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# ABSOLVING AMY

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Prologue

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**T**he hotel room was mostly dark, the only real light coming from the hallway through a crack underneath the door. Amy Johnson's heart raced as she snuck around quietly, trying not to bump into anything and wake the large man sleeping in the bed. Finding her underwear across the room, she bent quickly and picked them up. Upon examination, she realized they were too dirty to put back on; instead, she shoved them into her small purse. Her discarded dress was at the foot of the bed. She slid it over her head. Stumbling, she reached down to steady herself. Terrified that her mistake might have outed her, she froze and looked over her shoulder, wide eyed. The sound of Ben's snores from the middle of the large king-sized bed reassured her of his uninterrupted slumber. She picked up her left shoe and looked around desperately trying to find its mate, spying it beside the TV stand.

A creaking noise brought Amy's gaze quickly back to Ben, her heart racing in anticipation of him waking. Thankfully, he remained asleep; he had just rolled over. She tiptoed as quietly as she could the rest of the way to the door, both of her high heels now swinging from her hands. She paused, looked back, hesita-

tion puddling in her gut. Damn, that man was perfect. Amy had never had a lover like him before. He was attentive to her needs and brought her to mind altering, body shaking orgasms several times throughout the evening they had spent together. Her hand paused on the doorknob. Was this really what she wanted? Was this how she wanted to end this truly unforgettable and magical night?

Deep down, Amy knew that it was so far from the ending she wanted. She longed for that gorgeous man to belong to her. She wanted nothing more than to lie safely sleeping in his arms and wake up to him lying on top of her again, to have breakfast together, and to spend many more hours conversing with him. But, sometimes in life, you had to do what was needed, even if it wasn't what you wanted. This was, regrettably, one of those times. Life had never been fair for Amy, so why would this be any different? She held her breath, turned the knob, walked through the doorway and shut the door quietly behind her before hurrying down the hallway to the elevator, never looking back.

She was still holding her breath when she walked out of the lobby and into the parking lot of the hotel. Finally, reaching her car, she let out a long, slow breath and looked down at her now stained and wrinkled bridesmaid dress. Amy knew that anyone who saw her sneaking out of the hotel at five am in the morning would know she was doing the walk of shame, and she did feel ashamed. Not for having sex with Ben, no, she would never feel ashamed for that. It was the best sex of her life, and there could be no denying the connection between them. No, she was ashamed of how she had snuck out of the room without a word, like a dirty one-night stand. Amy knew if Ben found out who she was, she couldn't bear to see the look of disgust in his eyes. It was better this way, better if she left with these as her last memories of him than to stay and deal with the condemnation of her past sins—sins Amy knew Ben would never dare to overlook.

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## Chapter 1

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"Have a good night!" Amy called after her employees as she turned to lock the restaurant doors. She watched for them to get into their cars and made sure both of their vehicles started before she finished securing the building. As a manager of her local Panera restaurant, she took her job, along with her other two jobs, seriously. She looked down at her watch and saw that it was just a few minutes past eleven. Amy was proud of her crew; they had gotten the closing down to an effective routine, and she valued their work ethic. She pulled on the door to make sure it had fully locked, took a deep cleansing breath of crisp Washington night air and headed to her car.

The unassuming red Chevy Cavalier sat in the same spot it always did while she was at work—the parking space right underneath the large light post. Amy was well aware of the dangers that lurked in the night and did whatever was possible to keep herself safe. Opening the trunk, she put her backpack in its assigned spot. The trunk was neatly organized in a way to make Amy's life easier. She had devised a system for turning her car into her temporary residence during periods of time, like this, when she found herself homeless. She reminded herself once

again that she would be back in the dorms in a couple weeks, once fall semester started. She had a full academic scholarship to the University of Washington, and she received room and board as compensation for her job as a residential assistant of her dorm. It was a good gig during the school year. Unfortunately, even though she continued to be enrolled full time in the summer, the college didn't have enough demand to keep the dorms open, so Amy had to find other housing options. Attending classes full time while working three jobs, she didn't miss having a place to stay too often, although she was very disappointed that her arrangements had fallen through and she was homeless once again. It made her feel like a failure and reminded her of how very alone she was in the world.

