, and I'd finally landed my first real job a month ago.

Pride shimmered around my consciousness. Not the arrogant kind. I was just . . . happy. Happy because of what I had achieved.

I bit the inside of my lip, doing my best to contain the ridiculous grin I felt pulling at my mouth.

Finally . . . *finally* . . . I'd attained something that was all on me.

Ben was always the one who took care of me. But he also had a bad habit of taking all the credit. Like my life would fall apart without him in it.

Slowly, I wound my way up toward the registers. I needed to get out of here before I drained what little I had in my checking account with all my *celebrating*.

I rolled my eyes at myself and squashed the mocking laughter that rolled up my throat.

Yep, livin' large and partyin' hard.

My life was about as exciting as Friday-night bingo at the retirement home down the street.

But hey, at least my hair would smell good and my lips would taste even better.

Scanning the registers, I hunted for the shortest line, when my eyes locked on a face that was so familiar, but just out of reach of my recognition. Curiosity consumed me, and I found I couldn't look away.

She was standing at the front of her cart, her attention cast behind her. Obviously searching for someone.

I stared, unabashed, craning my head to the side as I tried to place the striking green eyes and long black hair. She was gorgeous, enough to make any supermodel feel self-conscious, but she was wearing the kind of smile that spoke a thousand welcomes.

Two feet in front of her, I came to a standstill, which only caused her warm smile to spread when her gaze landed on me. My attention flitted to the empty infant car seat that was latched onto the basket, then darted back to her face. My stomach twisted into the tightest knot as recognition slammed me somewhere in my subconscious, my throat growing dry when her name formed in my head before it swelled on my tongue. "Aly Moore?" I managed, everything about the question timid and unsure. Well, I wasn't unsure it was her. There was no question, no doubt.

What I wasn't so sure about was whether I should actually stop to talk to her. My heart was already beating a million miles a minute, like a stampeding warning crashing through my body, screaming at my limbs to go and go now.

Still, I couldn't move. Short gusts of sorrow were a feeling I was well accustomed to, dealing with Stewart and all the sadness his illness brought into my life.

But this?

Pain constricted my chest, pressing and pulsing in, and I struggled to find my absent breath.

God, she looked just like *him*. I always did my best to keep him from my thoughts, all the memories of him buried deep, deep enough to pretend they'd forever been forgotten, when in reality, everything I'd ever shared with him was unrelentingly vivid.

Seeing her brought them all flooding back.

His face.

His touch.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block them out, but they only flashed brighter.

God.

"Samantha Schultz." My name tumbled from her mouth as if it came with some kind of relief. She stretched out her hand, grasping mine. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe it's you. How are you?"

I hadn't seen her in years. Seven, to be exact. She was only two years younger than me, and she'd always been a sweet girl. Sweet *and* smart. Different in a good way, quiet and shy and bold at the same time. I'd always liked her, and some foolish part of me had believed she'd always be a part of my life. I guess I'd taken that for granted, too.

But that's what happens when you're young and naive and believe in promises that turn out only to be given in vain.

I swallowed over the lump in my throat and forced myself to speak. "I've been good. It's so great to see you." It was all a lie wrapped up in the worst kind of truth.

I dropped my gaze, my eyes landing on the diamonds that glinted from her ring finger where she grasped my hand, and I caught just a peek of the intricate tattoo that was woven below the ring, like she'd etched a promise of forever into her skin.

A war of emotions spun through me, and I wanted to fire off a million questions, the most blatant of them jerking my attention between the empty infant carrier and her ring. My mind tumbled through a roller coaster of memories as it did its best to catch up to the years that had passed.

"Oh my God . . . you're married? And you're a mom." I drew the words out as I finally added up the obvious, and a strange sense of satisfaction at seeing her grown up fell over me. It seemed almost silly, thinking of her that way, considering she was only two years younger than me. Now the years separating our ages didn't seem like such a big deal. Not the way they had then, when I'd thought of her as just a little girl, a hundred years and a thousand miles behind me. It seemed now she'd flown right past me.

With my words, everything about her glowed. She held up her hand to show me the ring I'd just been admiring, her voice soft with a reverent awe. "Can you believe it?" She laughed quietly. "Some days I can't believe it myself."

The joy filling her was so clear, and I chewed at my bottom lip, both welcoming the happiness I felt for her and fighting the jealousy that slipped just under the surface of my skin. Never would I wish any sorrow on her, or desire to steal her happiness away because I didn't have it myself. I wasn't vicious or cruel. But seeing her this way was a stark reminder of what I was missing.

Happiness.

I bit back the bitter feeling, searching for an excuse to get away, because I was finished feeling sorry for myself, when Aly's face transformed into the most radiant smile, her attention locked somewhere behind me. There was nothing I could do but follow her gaze. I looked over my shoulder.

All the surprise at finding Aly Moore amplified, spinning my head with shock when I saw who she was staring at.

Jared Holt strode toward us.

My knees went weak.

The grown man was completely covered in tattoos, every edge of him hard and rough. But none of the surprise I felt was caused by the way he looked, because I'd been there to watch his downward spiral. Part of me was surprised to see he was still alive.

He held an adorable, tiny baby girl protectively against his chest, the child facing out as they approached. She kicked her little legs when she caught sight of her mom. A soft smile pulled at his mouth and warmth flared in his eyes when they landed on Aly.

My heart did crazy, erratic things, and the small sound that worked up my throat was tortured. Someone was trying to pull a sick joke on me, dangling all the bits of my past right in front of my face.

It just had to be Jared.

No, he hadn't been responsible for any of the choices Christopher or I had made. Still, he'd been the catalyst that had driven the confusion.

The overwhelming feeling rushing over me was altogether cruel and welcome at the same time, because God, how many times had I lain awake at night, unable to sleep because I was thinking of Christopher Moore, wondering where he was and who he'd become? And suddenly here was his world, our world, his sister and his best friend, the people who had been with us and were part of what defined that time—standing in front of me at Target with their little baby girl.

Aly must have sensed my panic. Again she reached out to squeeze my hand. "You remember Jared Holt, don't you?" She obviously knew I did. There was no missing the look that passed between the two of them, a secret conversation transpiring in a glance.

"Of course," I whispered hoarsely.

"Samantha," Jared said as a statement. He handed Aly the little tube of diaper rash ointment he must have gone in search of while she waited at the front of the store. He turned his attention right back to me. "God . . .

it's been years. How are you?"

"Good," I forced out, wondering where in the hell that word even came from, because right then, I was definitely not feeling *good*. I was feeling . . . I blinked and swallowed. I couldn't begin to put my finger on it except to say I was fundamentally disturbed, as if the axis balancing my safe little world had been altered. "How are you?"

The concern that involuntarily laced my tone was probably not needed, because he smiled at Aly as he situated his daughter a little higher up on his chest and kissed her on the top of her head.

"I'm perfect," he said through a rumbled chuckle.

Aly took a step forward and lightly tickled the tiny girl's foot.

The little black-haired, blue-eyed baby kicked more. Her mouth twisted up at just one side, as she was obviously just learning how to control her smile, and she rolled her head back in delight. She suddenly cooed, and her eyes went wide and she jerked as if she'd startled herself with the sound that escaped her.

Aly's voice turned sweet, the kind a mother reserved only for her child. "And this is our Ella . . . Ella Rose."

Ella Rose.

They'd named their daughter after Jared's mother, Helene Rose.

Affection pulsed heavily through my veins as I looked on the three of them, so happy to see their joy. As strong as that emotion was, it wasn't enough to keep my own sadness at bay, and my mind reeled with the questions I wanted to ask about Christopher.

But those questions were dangerous. It wasn't that I didn't want to know. I *couldn't* know.

Instead I reached out to let their baby girl grip my finger. I shook it a little, and that sweet smile took over her face again, this time directed at me as she tried to shove my finger in her mouth.

I just about melted. I was pretty sure this little girl had the power to single-handedly jump-start my biological clock. "Well, hello there, Ella Rose. Aren't you the sweetest thing." I glanced up at Aly. "How old is she?"

"She just turned two months yesterday," she answered. "It feels like she's growing so fast, but I already can't remember what it was like not to have her as a part of our lives. It's such a strange feeling."

My head shook with stunned disbelief. "All of this is crazy." I eyed them happily as some of the shock wore away, as if being in their space was completely natural. "The two of you ending up together."

Aly blushed, and Jared watched her as if she was the anchor that kept him tied to this world. Then he slanted his own mischievous grin my way. "Don't be too surprised, Sam. This girl was always meant for me."

Good God. How Aly wasn't a puddle in the middle of the floor, I didn't know. His words were enough to leave me all swoony and light-headed and they weren't even intended for me. And I wanted to laugh, because he'd always called me Sam, almost like a tease, a dig at his best friend, Christopher, who refused to call me anything but Samantha.

It instantly took me back too many years, and I was there, feeling flickers of that flame that had been missing from my life for so long. But those kinds of flames had burned me right into the ground. Those kinds of

flames hurt and scarred.

“So what about you?” Aly asked, stepping back. “What have you been up to? Do you live around here?”

“Yeah, I live with my boyfriend in the neighborhood right behind the shopping center.”

“You’re kidding me. We do, too.” She laughed at the coincidence. “We’re neighbors.”

Here we all were, standing in the same store in this huge city, miles away from where we’d all begun. I almost had the urge to look behind me, fully expecting to see Christopher sauntering toward us, an apparition sent to taunt me in a ruthless twist of fate.

“How is your little brother? I heard he was doing really well after your family moved across town.”

After being thrown headfirst into all these tumultuous memories of Christopher, my walls were down, and this time I wasn’t prepared for the sadness that sliced straight through me. I attempted to steady my voice. “He was in remission for five years, but the cancer just recently came back.”

Aly sobered, and genuine sympathy edged the curve of her mouth. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” she murmured, and it didn’t hurt to hear her say it. Instead I felt comforted.

“Me, too,” I agreed, shaking my head as a saddened smile twisted up my mouth. “He’s the sweetest kid.” Well, he wasn’t so much a kid anymore. Really, he was almost a man, but it was hard to look at him that way when he was so frail. “I just keep praying for him, and I spend as much time with him as I can to keep his spirits up. He’s been pretty sick with the treatments, so he hasn’t been getting out of the house all that much lately. I couldn’t imagine having to go through my junior year of high school online, but he doesn’t complain.”

Stewart was now seventeen, the youngest in our family. My brother Sean was two years younger than me, in the same grade as Aly had been, and my sister, Stephanie, was nineteen. My parents had us in quick succession and had had some kind of overindulgent lovefest with our names since theirs were Sally and Stephen. It used to bother me when I was young.

Not anymore.

We’d been a normal, rambunctious family until Stewart had gotten sick when he was nine. When I met Christopher, Stewart had been at his worst. Well, at his worst . . . until now.

Ella released a shrill little cry and squirmed in Jared’s hold. Gently, he bounced her, shushing her in a soft whisper against her head. “I think someone is going to need their mommy soon.” Soft affection flowed from Jared’s laughter. “She goes from completely content to starving in five seconds flat.”

“Oh, well, I better let you two go,” I offered, hating that it sounded almost reluctant. “It was really nice to see you again.”

Aly hesitated, glancing at her husband, before she tipped her head and studied me with intent. “Would it be weird if we . . . I don’t know . . . had coffee or something? I totally understand if you’re not comfortable. I get it. But I’d love to really catch up with you if you’re up for it. I could use a friend around here.”

Maybe that’s what I liked about her most. She just came right out and said it, gave voice to that huge elephant that was snuffing out all the air in the room. That and she was genuine and kind.

I refused to allow myself to believe I was agreeing because she was Christopher's sister.

"Yeah, I think I'd like that."

"Good."