Luckily, between working three jobs and attending school, she kept herself occupied, and it stopped her from obsessing over the void of personal connection in her life. It would be fall semester soon, and she had a future to plan for. Planning was something Amy did extremely well. She had planned her jobs, like her trunk, in an organized and detailed manner. She made sure she worked a job that would further her career and look good on her resume. Working at the courthouse with her former caseworker, and now her good friend, Addie, was exactly that job. Out of all of her jobs, this was the most fulfilling. She loved being able to see the growth of relationships between parents and children during their visits together. She also worked the front desk at a local gym. Amy had sought this job out intentionally. She could take a nap in a safe place, have a hot shower, study, swim or work out, since her job came with the benefits of a free membership. The front desk gig only guaranteed her ten hours a week in pay, but the benefit of membership outweighed the minimum wage paycheck. Working at Panera was how she fed herself. The pay was good and the food better. She could eat delicious salads, soups and sandwiches for dinner and the bakery had fresh, homemade breads, bagels and treats like the ones that were

making her mouth water in the bag next to her on the front seat. The leftover food at the end of the shift was donated to local organizations that fed people in need or tossed. Whenever possible, she would grab a few items to get her through until the next shift.

No matter how busy Amy kept herself, it didn't keep *him* from invading her thoughts—Detective Ben. They had only met a handful of times, while in the planning stages of her friend's wedding. They had great conversation and an undeniable physical attraction. The chemistry came to a head during a long night of sexual gratification. When she closed her eyes, Amy could still smell him. There was no denying her sexual attraction to him. He was a great lover, selfless and giving. He was kind, but there was also an edge about him. He was naturally dominant, and she had found herself responding to his commands willingly. She had tried desperately to erase him from her thoughts the past few weeks, but she hadn't been able to. If anything, she found herself thinking about him more frequently. She could feel his mouth on her breast and the way his fingers dug into her hips as he rode her from behind. He had brought her to three amazing orgasms, that night, and left her craving more. She was sexually frustrated, but living out of her car wasn't helping to satiate her desire; she wouldn't dare masturbate in a public place, even under a blanket.

Amy hadn't planned on living like this, yet here she was, once again, calling her little car home. She considered getting a hotel room, but she didn't want to drain her entire checking account, the little that was left, after paying her car payment, insurance and cell phone bill. Of course, it was never in her plans to convert her small vehicle into an apartment, but sometimes, life had other plans for her. Amy drove her car a couple blocks to a back alleyway behind a bunch of small local businesses. She pulled into the parking lot of the unassuming white house with the pink shutters. It was the office of a local insurance agent. Twice a month, she deep cleaned it for him, and she knew he

didn't have cameras on the property. She backed in and parked under the large tree in the corner of the lot as she had done many times before. The tree gave her some cover from the road. She always backed in, making sure she could make a quick getaway if the need arose.

Parked, Amy got out of the car and walked around to the trunk. She took out her overnight gear, opened the back door and carefully laid it across the seat. She quickly changed out of her work slacks and put on her yoga pants, slipped out of the bakery-smelling shirt and switched into a tank top. She folded her clothes up and set them on the passenger side seat before crawling into the warm embrace of her Coleman sleeping bag, a luxury impulse purchase that had been worth every penny. Her head embraced the softness of her pillow as she hunkered down to sleep. She knew she wouldn't ever achieve a full REM cycle in her car—her body was aware of every sound and every movement outside, but she would get at least *some* rest. She had just started drifting off to sleep when she heard crunching of tires on the hard gravel.

The sound of loud, angry voices startled her awake and Amy quickly sat up, looking for the source of the sound. As quietly as she could, she slipped her flip-flops back on and climbed over and into the driver's seat just in time to see a large black SUV pull up beside a smaller white Nissan.

"Where is my fucking money? You moved the product and I haven't received my payment." The SUV's passenger, a burly middle-aged Hispanic man leaned over and shouted at the driver of the Nissan.

"I'll get your money. We had some problems at the park with pigs. They interrupted distribution. Some mass casualty bullshit at another park has them on high alert. Bunch of college idiots, including a senator's son, overdosed at a school sponsored event, and now the pigs are patrolling harder than ever before."

"I don't fucking want to hear your excuses. Our deal is that



we give you the product, and you give us the money. What you do after that doesn't concern us. I don't care if you give it away, as long as I get my money. This is our third conversation about this. I told you we weren't going to fuck around anymore. It's time I make my point clear to your partners." He sat back into his seat and looked at his driver. "Do it." The next thing Amy knew, the driver had pulled out a gun and shot the man. The injured man fell forward, hitting his steering wheel as blood splattered all over the front windshield.

Panicked, she went into survival mode. She started the engine and floored it, turning the wheel sharply to go in the opposite direction down the alley. She heard an engine rev, before another shot was fired. She screamed as the glass shattered in her back window. Another bullet flew past her and embedded into the radio. She sped up, making a sharp left turn onto one of the busiest roads in town. She knew the police station was only two blocks away. Another bullet pierced through the car and into her passenger seat, Amy flew through the red light, scared, praying another car wouldn't be going through at the same time.

The bullets stopped flying, then, as a car had turned in behind her at the light, putting itself as an unintentional buffer. Looking in her rearview mirror, she saw that the men continued to follow her. The police station was finally in view, and Amy frantically turned into its parking lot, coming to a quick stop next to a car with a man sitting inside of it. She rolled down her window, frantically waving her arms around and started screaming, "Help!" She covered her face with her hands and ducked down low when, seconds later, the black SUV rolled by slowly. The passenger held his phone out the window toward her.

"What in the world?" Detective Ben De Luca jumped out of his car, drawing his gun. He ran over to the car, throwing his body in front of the driver's side door, facing the road, his back to the woman inside.

Amy watched the SUV speed off down the road and heard

the officer get on his radio and request backup in the parking lot. Dispatch seemed confused.

"Repeat your location, Detective?" Amy heard dispatch ask.

"Parking lot of station 20," the detective answered, his back still to her.

Amy's fingers were numb and white from how hard she had grasped the steering wheel. Her heart was beating so fast, she thought it was going to leap from her chest and run away. She wouldn't blame it if it did. *What the hell had just happened?* She lifted her hands and shook them out; they tingled in pain.

Several officers rushed out of the police station and surrounded her car. "Hands on the steering wheel!" one of them screamed, his gun drawn and pointing at Amy, who quickly obeyed.

"Stand down!" Ben said, reprimanding the man. "She's the victim."

Amy thought the voice sounded familiar to her. Where had she heard it before?

"How the hell was I to know that?" the younger officer said, while the one barking orders holstered his gun and turned towards the car.

Amy's mouth dropped open. *Oh, no! It was him! Jesus, can I get a break? This wasn't happening.* She saw the look of recognition that crossed Ben's face and groaned.

"Amy?" Ben asked, tapping on her window, motioning for her to roll it down.

"Ben." There wasn't a question in her tone. She knew exactly who he was. She would never forget how all the flirting between them had led to that one very steamy night together. The sex had been the best of her life, which was saying a lot, since Amy wasn't exactly a virgin.