She dug around in her huge bag for her phone, while Jared just stood there swaying Ella, his mouth seemingly pressed permanently to the side of her head as he showered her with small kisses.

Aly thumbed across the screen. "What's your number?"

I rattled it off while Aly entered it into her phone. Two seconds later, my phone dinged with a new message.

"There, you have my number, too."

This time, Ella's cry was a demand.

"We'd better get her home so I can feed her. I'll call you soon."

"That would be great."

She hugged me, only glancing back once as she followed Jared into a lane to pay.

I hurried to one of the express registers, all of a sudden feeling guilty, like I'd committed some sort of mortal sin by giving my number to a Moore.

Christopher had broken me, shattered my belief and trust. But more important than that, I had Ben to think about. Ben, who had stood by my side. Ben, who even with all his faults, truly cared about me. He was my father's best friend's son, and basically we had grown up together. My parents had raised me with the impression that someone like Ben would be the right kind of guy for me, and with my demolished heart, it hadn't taken him all that much to convince me I belonged with him.

I paid and rushed outside. The blistering Phoenix summer was in full force. Suffocating heat pressed down from above, taking everything hostage, the evening sky heavy with dense clouds building steadily at the edge of the horizon.

My feet pounded on the scorching pavement as I made my way up the aisle to my Ford Escape.

Funny, that suddenly felt like exactly what I needed to do.

Escape.

Take this whole afternoon back.

Leave the classroom of the tiny private school where I'd taken a job as a teacher during their summer program, and instead of coming here gone straight to the small house I shared with Ben—where I was safe and memories of Christopher were buried and hidden in the hope that one day they would finally be forgotten.

I slumped into the driver's seat, my gaze drawn to the little family that came bustling out of the store.

My heart rattled in my chest.

“Shit,” I cursed, gripping the wheel. “What am I doing?”

The sick part was I knew the answer to that.

TWO

Christopher

Outside the bedroom door, the party raged on. Timothy’s house was splitting at the seams, the way it always was on a Friday night. Music blared and voices lifted above it, echoing through the thin walls. Distorted sounds pounded heavily against my skin, my eyesight hazy in the deep shadows of the darkened room.

I felt completely weightless and somehow still pinned down by the pungent fog clouding my brain.

Every elemental part of me slowly became detached. Floated away. All of my emotions. All of my thoughts. It was like they hovered somewhere overhead, just out of reach. My entire consciousness faded away, right along with my conscience, leaving me with nothing but the physical.

It’s what I craved. Needed. The relief of feeling nothin’ but skin on skin.

Even though some part of me hated it at the same time.

Slouched back on the worn-out couch in the spare bedroom, I lifted the half-drained bottle of Patrón to my lips, idly watching the dull mop of brown hair obstructing the face of the girl who was on her knees, sucking me off.

The only things I could discern were the pleasure of her hot, needy mouth and the burn of tequila as it roared through my system to settle in a scorching pool in my gut.

She looked up from under her thick veil of hair, brown eyes wide as they searched for a connection but instead met with the apathy in mine.

That was the fucking problem. I was on disconnect.

That plug had been pulled a long time ago.

Never would I allow someone to have that kind of control over me.

Not like *she* had.

Not ever again.

• • •

Monday morning, I rolled up in front of Jared and Aly’s house at the ass crack of dawn. I squinted against the bright rays of light burning my eyes as the sun climbed over the horizon, chasing the last of the night from the sky.

I cut the ignition and jumped from the cooled cab of my truck. Heat swallowed me whole. You’d think at five thirty in the morning we’d get a little reprieve. No such luck. Summers in Phoenix were fucking misery.

That didn't stop the eager smile that tugged at my mouth as I ambled up their walkway.

So what if I had to leave my man card at the door every time I walked into Jared and Aly's place. Call me a pussy, I didn't care. My niece had me wrapped around every single one of her tiny fingers.

I rang the doorbell and rushed my hand through my hair, listening for movement inside. A shadow passed behind the draped window before metal slid as the lock was unlatched. My sister grinned at me when she opened the door.

"Christopher, aren't you looking chipper this beautiful morning," Aly teased as she lifted a knowing brow, stepping back to let me inside.

So yeah, I'm sure I looked like hell. Both Friday and Saturday nights, I'd been over at Timothy's house, *living* it up. Funny how all that *living* made me feel like death warmed over. Every weekend left me just a little more hollowed out. I was pretty sure I was slowly killing myself, week by week losing just a little more of who I was, carving away more and more of what had been important to me.

Pretty soon there would be nothing left.

But there was no way to get any of it back.

Ancient-history bullshit, anyway.

I shoved all the unwelcome thoughts off, rolled my eyes as I ruffled Aly's messy hair. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. You don't have a whole lot of room to talk there, Aly Cat. You look like you got about as much sleep this weekend as I did. Livin' up to your name?"

Dark bags sat heavily under her green eyes, and her near-black hair was all tangled. She was wearing an old stained-up T-shirt that had to be Jared's, because the girl was swimming in it. Still, my sister was beautiful. Inside and out. No wonder my dumb-ass best friend couldn't keep his hands off of her.

She groaned a little, but somehow the sound was filled with pure affection. "Ella decided she was hungry every twenty minutes last night. I have no clue how I even got out of bed this morning. I feel like a walking zombie."

Jared suddenly appeared behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist as he tugged her against his chest. He buried his face somewhere in her neck. "Apparently Ella likes her mommy as much as I do."

I'd just about lost my goddamned mind when I found out these two were hooking up. Not because I didn't like Jared. He'd been my best friend since I was a little kid. Sure, we'd fought like brothers, messed with each other until one of us was crying, but bottom line, we were thicker than blood. Brothers. We were always the first to have the other's back.

Until the day Jared caused that car accident. The one that stole his mother's life. That accident had stolen my best friend, too.

An old kind of pain hit me, and my chest tightened. That car accident had stolen everything. Changed everything. None of us had come out looking the same.