Sneaking out of the room while he had slept had been one of the hardest decisions in her life. Amy wasn't good enough for a fancy police detective. The second he ran her background check,

which she knew he would, he would be disgusted by what he saw and run away. She did what she had to do, to protect herself. She had done her damndest to avoid him ever since, even though he had a frequent role in her fantasies. And here he was, standing there in all his masculine glory. It was all Amy could do to not drool. Ben had to have been one of the largest men she had ever met. Amy imagined that, outside of professional athletes, there were very few men who boasted the size that Ben possessed. His arms were ripped with muscles. Amy knew, from working at the gym, that muscles like that took a lot of time and dedication to build. His arms weren't the only place that his dedication to fitness showed. The thickness of his parted thighs demonstrated the same discipline. Underneath that shirt lay chiseled abs and this beautiful v-shaped arrow pointing to an equally large...she shook her head, trying to command her body to not respond to that mental image. She had just been shot at, for God's sake. Now was not the time to be aroused! Yet, even with the car door between them, Ben's mere presence had every nerve in her body standing on edge.

His tan skin came from his Italian heritage and not from the sun, although he had evidence of too much time in the sun on his face and hands. His hair was as dark as the night they were standing in, and his eyes were a rich chocolate that reminded her of one of her favorite foods—Nutella. The hazelnut spread was something she could never grow tired of. She had already tasted him, and he was addicting. She had just started to get over him. "Liar!" the devil on her shoulder shouted in her ear. She licked her lips before she realized those creamy delicious eyes were staring back into hers, demanding something from her, "I'm sorry, what was that?" She hoped the warmth of the blush she felt spreading up her neck wasn't noticeable.

"How about you get out of the car, Amy, so we can talk about the bullet holes riddling it?" Ben's tone held all the professionalism she knew she could expect out of him, but she also heard

something else underneath it. Anger? No, that wasn't it. Frustration? Well, there would be no denying the sexual frustration between them. Amy couldn't put her finger on it, and it was making her a tad uneasy. Whatever that tone was, it was making her thighs clench together.

"Oh!" Amy opened the car door so fiercely, it slammed right into Ben. "I'm so sorry!" She tried to get out gracefully. Instead, she stumbled forward, unstable on her feet. It must be the adrenaline. After all, she did just witness a man getting shot.

"It's okay!" Ben put a steadying hand on her arm. "Why don't we go inside and have a conversation? Get you out of the open?"

Together, they walked into the building. Ben put his hand on the small of Amy's back and guided her through the hallways and back to his office.

He motioned for an attractive female detective to join them. "Amy, this is my partner, Detective Min Cho."

"It's actually Min-seo Cho, but everyone just calls me Cho. It's easier on the Americans." She laughed. "Hi, Amy. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Please!" Amy said, never one to turn down coffee. "Do you have cream and sugar?"

"Sure do," Detective Cho said. "How do you take it?"

"Three packets of sugar, and then can you fill the cup half up with cream before the coffee?"

Cho blinked and then smiled warmly at her. "Sure thing."

"Why don't we get settled, while Detective Cho grabs your coffee," Ben said, ushering her into the comfortable looking office. He went behind the large mahogany desk and sat in his brown leather desk chair while Amy sat in one of the two oversized armchairs across from him. Amy looked around the office and was surprised at how homey it was. In addition to the soft cream armchair she was sitting in, there was a fashionable blue and white rug on the floor, large framed photos of two beautiful dogs on the wall, and instead of the overhead sharp fluorescent

light that brightened the rest of the building with an institutionalized feeling, he had a beautiful bronze three-piece matching table and floor lamp set spread around the room, putting off soft, white light. It reminded her of her therapist's office. She looked everywhere but at him. She wasn't sure she was capable of retaining a thought, with him in the room.

"These aren't the type of chairs I'd expect to see in a police detective's office," she observed.

"Yeah, I figured if people were going to come in here and talk to me for long periods of time, they might as well be comfortable. Besides, I take the bad guys into an interrogation room. Only the good guys get to sit in my comfy chairs."

"I'm kind of surprised the department paid for all of this."