Afterward, the guy had fucked away his life, landed himself in juvie, then disappeared for years. I never expected to see him again. When he showed up here last summer, there was no question he was still haunted. I recognized it immediately, because I recognized the same bullshit in myself.

Then he'd gone and taken a liking to my little sister, and all hell broke loose. He and I were too much alike, and I wasn't about to let him bring my sister down. She deserved so much better than that.

Of course the guy had proven me wrong in every way. He loved her. Wholly and completely. Loved her in a way that girls like Aly deserved, with respect and care and devotion.

How could I stand in the way of that?

Didn't mean it didn't make me a little sick to my stomach. I took it upon myself to razz the asshole every chance I got. "Watch yourself, man. No matter which way you cut it, that's still my little sister."

He nuzzled her more, this time lifting his gaze to meet mine, the mischief in his blue eyes meeting the challenge. "And no matter which way you cut it, she's still my wife. This girl belongs to me."

Aly grinned wildly and leaned back into his hold.

My chest tightened more, because it made me happy to see her this way. Happy she got to have this. Not many of us did. Love like that didn't come around often, and she'd snatched it up when she saw it, even when it'd seemed dangerous and impossible. But she'd known it was worth it.

I'd been the fool who'd let that kind of crazy love go. Didn't matter that I'd been just a stupid punk kid, barely sixteen, or that the girl and I were nothing alike and the entire world was against us.

None of it mattered. Not at fucking all. The only thing that mattered was it'd been real.

Cringing, I put a cap on those thoughts, because I wasn't about to go there. Stupid shit that I couldn't deal with. Nor did I want to. All it did was leave me feeling pissy and sorry for myself, scorned by a girl I'd always thought would be mine.

Leaving Aly and Jared all wrapped up in each other, I headed for Ella, who was lying on her back on the cushioned play area Aly had set up for her in the family room between their huge-ass overstuffed couch and the fireplace.

"There's my girl," I sang as I wound around the couch and knelt down in front of her. Her blue eyes were all bugged out as she watched the lights flashing on the infant play gym set up over her. Five brightly colored stuffed animals hung down from it, teasing her. She didn't come close to being able to touch them. Yet she had her tiny hands all balled up in fists, her arms flailing and her legs kicking as she stared, fixated, making it clear how badly she wanted to reach out and touch one.

A tiny sound escaped her pursed lips, and my heart throbbed a wayward beat.

Yep, man card at the door.

This little girl owned me.

"Don't worry, angel . . . Give it a few weeks, and that monkey is yours," I promised as I bent down and maneuvered her from under the play gym and into my arms. "Come give Uncle kisses before your daddy drags me off to a grueling day of work."

"Grueling my ass," Jared shot from the other side of the room. "You're in the air-conditioned office while me and the guys are out doing the grunt work. I'd say you have it pretty easy there, my friend."

Laughing it off because what he said was nothing but true, I brought Ella's face close to mine. She offered me one of those little grins that I felt right in the center of my chest. She reached out, her nails digging into my bottom lip as she grabbed for me. I kissed them. "You take care of your mommy while we're gone."

"She always does," Aly said, watching us with a soft smile on her face. Something shifted in her expression, and she bit at her lip and quickly turned her face to the floor.

I felt the frown crease my forehead. I knew my sister pretty damned well, and that meant I was pretty damned sure she was holding something back. "What?" I asked, my eyes narrowing as I pinned her with a stare.

She lifted her head, blinked, looked away. "Nothing."

At the same second, Jared tensed up a little, like he knew exactly what was running through Aly's mind.

Nothing my ass.

My frown deepened. "Nothing?" I challenged, my brow rising.

Aly shook her head and looked almost repentant. Unease slowly snaked its way through my senses. My gaze darted between the two of them. Something was up. Something they didn't want me to know. A silent tension filled the room.

"Nothing," she reaffirmed in what I knew was a lie. "I just . . ." She shrugged. "Seeing you with Ella like that makes me happy."

"Come on, man, we need to get a move on," Jared cut in, obviously putting an end to my questioning. He walked to the kitchen island and grabbed the small cooler he kept stocked with food, water, and sodas. "It's going to be a busy day and an even busier week. You may just find yourself on the job. Then I'll let you complain about work being grueling." He tossed me a mocking wink, then sauntered up behind Aly, hugging her as he whispered something in her ear.

Below her breath, she laughed and nodded.

Three months ago, my brother-in-law, aka best friend who bagged my little sister, had somehow managed to persuade me into starting a new venture with him. I went straight from a lazy college student, one who gave little thought to what he was going to do with his life after he graduated—because the truth was, he really didn't give a shit—to business owner in a matter of weeks.

I mean, fuck, me being part owner in the remodeling business with Jared and our other partner, Kenny? All signs pointed at a no-go. I wasn't exactly what most would consider the ambitious type. But somehow Jared convinced me to team up with him, said he didn't want to do it without me. Jared and Kenny had fronted the money, and now I was doing my all to live up to it. Turned out I was pretty damned good at it, too, basically running all the business shit that didn't deal with the hard labor, all of the accounting and paperwork that needed to be dealt with in the office, although the company was growing so fast there'd been a couple of times Jared had hauled me out on a job when he was shorthanded. It was crazy going from scrimping every month to having more money in my bank account than I knew what to do with. I wasn't loaded by any means, but it sure felt nice not to have to check my bank balance anytime I wanted to buy something.

Truth was, I liked having a reason to drag my ass out of bed in the morning. And I had two. The other one cooed, grabbing my attention. I kissed Ella at the corner of her mouth. "Stay sweet, little one."

I passed her off to Aly and followed Jared out the door and into the approaching day. Jared climbed into the passenger seat of my truck.

Each week, we traded off driving. We figured after I moved into my new place a couple of miles away, there was no reason for both of us to hike it across town separately since Jared checked in at the office every morning before he headed out to the job sites in a work truck.

After Aly moved out, the apartment we had shared near the ASU campus had felt all wrong. Lonely. I knew it was time to make a change. Plus being so near to them gave me an excuse to stop by all the time so I could hang out with Ella.