"They didn't." Ben chuckled. "It's all my stuff. The only thing in here that was in here when I earned my corner office was this filing cabinet, this huge annoying phone, and laptop. I had an ugly metal desk, two black plastic chairs and a flimsy desk chair. I went shopping with my sister, and she helped me do all this. Believe me, she was happy to be handed my credit card and given free reign."

Amy found herself relaxing with the small talk. The stress and fear started to flee from her body, and the tension in her shoulders started to abate. Ben had been easy to talk to at the rehearsal dinner and at the wedding, so she wasn't surprised that conversation flowed so easily between them. Neither brought up the elephant in the room, recognizing it wasn't an appropriate setting to do so. A couple minutes later, Detective Cho walked back in and handed Amy a steaming hot cup of half cream, half coffee and sat in the chair next to her.

"Mmm," Amy said, taking a long drink, "This is perfect, thank you!"

"Would you like a little coffee with your cream?" Ben teased, and everyone laughed.

"To catch you up, I had just pulled into the parking lot when

Amy, here, pulled in next to me. It appears that she was being chased by someone. Her back window was shot out, and I observed two other bullet holes inside the vehicle. A black Tahoe driven by two Los Diablos members followed her. The driver took photos of Amy while the passenger made shooting motions with his hand. We haven't discussed the situation beyond what I witnessed," Ben said.

"Okay. Wow. Well, I guess the best place to start is the beginning. What happened, tonight, Amy?" Concern was etched all over Detective Cho's face as she turned to face the other woman.

"I had just gotten off work at Panera and had went to... umm." She bit her lip. Amy didn't want them to know she was homeless. She didn't know why, but she didn't want Ben to have more reason to think badly of her. For some reason, his opinion mattered to her. "I ran across the road to the insurance company I do some cleaning for. I had left something in the office and went to retrieve it. I had just left the building and had headed out to the car, and that's when it happened. I heard angry voices. The passenger in the black vehicle that we saw..." She paused and looked at Ben, who nodded encouragingly. "...he yelled at the passenger in a white vehicle and then, *oh!*" Amy shouted, half rising out of her seat, remembering that she hadn't told them about the man who was shot yet. "You have to get an ambulance over there, right away! He shot a guy in the white car, and what if he's still alive?" Amy couldn't believe she had forgotten the man who had been shot! The adrenaline, the shock of seeing Ben and being shot at, herself, had made her brain a little slow.

"Wait, what?" Ben asked. "Slow down a second. Who shot who?"

"There's a white Nissan in the alley with a man who has been shot! The alley behind the McDonalds. You know it?"

"I'm familiar." Ben nodded to Detective Cho, who had her phone already out calling in the shooting before he picked up his phone.

"Boss, I have a witness to a Los Diablos shooting in my office." Ben paused, waiting for further instruction. "Five minutes, yes, sir."

"Okay, Amy, I have to stop you from saying anything else for a minute. We have to gather the team together and play this by the book. I want you to know you are safe now, and I promise I will keep you that way." He leaned across his desk. "I'm going to be honest with you; this is going to likely get scarier before it is over. Can you be brave for me?" He bored into her soul with those hazelnut eyes.

"Yes, I can do that," she heard herself say. *Shit! What have I gotten myself into?* There wasn't much she wouldn't promise the handsome Italian sitting across from her. Soon, two other men joined them. Captain Davis, Ben's boss, and a Vice Crime Detective, Mr. Gonzalez, who they called Gonzo. Ben quickly made introductions. The men leaned up against opposite walls. Amy felt positively surrounded.

"Okay, Amy, we are all here. Can you tell us more?" Ben asked.

"Tell us more, tell us more," she sang the lyrics from Grease quietly under her breath. She hoped no one heard her.

"What?" Ben asked.

"Nothing. Sorry. I do that when I'm nervous. I don't know how much more I can tell you. He shot the guy, and then I got into my car and sped over here. They followed me, shooting at me."