I glanced across at Jared as I hopped into the driver's seat of my brand-new truck, the leather already heating up with the rising sun blazing through the window. He smirked at me, lifted his chin. Guess it wasn't so bad hanging out with him, either. Honestly, it'd been good watching him come back to life, overcoming the darkness that had plagued him since his mother's death.

A flash of resentment twisted through me, and I quickly tamped it down. I didn't blame him. Couldn't. He'd been through more than I could ever imagine. What had happened wasn't his fault. I'd made those mistakes all on my own.

I started the truck and shifted into gear. "So what was that back there?" I asked.

His face lifted in a clueless expression. "Don't know what you're talking about."

I cut my eyes toward him, watching the little twitch of his jaw when he gritted his teeth. He averted his gaze to his tablet and clicked into his schedule, asshole acting like he was all too busy to look my way.

Right.

He knew exactly what I was talking about.

And whatever it was, I wasn't really sure I wanted to know.

THREE

Samantha

My eyes popped open to the blaring of my alarm clock. I flopped over, smacking at the little button on top to silence it. Groaning, I squeezed my eyes shut and wished for five minutes' more sleep. But all those little kids were waiting for me.

Working at a private school summer day camp hadn't exactly been my dream when I'd gone to college to get my degree, but it got my foot in the door, and I was all too happy to jump on the opportunity.

I'd always wanted to be a teacher, and if this job meant I got to be around a bunch of kids with eager minds, their little brains sponges, sucking in all the information around them, then sign me up. It was at a small private Christian school about five miles away, and a few of the regular teachers hadn't been available to work during the summer program, so there'd been an opening.

My insecurities had screamed at me that I wasn't qualified and that I might not want to work in such an

intimate setting, but somehow I'd built up the courage to apply.

I'd loved it the second I stepped through the doors.

Beyond that, it made my parents happy. They loved the idea of me working at a small, conservative school, where I'd be safe and maybe some of that *conservative* would rub off on me. I was no wild child, like they'd chalked me up to be, and I'd spent the last seven years trying to prove that to them.

Funny how they'd accused me of conspiring with the devil when I was with Christopher yet they'd had nothing but praise for us when Ben had announced we were moving in together.

Warily, I looked over at him where he slept on his back on his side of the bed.

That announcement had come as a big old surprise to me, too. I'd done everything in my power to backpedal, giving up explanations that Ben was only joking around, because he had to be *kidding*. No sane man would just rent a house and announce to his girlfriend's parents that they were moving in together without consulting her first.

But that had always been Ben's way. Making decisions that weren't his to make. Up to that point, they'd always been small and I'd just shrugged it off. Attributed it to his protective way. Our whole relationship he'd taken care of me. But this? It was the first time I'd begun to question his motives, this elaborate announcement that had made him look as if he were some kind of exaggerated hero, doing all of this for me, and cornering me so that any hesitation I showed just made me look like the unappreciative jerk.

What no one knew was that he'd asked me to move in with him the month before, and I'd told him I wasn't ready for that.

Yet here I was.

Sighing, I climbed out of bed and headed for the en suite bathroom. I turned the showerhead to high and let the small room fill with steam as I peeled my tank and flannel sleep pants from my body.

That was just Ben—something I had to accept. He always thought he knew better than I did. And maybe he did.

He'd been right about Christopher.

I guarded my heart from the ache that flared at the thought of *him*, his black hair and searing green eyes, blocked the distinct memory of his laughter, a sound that struck me all the way to the core.

Thoughts of him had been all too frequent over the last week, since I'd run into Aly. A feeling of anxiety and dread had steadily built up in my gut as I thought of how close she was, somehow knowing that made him close, too. Like at any moment, I'd walk out the door and he'd be standing there, that potent smile at the ready to crush me all over again.

The worst part was that the anxiety and dread were growing into something that felt like anticipation, a sweet taste on my tongue that warned that something was to come.

But that's what I needed to take it for. A warning. Not a promise.

Stepping into the shower, I closed my eyes and let the soothing water rush over me, the warmth washing me of all my pent-up thoughts and regrets, the hurt of Christopher and the worry over Stewart. If I let it, it'd all

be too much to bear, and I had twenty-three other obligations waiting for me who all needed my undivided attention today.

Washed and shampooed, I managed to feel refreshed as I shut off the faucet, grabbed my towel, and began to dry off. I wrapped my towel snug under my arms, brushed my teeth, then ran a brush through the long sheets of my light blond hair. So maybe I felt a little too self-satisfied being doused in the smell of my brand-new yummy shampoo and body wash. As if maybe using them was just like lifting a big ol' middle finger, one directed at Ben, one I'd never be brave enough to give him.

One that told him to stop acting like my father and more like my partner.

My lover.

But I'd started to question whether I still wanted him to be either of those things.

An unwelcome cringe assaulted me with the thought, followed by a wave of guilt. I knew I shouldn't be in this place and with this man if it didn't make me happy. If my heart wasn't committed to this relationship. But my heart belonged in a place it should never go, to a man it never should have known, to an entity who was just as callous as Ben and my mother had promised he would be.

This . . . this was where I belonged.

I headed into the walk-in closet that lined the back of the bathroom, the space jammed full of both my and Ben's things. The house was quaint but nice, a little on the small side, what most new families would consider a starter home.

No doubt it'd be scorching out, so I dressed in a flowy white skirt that went just past my knees, a cute pink top to match, and white sandals to top the outfit off. My pedicured red toenails peeked out, the color almost as red as the natural color of my lips. I brushed on the same clear lip gloss I'd picked up over the weekend.

I never put color on my lips.

For very foolish reasons.

But it was something that had stuck with me all these years.

I was almost tempted to grab one of the lipsticks Ben had surprised me with over the years, all of them left unopened, just to mute the vibrant color out. But doing so felt wrong, like a slap to the perfect memories I had of him, the ones I cherished before everything had gone right down a festering drain.

Hearing the shuffling behind me, I glanced up through the large mirror above the sink to find Ben lumbering into the bathroom, scratching his bare stomach while his mouth was wide with a yawn that was turned toward the ceiling.

He wasn't an unattractive man. Quite the opposite.

And he definitely knew it.

His dark blond hair was a morning mess and his chocolate eyes watched me with appreciation as he approached.

I shuddered, and he smirked.

This was the part I hated, Ben watching me like he wanted to eat me when I had a hard time thinking of him as something beyond a friend.

“I see someone has left me with quite the invitation this morning . . . can’t say I don’t like it.” His voice was rough with the innuendo, and he went right for the hem of my skirt. He ran his hands up the outsides of my legs, gathering the material as he went, gripping my thighs.

“Sorry, but that’s not going to happen. I have to be at work in fifteen minutes.”

He ground himself against my ass. “I can make it fast.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. No question he could.

Wriggling out of his hold, I sidestepped him, mustering the best smile I could find. “Sorry, babe, but I really have to go. You’ll have to take a rain check.”

Annoyance twisted his face into a scowl. “Those rain checks just keep piling up. You owe me big. One of these days I’m going to keep you in bed the entire day so you can pay up.”

Right.

I always owed him and he never let me forget it. But this was the one debt I was always loath to pay.

His eyes softened, and he grabbed my hand and pulled me into his chest. “I just miss you,” he whispered at the top of my head.

Another pang of guilt ribbed me, and I sighed into his hold, remembering how good he’d always been to me. Even though he pulled so much of this overbearing crap, I knew he really cared about me. “I know . . . I’m sorry I’ve been so busy lately. This new job is exhausting, so by the time I make it home at night, I’m completely spent.”

He kissed my temple. “Just as long as you’re coming home to me at night, that’s all that matters.”

Nodding weakly, I pulled away. “I’ll see you later.”

• • •

I hadn’t been lying when I told Ben I was spent by the end of the day. Late Friday afternoon, I turned the key to the lock of our little house, my feet dragging as I went inside. I dumped my purse and keys on the side table next to the door. Blowing an exhausted breath from my lungs, I flopped back on the couch.

As much as I loved those kids, they were filled with more energy than any one person should have. And I swore, every time they touched me, they zapped a little of my own energy and used it for themselves. *Hyper* didn’t come close to describing a room full of five-year-olds.

From the table, my phone chimed with *that* ring. I smiled and dragged myself up, never too tired for him. I grabbed my phone and settled back onto the couch.

I opened Snapchat and pressed my finger to the waiting message.

Stewart’s face lit up the entire screen, the biggest puppy-dog eyes begging from the image he’d captured.

Coming to see me Sunday?

Grinning, I snapped back an even bigger, eager smile, pretending it didn't hurt to see him this way, instead showing him how excited I was to hear from him.

I wouldn't miss it.

Stewart and I had a standing Sunday date. He rarely felt up to getting out of the house, so I brought over his favorite foods, praying something would seem appealing to him. I'd just hang out with him all afternoon, sitting on his bed and watching funny videos on his laptop or playing video games, even though they weren't exactly my thing and I was terrible at them.

But for Stewart?

Video games suddenly became my very favorite hobby.

I dropped my phone to the floor and sank into the comfort of the plush cushions of the couch, my legs stretched out and propped up as I closed my eyes and let myself drift away.

When my phone dinged from the floor, I jumped, my eyes blinking rapidly as I tried to make sense of my surroundings. The room had dimmed as the sun had declined, evening filtering in through the loose, shimmery drapes hanging across the window.

I rubbed my face. Guess I'd been more tired than I'd thought. When I ran my finger across the front of my phone, I saw I'd been out cold for two hours. Then something inside me went *cold* when I saw the waiting message that had stirred me, but it was the kind of cold that burned and flamed, a warning of something unknown that I felt approaching like a building storm.

So maybe the text was just from Aly.

It still stopped my heart, as if her words were an extension of him, a tether that led me right back into the past.

Coffee tomorrow morning? 10ish?

I clutched my phone, warring with my decision though it had already been made. It was foolishness to the extreme, I knew, putting myself in this position, but I couldn't stop my fingers from tapping across the screen.

Would love to. Where?

Five seconds later, my phone dinged with her reply.

Cory's? Great coffee and even better pastries ;)

Nerves twisted my stomach, and I quickly typed my response.

Sounds perfect to me.

Perfect and completely ludicrous.

Great! C U then.

For a few seconds, I held my phone out in front of me, trying to convince myself to text her back, to tell her something had suddenly come up, some ridiculous excuse that she would know was exactly that.

An excuse.

Something like I'd suddenly moved out of state, never to return again.

Instead I jumped when my phone suddenly lit up with a message from Ben. I grimaced as I read it.

Picked a place for dinner. At Firebird's by the mall. Will be waiting.

Reluctantly, I stood, gathered myself, and forced my feet to carry me out the door.

• • •

The next morning, I slowly pulled into the parking lot where the small mom-and-pop coffee shop rested in a tight corner of the popular plaza. The entire shopping center was packed on a Saturday morning, and I cautiously made my way through the crowded parking lot, searching for a spot. I pretended that I wasn't relieved, that I wasn't thankful for those few extra minutes that bought me a little more time.

Why I was so nervous, I didn't know.

I eased into the first spot I found and cut the engine. The moment the air conditioner was off, heat engulfed the entire cabin. Yet there I sat, unable to propel myself out the car door.

Okay, so maybe the reason I was nervous was glaringly obvious. Because some huge part of me knew this was wrong, that I shouldn't be here, and that I should run far, far away. The fact that I'd lied to Ben about where I was going this morning was evidence enough.

But the whole brokenhearted side of me, the one that was hoping to gain a measure of understanding? Her voice was just much louder than the one that whispered reason.

Opening the door, I stepped out into the sunshine. I'd pulled on my favorite jean shorts and a cute little tank, flip-flops on my feet. Rays of warmth hit my skin, and I relished the feel. People constantly asked me how I could live here, but I wouldn't trade the heat for cold. Not for anything. It took someone growing up here to appreciate it.