"There are a lot of questions, but first, we are going to get a sketch artist in here."

The next two hours went by quickly. Amy answered all the questions the best that she could, and soon, it was just her, Ben and Detective Cho left in the room.

"You did well, Amy. I'm proud of you," Ben said.

Amy felt heat puddle in her stomach. She didn't know why his praise had that effect on her.

"It sounds like the classic 'wrong place at the wrong time' scenario. I am sorry you went through all of this," Detective Cho said, standing. "I'm going to go check on where we are with protective custody."

"Protective custody?" Amy asked Ben.

"Yes. You witnessed one of the most dangerous street gangs in the world commit murder, and you can place one of the highest ranked members, in the vehicle, giving the orders. There is no doubt that Los Diablos is currently putting a price on your head." A knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

"Ma'am, is there anything you would like out of the car before we impound it?" a technician said, coming into the room.

"I'm sorry? What?" Amy asked. "You can't take my car."

"We have to, ma'am. It's in state's evidence now. You'll get it back, eventually."

"You can't impound my car!" Amy was getting frantic; they couldn't take it. No way. Her car was her most important possession. Her life revolved around it and its contents. If they took her car, they'd be taking her home.

Ben stood up. "It's late, Amy. You've been through a lot today, and I'm sure you are overwhelmed. We can talk about this after we get your stuff out of the car. I'll drive you home to get whatever you will need for protective custody."

"No! You can't take it! How am I going to get to work? To school? I need my car!" She felt the bile rising in her throat and hot burning tears forming behind her eyes.

"Hey, it's okay. I'll help you figure all of this out." Ben put a reassuring hand on her arm. "First, let's go get your stuff from your car, and then we'll go from there."

Amy wondered if she looked as defeated as she felt. She noticed how his hand went back to the small of her back as they walked outside. He was very good at guiding her when they walked. It was gentle and yet firm, his presence known by physical touch.



She opened the trunk of her car at the same time as Ben opened his; the idea was for Amy to transfer her items into his car. He walked around and stood next to her. Amy looked down at her trunk and then looked up at the shocked look on Ben's face. Then she looked back down at her life, arranged neatly in plastic bins in her car. Two rows of four bins. Each one was labeled with its contents. Five pairs of pants, a dozen shirts, two dresses, two sets of pajamas, seven pairs of socks, three bras, seven undies, and three pairs of shoes neatly lined up behind them—tennis shoes, sandals and a pair of heels. In front of all of them, in the netting, was a small box of toiletries, her textbooks, laptop and gym bag. Finally, in the very back, was a small Tupperware container holding the handful of photos and mementos from her life.

Without saying a word, although his expression gave everything away, Ben walked around the car and looked into her back seat. Amy knew what he'd see, her sleeping bag and pillow were right where she had left them.

*He's a detective. He's going to know my secret soon, if he doesn't already.*

"Amy." She heard him say her name, but she couldn't bear to look up. She didn't want to see the judgment in his eyes. She didn't want to see the disgust or the disappointment. He walked back over to where she still stood, cemented behind her trunk, looking blankly into it. "Amy, look at me." There was determination in his voice. Still, she didn't move. Ben reached over and very gently took her by the arm and turned her, until they were facing each other. He lifted her chin. Her face was tilted up toward his, but she continued to cast her eyes downward. "Baby girl, look at me." His tone was gentle and caring. Gone was the police detective and, in his place, was the man who made sweet love to her, the man she had fallen for—nothing she did or said could change that fact. She raised her eyes and met his.

Amy was surprised by what she saw there. She didn't see pity

or judgment. She saw raw concern that made her heart lurch. She was confused by his reaction. Surely, he didn't care for her. She was nothing more than a one-night stand, wasn't she?

"Good girl." Ben rewarded her obedience with a gentle smile. "Baby, I need you to be honest with me; are you living out of your car?" His tenderness was almost her undoing.