For a second, I lifted my face to the sky and sucked in a breath of resolve, reminding myself that I actually *liked* Aly. I truly cared about her and wanted to catch up on her life. Meeting her wasn't just a messed-up manipulation to bring me closer to Christopher.

With that resolution set firmly in place, I tucked my purse strap tight up on my shoulder and strode toward the coffee shop. I jogged across the busy lane right in front, hopping up onto the concrete landing.

Little metal tables with big red umbrellas were set out in the outdoor patio area in front, pots of flowers strategically placed around them. Misters cooled off the patrons who rested leisurely around the space, enjoying all the deliciousness the place had to offer.

I pulled in a deep breath through my nose as I headed for the entrance, the heavenly aroma of coffee wrapping me up and drawing me forward. I was a coffee whore and I wasn't ashamed to admit it.

"Samantha," a voice called from behind me, and I shifted my attention over my shoulder to see Aly working

her way toward me, the infant car seat handle tucked in the crook of her elbow, the carrier bouncing at her side and her other arm weighted down by an overflowing diaper bag and a huge purse. She rushed across the busy lane I'd just crossed, her smile wide as she approached. A phone rang out from within the depths of her bag, and she lifted the entire load she had on her arm, as if she were contemplating how in the heck she was going to maneuver to reach it.

Awkwardly, I stretched out my arms and giggled as my hands flapped all around, searching for something to take from her. Then I laughed outright, feeling completely useless, standing there with a tiny little purse while Aly looked as if she'd taken on the world. "Can I help you?" I asked, reaching forward again.

Aly released a relieved laugh, one that was completely filled with ease and harmony, as if she found no burden in lugging all of this stuff around. "Oh gosh, thank you," she said as she shifted the carrier into my hold and turned to dig through her purse.

I was almost surprised by her passing her daughter off to me so quickly, but I was quickly distracted by the sweet baby girl nestled in the seat, wearing the cutest onesie with tiny pink flowers all over it, all the hems edged in a satiny pink. Twisting the carrier around, I held it in both hands, the bottom of it pressed into my stomach, bringing her the closest I could get her. "Good morning, little Ella. How are you today?"

Her wide blue eyes latched onto mine, and she did one of those squirmy smiles where her head rolled back and her mouth lifted just at the side.

My heart swelled, and I cooed softly, murmuring all of her sweetness back to her.

I barely registered Aly's conversation, though it was clear she was speaking with her husband, her voice lilted in a tone that was obviously reserved for him, playful and affectionate, edged with a hint of seduction. "You can't do anything without me, can you?" she provoked him, smiling over at me and mouthing, *Sorry*.

I just shook my head, not offended or annoyed for a second, and instead I turned back to have a little more me time with Ella.

A thud of panic hit me when I realized I'd already claimed a little part of her as my own.

Foolish, foolish girl, I chastised myself. *Watch yourself*.

This wasn't my family. Was it wrong that that fact hurt me? That I felt as if there was a huge missing piece in my life?

Yeah, it was probably very, very wrong.

Aly ended her call and tossed her phone back into her purse. "Sorry about that. The second I leave Jared at home by himself, he always needs something."

My tease was knowing. "He just can't stand when you're gone."

She grinned like a crushing schoolgirl. "Pretty much." She shook it off and reached for the seat. "Here, let me take that. I didn't mean to make you a babysitter."

"Oh, I've got her. Let me give you a little break while we order. I want to eat her up, she is so cute." Adoration filled my voice as I turned back to Ella, who had her sight set on her mom.

Aly shook Ella's hand, her words soft. "She does have that effect on people." Aly gestured to the entrance.

“Come on, let’s get something to drink. And I’m dying for one of their apple strudels.”

I followed her inside. We ordered and found a little spot in the shade outside. Aly unfastened Ella and pulled her into her arms, relaxing back and sipping from her iced decaf latte. It didn’t matter to me how hot it was outside, I liked my coffee the way nature intended it, piping hot, warming up my body from the inside out.

For a few minutes we rested in the comfortable silence between us. Birds chirped from the tree that grew up close to our table, and there was a distinct calm out on the patio as people took a break from the hustle of their lives, couples chatting quietly with each other, some absorbed in a book, others looking off into nothing at all.

Finally Aly sighed in contentment and smiled across at me. “Thank you for meeting me today. After we left you last weekend, I was a little worried I had put you on the spot.”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I was excited when I got your text.”

Completely freaked-out and panicked, but excited. She really didn’t need to know that, though.

She rested back against her chair, slowly rocking Ella, who she’d shifted up to her shoulder. “So tell me all about you. What have you been up to all these years?”

A soft chuckle fell from me, and I shook my head as I thought of the last seven years, realizing not a whole lot had happened, all the day-to-day stuff that made up a million memories, though very few of them stood out.

“I guess there isn’t a whole lot to tell. I finished up college here this last May, and I got a job for the summer at a small private school not too far from here . . . Which I love,” I added quickly.

“That is wonderful.” She smiled. “I remember you telling me you wanted to be a teacher.”

I nodded, a self-conscious blush landing on my face. “Thank you . . . I did always want it. It feels incredible to finally be finished with school and get started. All the kids are great.”

I took a sip of my coffee. “Sean and Stephanie are both doing really well. Stephanie’s going to school out in California, and Sean is here at ASU.” I swallowed hard. “And Stewart . . .” I trailed off, the lump in my throat growing solid and thick. “He did really great for quite a few years, but he got sick again about six months ago.” Moisture filled my eyes, and I swiped at the wayward tear that slipped free. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get all weepy on you.”

Aly reached her hand across the table, taking mine. “Hey, don’t apologize. I asked about your life because I wanted to know how you are . . . how your family is.”

A swell of gratitude got all mixed up with my sadness, thankfulness that Aly was willing to be there, even after I hadn’t seen her in years and years, thankfulness that she was so kind and seemed willing to just listen.

I didn’t have a whole lot of that in my life.

I nodded a grateful acceptance and continued over my choppy explanation. “God, Aly . . . I thought he was out of the woods and we didn’t have anything to worry about. Then he started feeling weak and developed a cough. My mom took him in to the doctor just to check it out, and in the matter of days, our worlds were turned upside down again.”

Sympathy wet her own eyes. "I'm so sorry, Sam. I hate hearing he's going through this again . . . that you and your family are going through this again."

We sat in a few minutes of silence, Aly letting me gather my staggered breath, before she shot me a playful stare. "And . . .," she drew out, prodding for something that was so plain to her while I sat there without a clue.

My brow quirked in question.

"Your boyfriend?" she asked, as if it should have been natural that I would first have blurted everything about him, swooning like I should be after I'd met the man of my dreams. A frown crossed her face when she took in my expression, which I guessed to be verging on numb. Her frown deepened. "You did tell me you lived with your boyfriend, right? Did I misunderstand?"

Fidgeting, I laughed off the unease. "Oh no, sorry," I apologized again, feeling like an idiot. "I do live with my boyfriend. Do you remember Ben Carrington?"

Aly seemed to sift around in her memories before she shook her head. "I don't think so. Should I?"

I lifted an indifferent shoulder. "Probably not . . . He's four years older than me and went to high school across town, but he used to hang out with some of the guys from the old neighborhood sometimes, so I thought you might have met him."

She pursed her lips. "Nope, can't place the face." Her green eyes gleamed with a warm mirth. "You'll have to introduce me sometime."

"Yeah, sure . . . of course. He's sells health care policies to small companies. Travels a lot. He's a good guy." I described him with all the enthusiasm I could muster, which this morning was about zero. My gaze wandered off to the side because I was afraid it was completely obvious, the lackluster response to her interest in my boyfriend up against the flagrant way my heart hammered with the questions about Christopher that continually swirled through my mind. Inside, I was begging her to mention him, to give me just a hint of what he was doing or where he was.

How he was.

The dimming in her eyes told me she'd caught on to it. She pulled in a deep breath, hesitated, then dropped her voice to a mere whisper as she leaned in closer to the table, careful to protect her daughter's head. "You can ask about him, you know."

I lifted my face to her, and that lump from earlier was back in full force, knotting up my throat with unspent emotion. "I'm not sure that I can."

A war raged inside me, one side desperate and destitute, the other rigid and strong. Funny how the damaged side felt so much more powerful than the fortified.

That scared me.

I was sure that fact was written all over my trembling face.

Aly managed to lean in closer. "Let me ask you something. Are you here because you wanted to hang out with me or because I'm Christopher's sister?"

That rigid side reared its head, and I met the curiosity in her gaze. “Let me ask you something. Are you here because you wanted to hang out with me or because I’m Christopher’s ex-girlfriend?”

Aly sat back with a wry laugh. “Touché.” Her head shook as if she were trying to make sense of it, to find the straight truth in her answer. That was one thing I was sure I would get from Aly, something genuine and without condition or expectation. It was the thing that kept me sitting in this chair even though I felt more vulnerable than I had in a long, long time.

Apparently the Moores had that way about them.

“Honestly?” Chewing at her lip, she stared across at me, her eyes kind and open. “I was really excited to run into you. But seeing you definitely did make me think about my brother and the way he is.”

I cringed.

The way he is.

Of course I knew what she was talking about, but a piece of me had been holding out hope that he’d become a different man from the one I’d left in that room staring at me without remorse while I stood frozen in outright horror. The night he’d broken every ounce of trust I’d had.

“I won’t pretend that I know all that much about your relationship or what happened between you two. All I know is my brother was the happiest he’s ever been when he was with you.”

Another stake right through my failing heart.

Remorse took up the whole of Aly’s face. “And I know it all fell apart when everything went down with Jared. Watching his best friend lose his mother and then himself. Christopher basically lost Jared at the same time.”

I remained mute, unsure how to respond. She had so much of it right, though there were holes all over her assumptions, all of them punched out by my insecurities and Christopher’s callousness.

Sighing, she hugged her daughter close, as if she were protecting her family as she drifted into the past. “My husband has been through a lot and has overcome so much, Samantha, and I’m pretty sure Christopher got lost in the shuffle. Believe me, he hasn’t said a word about what happened between you two, and I’m going to be truthful and tell you I’ve often thought about it . . . wondering about everything that happened with Jared and how it affected Christopher . . . how he just kind of lost it after. And I’ve thought about you,” she admitted quietly, “wondering if you were okay or if he’d left you broken, too.”

My mouth twisted up with pain, remorse and regret and guilt spinning through my being. That breaking had gone both ways.

Aly flinched, just the smallest fraction, but it was there, the woman insightful. Her head pitched just to the side. “Judging by the look on your face, I’m going to take a wild guess and say it went a whole lot deeper than what happened with Jared.”

It did. It went so deep that it’d cut me right in two. But I wasn’t ready to tell her that. Offering a halfhearted shrug, I issued the lamest excuse I could find. “We were young.” As if our ages had diminished anything we’d felt.

Puffing out a knowing breath, Aly softened. “I love my brother. He’s truly amazing. He constantly makes me

laugh. But it goes far beyond that. He's caring. Loves with everything he has. This little girl?" She patted Ella's back. "He'd do absolutely anything for her. He is one of the best guys I know when it comes to us . . . to his family. But I know he doesn't see the rest of the world that way, and he most definitely doesn't see himself that way. It makes me sad. I worry about him. He's messed up, but I won't judge him for anything he's done in his past . . . just like I won't judge you."

I cut my attention away. God, she could see right through me. Finally I lifted my gaze and shook my head in surrender. "It doesn't matter, Aly. What's done is done. And neither me nor your brother can undo it."

Even if either of us wanted to.

She looked like she was going to object, so I interrupted. "Enough about me. Tell me about you. How in the heck did you end up with Jared Holt?"

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