"Yes," she whispered. "I had a place I was subleasing for the summer, but the owner returned early, and I had to leave two weeks ago. I didn't have anywhere else to go, and the dorms open back up in a couple weeks, and..." She took a breath as the tears spilled down her cheek. She started singing a song from one of her favorite musicals, *Rent*, quietly under her breathe 'how we gonna, how we gonna, how we gonna pay rent?' Ben looked at her like she had lost her mind.

"I'm sure there is a really good reason for you to be living out of your car, sweetheart. Let's get all of this into my trunk and we will go inside and figure all of this out." He looked down at his watch and shook his head. "No, we won't. It's two thirty in the morning. I'm taking you back to my place. I have a guest bedroom. What you need right now is a warm bed and some good sleep. We can figure it out when you wake up. Plus, my boys have waited long enough for me to get home tonight." Once Ben made the decision, he made fast work out of moving her belongings into his trunk.

She watched as he took his phone out and texted someone. He motioned for the technician to come back over and signed off on the car then opened his passenger side door for her to get in.

"I don't know, Ben," she said. "Maybe I should go check into a hotel or something."

"Absolutely not. One of the most violent gangs in the world is looking for you. The only place I would trust, besides with me, would be an official safe house or Brad's house. Brad and Addie are on their honeymoon, so that's out. I'm not going to force myself on you, Amy, and besides, I'm pretty sure you enjoyed our

night together." Amy felt the blush rise across her chest, and even the tip of her ears got hot. He wasn't wrong. She had enjoyed every second of their sexfest. With dwindling options, Amy got into the car.

Once they were on the road, Ben brought up that night again. "Imagine my surprise when I woke up to an empty bed, the next morning. I thought we really hit it off, Amy. I had enjoyed our conversations leading up to the wedding, and dancing with you that night just felt right. The sex was incredible. Disappointment doesn't begin to describe the feeling I had, waking up without you. Is it my age? I know I am a decade older than you—"

"What? No. Your age is fine. I've always preferred older men. I'm not like most twenty-five-year olds. I've gone through a lot in my life, makes you grow up fast."

"You *are* mature for your age. I noticed that right off. Then, what? I know I didn't imagine the chemistry between us."

"No, the sex was great."

"What was it? What made you take off like that?"

"It was just I-I liked you, too. I j-just can't..." she stuttered. She couldn't tell him how she felt that would mean telling him about her past and her criminal record. They pulled off the interstate onto a quiet two-lane highway before turning down a back road.

"I live in West Bend, up on the mountain, in a gated bedroom community. Our houses are spread out, and I have about an acre of land. You aren't scared of big dogs, are you?" Amy's face lit up with the mention of dogs.

"I love dogs! All dogs, big and small!" They pulled down a long driveway and into a garage. Ben got out of the car and plugged some numbers into the home security system. Suddenly feeling awkward and self-conscious, Amy was slow to join him.

"Brace yourself," Ben warned, and before Amy could do anything, he threw open the door to the house and out came two

huge brown and black dogs. They jumped all over Ben, ignoring Amy completely. They licked him, and their tails beat against the cemented ground. Amy started laughing and the sound got the dogs' attention. Both of them raced over to her. She squatted down to their level. One of them knocked her over while the other covered her face in sloppy licks. Ben's deep laugh echoed off the walls in the garage.

"Thor! Loki! Come!" Both dogs immediately obeyed.

"Thor? Loki? You named them after marvel characters?"

"First, I am impressed you know Marvel. Most women can't tell the difference between Marvel and D.C.. Second, yes, I did. This big dude right here is Thor. He's all bark and no bite." He stroked the head of a large, longhaired German Shepherd dog. "This smaller but mighty beast is Loki. Loki has a hard bite when messed with, but he is goofy as crap, too." His hand rested on the top of the slimmer Belgian Malinois. "Both of these beasts are police academy drop outs. They are extremely well trained but couldn't hack the force, so I adopted them. Thor couldn't get over his appetite for cats, no matter what they did to deter him. If there was a cat, his attention was on it. Loki's personality was too big for the job. You'll understand when you spend more time with him."

Amy picked up on the 'when' in the phrase. He didn't say 'if' she spent more time with him but 'when'. *Don't get hopeful, Amy. He will figure out who you are and run away. They all do.*

"Are you okay, Amy?" Ben said, studying her closely.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'm just exhausted." She *was* exhausted; it wasn't exactly a lie. She felt like a ton of bricks had been dropped on her body. Every step took more and more work to complete.

"Okay, baby, let's get you inside and settled in." Ben closed the distance and took her hand, guiding her up the two steps into the house. Turning on the lights, he called after the dogs to follow. Once in the kitchen, he flipped on the Keurig in the kitchen, and the sound of the water heating up filled the air.

"Come here, baby girl." He said it as if they had been together for years and he was talking to his wife, instead of to a woman he'd had a one-night stand with. Amy was certain she could get used to him calling her baby. It sounded so right coming from him. It didn't sound demeaning in any way, instead, it was endearing.

He opened the guest bedroom door and motioned for her to enter. It was a simple room. A four-poster white bed, two white nightstands, pale blue curtains on the windows, lamps that perfectly matched the curtains. A beautiful painting of a field of yellow sunflowers hung above the bed.

"That painting is gorgeous! Your sister?"

"Yeah, she is an interior decorator or something fancy like that. She designs homes for a living."

"She is talented; it's very comfortable in here."

"There is a half bath through there." Ben nodded toward a door that Amy had assumed was a second closet. "There's a toilet, sink and a shower. If you prefer a long, hot bath, there's a big soaking tub in my room. Although, I'd prefer you wait on the bath until tomorrow, and get a good night's rest, tonight."

"That's probably a good idea." A bath sounded fabulous to Amy. She had been taking short showers at the gym she worked at for several months. "I'll get cleaned up and head to bed. Oh! I need to go back out to the car and get some stuff for tonight." A large yawn followed the statement.

"What do you need, baby? I'll grab it for you. You are already in night clothes."

"Oh!" Amy looked down. In all the commotion, she had forgotten what she was wearing. "I guess I just need my toothbrush and my cell phone charger."

"There's a basket of new toothbrushes in the bathroom, and I have several chargers. I'll grab you one." Ben left the room while Amy headed into the bathroom. There was a basket with mini soaps, shampoos and travel-sized toothbrushes. Amy

brushed her teeth, washed her face and ran her fingers through her hair. She climbed into the bed and underneath the soft blanket, wondering where Ben was.

He came in, seconds later, with a steaming mug in his hand. "Here is the charger I promised." He pulled it out of his pocket. "I'll plug it in for you. This..." He paused, handing her the warm mug. "...is Sleepytime tea. It's my favorite. I also put in some local honey; it should soothe you. It makes me relax after a long night at work. Take a sip; you'll like it."

Amy knew what had taken him so long. He was making her tea. She thought the act was incredibly sweet. A large, masculine man like Ben drinking tea made her smile. He was a world of contradictions. She sipped on the tea while Ben plugged in her phone. The warm liquid filled her stomach, warming her from the inside out.

"Okay, baby, you should be all set." Ben came over and brushed the hair off her forehead and kissed it gently. "Sleep tight, baby girl. See you tomorrow."

*Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow. You're always a day away.* Amy found herself quietly humming the song from Annie. Ben turned off the light as he left the room. After taking a few more sips of tea, she put the cup on the table and snuggled down into the bed. She knew she should be worrying about her car being impounded and about the scary men who had committed homicide and chased her through town. She should be worried about her very life. But she wasn't. Instead, she was thinking about the incredibly sexy, muscular man in the other room, who had just handed her a cup of tea and kissed her forehead.